

# INFORMATION AND START-UP ADVICE FOR GROUPS

*This leaflet is aimed at group leaders and potential group leaders. It is based upon a document by Martin Funnell from Merton U3A (South London) who gives great advice on running a U3A group based on his experience.*

*It includes some social matters as well as practical details. Martin's advice is: "Pick and choose what you need out of it - have a go - and do it your way!"*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Leaders in U3A are more often amateurs bitten with enthusiasm rather than experts in the field. Usually it's best to have one person in charge and this paper is written for that person.

You will probably already have some idea in your mind what you want to achieve in the group. This idea should be kept in mind as it is probably the best one to motivate you over the coming months. You may of course gather people who want to do something else - so compromise may be inevitable – but it's useless trying to do what some other person has suggested if it isn't easy for you. People in sympathy with your approach will stay with you.

## **GETTING STARTED**

The usual procedure is to work out what you propose to do, prepare a handout, advertise an initial meeting and cajole members to come. Talking directly to people is by far the most effective way. If you are not used to developing ideas of this sort into complex reality just "keep going" and deal with problems as they arise.

The first meeting can be more or less democratic, and can settle the way you will carry on, where and when you meet and so on. Some initial meetings have produced large numbers of people, but most groups start modestly and manage in someone's room. A few members usually drop out after a first meeting - but don't be put out by this. Your finally agreed programme needs to be publicised accurately.

*Be friendly.* Research shows that many U3A members attend groups for social reasons as much as for learning, and it is important to welcome members and sustain a friendly atmosphere. You can describe many U3A groups as "Parties with a Purpose". Participation is a good way to bind a group together, and people can feel valued if offered small jobs (or big ones such as keeping tabs on everyone's telephone number, address and attendance).

*Meeting in members' premises.* If you meet in a hall there are probably rules to obey. Meeting in members' homes poses other problems. We curse having to tidy the room in advance and remove minor hazards, but have never had a bad accident whilst accommodating groups of

U3A – but we do take precautions. We confine coffee to a separate room where there is a big table to put things down on so that there is no spillage. The host member is normally free to invite non-U3A friends to visit, but U3A insurance only covers members and potential members. We are also ready for coat hanging, WC, parking and public transport problems.

Timing and Refreshment. Instant coffee seems to be a regular feature of U3A meetings, and we usually get it over at the start (10 am) so that the meeting has a clear run (from 10.30 to noon), but some long sessions seem better with a break in the middle. Tea-making volunteers deserve more status than they normally receive. I like decent biscuits – and speakers like a glass of water!

Confidence trick. Running a group needs to be done with confidence so that everyone anticipates having a good time, and one has to conceal the natural anxiety that something may go wrong - but disasters are very rare. I keep a spare video on the shelf just in case...

Waiting list? If a group gets too big for comfort it's a pity to turn people away, and there are other options which may be possible: - a bigger room, running the course/group twice or making a "waiting list" for a later re-run. You may be tempted to take people off your list if they have not attended regularly and you want to let in "new blood".

### **STUDYING - TALKS AND VISITS**

Hard work. It can be quite hard work preparing a year's programme, and I now prefer to find a way of either spreading the load by using other speakers or using a semi-ready-made course – such as following a book or a set of videos. But it can be fun working up a new idea, and the hard work can be very rewarding. I found a monthly meeting worked well, and for a while we had a visit as well between each meeting – and a packed programme like this keeps everyone interested.

Variations in programmes. Some leaders like to have a theme for the year and others take subjects more at random. Some courses/groups only run for a few sessions and others run for years. Big groups using invited speakers have to select subjects from what speakers can offer.

Members contributing. Most sessions are likely to be given by one person, but can be shared. The "workshop" technique usually requires the subject to be split so that each person contributes a part. Discussion is usually best after a presentation, and time should always be allowed for questions. Getting the members to contribute is good for morale – but not always rewarding. U3A is famous for trying out new ways – and quizzes and other party games can be adapted to add variety.

