

Study Circles

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Tool summary

A Study Circle is a small, diverse group of 8-to-12 participants who meet for about two hours weekly for four to six weeks to address critical public issues in a democratic and collaborative way. It is led by a neutral facilitator where people consider the issue from many points of view while the discussion progresses from a session on personal experience of the issue, to sessions that examine other points of view on the issue, to a session that considers strategies for action and change. The popularity of the Study Circle as a participatory tool for social and community development can be traced to *Everyday Democracy*; a non-profit, non-partisan, non-government organization based in the U.S.A. Everyday Democracy has used Study Circles to help communities at local level overcome interracial tensions, solve problems within communities, improve relationships of communities with the police and the schools, training and engaging the youth in a dialogue process.

What is it?

Study Circles have been traditional methods for liberal adult education in Nordic and Scandinavian countries for more than one hundred years at least. Oscar Olsson, also known as “the father of the Study Circle”, is considered as the initiator of Study Circles in, Sweden in 1902.

Study Circles are developed within and by communities and driven by people who want to reach out to others so that an issue of particular interest can be explored in an open, generally informal platform that is both instructive and constructive. There is no one set model but usually a study circle will involve between five and 20 people, though some suggest a maximum of 12 to 15. The participants should have diverse backgrounds and meet for a couple of hours every week over several weeks

A study circle is led by a trained, neutral facilitator. It should ideally begin with discussion materials which allow participants to see the issue from different points of view and to offer their personal experiences and ideas. It does not begin with a particular solution in mind but instead allows participants to develop their own approach in a collaborative way. In some cases, it can lead to on-going dialogue, where other study circles or a larger community gathering (where ideas for action and change) can be further discussed. As mentioned earlier *Everyday Democracy*, is a U.S. based CSO (formerly known as the Study Circles Resource Center). It has helped organize study circles in more than 550 communities addressing a wide range of issues including racial

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equity, poverty, diversity, immigration, police-community relations, violence, education, neighborhoods, issues affecting the youth and growth and sprawl. The principles of the Study Circle are as follows:

- Involve everyone and demonstrate that the whole community is welcome and needed.
- Embrace diversity by reaching out to all kinds of people,
- Share knowledge, resources, power, and decision making.
- Combine dialogue and deliberation, and create public talk that builds understanding and explores a range of solutions.
- Connect deliberative dialogue to social, political, and policy change.

Study Circles have also resonated in the Scandinavian countries based very much on the same principles as in the U.S.A though their scope is broader. For e.g. the Swedish Study Circles involve up to two million adults every year either to facilitate acquisition of new skills or to an issue of community importance. Their approach is being adapted elsewhere by community groups, farmers' associations, unions, churches, and businesses, as a way to both educate and activate people on social issues.

How is it done?

At the heart of an effective effort are many small dialogue groups that meet several times over a period of weeks to explore a common issue. A small comfortable setting is best suited for the session in order for people to relax and see each other easily. The gatherings are guided by trained peer facilitators from diverse backgrounds to manage the discussion and make room for all voices. Before commencing, the group should agree on the ground rules. As the discussion progresses, the facilitator writes down comments or questions on a blackboard or flip-chart. Between meetings participants review materials such as articles or self-produced documents to be used as a springboard for the next meeting and to help fill any information gap.

