

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
DIVISION OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING IN RETIREMENT



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GUIDE FOR STUDY GROUP LEADERS

A sharing of Information about  
creating effective Study Groups

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# **HARVARD INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING IN RETIREMENT**

## **GUIDELINES FOR STUDY GROUP LEADERS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

These guidelines for current and potential leaders are based on principles which were set forth at the inception of Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement in 1977 and include policies, practices, and procedures which have been developed since that time. Further information is provided in the *HILR Membership Handbook and Bylaws* and in the article "Creating Successful Study Groups" by Nancy Sack.

### **HILR LEARNING CONCEPT**

HILR is a part of the Harvard University educational system. Our program therefore endeavors to incorporate the major fields of learning and to include subjects that reflect the University's liberal arts and sciences tradition. A serious approach to subject and a firm grasp of material are basic to this goal.

The two cornerstones of learning at HILR are peer learning and active participation. Peer learning implies both active and informed participation. Study Group Leaders propose and coordinate the courses; members, by their willingness to share the results of their study with others, assume a large part of the responsibility for the success of the study group. The result is a rich and dynamic interactive learning environment to which all contribute, and from which all gain a sense of accomplishment.

### **HILR STUDY GROUP LEADERS**

#### **Leader's Role and Responsibility**

The Study Group Leader's role is vital to the character and quality of learning experiences to which HILR is committed. Leaders must understand that HILR policy is to encourage interactive learning through member participation to the greatest extent possible.

For this reason, the leader's function is to establish the scope and objectives of the course, introduce basic concepts, keep the group on target, clarify areas of confusion, fill important gaps and ensure the cooperative nature of the endeavor. Lecturing should be limited to that necessary to establishing key issues and providing coherence to the overall

study. From time to time the leader should draw together and emphasize cogent material presented by participants.

The leader is expected to provide guidance to study group participants. He/she should encourage presentations emphasizing issues of substance rather than peripheral material, class discussion based on credible sources rather than uninformed opinion, and only those illustrative personal experiences pertinent to the topic.

With their experience and preparation of course content, Study Group Leaders act as a primary resource for study group members. Leaders should strongly encourage members who give presentations to consult with them about definition of and resources for their topic.

### **Using Harvard Learning Resources**

HILR and the surrounding university offer resources that can be helpful in preparing for the kind of participation that will be enriching to the Study Group Leader and individual members and of value in supporting study group goals. Leaders should become familiar with and continuously urge study group members to use the full range of the university's libraries in preparing course work.

**Harvard Libraries:** Harvard makes its renowned collections of historic and current materials available to HILR members, who are strongly encouraged to use the wide range of departmental libraries as well as Widener in preparing coursework. The HILR Library Committee arranges orientation to the library system and provides ongoing information on library usage.

**HILR Dunlop Library:** Provides a reading and study area for members. New materials have been purchased with the needs of the study groups in mind. Study Group Leaders are urged to survey the library and suggest the use of the collection whenever possible. Although the library materials are non-circulating, a duplicating machine is located nearby and members are allowed to take materials to the copy machine. Priority in shelving will be given to materials related to current courses. Subject to space limitations, study group leaders may lend current course materials for reserve placement. Such course-related materials may be borrowed if authorized by the course leader, and at his/her own risk.

**Library Orientations:** At the beginning of each semester, the Library Committee offers an orientation program and a tour of Widener Library. Committee members can also offer help with the on-line HOLLIS system.

**HILR Teaching and Learning Resources Committee:** Offers workshops each semester on strategies for leading effective discussion. In conjunction with the Curriculum Committee, TLRC assists and supports new SGLs with course offerings. The Committee continually seeks information and ideas from Study Group Leaders themselves to be shared for the benefit of the HILR learning program as a whole.

**Harvard Departmental Open Seminars:** Attending university seminars pertinent to current study groups can enrich members' knowledge and in turn contribute to class discussion. The Harvard Gazette contains a weekly calendar of university events, including museum and film offerings. Individual departments and centers publish newsletters as well.

## **STUDY GROUP ORGANIZATION**

### **Course Structure**

Various ways of structuring the group accomplish the HILR goal of participatory learning. The following modes have been successfully used as a basis for member participation and class discussion: prepared questions, assigned readings, reports, slide presentations, panels, debates, and sub-groups. Occasionally, Harvard faculty and other resource experts may be invited to speak on aspects of their field related to a study group topic. Courses, however, should not be organized around a series of such speakers.

### **Study Group Syllabus**

The practice is for the leader to prepare a syllabus listing the topics to be examined at each session, together with pertinent readings and references. The syllabus can be photocopied in the Office if submitted at least one week in advance. It should be distributed either prior to or at the first study group session.

