

THE STUDY CIRCLE METHOD

Extracts from a booklet by C. Kindstrom

The aims of the study circle

Attending a study circle is a participatory and dynamic process based on the experience of the participants, the skills of the study circle leader and the quality of the study material. This process represents the unique pedagogical method of the study circle. As opposed to conventional education that is based on a hierarchical model, in which the teacher disseminates knowledge from the top down, a study circle involves interaction in which all participants contribute.

A study circle is:

- Free and voluntary studies of conditions and opportunities for humanity, society, working life, nature and culture in the surroundings.
- To understand the strength, power and pleasure in creating something together.
- Together with others, be able to acquire new knowledge and to scrutinise conditions with a view of developing their own society.

In the study circle, work is built around the participants' search for knowledge according to their own needs and interests. Work is characterised by democratic values where the individual's exchange of experience and analysis are the guiding factor. The studies depend on active contribution from the participants in the planning and implementation of the work.

A study circle is a small group of people (normally between 7-12 participants) who during a certain time period repeatedly meet and carry out planned studies under the leadership of an accepted leader. The main factors are:

- The participants' experiences and skills
- A study plan or specially produced study material
- A well-informed and trained leader who is mainly responsible for the study circle work.

Basic principles

One can say that the work in a study circle is a vivid, active process that relates knowledge to action and social change, to development and creativity. The method can be described in some basic principles.

Equality and democracy

The work of the study circle is based on the concept of equality among the participants. Democracy and democratic principles are essential for the work of the study circle. It should always be a spirit of informality in a study circle. The study circle leader's work is to inspire dialogue - an exchange of views and information in a relaxed manner.

Experiences and co-operation

The work in a study circle must start from the participants' experiences and knowledge. Beginning with their everyday experiences, with identified problems, they will bring new knowledge into the study circle. The work and the progress of a study circle are characterised by co-operation and companionship, of working together towards mutually shared and resolved-objectives. The participants assist each other instead of competing. They share the progress and setbacks of their joint work. Such study situation provides security for all and contributes to openness.

The freedom of the study circle and its right to set its objectives

The objective of a study circle is to be determined by the participants and shall rest on their needs and wishes. A study circle formed within an organisation will always have to work within the frame set by the objectives of that organisation. Freedom walks hand in hand with responsibility. It is the participants of the study circle who will be responsible for how they work and how the studies are carried out. This can never be delegated to others without interfering seriously with the freedom of the study circle.

Continuity, planning and active participation

Continuity means that studies have to be organised and planned. The objectives set or considered and approved by the participants, imply that studies must follow some kind of a plan. The participants of the study circle must be actively involved. The participants' active contribution is

the base, which the study circle is built upon. People learn best when they are active. They cannot share responsibilities as participants without acting, without personally having an opinion.

Study material

All study circles should be equipped with some kind of study materials, which taken together should cover the intended number of meetings of the study circle, contain facts, highlight points for discussions and guidelines for the work in the study circle. Very often the study material is specially prepared for use in study circles. The participants themselves in the study circle can also produce the study material.

Change and action

The study circle would not flourish if the participants were only concerned with learning for its own sake. But when study circles also strive for change and action, the learning will not only be more "profitable" but also more meaningful. For individuals, this can result in personal enrichment and an improvement of their environment.

Composition of groups

As participants in a study circle must be actively involved in all the work of the study circle, it is important that they are small groups, about 7-12 participants, including the study circle leader. It is necessary to have such small groups otherwise the intention with a study circle is lost. The smaller the group, the better are the chances of active participation of all group members. Otherwise there will be no co-operation, no joint responsibility, less conversation and therefore, no study circle. We learn best when we are active. On the other hand the group should not be smaller than 5 participants. Experience has shown that a broad conversation is difficult to maintain in too small groups and large groups provide limited opportunities for all to participate.

When you start a study circle it is important to try to gather people who have by and large, common values and possess different experiences. The important thing in a study circle is to investigate and research together. If you have common interests about the same education-level and live in the same village it will help a lot. In the group you should feel free, have a comfortable and relaxed relation and have fun together! Humour also helps a lot in solving problems.

