

Reflections one year into piloting peer study groups: is this a model of engaging and providing peer support to Masters and Distance Learners?

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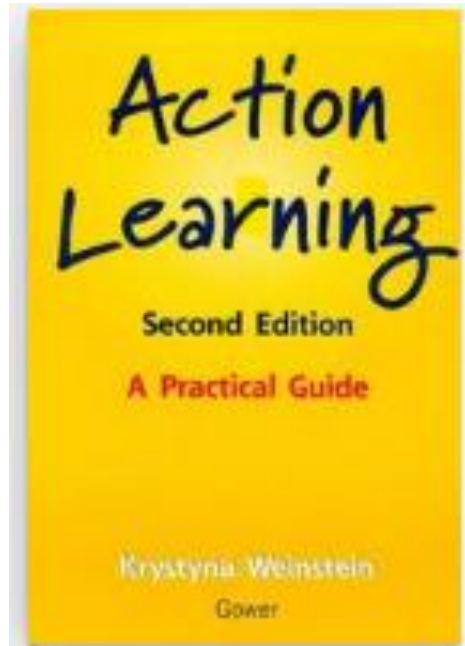


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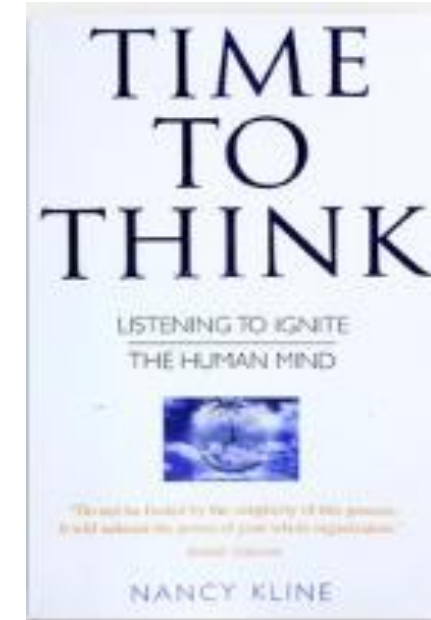
Action learning sets and some useful books



Weinstein, K. (1999) *Action Learning: A Practical Guide*. 2nd edn. Gower Publishing Company.



Starr, J. (2021) *The Coaching Manual*. 5th edn. Pearson Education.



Kline, N. (1999) *Time to think: listening to ignite the human mind*. Ward Lock.

Peer study groups for DL PGT History students

No one knows what an action learning
set is!



How it went

- Ran them in week 4 within two core modules.
- All online. Evening and lunchtime.
- 2 sessions for Y1 (focussed on transition to study); 2 sessions for Y2 (focussed on dissertation)
- 1.5 hours – 20 mins for explanation and set up; 60 mins in breakout rooms; 10 mins – review and Q&A.
- Ran them again in Semester 2 within optional modules – less take up.



Feedback

Students

Appreciated by the students

Liked meeting each other face to face.

“I think the format of allocating each participant a set amount of time was useful”

“optional topics of discussion, breakout rooms”

Some groups/pairs are still meeting up

Academic

“Pedagogic benefits – the discussion boards seemed to improve in terms of student familiarity with each other in the week/s following the sessions for Historical Approaches”

“In some sense, they were also good in raising consciousness of the challenges and opportunities we face on the programme. They could see the complexity of navigating time zones, people’s life and work commitments, etc.. and, perhaps, came to see why we largely teach asynchronously.

I think it also helped people grasp the different types of people on the course more fully.”

The challenges we faced.

A. How to integrate students who couldn't make the time.

B. What's a suitable level of contact/support? E.g Do we need to keep creating the groups each time? What if things go wrong?

