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In the Company of Critical Thinkers
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Study groups investigating real-world issues energize high school minds.

Let [your scholar] know nothing because you have told him, but because he has learned it for himself. Let him not be taught science, let him discover it. If ever you substitute authority for reason, he will cease to reason; he will be a mere plaything of other people's thoughts.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

What if engagement were truly at the center of learning, if teachers and students could work together as teams discovering, reflecting, and processing new knowledge. What if, instead of following steps in a program that promises to *teach* critical thinking, students were actively *engaged* in critical thinking, participating in rich discussions to expand their knowledge?

Student study groups can promote this kind of deeper learning and thinking among high school students, as I have seen through teaching high school for more than 20 years. In English classes, in U.S. government classes, and many others, I have watched students benefit from the collaboration and ownership afforded them through study groups. I now work with districts, schools, and teachers to help them initiate this powerful form of learning, and I am collecting data on how study groups affect achievement.

One reason study groups work so well is that they are inherently engaging, a quality that is often missing from classrooms. Too many students in our high schools are disengaged from and even contemptuous of learning, as though learning were something inflicted on them rather than a joyful and natural part of life. They can call on critical-thinking abilities when they need to, but many have learned how to play the game of school and succeed without raising a critical-thinking eyebrow.

Students whose teachers incorporate collaborative learning or study groups into the classroom will have more opportunities to think reflectively as they apply new knowledge. For students to become engaged in a subject, they must be both immersed in it and intrigued by it—and they must believe that their new learning has relevance to their lives. Consider why adults think critically: to solve a problem, satisfy curiosity, or increase knowledge. Rarely do we dig into learning just for the purpose of passing a test.

What's Different About Study Groups?

Student study groups differ from traditional literature circles in that the topic, not the text, guides the exploration. The purpose of literature circles is to understand a text more deeply. The purpose of a study group is to engage students in reading, writing, and thinking critically about a topic—and to spur some kind of action. For example, I have seen effective study groups tackle controversial school policies, analyze current events, and explore intriguing periods in history. In addition, successful study groups generally incorporate not only students but also teachers, other school staff, community members, or parents. These groups frequently meet outside classroom settings.

The kinds of student study groups that a school community can engender are limited only by the energy and resourcefulness of the participants. A school committed to a culture of learning through study groups

finds ways to make such gatherings an intrinsic part of the community. One way to launch groups is for a school leadership group, such as the student council, to select stimulating topics and publicize study groups focusing on these topics around the community. Another strategy is for schools to designate an hour each week during which all students meet with their study groups, much like clubs. Likewise, individual teachers may devote an hour each week within a particular course to study group sessions. As students take ownership of the groups, they learn how to organize meetings and events. A good way to get parents and teachers involved is to talk up study group topics at the school's open house and in the school newsletter. Students can also advertise the groups in the local newspaper or on radio and TV shows. When a study topic—such as local skateboarding laws—involves a specific segment of the community, the group might hold a special meeting in a centralized location like the city hall.

Possible Focuses for Study Groups

School Policy Issues

One reason high school students disengage so regularly from school is that they lack ownership of school realities. Too often, decisions are made *for* youth, not *with* them. Although many schools have a token student on a working committee, how many allow students to work with their teachers to investigate issues that directly affect learning—or to launch an all-student group researching such a topic? Students deserve input on issues that influence their ability to learn, such as textbook selection, major schedule changes, attendance policies, disciplinary issues, or elective offerings. Such participation enables students to witness adults using problem-solving skills in authentic settings.

In one high school, students took on the controversial topic of high-stakes testing. They had read in the local paper that state policymakers were thinking of tying students' standardized test scores to graduation requirements. Most of the students opposed this idea but believed they needed more information. So they interviewed a testing specialist at the district office and read articles and books to educate themselves. This group then organized a community forum and invited the author of one of the books they had studied to be the keynote speaker.

Adults and students participated in a lively discussion at the forum. The event enjoyed extensive media coverage, and the students believed that they had contributed to a better understanding of how standardized testing affects education. One student organizer was offered a summer job in the state representative's office as a result of her leadership in this project.

Current Events

As world events rapidly unfurl, it's essential that students stay aware of what is happening outside their own lives. Textbooks can't offer the latest on environmental issues, the energy crisis, or the escalating nuclear threat from North Korea. A current events study group usually involves participants in reading articles from various newsmagazines and coming together to discuss, debate, and analyze what they have read. Students might vote on a weekly topic and post it early in the week so group members can gather newsmagazines or Internet resources.

A speech and debate class I worked with became interested in the underlying cause of school shootings. The more they researched the topic, the more these youth became convinced that bullying was a major cause in each shooting case. The group invited interested teachers and the education editor of the local paper to attend its next meeting. As a result of attending the meeting, the newspaper editor wrote an article about the issue, quoting students extensively, which prompted a local TV reporter to interview group members about their findings. Before the week was out, a national Internet radio show asked the students to participate in an online program about school shootings. A simple interest in current events

turned into a memorable experience through which these students were able to share their knowledge widely.

