



# The Dog Ate My Study Group Plans!

Four Instant (and Fun and  
Reflective) No-Prep Teacher  
Workshops

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Okay, so maybe it wasn't the dog that ate your plans. Maybe leading today's study group is the 45th item on your "To Do" list, and you just didn't get past item 23. Or maybe you did schedule an hour of planning time, only to have a parent show up at your classroom door needing some attention and support. Maybe an administrator dumped a mountain of data on your desk this morning, requiring instant analysis.

If you're leading a workshop today and you've got nothing prepared, here are some activities guaranteed to interest virtually any group of colleagues and spark some lively discussion. These are the ones we pull out in those rare situations when (for whatever reason) we haven't had time to prepare anything. Most can be used repeatedly, even in the same year with minor variations, if your colleagues find them enjoyable.

The proof of the worth of these activities is that we sometimes choose to try them with colleagues even when we do have time to prepare something else. It almost feels like cheating because they are so easy to lead, but the results are always energizing and encouraging. They are designed to spotlight the needs, interests and opinions of group members in different ways. They can also re-energize a group that is in the doldrums.

You might want to print a few copies of these to keep handy in your study group folder for those workshop dates that jump out and surprise you in the future.

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## Workshop 1: Where I Draw the Line

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Prepare some statements on the blackboard, whiteboard or chart paper before participants arrive (see examples below).

Once everyone arrives, draw an imaginary line across the front of the room. Tell everyone that this line is a continuum, with one end designated for those who “strongly agree” with the first statement, and the other end of the line reserved for those who “strongly disagree.” The middle territory is for those who are neutral or ambivalent. Ask participants to place themselves on the line based upon their response to the statement.

Statements to post might include:

- *Teachers must know and use research findings to inform their practice.*
- *Reading comprehension strategy instruction is a fad that will pass in time.*
- *Every teacher in the same grade in our school should teach reading in the same way.*
- *There is enough phonics instruction in our school.*
- *My experiences as a writer influence the way I teach writing.*
- *My experiences as a reader influence the way I teach reading.*
- *Research is only valid if it is objective.*
- *Not enough attention is paid to grammar and spelling skills in our school.*
- *Boys' literacy is of greater concern to me at the moment than girls' literacy.*
- *I have never experienced as much pressure as a teacher as I do now in the classroom.*
- *The standards movement has been a positive force in schools over the past decade.*
- *Parents are becoming more involved in our school.*

After each person has lined up for the first statement, have people share why they feel strongly or are ambivalent about the statement. Take no more than five minutes to discuss each statement. After the discussion of a statement is completed, read aloud the next statement, have everyone rearrange themselves on the continuum, and discuss the new topic.

Ideally, you don't want to post any statements that lead to a herd of teachers at one end of the continuum. Sometimes the statements that are the most fun are those that are most polarizing, or lead to a chain of participants all along the line. You can easily adapt these statements to reflect current literacy initiatives in your building.

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## Workshop 2: Tabloid Team Tableau

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Tableau is a quick, fun way to step into the minds of colleagues and try on the thinking of others through role play. In this workshop, you will put participants into groups of three or four. Each group will be given a scenario to dramatize for the whole group.

Some ground rules:

The preparation time in small groups should be no more than five minutes—no elaborate props, scripts or staging. These are improvisations, not scripted exercises. The feel should be loose and fun.

Each improv should last no more than five minutes, with another five to ten minutes following the improve reserved for discussion.

Each group should designate someone as a narrator to set the scene and to lead the discussion. This allows participants who are truly shy to be a part of the presentation without having to take on a dramatic role.

Only distribute one scenario per group; if you pass out all the options to all participants before assigning them, you can get into haggling and horse-trading between groups, which wastes time.

Encourage everyone **not** to create “angels and villains” in their improvisations. Rather than caricatures, each person in the scenario should seem believable, presenting some validity for their point of view.

Here are sample scenarios to distribute, but you may prefer to develop a few of your own based on previous controversies at your school to file away for future use:

1. You are a new teacher at your school, working in an eighth-grade classroom. A couple of your colleagues are talking in the staff room about adopting a new writing program, one that emphasizes lots of drill work on vocabulary and spelling instead of time for writing in workshops. The colleagues think the program will address the low scores at the school. You have seen the program and don't like the content. Recreate the discussion.
2. A colleague who is a veteran at the high school where you work has heard of some new strategies or techniques for teaching reading comprehension. As you talk with her, it becomes clear that comprehension instruction for her consists solely of asking good questions after students read the book. She is concerned that she has so many classes and students to teach—how can she try these new techniques when she has 80 students every day? Recreate the discussion.