C. Gathering feedback, evaluating or measuring impact.

D. How do we make it easy for the students to join?

E. How do we make it administratively simple for the lecturers to run?

PGT Essentials: the context

- ‘**PGT Essentials**’ is our programme of workshops open to all postgraduate taught students
- There was a need to create additional provision during UoB Xtra – a three-week period of extra-curricular activities following the summer assessment period

Semester 1	Semester 2	UoB Xtra*	Summer
Transitioning to PGT Study	Getting started with your research strategy	Reference management tools for your dissertation	Writing up primary research
Finding and using information	Critical thinking	?	Writing up secondary research
How to critique an academic article	Developing your writing		Researching and writing systematic reviews
How to paraphrase and write concisely	Managing your research project		Formatting, visuals and data presentation
	Getting started with your dissertation		Editing and proofreading your dissertation

How can we do more with less?

- The PGT Essentials programme is already comprehensive
- How can we balance the need to expand and improve upon provision for students, but with limited time (and content) for the creation of new workshops?
- ‘Community’ targeted as an area for improvement following the 2025 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey results
- Could peer study groups provide opportunities for interaction – AND fill a gap in our PGT workshop timetable without the creation of another new workshop?

“There are specific opportunities to interact with other postgraduate taught students”

PGT Dissertation Conversations

- Adapted aspects of action learning sets
- Students could discuss their dissertations in a session facilitated by us
- Two sessions: one in-person, and one online
- 188 students booked (56 for in-person, 132 online)
- 6 attended in person
- 23 joined online (this dropped to 12 after we put them in breakout rooms!)



25th June 11am - 1pm

PGT Dissertation Conversations: Share, Think and Solve

📍 Online

Are you feeling daunted by your dissertation?
Do you wonder how other students are
approaching their projects? Or would you like to
chat about your experience and reflect on your
next steps? Come along to the PGT
Dissertation Conversation!

The in-person session

- Two groups of three for the in-person session: students followed the simplified ALS structure we set out and engaged in productive discussions

‘What was helpful?’

- “Different opinions, new perspectives”
- “Knowing how others are approaching their dissertation work”

‘What should we keep?’

- “The group format”
- “Everything was great”

‘What should we change?’

- “Have more people from same course”

“[It was] good and keep going, and thank you for hosting”

“Just thank you, it has been helpful.”

The online session

- Much harder to gauge the quality of interaction; large numbers of students left after being placed in breakout rooms

‘What was helpful?’

- “Discussing challenges”; “Hearing challenges and the solution”
- “[Sharing] my problems with people and getting guidance from them”

‘What should we keep?’

- “Group discussion”; “The group meeting”
- “Sharing the challenges that the students experienced”

‘What should we change?’

- “Arrange a host in each group”

“Good session where ideas were shared”

“Make the discussion more engaging”



Analysis and key takeaways: PGT Essentials sessions

- “Students **crave connection** but often need it **intentionally facilitated**” (Fisher and Fido, 2025)
- Research also indicates that helping students develop their social skills enhances their **learning, motivation** and ability to **cope with academic pressure** (Vazquez et al, 2025; Malik et al, 2025).
- Peer study groups can achieve ‘more’ and with ‘less’ staff input than a typical workshop
- However, students still require substantial support to interact effectively
- This approach may be more suited to cohorts within modules or degree programmes.

So, now what...?

Refine and run it again for History PGT
DL students.

A low-stakes session for PGT Essentials



On your tables, discuss:

1. What challenges have your distance learners or PGT students identified?
2. What peer support and/or community building activities have you provided (or experienced) for PGT/DL students?
3. What worked well? What didn't work well?
4. How have you measured impact or evaluated it? Or, how could you?

Thank you



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References

Fisher, G. F and Fido, D. (2025) Reimagining connection and communication for Gen Z students, *Times Higher Education*, 13 May. Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/reimagining-connection-and-communication-gen-z-students>. (Accessed: 7 August 2026).

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Vazquez, L. M., Olmedo-Moreno, E., Alvarez-Rodriguez, J. and Rodriguez-Sabiote, C. (2025) 'Social skills and learning competences in university students: a study of the mediating effects of academic motivation and emotional intelligence', *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 17(7), pp. 190-204.

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