

University of the Third Age

Chesterfield

Starting a New Group: Guidance for Group Co-ordinators

In the Beginning

Groups start in a number of ways. Sometimes the group leader emerges first and the group forms around the enthusiasm of an individual. Sometimes the group starts with little more than a desire to learn or experience a subject or activity and there is no obvious leader in the beginning. Sometimes the Groups' Facilitator or their Assistant has been asked to form a group and convenes a meeting with no intention themselves of being the group member, let alone becoming the Co-ordinator. It does not matter which way the group starts but what does matter is it is made clear what the group is going to do and what members of the group can realistically expect of each other.

The Set Up Meeting

The set up meeting will be arranged by either the person with the idea and potential Co-ordinator or the Groups' Facilitator. This meeting must be at a time and place that suits the majority of the potential group members. Allowance must be made for members who are interested but cannot make the meeting: they must be kept informed of decisions made at the meeting.

There should be a written agenda for the meeting. This may be simply a list of targets which may include the following:

- When and where will you meet, how often and for how long?
- Who will be the Co-ordinator? (Your U3A needs a point of contact.)
- How will meetings be organised? For example what form will they take (lecture, discussion, outings) and how will you cater for the variety of interests and abilities?
- What kind of venue will be suitable, formal or informal, will a hired room be needed or will you meet in members' homes? The venue is often dictated by the size of the group.
- How will costs be managed? For example room hire, refreshments, speakers, travel.
- How will the members contribute to the running of the group?
- Where will you get equipment and resources from?

At this meeting you will be able to find out and make clear what the members expect of the group. A successful group will be clear about and share expectations. If there is a wide variety of expectation, consider forming more than one group, even if that means splitting six interested parties into two groups of three. A small group of like-minded souls will be more successful than a large group at odds. Successful groups grow.

Aim to plan a programme for the first few meetings. Delegate responsibility; try not to leave everything to one person.

It is a useful exercise to agree to a short description of what the group hopes to do and how they hope to do it, but be realistic in setting yourselves attainable targets.

Discover the expertise in the group. Once this is known it must be decided how the group is going to use such expertise as there is. The group must also consider how it is going to gain expertise if little or none is present. You may be fortunate to have many group members who are able and willing to share their expertise, or you may start with one enthusiast. You may also start with little or no expertise. The ethos of U3A is that its members share their knowledge and experience freely, but there may be times when an external expert is required. (See below)

Contributors

As the potential group Co-ordinator you should decide how much time/expertise you would realistically be able to offer the group and what you will expect of the group members. Do not over commit yourself because you may get tired and the group will suffer.

Group members must be encouraged, even required, to assist and contribute to the running of the group. This help can take many forms: one member may handle the money, another may be responsible for booking the room, yet another may arrange outings. Members with some knowledge of the subject may lead a meeting or outing.

Occasionally it may be appropriate or desirable to call on expert assistance. This may take the form of another U3A member who can voluntarily come to a meeting and offer informed input. It may also take the form of a professional lecturer, tutor or other outside expert who will be paid to make a presentation to the group. This can only happen occasionally, it is not the 'U3A Way' to engage paid tutors on a regular basis.

Getting Going

At the first meeting there will be a number of administrative tasks to manage:

- 1) The chosen Group Co-ordinator will have to keep a membership list; name, telephone number, email and U3A number are essential. Postal address may also be added if felt necessary.
- 2) If the group is over subscribed, an identical written list of those in waiting must be kept as a waiting list. The Groups' Facilitator should be given a copy of this list, as s/he may be able to start a second group.
- 3) Each member may be required to pay £1 towards the running costs of the group, this is an annual fee. New members joining during the year must contribute £1 on joining. If meetings are held in members' homes it is customary to contribute 50p towards the cost of any refreshments that may be provided. If the meeting is held in a hired room the members must contribute their share to the cost of the hiring. It may be best to appoint a member to handle the finances and room hire.

- 4) If a plan was not agreed at the set up meeting it must be done at the first meeting or the group may lack direction.

Delivery of Information about Your Topic

What will be your method of delivery? There are several ways of approaching interest group organisation in U3A.

- Member-led sessions with participation by the group.
- Shared presentations which are dependent on the commitment of the group.
- Discussions.
- Taught sessions with participation. A member of the group who has some subject knowledge leads a session for the benefit of the group.
- Tutored or lecture sessions. Someone from outside the group delivers an informed talk on a particular area of the group's interest.
- Outings, trips or visits with or without guides.
- TV programmes, Videos, DVDs provided by members. These are usually educational and self-explanatory.

All these methods are legitimate, as part of the shared learning experience, provided they are suitable for the topic and are accepted by the group. It is not necessary, nor is it recommended, that one method be chosen for all time. A variety of delivery methods is a positive way to maintain the group's interest.

In Conclusion

A successful Group Co-ordinator does not need to be an expert in the chosen field, indeed does not need to have any previous knowledge at all. The qualities required to be a successful Co-ordinator are not academic, they revolve around such words as organised, enthusiastic, interested, busy, welcoming, sharing and enabling. Expertise can be brought in, may be even bought in, but a group that is not organised and well led will ultimately fail.

Inevitably there will come a time when you feel you have done enough as a Group Co-ordinator and wish to step aside to let someone else move the group forward. Please do not wait until the last minute to find a successor. If your group has been run as a contributory group, with you merely the helmsman, one or even two members should be 'prepared' to step in from the wings and take over at the appropriate time.

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See also and Appendix 1 below and '*Guidelines for Co-ordinators, April 2012*', available from the Group Facilitator

Appendix 1

A true story of the development of a successful group:

An interested member enquires if there might be some interest in their U3A in a particular subject in which the member has some interest but absolutely no knowledge. The idea is not well received. However, the member pursues the idea and advertises the proposed new group in the Newsletter.

Soon there is a small group of individuals who have a similar interest but no expertise. A room is booked and a programme developed.

The new Co-ordinator manages the group, books the room and contributes to the programme by reading from books and magazines and talking about personal experiences, holidays, etc. Other ordinary members contribute by talking about their own interest in the field of study.

The annual programme now contains several elements:

- A motivated and enthusiastic Co-ordinator.
- An appropriate venue
- Interested and supportive members who assist the Co-ordinator.
- A varied programme which includes:
 - ❖ Sessions led by the Co-ordinator;
 - ❖ Sessions led by members;
 - ❖ Recorded TV programmes/DVDs;
 - ❖ Invited (paid and unpaid) experts who give talks on the subject;
 - ❖ Outings in the summer months,
 - ❖ Annual attendance at a U3A Summer School.