



Creating online, inclusive spaces for learning: ‘Study Together’ with the personal learning advice service

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Presentation abstract

There is a wealth of scholarship on the benefits of synchronous writing sessions for staff and students in higher education (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Eardley et al., 2021; Morley and Aston, 2023). In the Personal Learning Advice (PLA) Service at the Open University UK (OU), we developed bespoke, online study spaces for students from groups currently underrepresented in higher education – known as ‘Study Together’ sessions. The sessions prioritise students from minoritised ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with mental health needs who are at risk of poorer study outcomes. This presentation charted the development of Study Together in response to student feedback and evaluation and sought to show the value of ‘targeted’ invitations to engage students with spaces for learning development. Our presentation began by outlining the rationale for a 2022-23 Study Together pilot and its impact on community and belonging for students with mental health declarations (Lavery et al., 2023). We shared our approach to hosting Study Together and the techniques used to create an inclusive, productive study space; we showed how these approaches allowed us to incorporate timed study bursts and reflective practice, building positive study habits among students. Finally, we presented findings from the evaluation of Study Together in 2023-24 and situated this within the wider literature on the benefits of virtual communities of practice for learning. Our presentation spoke directly to the ALDcon24 theme ‘Building inclusive learning development spaces’ and invited delegates to consider the place of virtual, guided study spaces in their own practice.

Keywords: online; inclusive; coaching; group work.

Introduction

The PLA Service was set up in 2021 to offer coaching/mentoring to students identified through the OU Access and Participation Plan in one-to-one and group settings. The team developed an equity lens for coaching and mentoring, to address power dynamics and privilege when working with under-represented students whilst also meeting institutional goals. Study Together emerged, drawing on student feedback and practitioner experiences of remote working. It combined traditional online writing spaces with key study practices and an inclusive approach to facilitation.

Each Study Together session guides students through a sequence of study practices: creating a study environment, goal setting, study mindset, study focus and reflection. Sessions are stand-alone but repeated offering space for students to revisit, practice, build confidence, share and learn from others. An initial pilot was rolled out to all students eligible for PLA support. Over 50 sessions have been offered with 20-40 students attending. Student feedback includes how the space has helped them get unstuck, feel less isolated, recognise their achievements and make progress with their studies. Many students reflect openly about neurodiversity, disability, feelings of isolation, connection and motivation.

Lessons for facilitators in creating an inclusive environment included: creating a safer online space where students feel comfortable; valuing all contributions however small without judgement; different ways to engage and adapt sessions; limiting teaching whilst maximising student learning; facilitating peer learning and care in following up of disclosures (in session or out of session).

Community response

Cherlene Brand (Academic Development Tutor at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) GSBS Learning Development Centre) commented:

I found the session very insightful and inspiring so much so that I am piloting a Study Together online session tomorrow for our school. I am following the idea exactly as prescribed and feel really quite excited about it.

I started up a similar support package in the form of online writing retreats during lockdown which were open to all students in the GCU Business School. I have been thinking for a while now about how I could encourage better attendance, refresh the format/structure and really wanted to utilise the student feedback to make what I had better and more long-lasting.

Janet and Mary-Jayne's presentation really struck a chord with me as the structure, the branding, the communication style and follow-up was super clear and concise. The Pomodoro technique in particular was a real hook for me as it is something I can use to explain the effectiveness of the structure for students. I also found the information on how the team continued to develop the sessions over time in line with feedback interesting and want to replicate this.

I found that my writing retreats were well attended by graduate apprenticeship students and international students rather than full-time undergraduate students and wondered if I needed to change my advertising approach. I will be interested to see if my pilot of Study Together reaches a more diverse group of students.

Next steps and additional questions

Creating online, inclusive study spaces requires a shift in practitioner thinking and reflection on the context. The rationale behind any intervention can impact delivery to imply an individual or institutional deficit so it is important to consider power and privilege. Experts vs fellow learners - the facilitator's position can impact power dynamics in several ways.