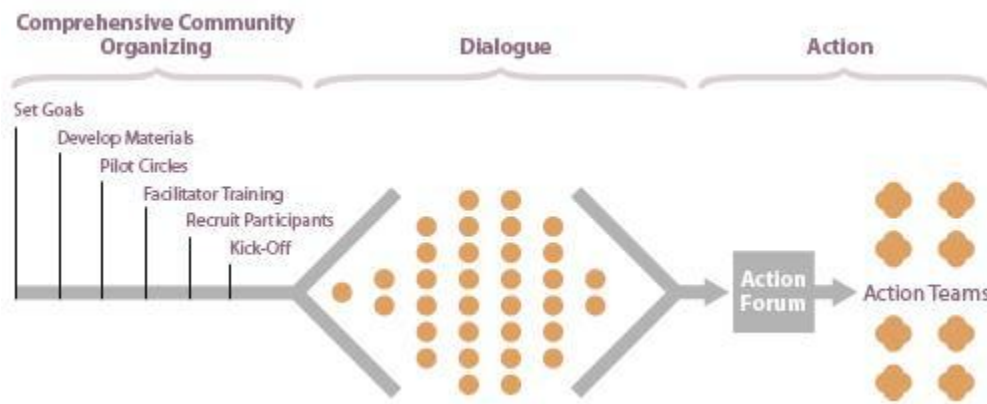
Non-partisan: accessible discussion materials act as the trigger for the conversation. The first session is often devoted to personal stories and concerns while subsequent sessions explore the nature of the issue including facts and figures. Participants examine the issue from many points of view, consider possible approaches, and ultimately develop ideas for action and change.

Sometimes the small-group work is launched and energized at a large community-wide event, and often gets wrapped up with another large gathering to help spur an on-going activity.

The approach developed by *Everyday Democracy* consists of three primary elements:



- *The organizing that goes into bringing people to the table:* Representatives of the community come together to design a process, set goals and plan for the launch of diverse community conversations and the support of action ideas that will come from the conversations.
- *The dialogue over several sessions:* Many small groups meet to discuss a common concern.
- *The movement from dialogue to collaborative action:* The talk leads to concrete ideas and action planning. Everyday citizens work along with people from government agencies, nonprofits, and private sector groups to implement changes.



A diagrammatic representation of the three stage process of a Study Circle
Source: www.everyday-democracy.org

The best way to engage a significant number of people from every sector of the community is to create a diverse working group of community leaders who will plan and organize the effort. The organizers themselves need to take time to experience the dialogue and build trust. They can then define the overarching goals and develop recruitment strategies that emphasize diversity, inclusion, and collaborative problem-solving. Creating an explicit link between the dialogue process and measurable community change is vital to successful organizing.

The structure of the dialogue is critical to the full participation of people from different backgrounds. It needs to give space for story telling, connecting personal concerns to public issues, developing trust and relationships. When people have the chance to do that, they can much more productively explore the nature of an issue, examine data with interest, learn from each other, look at it from all angles, and grapple with tradeoffs. And at that point, they are often eager to start talks regarding approaches to change, finding common ground, and setting priorities for action.

Benefits



- Study circles offer people the opportunity to sit down and discuss community issues of interest in a relaxed setting.
- They are instructive in that they allow conversations that reflect as many views as possible, with people representing all ages, races, religions, political ideologies and income levels.
- They are also constructive in that they encourage citizens to address the issues that affect their lives and open the door to on-going activities and a larger process leading to change.
- People also form new community connections and begin thinking of themselves as members of a community capable of solving its problems.
- Within the community as a whole, this kind of civic engagement builds and strengthens connections among individuals, organizations, sectors, and between the public and community institutions.
- As a result, collaborative solutions to public problems come about. The solutions that citizens themselves have developed and want to take part in implementing.
- When residents and public officials spend time in these diverse conversations, and when everyone has a say in creating solutions, they are more likely to work together to see those ideas become reality.

Challenges and lessons

- Overcoming a preconceived notion that they already know exactly what's wrong and what needs to be done is very crucial. An organizing group needs to frame the goal of the study circle in broader terms giving room for all kinds of people and organizations to bring their voices and resources to the table.
- Lack of diversity in the organizing coalition renders the study circle ineffective. Sometimes the first impulse is to partner with obvious "stakeholders", those with a clear interest in the issue or with financial resources to contribute. Instead, the priority should be on energy, experience, ideas, connections, and trust than the money power.
- Failing to listen to each other defeats the very purpose of the dialogue. Have an intentional process for working together. Establish times for dialogue, to create trust and develop relationships.
- Failing to engage residents is a fundamental flaw. Many "public consultation" efforts happen between major community institutions like service agencies, schools or local government who have the time and can better control the agenda. It is critical to engage residents in any community building process.
- Lots of talk and no action over considerable length of time can burn people out. The best change ideas come from the community itself, and support for turning them into action often come from the partnerships formed through dialogue between residents and institutional leaders.
- One of the hardest tasks of any kind of on-going community work is assessing it and telling the success story. If people don't know their efforts have led to change, much



of the power of what they have done is lost. Valuing and measuring process as well as impact, and making the assessment process as participatory as the dialogue and action, are some of the useful tips in this endeavor.