Gender and youth aspect

The study circle is a good methodology for men and women to increase and develop their self-esteem together. In a meeting there are often some people who make their voices heard and some people who are shy and quiet. The study circle methodology helps to overcome such tendencies and improves self-confidence among all the participants.

Groups with both men and women also show that you can do much better if you co-operate than if you are working separately. It is a good way to show that gender is not only for women, it concerns both men and women.

It is important to involve the youth in the study circle activities because it will help them to use and share their knowledge with others and teach them how to work together in a group. They will also understand that they will be stronger, both as individuals and as a group, when they co-operate.

Organising the study circle

When you have decided to work with the study circle concept in your organisation you need someone who can take care of and organise the study circles, the study organiser.

The organiser has to be somebody who knows the members in the organisation, somebody who is readily available to both the circle leader and the participants. The organiser should preferably be somebody, who has the authority to make decisions with financial implications, or, even better, have a separate budget for the purpose.

To be a study organiser

One of the most important duties for the study organiser is to sensitise and encourage members to participate in study circles. The study organiser has to be active, participate in general or committee meetings, and suggest issues, which can be discussed and/or developed in a study circle.

The study organiser should also assist the study circle leader with practical problems like finding the needed study material, find a suitable venue and identify and contact external facilitators when necessary. The study organiser should be responsible for collecting attendance lists, the written assessments and study materials used in different study circles. The study organiser is responsible for keeping all materials and recommend different materials to the study circles in the future. The study organiser should also continuously report to the committee about the general progress of study circles in the society and introduce new ideas.

Introducing the study circle concept

Before you as a study organiser introduce the study circle concept to the members you have to plan for it.

Discuss with the organisation what areas you need to improve. Have you decided to have some special training this year? Do you have new members or do you need to involve more members in the decision making? Have some members asked for more information or training in some areas?

List the topics or the topic areas. Check again and be certain that you have covered everything. Make sure that your introduction of study circles is on the agenda for the next general meeting. Prepare the introduction by photo copying the topic list or write it down on a flip chart before the meeting. Ask the meeting to give priorities to the topics and of course add new suggested topics.

Financing

The study circle is developed as a concept with no or very little expenses. The participation in the study circle is resting on voluntary work from both the study circle leader and the participants.

But sometimes it is unavoidable to get some expenses. If you want to use an external facilitator you may have some expenses. Another area is the need for study materials. You may have to purchase one or several books and you may also need to develop or reproduce some materials. All this has a cost that has to be shared among the participants.

The study circle leader

Basically, learning is an active process and it will be improved by using a learning process where common efforts aim at combining the individual resources of those involved in the learning situation. It is therefore quite natural for study circles to base their study work on training the members to address problems together.

General leadership qualities

Leadership is built on three legs:

- ability to set the goal;
- ability to make other people able to reach the goal;
- and, together with other people, organise a task.

The study circle leader plays a very important role in that work. The study circle leader shall create and develop the learning processes that stimulate and encourage the participants actively to look for knowledge. At the same time the study circle leader is one of the members in the study circle and is accepted by the participants themselves and works according to agreements with the participants. The study circle leader should never act in an authoritarian manner.

The study circle leader should do that by:

- putting the participants own development in focus and ask the right questions;
- emphasising the development of dialogue between the participants and, encourage the participants to discuss solutions and ask questions among each other;
- develop the team spirit so the participants feel secure;
- strengthen the participants self-confidence;
- apply a common view on the process of knowledge which enable the participants to apply what they have learnt in everyday situations;
- make different options clear;
- encourage co-operation among the participants and prevent competition.

The study circle leader is a resource person when it comes to organising the studies but does not necessarily have to be a subject matter expert.