- In practising study skills alongside students and sharing their experience of adaptations, challenges and successes, facilitators show we are all on a learning journey.
- Is the space for facilitators to show what they know or for students to put learning into practice? Student and facilitator anxiety can shape who speaks and owns the space.
- Asking questions instead of giving answers can support peer learning and value diverse experiences e.g. 'What do others suggest?' and 'What else have others tried'?

Building comfort in the learning space. Students can find engagement challenging – a past experience, disability or condition, may inhibit participation. Those working in higher education may not recognise how daunting this may be.

- Try different ways to build confidence, e.g. different communications, videos or sharing in one-to-ones. Listen carefully to challenges or difficulties students share.
- Offer multiple ways to participate; those who stay silent, contribute in the chat or speak on the microphone. Find ways to acknowledge participation, e.g. feedback that values the student voice (even if it was not possible to implement).
- Normalise adaptations to counter that there is only one way to study successfully. Giving options can support reflection and adjustment about what is right for them.

Practically good operational support is essential to consistently reach more students, e.g. expertise in webinars, drawing up appropriate student lists to promote sessions, and systems for monitoring sign-ups, attendance and feedback.

The main challenge for scaling up Study Together or similar inclusive online spaces is that it requires facilitator resources. Sessions could be delivered by students, however, training, support and individual follow-up may be needed. Further evaluation and evidence of the impact of this support for specific under-represented student groups (e.g. neurodiverse students or students sharing a mental health condition) would help build the case for future support.

Authors' reflection

Through the ALDinHE conference, we were able to speak about the Study Together work informally - hearing initial reactions from others about the work we have been doing. We kept coming back to questions about what we had been delivering, the approach we had been taking to inclusion, collaborating with students and how it differed from other approaches. Listening to others before our presentation really helped to clarify in our minds the way we were creating and supporting an online space for students to learn and

grow. Presentations from others at the conference also resonated: Matt Phull (study as practice), Jane McKay and Anne-Marie Langford (psychological barriers) and Kevin Watson (unconditional spaces for one-to-one work).

Although it looked simple to be using a known technique (Pomodoro), using coaching approaches informed by equity made the space different. This approach meant that:

- The facilitators experienced the session with students – making it clear that we would also be tackling work tasks ourselves – which positioned the facilitators as fellow learners in developing study practices.
- The sessions valued student voices and embedded student reflection on their developing study skills into the process; either individually on their own or using the chat/microphone depending on their preference.
- Students were offered space for connection where their study experiences and questions could be shared with others, valuing the students own learning and enabling learning from others.

We really valued hearing comments and feedback on the day. It was heartening that the levels of engagement (20-40 per session) were seen as successful, and it enabled us to recognise different team contributions to this success. This included care with the pre- and post-communications with students and the skill of the PLA operations team in ensuring that the event was promoted sufficiently to achieve a good level of attendance (full enough but not too full). Overall, it helped us to recognise what we have been achieving as a team and that it was worth sharing with others.

Since the conference, the Study Together team have been thinking about the future given the conclusion of the PLA service in 2024. We are looking at how we continue to share our learning with others at the OU and beyond. We have been excited to hear about Cherlene's experience in trialling sessions at Glasgow Caledonian University and there may be others. Student feedback has suggested that students with ADHD have particularly valued these spaces so there may be an opportunity to develop a toolkit for others for the Neurodiversity Resource Bank.

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Author details

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put study skills into practice. She trained as a career coach, completing the postgraduate diploma in Career Management and Coaching at Birkbeck, University of London and is a registered career development professional of the Career Development Institute. She has a strong interest in coaching approaches that support social justice, in particular recognising the impact of wider networks and systems on an individual.

Mary-Jayne Wilton is a coach/mentor in the OU Personal Learning Advice Service. Her role involves working to achieve equitable outcomes for students from backgrounds currently underrepresented at universities in the UK by offering one-to-one sessions and group workshops designed to engage, support and empower. Areas of particular interest are anti-oppressive and inclusive practice and finding ways to diversify our community of practice as learning developers with new perspectives, ideas and stories. She has previously worked in HE and the voluntary sector in learning and development and advice and guidance practitioner roles.

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