CIEA 2014

Changing Communities. The Study Circle – for learning and democracy

Sturla Bjerkaker*

*Norwegian Association for Adults Learning

Abstract

This paper covers study circle history, tradition, research, practice, development and challenges for the future. As a method for “liberal adult education”, the study circle (SC) has existed in 100 years. The SC is a democratic and emancipatory method for learning. “For the people, by the people” became the study circle slogan influencing adult learning in Scandinavia for years. The article is based on the paper “The Study Circle – a method for learning, a tool for democracy” which was presented at the FACE Conference in July 2003.

Study Circles – when they are functioning at the best – may offer you: Learning without humiliation, learning without guiltily and bad consciousness, non-violent learning, a humble way of learning and learning for self contain self confidence and self esteem. But there was a long way to go to here...

As a Nordic traditional method for liberal adult education, the Study Circle has been active for more than 100 years. From the beginning, the Study Circle is seen as a democratic and emancipatory method and arena for learning, particularly among adults. Study Circles were born in New York in the 1870s. By their peak in 1915, 700.000 people were participating in 15.000 study circles in the USA. People close to the union, co-op, the temperance movement and the Social Democratic Party to educate their followers carried the idea to Sweden.

* * Corresponding author.
E-mail address: sturla.bjerkaker@niace.org.uk.
Even though study circles more or less passed away in USA, they have ever since flourished in Sweden and Scandinavia. Still, nearly three million Swedes participate in more than 300,000 study circles annually, partly funded and subsided, but not controlled, by the public sector and the government. Scandinavian communities have even convened study circles to work through major issues facing their local areas and towns, with study circle participants turning into activists who then have a significant impact on events. The last ten years, there is a renewed and blooming interest in study circles (also) in the USA.

The Study Circle followed the “top-to-bottom approach” for enlightenment developed in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, expressed i.e. through the University Extension movements in France, England and Scandinavia (Arvidson, 1998) to become a “bottom-up” method. The so called founder of the Study Circle, the Swede Oscar Olsson, expressed that “The emancipation of the working class should be a task for the workers themselves”, “For the people, by the people” (Johansson 1994) became the political slogan that influenced the Study Circle and the adult education system in Scandinavia for years.

The Study Circle is a human, easy and fearless way to learning for adults with low self-esteem and self-confidence. But the Study Circle method is also demanding. It claims activity and dialogue between its participants (members), and just occasionally you can rely on a teacher or an expert joining in. Normally the Study Circle is a group of equals, the leader the “primus inter pares”. The pedagogical idea may – in my words - be summarised by “learning by sharing”, relying on each member’s experience.

"The Study Circle, which voluntary organisations claim to be their special method, from both ideological and educational reasons, has very much been taken for granted", says the Norwegian researcher Hallgjerd Brattset in her study (Brattset 1982:13) on how to describe and analyse the experiences from methods of planning and organising Study Circles.

Scandinavian background

The Study Circle developed from late 19\textsuperscript{th} century Sweden. We are usually dating it to 1902; the year Oscar Olsson, “the father of the Study Circle” started his first circle in the Lund branch of the International Order of Good Templars, and named it a “Study Circle”.

The most distinctive features of circle studies, as Oscar Olsson (quoted in Brattset 1982: 8) described them, was:

- People studied in small groups, often at home.
- Study material was rare.
- Teachers were not considered a necessary prerequisite of study. The leader of the group was an organiser and he possessed no theoretical qualifications.
- People supplemented their group studies by attending lectures or meetings.
- Circle members had no previous theoretical qualifications, but a good deal of practical experience.
- They learnt to discuss, argue, show consideration for others, accept defeat and share responsibility.
- They Experienced a sense of community and identity.
- The knowledge they acquired could be directly related to their everyday lives.
- Studies began at the initial cognitive level of the members and were guided by their needs.

According to Oscar Olsson, the most important features of the Study Circle was that they operated independently of teachers, were based on the reading of fiction, and used conversation and discussion as method. His definition of a Study Circle was: A circle of friends who come together to discuss problems or subjects of common interest.
From this definition it follows that the leader should be more a guide to the members than a traditional teacher. A practical consequence of this is the terms applied: circle members or participants, not pupils or students; circle leaders, not teachers, circles or groups and meetings, not classes or lessons. This use of terminology has been considered quite important, because the participants should not associate the studies with “bad school experiences”.