Key resources

Andrews, Cecile. *Study Circles: Schools for Life. In Context, A Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*, Fall 1992

<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC33/Andrews.htm>

- ☞ This article is a concise introduction to Study Circles and their application in the context of U.S.A while also listing organizational resources on Study Circles

Australian Study Circles Network:

<http://studycircles.net.au/home>

- ☞ The Australian Study Circles Network assists and works with individuals, organizations and communities wishing to establish a Dialogue to Change Program in Australia. Their website contains several case studies and useful documents on Study Circles

Baltic University Teachers' Website: *Guideline for Consultants of Study Circles*

http://www.balticuniv.uu.se/teacher/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=109&Itemid=67

- ☞ These guidelines on the methodology of Study Circles represent experience accumulated during the "Education for Change" project in various countries around the Baltic Sea.

Bjerkaker, Sturla: *The Study Circle – a method for learning, a tool for democracy.* Paper for the FACE Annual Conference 2003

<http://www.face.stir.ac.uk/documents/Paper109Bjerkader.pdf>

- ☞ This is a concise introduction to Study Circle methodology situated in the context of Scandinavian countries.

Everyday Democracy

<http://www.everyday-democracy.org>

- ☞ The pioneering leader of Study Circles, *Everyday Democracy* is a non-profit, non-partisan, non government organization based in the U.S.A. Everyday Democracy has organized numerous Study Circles to help local level communities overcome interracial tensions, problem solving within communities, improve relationships of communities with the police and the schools, training and for engaging the youth in a dialogue process. Their website is a repository of resources on Study Circles

Everyday Democracy (2001): *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change*

<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.39.aspx>



- ☞ A comprehensive guide for developing a community-wide study circle program from start to finish

Everyday Democracy (2003): *What Works: Study Circles in the Real World*
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.19.aspx>

- ☞ A practical, short publication based on the *Toward Competent Communities* study of best practices in study circle programs.

Everyday Democracy (2008): *Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation*
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.91.aspx>

- ☞ A discussion guide spanning six sessions to help all kinds of people take part in meaningful dialogue to examine gaps among racial and ethnic groups and create institutional and policy change

Everyday Democracy (2008): *A Guide to Training Public Dialogue Facilitators* (incorporates elements on training on structural racism, and on cultural competency)
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.106.aspx>

- ☞ This is a comprehensive training curriculum and includes advice for creating a training program for both youth and adults, with expanded facilitator training, plus suggestions for ongoing support and evaluation of dialogue facilitators

Everyday Democracy: *Online Issue guide exchange*
www.everyday-democracy.org/exchange

- ☞ This is a free, online resource available to anyone who is interested in broad-based, inclusive dialogue leading to community action. It is a place for people to share, create, and discuss dialogue materials.

Everyday Democracy: *Discussion Guides*
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/DiscussionGuides.aspx>

- ☞ Everyday Democracy publishes discussion guides on a variety of public issues. Each guide consists of 4-to-6 sessions in which the conversation progresses from a session on personal experience ("how does the issue affect me?") to sessions providing a broader perspective ("what are others saying about the issue?") to a session on action ("What can we do about the issue?"). These Guides are available for download from the above link.

Folkbildningsradet, Sweden
<http://www.folkbildning.se/page/492/english.htm>

- ☞ Swedish folkbildning is the collective name for the activities conducted by the country's folk high schools and study associations in the form of courses, study circles and cultural activities. Folkbildning is a part of the liberal non-formal

educational system. Every year, several million Swedes participate in folkbildning activities.

Pioneers of Change Associates (2006): *Mapping Dialogue - A research project profiling dialogue tools and processes*

<http://pioneersofchange.net/library/dialogue/Dialogue%20Project%20V%202.0c.pdf>

☞ Amongst other dialogue tools, this useful Guide profiles also study circle methodology along with a case study of Kufunda village in Zimbabwe.

Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan (SV), Sweden

http://www.sv.se/templates/SvStandardPage_9687.aspx?epslanguage=EN

☞ Founded in 1967, SV is one of the largest association of study circles in Sweden with an estimated 60,000 circles. SV is also partnering with CSOs in other countries to promote the Study Circle methodology. SV's website is a treasure house of information on Study Circles.

Study Circle Bangladesh

<http://www.studycirclebangladesh.info/pub.php>

☞ Study Circle Bangladesh is a SIDA funded programme which aims to integrate the Study Circle methodology into the community development framework. Their website has very useful operations manuals and guides for facilitators and organizers of Study Circle.

The Financial Express, Dhaka August 18, 2007 : *Swedish 'study circle' helps cut school dropout in Bogra*

http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/search_index.php?page=detail_news&news_id=8270

☞ This newspaper report describes how the study circle methodology has helped reduce school dropout rate in Bogra, Bangladesh

Velichko, Aliona. *Welcome to the World of Study Circles*. SV Sweden In Educator 1-6, 2004-2005 http://aha.adukatar.net/storage/users/2/2/images/16/Digest_pages_23-25.pdf

☞ This is a short introductory article on Swedish Study Circles tracing its origin, methodology and application

Wisdom Circles, U.S.A

<http://www.wisdomcircle.org>

☞ Wisdom Circles is both the name of a variant of study circle method and also an organization whose commitment is to give voice to the values of compassionate community and the make integrity a visible force in the world.



Case studies

Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland, U.S.A

Since 2003, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has been demonstrating what can happen when a community institutionalizes the dialogue-to-action process. With 137,745 students, Montgomery County is the 16th largest school district in the United States, as well as one of its most diverse. MCPS has been using study circles to address racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement and parental involvement. Trained facilitators help parents, teachers, and students from different backgrounds build relationships, explore each other's cultures, learn about racial and ethnic barriers, and plan action to help all students succeed. Already, over 1,300 people have participated in more than 87 study circles. Many circles are bilingual and several have been conducted in Spanish. Outcomes include: more teacher awareness of the impact of race on schools and student achievement; better strategies to engage parents; and a school discipline plan that treats students of color fairly.

Sources:

www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/studycircles/
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.101.aspx>
<http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Article.694.aspx>

Environmental Justice Collaborative, Indianapolis, U.S.A

In an Indianapolis neighborhood where most of the 10,000 residents are African-American, community leader and activist Reverend Ray Wilkins learned that an environmental analysis had found that a nearby business had improperly disposed of trichloroethylene, a toxic chemical that had possibly seeped into subsurface water flowing beneath the church property. The issue was discussed in a dialogue-to-change program, and participants went on to form Environmental Justice Collaborative (EJC) which is working with a growing list of partners to raise awareness of the continuing toxic threats in their neighborhood. So far, the effort has produced several results. The Indiana Black Expo and the Marion County Health Department are testing children for lead poisoning, the EJC is hoping to get a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to continue remediation efforts for properties affected by toxins, and the EJC is teaming with university graduate students do a full lead contamination assessment and illegal dumping study.

Source: <http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Article.744.aspx>

Youth Study Circle in Port Nolloth, South Africa

Even though the small resort town of Port Nolloth was the centre of a small-scale diamond recovery mining operations, it was plagued by poverty and HIV/AIDS. In 2004, Godson Mdlalana took a citizen leadership course through the Institute for Democracy



in Africa. A year later he organized a Study Circle in his hometown. They first tackled HIV/AIDS, and began working with Love Life, an organization that works with young people to make them aware of the dangers of unsafe sex. The study group also focused on unemployment with each meeting being dedicated to training in certain areas. Together, they learned how to formulate a business plan, among other skills, and one by one, they have found new jobs.

Source:

http://www.idasa.org.za/index.asp?page=output_details.asp%3FRID%3D1002%26OTID%3D4%26PID%3D67

