Chapter 3

What Are Study Circles?¹

A study circle is a group of 8 to 12 individuals who meet regularly over a period of weeks or months to address a critical public issue in a democratic, collaborative way. Participants examine the issue from many points of view and identify areas of common ground. They emerge with recommendations for action that will benefit the community.

A study circle is typically led by an impartial facilitator whose job it is to keep discussions focused, help the group consider a variety of views, and ask difficult questions.

In general, a study circle will progress from a session on personal experience (“How does the issue affect me?”) to sessions providing a broader perspective (“What are others saying about this issue?”) to a session on action (“What can we do about this issue right now?”). Study circles produce good ideas and plans for action, which can draw the neighborhood community together and improve everyone’s quality of life.

Individual study circles can take place within communities or within organizations such as schools, unions, or government agencies. However, study circles have the greatest reach and impact when organizations across a community work together to hold multiple study circles as part of a large-scale program. These community-wide programs engage large numbers of citizens — in some cases thousands — in study circles on a public issue such as race relations, crime and violence, or education. Broad sponsoring coalitions create strong, diverse community participation.

¹ Based on the writings of Study Circle Resource Center, scrc@neca.com
What Study Circles Are and Are Not

Study Circles Are:

- Small-group discussions that combine dialogue, deliberation, and problem solving. They are based on balanced discussion materials, the dialogue is enriched by the members’ knowledge and experience. Study circles are aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to keep the discussion on track.

- Discussions where people examine a public issue from many angles and work together to find solutions that can lead to change in the community.

Study Circles Are NOT:

- Conflict Resolution – using a set of principles and techniques to resolve conflict between individuals or groups.

- Mediation – a process used to settle disputes and relies on an outside neutral person to help the disputing parties come to an agreement.

- Focus Groups – small groups organized to gather or test information. Participants (often paid) are recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or target audience.

- Traditional Education – where a teacher instructs students (or learners).

- Facilitated Meetings with a Predetermined Agenda – such as a committee or board meeting with tasks established ahead of time.

- Town Meetings – Large-group meetings where citizens make decisions on community policies.

- Public Hearings – Large-group public meetings that allow concerns to be heard.

Why Should Study Circles Be Used?

People find study circles valuable because:

- The discussions begin with people talking about their own experiences. Study circles don’t deal with problems in the abstract — they deal with real problems that real people experience every day.

- The small groups help people of different backgrounds talk about difficult issues in a safe, respectful way. Large groups can be intimidating, but many people who are uncomfortable in a large group will open up more easily to a smaller one.

- People know that they are part of a larger effort, and they feel good about that.

- The study circle program as a whole empowers community residents. It helps people solve problems and take action in their own neighborhoods and communities.

Once study circle programs get started, they usually grow larger and stronger — people come to enjoy working together on a common goal. Study circle participants often talk about how quickly the time passed, since the discussion was focused, honest, and productive. They also talk about how much fun they had getting to know one another.
Three Phases of Study Circles

Phase 1: Organizing

Organizing begins with sharing the burden. Solicit volunteers in the community that will help organize the program. Not only will this help you, but it will also give the participants a greater feeling of ownership over the process.

Second, make it clear that all different backgrounds will be respected and welcomed in the study circles. Without this assurance, you’ll foster the perception that only certain people and their opinions or experiences are important — definitely not the right message to send!

Third, make sure that people understand that this project will help create a plan to solve real problems in their community and not just talk about them.

Time to Set Goals

Begin with a core group of dedicated community members to identify the situation and define the goals or outcomes that are desired.

Typical Progression of Study Circle Sessions

Session One – Getting to know one another. Critical question to address: “What is my connection to this issue?”

Session Two – “What is the nature of the problem?” (May include supplemental data.)

Session Three – What are some approaches to change? (May include visioning or asset-mapping.)

Session Four – Moving from dialogue to action: What can we do?
**Plans for Action**

Work with the core group to design a study circles program that includes all interested parties in the community. Talk about why it is important to engage the community in dialogue and problem solving on this issue. Define the goals of the program, including geographic scope. Consider how to achieve diversity in the circles. Talk about resources — both what is available and what is needed. And decide on channels of communication and organizational structure of the effort.