### **First Session of Study Groups**

The first meeting of a study group is very important in establishing course objectives and plans for achieving them. The course plan or syllabus should be reviewed and explained and the procedures for class participation should be put in place. Different classes adopt different procedures for questions, discussion periods, and other "rules of the road."

Goals, content, and method should be set forth clearly. The leader should explain the purpose of the course and the level at which it operates so that members will understand whether to expect an introductory or an in-depth treatment. Particularly, leaders should be certain to make explicit their expectations for members' participation in the study group.

The learning environment of HILR offers complex challenges to Study Group Leaders. There are no tests, no grades, and no credit. Accountability within HILR comes from the willingness of members to share responsibility for the success of the study group with the Study Group Leader. Leaders should not hesitate to keep members of their group constantly aware of this ideal.

## **LOGISTICS**

### **Classroom Procedures**

To ensure the efficient running of HILR and to keep study group members informed of Institute matters, it is essential that certain procedures be carried out in each study group. To accomplish this, the leader or a designated group member should:

- pick up notices in the Office before each class;
- establish a phone tree based on the class list and explain its use for cancellation or changed location of meetings, weather emergencies, etc.
- take weekly attendance for the first three weeks;
- notify the Office and all enrolled study group members of any changes or cancellations of meetings (by phone tree, if necessary).

If a member is persistently disruptive in study groups, inform the Office and the chair of the Teaching and Learning Resources Committee.

### **Textbook**

In some cases, the topic and planned approach to the subject lend themselves to the use of a text for assigned general reading. Whenever possible, paperbacks should be selected for the sake of economy. When no single text is available or desired, the leader can prepare a bibliography of selected readings or choose material to be photocopied as a basis for the course. (See Photocopying below.) Please be aware of the Copyright restrictions governing the use of published materials, copies of which are available in the office.

### **Book Orders**

Requests for textbooks should be submitted to the Office as part of the course proposal for inclusion in the catalogue. Books secured through the Harvard Cooperative Society (the Coop) will be shelved with Extension textbooks on the third floor of the Coop. The HILR Office handles all Coop book orders at the time of submission. Leaders

are responsible for determining whether a given textbook is in print and for ordering only those in print. They should check with the Coop at least two weeks in advance of classes to ensure that the order has arrived.

Leaders may order textbooks from any source other than the Coop, but the leader is then responsible for ordering, receiving, and arranging for payment of the books.

### **Audio-Visual**

The Institute owns various kinds of audio-visual equipment: a TV/VCR unit with a remote control is installed in each classroom except for Room 217; several boom boxes which include a CD player and cassette player; slide projectors and slide holders; 16mm film projector (class must provide operator); projection screens; and an overhead projector. Each classroom is equipped with a pull-down projection screen as well as wall brackets to hold maps. Equipment is stored on the third floor in a locked A/V cabinet. SGL's should obtain a key from the office before class. Members will be responsible for setting up, operating, returning the equipment, and returning the key to the office.

### **Photocopying**

Photocopying of syllabi, bibliographies and limited amounts of other necessary items will be arranged in the following ways:

Any material to be photocopied should be submitted to the Office at least a week in advance of the day it is scheduled to be used. The Office will assume the costs of reproducing syllabi and accompanying short bibliographical reading lists, as well as the initial mailing, but members of the study group should pay for any subsequent material.

For such duplication of material, leaders can make arrangements through the Office or they may use any commercial duplicating service directly. They are responsible for arranging for reimbursement by members of the group.

### **Condition of Room**

Leaders and group assistants are urged to see that rooms are left in a presentable state, that all materials belonging to the group are removed and that all debris is disposed of properly. Any problems should be brought to the attention of the Office immediately.

Each room has its own thermostat and a fan coil unit for heating and cooling. If a room is too hot or too cold, the temperature and thermostat setting should be checked; if there is a

discrepancy, make sure the fan coil unit is on before using the override button located on top of the thermostat. Press down on the small white button for two seconds to override the system. If nothing happens, contact the Office or Building Operations.

### **Emergencies**

In case of an emergency, ask the Office to call Building Operations, call the Harvard Police Department at 495-1212 directly, or come to the Office for assistance.

### **Luncheons**

Occasionally groups like to conclude the term with a breakfast or luncheon and special speaker. As early as possible in the semester, leaders can check to see whether members are interested in having an end-of-term luncheon, perhaps in conjunction with another study group. Arrangements for use of university facilities should be made by the Study Group Leader and the office should be informed.

## **END OF TERM PROCEDURES**

### **Mid-Term Feedback Process**

Study Group Leaders can obtain feedback forms from the Office. These may be filled out by study group members and returned to leaders for the leader's own use. The comments and suggestions contained in the completed forms have proven very helpful to the Study Group Leader in conducting the remainder of the course and in planning future offerings. Study Group Leaders may develop their own forms that the office will duplicate.