**Voluntary organisations**

Historically, Study Circles and popular movements are inseparable concepts. Oscar Olsson’s Study Circle exemplifies the close links that have always existed between popular movements and the Study Circle, and also that adult education has always been strongly associated with the voluntary sector in Scandinavia. The aim of their educational activities was to promote changes in society, according to their values. Therefore adult education can be described as instrumental to reach their goals, and the Study Circle their tool to do so.

The Study Circle is a flexible method. Several terms are therefore in use, such as Circles with or without a teacher, Circles combined with lectures, Circles based on pre-produced plans, Correspondence circles, Combined circles; members taking correspondence courses individually, supported by circle studies with teacher, Multi-media courses, studies integrated in a pre-produced scheme, including usage of media and – finally and most recently; “E-circles”, the members communicate on Internet.

**Research**

The Study Circle as an academic field of research has been rare. Most of the research being done the resent years is known from Sweden and the University of Linkoping. The most comprehensive study was conducted by Jan Bystrom (1976). The aim of Bystrom’s study was to investigate and discuss the reasons why Study Circles develop differently, and to pay special attention to the situation and function of the circle leader. The starting point of the study was the observation that in practice many circles do not correspond to the ideal.

According to Bystrom (1976) there are three main deviations. First, they might develop into a ”school class”, with recipient pupils and an instructing teacher. Secondly, they might develop into a “coffee party”, with discussions that have nothing to do with the objectives. And thirdly, they might develop into a “therapeutically group”, in which activities concentrate upon individual mental or social problems.

The (idealistic) principle of circle members shaping their own studies is practiced to a limited extent. This may be due to uncertainty among members as to how and when they should put forward their viewpoints. The leader has a central position in their concept of studies; the circle members show little tendency to link their studies with everyday learning and communal learning. They have little confidence in their own resources.

Jan Bystrom’s conclusion is that circle studies can be much improved, if 1) Guidance is given to potential circle members during the recruitment period, 2) Training is given to circle leaders, and 3) Attention ids paid to designing appropriate study material, with a view to making all members active in the learning process.

In her study, Brattset (Brattset 1982, page 15) used a survey consisting of fifty-one Study Circles, drawn from ten voluntary organisations in Norway. The findings of the survey confirm the pre-supposition that study work is characterised by diversity. Among her findings was that most circles were initiated by the organisation, mainly in the local community. Circle members and leaders had little direct influence on this.

To the question of why they took part, the main reasons for enrolling were, in order of priority: interest in the subject, need for social contact, and importance to their work. What motivated the leaders? The majority of circle leaders undertake the job because they have been approached directly by the organisers, according to criteria set by them. The most important reason for undertaking the leadership of the circle is, similar to the members, interest in the subject, followed by a desire to help the organisation, need for social contact, and to work with adults and gain teaching experience.

The appointment of circle leaders and teachers were left to the local organisers. The qualifications the organisers in Brattset’s sample emphasise most in selection of leaders are: experience from applying the subject in practice,
and ability to mix with people. Next to these qualities come knowledge, skills and teaching experience.

Planning

Brattset's study (Brattset 1982) also shows that members to a certain extent were invited to take part in the planning of circles. This was the case more often in internally organised circle studies than in external activities, and consultations with circle leaders were more frequent in external than in internal circle studies. Member and subject orientated planning was what the majority of all groups preferred. Generally, organisers participate most, also in the educational planning. Circle leaders participate more than members. Independent of subject and recruitment, members and leaders has more influence than organisers on the methods of the circle. Regardless of subject and method or recruitment, organisers have consistently much more influence on the aim and contents of the circle than members and leaders.

Methods

Still according to Brattset (1982), similar to the attitudes to planning, there is in all groups a tendency to prefer member-centred methods. Descriptions of practice show, that there is a tendency to apply member-centred methods more than leader-centred, but to a less extent than expressed as desirable at the beginning of the circle. The trend towards using member-centred methods in practice is more marked in more theoretical subjects in internal circles than in externally recruited circles dealing with practical subjects.

The most remarkable finding is, that a large part of both members and leaders state that this kind of discussion did not take place at all in their circles. That is; a large number of circles have not made use of the variations in the members’ background and experiences. Bystrom’s (1976) findings showed the similar comments. Consequently, members in these cases have little opportunity to influence the development of the work in the circle. This must be regarded as a departure from one of the most essential principles of the traditional Study Circle. The ideal Study Circle is perhaps a myth....

Leadership

Even though the Study Circle leader is just a “primus inter pares”, the role of the leader is most crucial if a Study Circle becomes a Study Circle – as previous described – or not.

