

# Study Groups

## A PROTOCOL FOR USING READINGS

Diane Heritage

### INTRODUCTION

This protocol was inspired by the Study Group protocol described by Nancy Mohr and adapted for the New Visions Programme (NCSL). It is further developed here for use with **collaborative leadership learning groups**.

Study groups use readings as a stimulus for reflection, analysis and as a starting point for interaction. It can be used with Think Pieces, published articles and research papers, extracts, summaries and précis.

Nancy Mohr (1998) suggests that study groups share several **beliefs**, four of which are:

1. Members each bring wisdom and knowledge to the table, and the group's task is to build on that.
2. They learn more by reflecting upon their own learning than by concentrating on getting others to change their minds.
3. They work on building genuine trust and respect, and therefore commit to long-term participation.
4. They recognise the need for strong leadership to make sure that all voices are heard: genuine democracy is not a free-for-all.

### THE PROTOCOL

A group size of between 3 and 5 people can undertake this protocol. Choose the written piece with care. Try to select relevant pieces that are of the right length and difficulty to challenge and engage the reader.

One person acts as facilitator. Their function is to ensure that the protocols are followed- keeping to time, ensuring equity, keeping to task.

The group should sit facing each other. Sitting in a circle of chairs or around a small table means that all participants should be able to see each other and be seen. We can hear so much from a person's body language as well as their speech.

Allow some time for the group to read the chosen reading. Circulate copies to all participants (preferably in advance). Reading before the meeting and then 10 minutes to re-read/scan the text at the meeting works best.

Decide if you want to set out '**a frame**' for the reading. This can be done with **guided questions**, which give the reader something to consider. Write these up so that participants can see them.



Each person is given an equal air time to speak about what they have read. The others remain silent and listen carefully. The listeners may wish to make notes, jot down questions to ask later, add their reflections. This is a crucial part of the protocol.

Giving each person the space to articulate their own understanding is an important learning space for them. Allowing others to reflect upon what is being said is equally an important place for learning.

At the end of each person's reflection on the piece the others can ask questions for clarification.

When all the group members have had their say the facilitator opens the group up to further discussion. The purpose here is to establish

- the common understandings,
- the differences in understanding,
- the meaning of the piece,
- the issues which emerge from the piece,
- the implications for practice and the actions that may have been suggested.

The group forms some corporate definitions. The facilitator should make sure that all views are respected and included.

In larger groups it is useful to share the learning from the smaller groups across the whole group. This should be fairly short with the leader pulling out 5 or 6 main learning points.

Finally have each of the participants review the process for example the adequacy of reading time, the feelings of the participants, and the balance of speaking and listening.

### Why use this protocol?

- Good learners take time for their own learning.
- Leaders are readers.
- Study groups achieve deep learning – they push beyond workshops.
- Learning communities develop accountability – learning from, with and on behalf of others.
- Learning communities require structure and leadership (strong facilitation).
- We should demonstrate our own commitment to learning.
- Looking at theory helps us to get beyond the day to day 'stuff'.