3. You are a member of a committee at your school that has been given \$3000 to be used to buy materials to improve writing instruction. Talk with your colleagues about the best way to spend the money.
4. A parent asks for a conference with you. She is concerned about the “free choice” reading time in your sixth grade classroom. Her child selected *What Jamie Saw* to read during this time, a book that includes scenes recounting domestic abuse. The parent is a fundamentalist Christian, and she is concerned about the content of the book. The principal sits in on the conference, since you are a first-year teacher. Recreate the discussion.
5. You are a new teacher at a school where the administration is contemplating moving to a full-day kindergarten program. The staff supports the move but is divided about the curriculum. Some staff members feel adamantly that the primary purpose of kindergarten is to promote social skills. They don’t want to “hurry” children into academics. Other teachers feel that you can’t start children too early with a rigorous academic program, particularly since some children come from homes with little in the way of books. Recreate the discussion about the “best” literacy program for kindergartners.
6. You are in a team meeting with colleagues. One colleague answers her cell phone three times during the half-hour meeting. Another colleague says she is “taking notes” on her laptop, but a glimpse at the screen reveals she is answering email and surfing the web. Recreate the scene as your colleague’s cell phone rings for the fourth time, and she begins to answer it.

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## Workshop 3: Classroom Hot Spots

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Housecleaning experts call them “hot spots”—the places in any home where junk collects (think of the messy counter next to the phone, or the jumble of shoes near the front door). We grow accustomed to the clutter and exasperated by it at the same time.

Classrooms have “hot spots” too: places where disorganized piles of paper grow or students are always elbowing and jostling each other as they gather materials. In an overcrowded classroom, it’s hard to know how to reorganize these spaces—especially when it’s your own classroom and you’ve become accustomed to living with the hot spots in it.

This workshop is designed to open up teachers to collaborating with colleagues. It requires a certain level of trust, so you’ll want to be sure you allow teachers to select their own partners.

Begin by asking everyone in the workshop to find a partner. Then ask each participant to pull out a clean sheet of paper and pen (or provide materials yourself), and write silently for 10 minutes in response to the following prompt:

*Think of your classroom organization and layout. What area is a “hot spot” causing problems? It could be a place where there is too much traffic or noise during certain stretches of the day, a location that is always messy, or a spot where students often jostle for position or argue over materials.*

*Why do you think the area is a hot spot?*

After 10 minutes, have all participants share their responses with their partners. After everyone has shared his or her hot spot, ask partner teams to spend the next 30 minutes visiting their partners’ classrooms to view each hot spot. Ask each team to brainstorm solutions to the problem within each classroom (i.e., moving materials, instituting new classroom rules, etc.). After 30 minutes, teams should return to the whole group and share what solutions were generated.

You might also launch the next workshop by having volunteers share whether or not they followed through with plans, and what difference the changes made in their classrooms.

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## Workshop 4: Literacy Timelines

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For this workshop, participants will create a timeline of friends, colleagues and family members who have influenced their literacy development. These timelines will then be used as a catalyst for discussion about what is meaningful and memorable in influencing the literacy of others.

Begin by asking everyone to draw a line across a blank sheet of paper (providing a stack of blank oversized sheets of paper and baskets of markers is helpful). On this line, ask everyone to mark a starting point with a vertical line labeled “Birth” on the left-hand side, and another labeled “Present Day” on the right-hand side.

Ask participants to think of at least five people who influenced their development as readers and writers during their lives. Participants should then map out on the continuum when they met each person. Below the timeline, everyone should list the names of these mentors with a one-sentence description of how and why that person affected his or her literacy.

This task should take no more than 10-15 minutes. Ask everyone to write silently. Often it takes at least a few minutes for participants to clear their heads and begin remembering names (especially those of distant mentors).

After everyone has completed their timelines, meet in small groups or collectively discuss the following questions:

- *What did your literacy mentors have in common?*
- *What are some striking differences?*
- *What connections do you make to how you mentor students?*
- *What connections do you make to how you influence the literacy teaching and learning of your colleagues?*

It can be helpful to use the workshop time as a starting point in creating timelines. You might choose to have participants keep the timelines for a week, fleshing them out before a follow-up session. Teachers often have their memories jogged when they work with students over the week and are able to return the following week with deeper connections.