To select a study circle leader

The study circle leader can be selected by either the participants or by someone who is responsible for the activities. Regardless of how the selection is done, it is important that the leader is a person who is reliable and known as a person working in a democratic spirit. If the group consists of only women or youth, the study circle leader should preferably be a woman or a youth. The study circle leader needs training in the study circle method and continuous support during the work in the study circle.

It is important to select a study circle leader with the ability to approach other people. The person must be known to be reliable and honest. He/she must be a good listener.

The selection can sometimes be a bit sensitive. But - it is very important to be honest; otherwise the probability for failure will be high. It is better to be straight and honest at this stage than to spoil the work for a whole group of people.

If you select one of the members in the study circle, all the participants must agree and discuss the matter openly. The one who is selected in the group will feel the support and will try hard to fulfil the expectations. Someone outside the study circle can suggest a study circle leader who has the qualifications needed as presented above.

The participants

The work in the study circle is built around the participants' search for knowledge. There should be an inquiring and searching approach. All participants as individuals have a responsibility to contribute and work actively in the group. In order for every participant to participate in all meetings, they must have decided on that assignment beforehand.

All study circles encourage co-operation and discourage competition. As a study circle participant you help each other and co-operate with each other. This means that all participants share the responsibility for the end result of the studies.

Planning the studies

The topic is decided in the group. That is why the topic in a study circle always concerns every one in the group. The topic should be concrete and it is said, "the work in a study circle shall start from the participants' experiences and knowledge".

When you have selected the topic, you discuss the priorities so you all know what you are going to study. It is very important to set a frame that corresponds to the time you have decided to spend for the study circle. The participants of the study circle decide on the plan of studies and are responsible for the planning of its own course.

It is important that every one in the group can come to an agreement about the study plan, otherwise you can end up in a lot of irrelevant discussions during your work. Often the planning phase is not a one-meeting affair. It has to take the needed time. A good result is a result of good planning and good preparation.

The meetings must be planned and goals for the studies agreed upon and means have to be found to attain these goals.

The study plan should show the different steps you are going to take in the work. You may use the terminology brainstorming, organising data and consensus. Sources of information and other necessary resources must be identified and arranged for.

A tentative agreement should be reached on how the study circle members should work and share the findings. Different social activities within the study circle framework should also be considered.

The participants have the privilege to make changes in the plan during the work in the study circle. The study plan is considered as a tool and can be changed at any time.

Venue

The venue should be as close as possible to the homes of the participants or where they work. It is important to choose a place that is convenient for all and can be reached without spending a lot of time to get there. Try to find a quiet place where you can meet every time and where you can study without disturbance from the neighbourhood.

The venue does not need a lot of equipment. If it is possible a flip chart will do. The study circle participants and the study circle leader must sit so they can see each other during the meeting, for instance in a circle. It is also good if the participants can take notes.

Time schedule

You decide on when and how often you will have your meetings. You should not meet longer than two hours every time and meet only once or twice a week during a time period. You get time between the meetings to let the new knowledge sink into your mind and to consider the results of the discussions and also find new aspects and reconstruct your opinions until the next meeting.

Responsibility

Before you start the study circle you also have to decide who is responsible for what.

- Who is going to be the study circle leader?
- Who is responsible for the study material?
- Who is responsible for the venue, ensuring that everything is in order when the meeting starts?
- How will everyone contribute to the development of the study circle?
- How do you handle those who miss a meeting? They arrive at the next meeting and do not know what the rest of the participants did last time. How do you deal with that?
- What kinds of excuses are acceptable for not coming?
- What do you do if one or more leave the study circle or just come every now and then?

You have to keep records over the participants' presence. It is important for the discipline to come to the meetings. The participation is also an important part of the assessment. It is not a good study circle if you realise after a while that there is no progress, no one gets any new knowledge and no one gets any benefits out of the work because of a lot of practical problems.

External facilitators

Do you need some extra help from some external facilitator during the work? An external facilitator in this case is a subject matter specialist. If you know from the beginning that you will need an external specialist you can include it in the study circle plan, even if you do not know when and who you need during the work.