Speaking. I like to appear spontaneous, work to notes and never read a script, but my wife types her paper and then hands out copies in the traditional University manner. A bit of both works well.

Outside speakers. Big groups need good speakers, and although many can offer a choice of subject there is inevitably an interesting diversity in a year's programme, and such a group tends to finish up similar to a local amenity group outside U3A. We do not invite speakers without a personal recommendation, and beware lists without a named recommender. I find speakers by joining specialist groups and asking around.

Regular speakers usually have a list of subjects already prepared, and some want a fee and travel expenses. If they do then they probably expect an audience of 50 or more, which may not be your scene - though my branch (Merton) has occasional big meetings open to the whole membership.

Visits. Visits to places of interest to the group help vary the content and can be very inclusive if the group come up with the ideas.

## **PRESENTATIONS**

A good display is well worthwhile. Whereas a scrappy presentation wastes time and can be irritating. As there does not seem to be any comprehensive guide to this subject I have written the following practical aspects of presentation in the hope that it might help.

Complicated equipment. If you are inviting speakers you ought to take a professional attitude to any technical equipment you use, as there is nothing more embarrassing than a distinguished speaker stalled in full spate by faulty equipment. The commonest thing to go wrong with a talk is for a plug to come out of a socket – usually in the wall.

Equipment is getting unbelievably complicated, and with hired gear in a hired hall there are countless possibilities for going wrong, and you need someone who is acquainted with equipment to organise it for you. For gear owned by a U3A there is usually one person who understood it originally. Treat this person with deference and don't forget to thank them even if things go wrong.

Choose your room. Proper black-out lining is expensive but worthwhile if you want to show pictures at their best. Some halls with clerestory windows cannot be blacked out, and are useless for daytime projection. For any projection we use proper "blackout" lining to the curtains, and we turn off all the lights and dim the lectern light - which all makes for a really gutsy picture. Real projection rooms have a black ceiling – but we are not willing to go this far!

Rooms with ceilings below 10 feet are problematic with large audiences as heads get in the way of seeing and the reflected whiteness of the ceiling spoils the image. I set the screen bottom edge above seated head level (5 feet) if I can. Increasingly, groups are using a digital projector and allied lap-top computer, which means that digital photos can easily be included. Some members have masses of digital slides and may be able to send you copies on line or on disc

Hearing what your speaker says. Speech is a major problem with U3A. A lot of U3A members are quite deaf. Some learn lip-reading and need to see your mouth, but it helps everyone if you can avoid important words at the beginning of sentences, speak slowly with clear enunciation of consonants and sum up occasionally.

For gatherings of more than 20 the speaker needs miking. Speakers find holding a mike a bit tedious and if they turn their heads they “fade” with a fixed one, so they need a head-set mike. Everyone uses radio mikes these days to avoid the long trip wire, and these are no longer expensive. The amplifier and loud-speaker equipment is often provided conveniently in one box that is easy to store.

### **MATERIAL IN RESOURCE CENTRE**

There is a variety of material in the U3A Resource Centre available for loan. This can be accessed via the link on Chorley U3A website.

### **LATER DEVELOPMENTS**

When you have been running for a while you may wish to contact other similar groups to share experiences and to join in events. There are certain enterprises that work better with larger numbers than one group can muster, although they may not form the bread-and-butter of your activity. Weekend visits using hotels and a hired coach, or even foreign travel are examples.

In order to make contact *Register your group* with the National Subject Coordinator.

### **FINAL THOUGHT**

The basis of all learning and creativity is of course “love” - and this also applies to running a group. Love your subject and get enthusiastic about it. This will communicate to others and you will get mutual support from your group. Hope for positive keen members and have fun with your subject. It also helps if you get to know (and hopefully like) your members and are careful never to make them appear small. Your U3A will rely on you as a leader to check on the welfare of your members.