**Develop the Materials**

Much of the discussion will revolve around people’s perceptions and beliefs. However, be ready to supply them with a true and accurate picture of the problem using statistics, photos, stories, and other pertinent information. Clarify the issue and develop discussion materials that lead the group in meaningful discussions. Discussion materials for a multiple-session sequence should start by allowing people to talk about how the issue affects them, then considers some of the larger questions surrounding the issue, and finally discusses ways to take action on the issue. They should convey the idea that by talking and working together they’ll gain a more accurate picture than they can by themselves. They should help people find common ground. And help move them to action.

**Pilot Circles**

Gather 10 to 12 people who might be interested in being a pioneer. Give them a personal invitation to the pilot study circle and try out one or two sessions. At the end, ask them what they think of the process and how they think they could make this work in the community. Repeat this process with new individuals. Those folks who are interested can now be used as advocates and individuals who plan and implement the study circles program.

**Facilitator Training**

As the number of interested individuals who wish to participate grows, the need for facilitators to run the individual study circles will grow as well. Study circles are typically led by an impartial facilitator whose job it is to keep discussions focused, help the group consider a variety of views, and ask difficult questions. Plan to spend at least a few hours training the facilitators and preparing them for the event.

**Kick Off**

The kick-off event is designed to raise an awareness in the community and spark as much interest from as many groups in the community as possible. Use social media, word of mouth, public media, and mailings/fliers to invite the public to be part of the process and join a study circle.

**Phase 2: Dialogue – A Typical Study Circle Session**

Study circles are an ongoing effort. They have a defined start and end but can be run at any time independent of one another. To that end, use the following timeline for a typical study circle session.

**Welcome and Introductions**

This is a time to gather the group, set the tone for the discussion, help people get to know one another, and begin the conversation.
• **Review of the Ground Rules and the Process** – Ground rules are key to the group’s success. Each group must develop its own set of rules to ensure that the conversation is respectful and productive.

• **Dialogue and Deliberation** – Open and honest dialogue and deliberation are the heart of a study circle. Participants use dialogue to build trust and explore the problem. This can include viewpoints, data, and other content. Participants also deliberate — weighing the pros and cons of different choices. This leads to concrete action ideas.

• **Summary and Common Ground** – This is a time to reflect on key themes and focus on areas of common ground from which work can begin to address the issues.

• **Evaluation and Wrap-up** – The session ends with instructions for next time and a quick evaluation: “How did things go?” or “What would we like to change?”

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**Tips to Facilitate these Discussions**

Exploring different points of view about an issue is one of the hallmarks of study circle dialogue. These viewpoints reflect some of the ways that different people think and talk about a public concern. Likewise, they deliberate different ways to bring about change. Looking at different approaches helps people understand the complexity of an issue and the tradeoffs that are often necessary to make progress. As participants in the circle develop a sense of what might work in their situation, they are more likely to come up with action ideas and strategies that make sense for them and the community. Following are tips to assist with the process:

- Write a one sentence description of each topic or view expressed on a flip chart.
- Help people understand that they are not choosing a “winner” but rather exploring a range of ideas.
- Give time for the participants to review the list and ponder what each item means to them.
- Ask participants to choose one view to discuss. They can agree or disagree with it. Allow for some discussion after the initial view is expressed. Capture the conversation.
- Touch on all of the views/approaches, and help participants see the connections.
- Summarize the discussion by noting areas of agreement and disagreement.
- Help people think about how this issue plays out in their own lives and in their community.

**Helpful Questions to Start Discussion**

- Which views are closest to your own? Why?
- Think about a view that you do not agree with. Why would someone support that view?
- Which views conflict with each other?
- What views would you add?
- Which approaches appeal to you and why?
- What approach would work best in our community? Which would not?
- How would this approach help us make progress?
Phase 3: Developing Action Ideas

In study circles, people spend the first several sessions engaged in dialogue and deliberation. By the last session, people are preparing for action. Use the following questions to help create action steps:

- Will the actions address the key concerns that the group has been discussing?
- Is the action doable or practical?
- Will the action create the desirable change?
- What resources are needed to complete the action?
- Does the action make practical sense in our community?

Ideally, action ideas should grow out of a discussion about approaches to change. However, sometimes people suggest large, abstract ideas for change, rather than specific doable actions. The facilitator can help the group focus by using the questions above.

A Fitting Conclusion: When the study circles end, it is time for another gathering at the community center — this time an action forum in which the study circle’s proposals for action can be discussed. The groups have come up with some good ideas that should be shared with the rest of the community and other decision makers. Be sure to listen to feedback as well as solicit support for action items.