It is very good to use an external facilitator at least once during a study circle period. You get inputs from someone who is an expert in the area you are studying. He/she can help you to come up with solutions about questions you may have raised during the work without getting a proper answer. There are two things to think about before you meet the facilitator.

In some cases an external facilitator might request some remuneration. To reduce the cost it is advisable that other study circles in the same or similar topics have a common meeting with the facilitator.

Before the meeting with an external facilitator the study circle should spend a meeting finding out what problems and what questions you want to ask the facilitator. When you have decided which questions and how many you are going to ask, you divide them among the participants beforehand. This gives a good training opportunity to speak in public, as you are well prepared in advance.

Check points - Assessment

When you have finished the study circle you need to assess conclusions reached, new knowledge and benefits gained from the work. This is a very important documentation so other members in the society can share your findings.

The assessment of circle progress should be some kind of a continuous process.

Two aspects deserve special attention:

- Does the circle work according to the study plan?
- Is the objective still relevant?

Should the answer to any or both of these questions be negative, the circle will have to try to find out what went wrong. After the problem has been identified, the circle should try to solve it.

- Can the actual circumstances be manipulated?
- Is it necessary to alter the plan of study, or must the objectives be revised?
(For example, were you too optimistic or too pessimistic?)

Instead of using some kind of questionnaire for "measuring" progress, a study circle can accomplish a much better measure if they simply ask themselves, discuss and record the answers.

- How well did we succeed?
- Where did we face obstacles?
- What may have caused them?
- Which of our experiences can be valuable to other study circles?
- What is next? (A consideration for the future.)

The participants also have to decide on how the observations and conclusions shall be compiled and presented. Shall the final presentation be made as an exhibition, at a meeting or as a play? Whatever type chosen, it will often be of great interest to know the result of the work not only for those who took part, but also for other in the society. The presentation should therefore in one way or another also tell the story of the process. Such information can be important for other study circles as well as stimulating new groups to form their own study circles.

Study material

When you have agreed on the topic and made the plan for the study circle you have to consider what kind of study material you are going to use by borrowing material and books from friends and libraries or to purchase if necessary. Very often your organisation will offer your study circle a prepared study material.

As a general advice a specially produced study material that can guide the participants and circle leaders, is the best alternative for the study circle. A proper material shall contain facts, highlight points for discussions and guidelines for the work in the study circle.

Advice on study material writing

As said above the study material is an important element of the study circle ingredients. The authors and editors must:

- be clear and tailor-make the study materials for specific target groups;
- give general information about the content at the beginning of the material and if possible at the beginning of each chapter;
- try to find out how much facts belong to the basic study material and how much facts belong to the recommended supporting/additional material;
- recommend questions for discussions (not for knowledge test) connected to every chapter/meeting
- encourage evaluation in the study circle

Self-made study material plan

If a specially produced material can not be found or produced, you have to depend on a self-made study plan and other types of material; brochures, pamphlets, scientific reports, parliamentary reports, newspaper, magazine cuttings, etc.

Having collected the materials the study circle will then proceed by sorting these into a topical or chronological order, after which the materials are divided according to the meetings planned for the topic. Prepare the questions after each part of the material.

- What is the text about?
- Do you agree?
- What experiences do you have from your point of view?
- Do you have other sources with different opinions?
- Discuss in the group and arrive at a common conclusion (consensus).

In case during the study circle you find new articles or other written material which you may want to add to the study circle, make sure that you always prepare it, before using it as a study material, as advised above.

A Case Study

During a general meeting with the Farmers Union there was a discussion about starting a poultry project. The crop didn't get enough profit, so they needed some kind of livestock production without too much investment in buildings and machines.

One of the farmers had attended a seminar about the study circle concept. He suggested that they should try to start a study circle with some help from the people that had organised the seminar about the study circle concept.

