

The Benefits of Learning Groups for OU Microcredential Participants – Pauline McColgan, EIS Learning Coordinator.

Learning groups, or communities, refer to people getting together for the purpose of discussing their learning while undertaking a course. This might be the traditional idea of an in-person group meeting weekly, meeting online, or a WhatsApp group to post questions to one another.

What are the benefits of learning groups:

Learning through discussion

- There's lots of opportunities to engage in discussions and seek support during Microcredentials through online forums, it's an important part of the learning. This can be a big change from engaging in traditional face to face learning, and a learning group can bridge the gap for those who prefer to learn by talking and hearing people.
- Developing discussion skills as part of the learning group can help build confidence to then engage with fellow learners on the course.

Colleagues learning collaboratively

- Colleagues who wouldn't otherwise have opportunity to work together can find commonality through study.
- Microcredentials provide learning that is to be useful in our own contexts, which the activities help embed. Talking through activities with colleagues can help make connections with the workplace – both by reflecting on past and present, and planning on how to implement learning into practice.

Wellbeing benefits

- With a group agreement that encourages supportiveness, learning groups can help participants keep motivated. And at some point during 150 hours of study, we all need a bit of extra motivation.
- Learning groups fall somewhere in between individual study online, and being part of an in-person course. The New Economics Foundation's Five Ways to Wellbeing states two of the 'ways' are – connect with others, and keep learning. So, learning groups bringing people together to learn, might just have positive wellbeing impacts. Learning and Wellbeing as part of the EIS Our Wellbeing Matters Programme: <https://www.eis.org.uk/our-well-being-matters/learning>.

It's useful to keep in mind:

- Who is the facilitator – what's their role? It might be that the group is self-regulated by members, or a facilitator needs to remain present. As a facilitator, you can help identify issues quicker with regular engagement. If groups are self-regulated, ideally have more than two members, as pairings can put too much pressure on one if the other is struggling.
- Who else can be involved? Past participants from your own or other unions? Another colleague who knows about a topic being covered in the course?
- Learning groups grow and change with their participants. What started out as a coffee and catch up every Monday might become fortnightly online with WhatsApp check-in in between. Both formats are valid – as long as every learner has the opportunity to participate. And of course, some people won't want to participate. That's fine, as long as the opportunity to do so remains. EIS Organiser discusses the benefits of learning online with colleagues: <https://www.eis.org.uk/digital-skills/onlinelearningeilidh>.