

How to be an Enabler

In this document

This is a detailed description of the enabler role in **Get the Picture** study groups, and includes advice on

- some of the thinking behind the scheme
- establishing and managing a study group
- supporting the group's progress, and managing its resources
- maintaining the group's links with **Get the Picture**
- spotting and dealing with problems
- running meetings

Introduction

These notes are intended to help you if you have stepped forward to enable a study group under the **Get the Picture** film study programme. We should say straight off that you deserve an accolade for taking on this role, which entails extra responsibility and small thanks (but great satisfaction). Our support for you in doing what needs doing will include these notes, which will be revised and updated as the scheme progresses and we learn more about how study groups work, and online help and advice. In them you will find some advice about setting up and running a study group, a description of some of the difficulties we anticipate may occur, and guidance on successful modes of operation.

This learning programme has been developed and tested over a number of months with the help of trials groups, who were extremely generous with their time in checking the effectiveness of the approach and the study materials. Before reading these notes, you should have read the *Programme Guide*, and it will help you if you have to hand the other documents of the programme, namely *How to be a Participant* and the *Study Notes* for the segment for which your group is registered.

The importance of the group

This film study programme is intended for groups that come together (often under the auspices of an established film society) to follow a self-directed and self-paced programme of informal learning about film, in this instance using Mark Cousins' 15-chapter series of films *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* as an organizational base and an expert reference. Because a 15-session programme might be more than some participants want to commit to initially, we've broken it up into three 5-session segments.

It is probably true that the programme could be followed profitably by an individual, but we believe that, just as film societies embody the principle that

watching a film together as a group adds to the aesthetic and intellectual experience, so studying in a group and talking with other learners extends and enriches the learning experience.

All of the learning materials generated for the programme will reflect the expectation that film study groups will form, and meet regularly. Our experience with trials groups has emphasised the value of this approach. Each group is asked to identify a group enabler (who may be the individual who got the group together in the first place), who will be the main point of contact with **Get the Picture**, and who will co-ordinate the activities of the group.

The role of the group enabler

Many aspects of the group enabler role will be familiar to anyone involved in a film society: setting dates and times of meetings, ensuring that the group has what it needs, booking a room if that is required, and so on. These tasks can be delegated, of course, but someone needs to make sure that everything is done. Beyond these tasks, we have identified two other key functions. Firstly, the group enabler is a reporter: we ask that you let us know who is in the group, and when you started. You also need to let us know when you have finished, so we can send out a letter of completion to all participants, recognizing their achievement. Secondly, the group enabler may well have to work at motivating participants who find the processes of self-managed learning unfamiliar and/or difficult. You may need, for example to persuade participants that preparation for each meeting by reading the study notes fully, and watching the relevant *Story of Film* chapter more than once, really is necessary. There are many people who love film, but who can't see the point of multiple viewings.

What you will need

- a group of participants who are willing to commit to 5 discussion meetings at least. We recommend that each group will comprise between three and seven individuals, because outside these limits, fruitful discussion and exchange of ideas can be problematic. So if eight

people want to be involved, it might well be worth considering forming two groups of four. If there are nine or more, we would strongly advise the formation of two groups (each with its own enabler).

- every participant will need access to the box set *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*.
- a realistic programme of meetings that everyone can attend. This will involve a balance. A group of members with busy lives may prefer meeting (say) once a month, which will allow everyone to see the relevant chapter enough times to take it in, and get through a reasonable selection of the individual activities, as well as watching the key films for the next discussion. Other groups, made up of people with more time to spend on the individual study activities, will want to meet more frequently (fortnightly, for example). Be prepared to be flexible as your group progresses and finds its groove.
- the resources to support the programme. These consist of pdf documents that everyone has to have (the *Programme Guide*, *How to be a Participant* and the set of *Study Notes*), which all group members can download from the **Get the Picture** website. It follows that you and all participants will need a broadband connection and an email account. The only software required for each participant is a web browser and Adobe reader, or some other means of reading pdf documents, as well as email client software, of course.

Scheduling meetings/managing time

Trials groups found time management to be a key issue. Some, those who elected to plan on the basis of fortnightly meetings, quickly ran into problems, because the study programme asks participants to commit a lot of extra time in a life pattern that's often already pretty full. The problems became more intractable if the group was trying to work on the basis of sharing one box set, because the logistics of moving it about make it difficult for all participants to see the film chapter for that all-important second viewing. Further problems arose when participants tried to tackle all the individual activities in the study notes. Only someone with a lot of spare time could cover that much ground.

The enabler can help with all these problems. You can

- hold regular reviews of meeting frequency and reschedule meetings with longer gaps between if need be
- suggest/make arrangements for the procurement of an extra box set, or box sets, of *The Story of Film*
- ensure the group is agreed on which topics to discuss and which areas of study to address
- clarify that the individual activities are optional, in the sense that everyone will benefit from doing some of them, but it's not obligatory for anyone to do all of them.

How meetings should work

The purpose of study group meetings is discussion, and the study notes provide questions to prompt that discussion. They also contain suggestions for individual study and research relating to the *The Story of Film* chapter under discussion, and these may well feed in to the group discussion. The meetings will need to be chaired, by someone whose role is acknowledged, because discussion groups can need help to stick to the topic, and some individuals may need support to get their voice heard. Normally, this support will come from you as enabler.

As a group, you will not just be learning about film. You will also be learning about how to be an effective self-organized study group, and skills (including chairing skills) may need to be developed. Someone who has not done much in the way of chairing before may need supporting, just as someone who thinks they can do it just fine may need advising otherwise. The important thing is to keep the steady learning progress of the whole group on course. It has to be recognized that participants will bring to meetings greatly varying levels of prior knowledge, and greatly varying experience of education, or of discussion as an activity. So the role of the chair/enabler may sometimes be difficult and complex. If you can bring your group through all the discussion sessions in the current study segment intact, and still talking to each other, you will have really achieved something. If they come to the end of the programme wanting more, you will deserve a medal.

