

Study Buddy: Engaging students in learning communities

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The Study Buddy project was informed by recent research that suggested that student retention was facilitated when students were enculturated into university life through the formation and maintenance of communities of learners. The project is an attempt to support the development of communities of learners within the Faculty of Education by fostering the formation of student networks. It provides a systematic means for the formation of peer study groups; Study Buddy - an online study group-pooling tool. This presentation will outline the background to the project briefly, before demonstrating the tool itself.

Background information

Ongoing work with respect to retention, achievement and satisfaction of students in the Faculty of Education, as well as an extensive literature in the area, has shown that of the factors that are important for first year students, one of the most important is enculturation of the student to university life. This is particularly important for Griffith Faculty of Education students where over 40% are first generation university attendees. Peer study groups have been shown to be an effective way to support the enculturation of first year students. Arising from the work on student retention, students have been encouraged to form peer study groups for the last two years.

Research into the effectiveness of these groups (Watson & Johnson, 2004, 2003; Johnson & Watson, 2004; Watson, Johnson & Austin, 2004) has identified the importance of compatibility of members as an indicator for the effectiveness and maintenance of these groups. To date the process for the formation of these groups has been haphazard with time being made available, encouragement being provided, and senior student mentors made available during orientation week but lacking any systematic way for students to establish contacts or facilitate maintenance. This project aimed to enculturate students to university (Faculty) life by providing support for the formation and maintenance of communities of learners within the Faculty of Education. Such support aimed to foster the development of student networks by providing the systematic means for the formation of peer study groups; an online study group pooling tool.

Study Buddy: Online tool

Project members from a number of Education schools worked with the Educational Products and Services of FLAS to produce an online study group pooling tool for Faculty of Education students. The tool, entitled *Study Buddy*, is now available on a Griffith University website. The site is organised into the following areas. Each of which will be demonstrated in turn:

- *Student Stories* - provides a first-hand account from students on the pros and cons of forming study groups and some topics for how to make them work.
- *FAQ* - answers some of the questions student may have about starting and organising study groups.
- *Group Spaces* - gives some examples of possible locations across Griffith's campuses where study groups can meet, either formally or informally.
- *Join Up* - where students register their interest in being part of a study group and provide details about their availability and preferences via a short questionnaire.
- *Member Login* - where students who have joined up can find potential "study buddies", with whom they can make contact. This area also allows students to change any of their registration details.
- *Feedback* - invites students to complete a short survey on how useful they have found this site and to provide suggestions for how it might be improved.
- *Resources* - contains a range of additional information relating to working in groups.

The initial conceptualisation of the site and the collation of materials and resources for inclusion in the site was led by Dr Glenice Watson in 2005. Further developments and revisions were led by Dr Sue Thomas in 2006. A draft version of *Study Buddy* was implemented in semester 1, 2006 and further in semester 1, 2007.

The online tool produced by this project provides an avenue for students, who are interested in forming study groups, to find like-minded students. It also provides a resource for academic staff who wish to incorporate study groups in their courses in a systematic way.

Transferability and Dissemination

Information about the study tool is included in Orientation, Program Common Times and emails to First year students early in semester 1. Senior student mentors in Orientation week sessions and semester programs encourage facilitation of the tool's implementation. Use of the tool is also actively promoted in courses.

It is anticipated that, with slight modifications, *Study Buddy* may be made available to students in other Faculties after the initial implementation of the final version in 2007.

Discussion

Study Buddy promises to be an effective way to help students form study groups over multi-campuses and across programs. Discussion will focus on concerns of ongoing use of the tool particularly on:

- encouraging student participation
- encouraging course assessment which would be aided by use of the tool
- management of the tool
- gaining feedback from students on their use of the tool

References

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