Student Subgroup Expectations

Organizational Expectations:

1. It’s the job of the subgroup leader to coordinate a regular meeting time and ensure that rooms are properly reserved.

2. Plan on meetings of 2-3 hours. The students may complain, but discussing 3 papers in one sitting and rehearsing a one-hour talk often takes that long (Discussing more than 3 papers/meeting almost never works).

3. It’s critically important to schedule at least one practice talk in front of the subgroup, because the senior graduate students will be able to anticipate some of the tough questions from the NTP faculty and make sure the talks match the NTP format.
   
   My ideal subgroup timeline:
   
   Week -1: send out 2-3 good reviews if possible (ideally <30 pages total excluding references or nobody will read them)

   Week 1 (if time permits, can split into two weeks but not at the cost of practice talks): review topic, learn general framework for approaching topic (subgroup leader), schedule regular meeting time if necessary, pick speakers [interim: subgroup leader helps speaker 1 pick good empirical papers in the field & distributes to all students]

   Week 2: read papers related to talk 1 & decide which should be used in talk [subgroup leader helps speaker 2 pick good papers]

   Week 3: read papers related to talk 2 & decide which should be used in talk [subgroup leader helps speaker 3 pick good papers]

   Week 4: read papers related to talk 3 & decide which should be used in talk + go over outline for talk 1

   Week 5: practice talk 1 + go over outline for talk 2

   Week 6: practice talk 2 + go over outline for talk 3

   Week 7: practice talk 3

Content of talks:

NTP seminars are not supposed to be comprehensive surveys of a topic. The seminars should be focused on specific papers or stories within the area of the general topic; the audience wants to hear the story of how this new field developed or why it’s such a hot topic and evaluate the evidence for it themselves. It is therefore important that the subgroup leader help the speakers find subtopics that the speakers find interesting. The subgroup leader’s specialized knowledge of the subject is crucial to making sure the talks are based on good studies in the field.

Related to topic selection, most incoming graduate students will not understand that a research talk tells a story, whether emerging or historical. The best subgroup
leaders use phrases like “the GABA story” throughout the subgroup and make sure each talk tells a story. Do not, however, treat all three talks as 1 story and save the punchline for the 3rd talk, as nobody will be in attendance by week 3. Good stories might be controversial and might not have a clear conclusion yet.

**Key roles of the best subgroup leaders:**

1. **Introduction/Framework:** Drawing from their expertise in the field, the subgroup leader should highlight the key features of the topic very early on in the subgroup and ensure that these come through in the talks. Giving the subgroup a good review or two and then leading an introductory discussion can usually cover this.

2. **Topic & Paper Selection Advisor:** When left on their own, students will unknowingly pick bad papers or topics. It’s a great idea to let them try to pick on their own first (often subgroup leaders have the speaker send them 4-5 candidate papers they might like to cover and the subgroup leader helps winnow it down or substitute so that there are 3 good papers). Students expect the subgroup leader to ensure that at least some of the papers are good papers.

3. **Expert Commentator:** As the expert, when the group is trudging through figures with new techniques and wondering whether a given study approached the topic correctly, an expert in the field can read between the lines and say "typically, studies in this area do test X to make sure that this isn't an artifact" or "this is a really good test that not a lot of studies do". Those of us who don’t work in the area could never come up with that type of knowledge on our own.

4. **Authoritative Facilitator:** As the facilitator, they need to come up with a system to ensure that everybody participates in the discussion and reads the papers. Subgroup leaders need to call on people if necessary and ask simple questions like "Joe, what do you think of figure 4?" That type of facilitation would be very awkward if it came from a fellow student. Another part of facilitation is to keep graduate students interested in the work. When left to their own devices, groups of graduate students seem to always find technical flaws in every study that lead them to be dismissive of all research as faulty data. A good subgroup leader will say "Look, obviously it has some flaws, but there's a reason Science chose to publish it as an Article" and will help the students see the breakthroughs.

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