Generating and supporting discussion

Enablers should be prepared for the fact that participants will bring to the discussions a wide range of prior knowledge, a wide range of levels of confidence, and a wide range of discussion styles. The discussion topics in the *Study Notes* will give shape and structure to the event, but successful chairing of a discussion event requires both

sensitivity and determination. If this is your first attempt at this sort of thing, don't worry, it's not as hard as it looks. We applaud your courage at having a go, and we can assure you that you will get better as you go along, as long as you follow a few basic rules.

- agree the ground rules for meeting behaviour before you start
- control the discussion timing, not too rigidly, but firmly
- no one person's voice should dominate (including yours)
- no-one should be excluded from discussion (even by their own shyness)
- it's OK to encourage (or even press) a participant to elaborate or clarify an assertion
- if things seem to be going wrong, ask **Get the Picture** for help
- it's often a good idea to discuss how meetings/discussions are going with the group, especially if you think they could be going better
- set the right tone by sharing these ground rules with the group at the outset.

That 'difficult' group member

These come in many guises. Some are amenable to advice or group pressure, others less so. Common experiences include those who like to talk, and don't 'get' the idea of offering other people space, or who come unprepared, and can't participate (or both). These you can, and should, deal with directly (though it does help to have agreed a plan with your deputy - see below). Equally common are those who are shy, or who need a clear gap in the talk before they can get involved: these you can support by creating that gap, and inviting them directly. It does help to ask people to read the *How to be a Participant* guide thoroughly, or to read it again properly. It spells out the approach that's needed, and is a useful external lever, since participants have notionally agreed to what it says by joining the group.

A typical meeting

We anticipate that most meetings will follow a pattern that includes

- deciding how much time to allocate to each discussion question in the current meeting - remembering that you can choose which questions to discuss (and which not to)
- a discussion phase
- a wind-up phase to allow for planning for the next session (including deciding which discussion questions to prepare for, reminding participants about the key films), ensuring everyone has access to a copy of *The Story of Film*, airing of difficulties and other issues.

The preliminary meeting

The preliminary meeting is a special case: it's not for discussion, but to establish the group. Here is what you would normally expect to cover (the agenda).

- final check on the participants - who's in, who's out
- setting the meeting schedule (you will have asked everyone to bring diaries)
- checking resources access (how are you going to manage everyone seeing each chapter twice, has everyone obtained all key documents)
- has everyone read *How to be a Participant*. Properly. All the way through.
- preparation for first discussion: this includes reminding people about reading the *Study Notes* (properly etc), seeing the relevant *Story of Film* chapter (twice), and at least trying to watch the nominated key films (films which Mark Cousins cites in the *Story of Film* chapter, and on which a lot of the study group discussion will draw. A list of key films for each segment is available on the **Get the Picture** website).

Refreshments

Some trials groups mentioned how refreshments could be disruptive, and could break the train of discussion if not carefully managed. By all means enjoy refreshments and the break they provide, but do remember that in a guided study programme like this where the emphasis is on learning, you can recognise the value of the time that participants have given up to be there by agreeing a specific break time and not over-running, or by simply leaving the refreshments till the meeting has ended.

Resources

Inevitably, questions will arise about something film-related which no-one can answer satisfactorily. In planning this informal study programme we have generally kept clear of technical or scholarly terminology, but when it's necessary, it's necessary. Similarly we have refrained from recommending a set text, because we're not sure it would be helpful, and it might put some potential participants off. However, as enabler, you may find it useful to have access to one or more reference texts, to look up terms, or concepts, for clarification. The following titles have been recommended for this purpose. *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford Paperback Reference) by Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell
The Oxford Guide to Film Studies by Richard Dyer, E. Ann Kaplan, Paul Willemsen and John Hill
The Cinema Book (BFI) by Pam Cook
Cinema Studies: the Key Concepts (Routledge) by Susan Hayward.

Individual terms are defined or clarified in the relevant study notes.

A successful enabler

As the group progresses, you may well lose focus on whether you're doing OK or not. To help you, here are some prompts: a successful enabler will

- recruit a group (of a suitable size) likely to last the course
- establish communication with **Get the Picture** to register the group, ensure everyone has the pdf documents needed to complete the programme segment
- organize a schedule of meetings which all participants agree will give time to undertake suitable preparation for each discussion,
- let everyone know what the schedule is (and be prepared to adjust it)
- if necessary, organize accommodation for meetings/viewing venues
- manage meetings so that everyone participates and benefits
- prepare for discussions at least as thoroughly as other participants
- let us know when the study group has completed the programme segment, and what you want to do next.

You and your deputy

When participants commit to a series of study group sessions, in most cases, they organise part of their lives around them. This means that if the unforeseen happens (you are ill, for example), sessions will still need to take place as scheduled without you. So we strongly encourage you to recruit a deputy. This brings a number of benefits. It means that there's someone you can call on if you need some help with something. It's also often useful to talk through plans, issues and approaches with a sympathetic partner, who can give an alternative viewpoint. And if study groups take off in your community, there may be a need for another enabler who knows the ropes... We do urge you to recruit and work with a deputy enabler. You know it makes sense.

The pleasures of learning

People will involve themselves in a film study group for a wide range of reasons, but they will only stay involved if it is pleasurable. For most participants this entails agreeable behaviour, mutual respect, roughly equal levels of participation. Some will want a strong social element, others less so. But everyone will appreciate and respond to a businesslike and efficient approach to the role of enabling, and we strongly commend this approach to you.

Good luck!