A few days later five farmers met again together with one of the committee members. He had got a material from the Swedish study organisation SV about how to work in a study circle. After a discussion the farmers decided to start a study circle about how to start a poultry. The committee member accepted to be the study circle leader. He had good contacts with SV in Sweden and they had promised to advise them during the study circle process. They had never been in contact with the concept earlier so the Union did not have a Study Organiser. They had to make all preparations themselves before they could start the study circle. They decided to have another meeting next week, same day and same time.

After a week they met again. Two of the farmers said that three more farmers wanted to attend the group. Now they were nine farmers all together.

The Study circle leader had got some information material from Sweden about the study circle concept and also advice about what kind of material they needed.

First of all they discussed the following four important questions:

- What is the most important thing we want to learn about this topic?
- What do we need to contribute ourselves to reach the goal?
- What do we want/wish from each other to reach our goal?
- What do we have to do if we can not realise our goal?

The discussion took quite a long time but after a while they agreed on the answers to the four questions. The study circle leader told the participants that he was going to save the sheet with the answers so that the group could use it for the checkpoints and the assessment.

Now the participants set the rules for the work and their expectations of each other. They continued the meeting to discuss and decide the following:

- number of meetings
- time schedule
- venue
- the goals
- resources
- sources of information
- external facilitator
- study visit
- planning of meetings
- assessment
- responsibility;
- the climate
- the responsibility for the study circle leader
- the responsibility for the participants

The farmers decided to start the study circle next month after the harvest and to meet 10 times. In the meantime the study circle leader should get the material and write the study plan after the above discussions and conclusions. One of the farmers had an old barn where they could practice to build nests.

Study plan

Farmers' Union in:	NN
Topic:	Poultry
Study circle leader:	Mr G
Participants:	-
Number of meetings:	10 meetings, starts in November
Time:	Saturdays, 10.00 a.m. - 12.00 a.m.
Venue:	The Union's committee room and in the barn.
Goal:	To learn how to operate a poultry farm.
Resources:	The participants own knowledge and experiences; the study circle leader's knowledge and experiences, advice from SV in Sweden, written information, external facilitators, study visit if possible.
Sources of information:	Books about poultry and chicken rearing, external facilitators and a study visit.
External facilitators:	A farmer from W who has a poultry farm
Study visit:	To Mr. W's poultry farm

Planning of meetings:

Meeting 1:	Study plan and establishment of the level of knowledge in the group
Meeting 2:	Books about poultry and chicken rearing
Meeting 3:	Continue
Meeting 4:	Prepare the barn and prepare the next meeting with the farmer from W
Meeting 5:	The farmer from W and an assessment of what we have achieved so far
Meeting 6:	A study visit to W to see a poultry farm
Meeting 7:	Construction of nests
Meeting 8 & 9:	Continue construction
Meeting 10:	Summary of the work in the study circle, assessment and discuss the future

The work in the study circle shall proceed from our own experience and knowledge. We shall encourage co-operation and discourage competition. We shall help each other and co-operate with each other. A companionship among individuals shall characterise the work in our study circle.

Assessment:

Check points by asking these questions after meeting no 5 and 10:

- Do we work according to this plan?
- Is the goal still relevant?
- If not - do we have to change it?
- How well have we succeeded?
- Have we faced obstacles?
- If we have, what may have caused them?
- Do we have experiences that can be valuable to other study circles?

The final assessment should be a conclusion of the checkpoints together with the result of how well we finally reached the goal.

Responsibility:

The climate: The four statements from the second meeting when we decided to start the study circle.

The study circle leader should:

- put the participants own development in focus
- encourage the participants to discuss solutions and ask questions among themselves
- develop the team spirit and encourage co-operation
- make different options clear
- fill in the attendance list
- prepare the meetings and make study plans for the books
- be responsible for the study material

The participants should:

- give priority to the study circle work
- keep the agreed time
- be prepared to contribute to the development of the study circle
- work actively in the group
- inform the study circle leader beforehand if you can not participate the coming meeting
- inform each other after the meeting if someone is coming late
- decide amongst yourselves who is briefing a participant who has not attended a meeting before the next meeting begins
- take their own notes
- share the responsibility for the result of the studies
- check the committee room

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