In other groups I've observed, students have been asked to write columns for the local newspaper, and parents have reported that discussions about the news reemerged at home. Students have come back to teachers after graduation, telling them that study group was the activity that best prepared them for life after high school.

Historical Periods

Often, just as students find themselves getting fascinated by a particular historical era, the teacher hurries them along to the next chapter in their textbook. Opportunities for deep, critical learning about history may be forever lost. Historical study groups allow for extended examination of events or eras.

A popular topic for such study is the Vietnam War. This topic also appeals to adults in the community, especially Vietnam veterans who may be willing to share their experiences. Because the study of such significant and complex events can span an entire year, activities can be infinitely varied. I have seen groups participate in reenactments, watch movies dealing with the conflict, or examine news clippings from the era. Often, students end up studying a specific component of the war, such as guerilla warfare. One group produced an oral history project interviewing U.S. soldiers who served in Vietnam.

Common Reading Interests

Students who are reluctant to crack open an assigned novel may be devoted to poetry outside of school. Others may disdain poetry but be fascinated by science fiction. Members of student study groups who meet to read fiction, poetry, or nonfiction that interests them, rather than only books that teachers assign, find new worlds opening up to them. Such meetings offer an important social and intellectual outlet for students who have little opportunity to discuss their reading with others who share their literary interests. Students' reading level is not generally an issue as they interact with fellow book lovers.

In one school, a student book club organized a book fair in conjunction with a local bookstore and used the profits to improve classroom libraries. Because these young people had read and discussed many current young adult novels, they could suggest books that would engage their peers. Another group read and discussed poetry, including their own. They organized a poetry coffeehouse as part of the school's annual academic fair.

Science Research

In the wake of funding cuts, many schools now have no separate class for science research. Science teachers try to provide materials and guidance for science fair projects or student research within their regular (and sometimes overcrowded) classes. Study groups centered on science create a climate in which high schoolers can probe such topics as astronomy, water pollution, alternative fuel sources, or new diseases. Business or governmental agencies, particularly research labs or environmental companies, often have employees eager to join such a group and work with students.

Science teachers Mike Sylvester and Dirk Naegele from Arnold High School in Panama City Beach, Florida, have sponsored science study groups at Bay High School for several years. Students began meeting after school to discuss topics that piqued their interest, such as time travel or black holes, with Sylvester and Naegele providing articles and demonstrating complex concepts. The group soon grew too large for one classroom as teachers and students from other classes joined.

Science professionals in the community became involved: An entomology lab invited students interested in researching insects to visit, the Department of Transportation made its chemistry lab available, and the Fish and Wildlife Service provided experts to enrich biology study. A group of students, parents, and a biologist from the community attended a composting conference in another state. When they returned, the students partnered with the local zoo to create a composting program, combining animal waste with newspapers to make compost for school gardens.

Whatever students choose to focus on, the months of study should lead to some concrete action that draws on the group's learning. For example, if students study clinical depression and the debate over prescribing antidepressants, their culminating action could be sharing findings at a meeting of mental health care providers. A group that researched the likelihood of various sports injuries could present their conclusions to a gathering of students who are considering which sports to pursue.

Accounting for Learning

“But what about accountability?” I hear the testocrats cry. As Albert Einstein said, “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.” One of the advantages of study groups is that students become responsible for their own learning. Giving students a grade on their performance according to an artificial rubric would work against fostering independent thinking and might defeat the purpose of the project.

The alternative method—group logs—helps study group members monitor what they are learning. At each gathering, the student facilitator, with help from group members, fills out a meeting log (see the sample, p. 70) and places it in a group notebook. Individual reflection logs may also be turned in to the sponsoring teacher as a way of recording participation.

If we hope to engage students in critical thinking, we must allow them the freedom and opportunity to get involved in socially constructed, ongoing processes that require the use and application of knowledge. Let's include students in their own learning by engaging them in activities that teach them how to think.

Student Study Group Meeting Log

Five-Minute Rewind (facilitator and recorder review major points of discussion from last meeting).

Five-Minute Fast Forward (facilitator reminds group of goals of study).

Group Action (completed by recorder with input from study group members):

1. What did members read or write to prepare for the meeting?
2. Summarize the major points the group addressed.
3. What new learning occurred today?
4. What questions emerged?
5. Who will attempt to find answers to the questions?
6. What other resources (such as teachers, experts, books) will we need to address questions for ongoing learning?
7. What will be the focus of the next meeting?
8. If additional materials or resources are needed, who will bring them?
9. What will members read or write in preparation for the next meeting?
10. Best quotes from today's meeting:

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References

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