### **Historical Record**

Each study group represents the collective endeavor of a committed group and every effort should be made to maintain an in-house historical record. Each group's syllabus (including a list of reports and presenters) should be submitted to the Office at the conclusion of each term.

Revised July 2000

# Teaching and Learning Resources

## Suggestions for Writing a Syllabus

Lydia Smith, *chair*, TLRC

Here are suggestions for writing a study group syllabus for study group leaders to use as they plan the semester ahead. It is not written in stone, nor is it intended as a one-size-fits-all plan. We hope this list of suggestions is indeed useful and will appreciate any feedback you may have for us. No such document is anywhere near perfect.

A good syllabus is a real teaching tool. There should be no surprises about the course, because the syllabus should spell out exactly what to expect. It also serves the teacher as a way to keep on track as the semester goes along. Although every course is different, in general a syllabus should cover at least the following:

1. **Name of the course and a brief description of it, stating the goal of the course and an overview of the content to be covered.**
2. **Your name, address, phone, e-mail (if you are willing to be contacted at home).**
3. **Semester, date, time, and place of meeting.**
4. **Reading(s):**
  - exact, correct titles of required texts to be bought, where they are available, and their cost.
  - additional references as appropriate, giving full information about availability, e.g., reserve shelf in library, personal loan from teacher, periodical, photo-copies (and cost), etc.
  - approximate amount of reading expected per week.
  - whether study questions will be provided
5. **Calendar and assignments:**
  - week-by-week calendar, with reading or other assignments
  - date(s) of any special events planned, especially if they require meeting at another place or time, or some special preparation
  - date(s) of holidays during the semester
6. **Course format:**
  - primarily lecture? discussion? both? presentations? (See below.)
  - chairs in rows? semi-circle?
7. **Presentations (if used):**
  - A. *Choose one or another plan as appropriate:*
    - class chooses topics of interest
    - teacher chooses topics and assigns them
    - teacher chooses topics and asks for volunteers
    - teacher chooses many topics to give wide choice and plans how many can be fit into a course
  - B. *Decide how long each presentation should last and make that clear*
    - topics should be focused and not broad and should provide additional material & ideas to the course
    - if you are willing, offer to work with the presenter before his/her date, to provide resources and feedback, etc.
    - remind presenter to check about A-V equipment, if used
8. **Ground rules (adapt to the group and your own preferences):**
  - teacher's rules about absences, lateness, completing assignments
  - wear name tags
  - raise hand to speak
  - listen actively to each other without interrupting (no side conversations)
  - agree or disagree with an idea, not with the person (comments should be backed up with reference to the text)
  - every member responsible for success of whole course, not just teacher
9. **Have ready (in addition to other course material handouts):**
  - extra stick-on name tags
  - list of course members and phone numbers
  - telephone chain in case of snow

# CREATING SUCCESSFUL STUDY GROUPS

*Nancy Sack, HILR*

*September 1996*

## **A. Theoretical foundation of our study groups: "peer teaching and peer learning."**

### **B. Organization of the study group**

1. Set up room so that members can see each other, if possible. (Not so easy 51 at Brattle!)
2. Self-introduction of group members (perhaps by having each answer a pertinent question such as "What is your interest in...?" Make copies of the class roster and pass them out so that connections between names and faces begin to take hold. Often it is helpful to continue weekly introductions for at least the first few meetings.
3. Pass out courses of study (or mail in advance)—what the group will cover and when. Stick to it—with only minor tinkering.
4. If there is a text, make clear assignments for each week—perhaps on the course of study. If there has been a reading assignment, be sure to discuss it in some way in the following class. (If the text is never referred to, group will become frustrated and will stop reading.)

### **C. Reports or presentations**

1. Present topics to the class at the initial meeting (or by mail, in advance) with clear indication of what dates are appropriate for each topic. Take time to allow members to sign up, but do not spend class time on this after the initial week. Use the telephone. Do not get bogged down in housekeeping chores week after week.
2. Should you insist each group member make a presentation? HILR members differ on this point. Certainly, this is a point for discussion.
3. Focus on the topic carefully. Poor reports are often the result of too vague or broad a topic. For example, topic should be: "Thomas Jefferson's political principles," not "Thomas Jefferson."
4. Make clear what is expected in the report regarding length. In most cases 20 minutes is ample—if the topic has been clearly limited, though some slide presentations may require more time. {In class, stick to that established time limit: if presenter seems ready to continue endlessly, break in with: "Please finish in the next five—or three—minutes." It is better to embarrass the presenter (who is breaking the rules), than to lose the whole class to boredom.}
5. What research help should you give the presenter? In some cases, you may have the best book on the subject to lend him/her, or at least the author and name (and call number?) of good research material. But remember that some experienced presenters prefer to do the work on their own, rather than being spoon-fed.