According to Henry Blid (2000:87) vii two main functions can be identified for the leader: To secure that studies progress as agreed, and to promote a positive social climate at the meetings.

The first function implies that the leader is willing to set aside quite a lot of time to circle duties. This does not mean that the Study Circle leader should do everything. The Study Circle works collectively, and each member has responsibility for the progress. The organisational role of the leader falls in between the roles of a chairperson/president and a secretary. According to Blid (2000:96), the most important organisational functions for leaders are:

- Prepare a draft plan for the studies to be considered by the Study Circle, presented together with a suggestion for study materials and their use.
- Prepare estimates for possible expenditure for the Study Circle and how such costs might be met.
- Keep a list of the members together with notes on how they can be called to the meetings.
- Arrange time and place for the meetings and prepare a meeting calendar.
- Turn up in time to check upon the arrangements for the meetings.
- Call the members to the meetings and ensure that he can be reached in case members should be unable to attend.
- Arrange for the purchase/provision of study material and their distribution.
- Suggest how all circle members can contribute actively to the meetings, for example by making summaries of or comments on sections studies.
- Keep the members well informed of matters concerning the Study Circle and its work.
Make the necessary arrangements if experts are required.

The social and emotional function is crucial to a positive development of the circle work. A failure by the Study Circle’s leader in this function will likely cause the lost of members, unless very strong ties keep them together. But by trying to apply the following advice, leadership may be improved.

- Be a good listener; listen to what the members want to say or try to say
- Learn who the members are, what they want, what they like or dislike
- Express the feelings and opinions of the circle – use “we” instead of “I”
- Promote co-operation and joint efforts
- Encourage all circle members to take initiatives
- Do not decide on behalf of the Study Circle without an explicit authorisation to do so
- Meet the confidence of the members by attempting to keep promises and agreements
- Should it be necessary to contradict/criticise someone, try to allow that person to change his/her position or to accept the criticism gracefully

Principles and participants

Inspired by Oscar Olsson, L. P. Oliver (quoted in Blid, 2000:28) has set up a series of main pedagogical principles for the work and function of the Study Circle, with emphasis on the role of the members (participants) in the group:

- Equality and democracy among circle members, with all members acting at one time as both teachers and students, and with reliance on dialogue and conversation rather than on lectures, outside experts, or formal presentations.
- Liberation of members’ inherent capabilities and innate resources, empowering them to act, and to influence and be influenced by social reality.
- Cooperation and companionship, with members working together toward agreed-upon ends, finding “common ground” in their relationships and ideas.
- Study and liberty, and member self-determination of formats and direction, based upon their needs and wishes, and on the objectives of the sponsoring association.
- Continuity and planning, meaning enough time for conversations that overcome “one-sidedness” withdrawal of individuals, and undue pushing of one’s point of view, along with emphasis on creating interest in further study after the circle ends. This also means planning by the members themselves, who have the ability to change plans as the need arises.
- Study Circles differ from open-ended discussion groups and radio/TV “listening groups,” which often do not have systematic study as their main objective.
- Active member participation to encourage cooperation, joint responsibility, and conversation, without which there is no Study Circle.
- As Blid (2000: 28) points out, “the members’ active contribution is the cornerstone on which are built not only Study Circles but also the far more important democracy…. People learn best when they are active.” With groups that are too small, it is difficult to maintain conversation, with larger groups, few participate; the ideal size of a Study Circles are said to be between 5 and 15 members.
- Use of printed study materials, from pamphlets, journal extracts, and newspaper articles to scientific texts. Printed matter should always be used to supplement circle conversations.

What next?

Today we will find study and discussion groups in organisations, at the work places, in neighbourhoods and
among people chairing common values organised much like Study Circles. These are recognised methods, and are used in both organised and informal adult learning in many countries. Is the Study Circle then unique? What might be the unique Scandinavian touch is the way the Study Circle is linked with the philosophy of the providers of adult education, the long tradition, the general acceptance of the method and the outspoken importance of the Study Circle method as a tool for learning and act democracy.

For those reasons, the method has hardly been questioned. It is only recently that the Study Circle has been subject to research, and the studies mentioned (Brattset, 1982 & Bystrom, 1976) legitimate our right to question the method. Study Circles has lost terrain the last 25 years, due to many factors, some of them mentioned in this Paper. The increased cost-benefit view on learning – that all learning should be useful for economical purposes – is focusing on so-called effective learning methods. The increased cost-benefit view on learning – that all learning should be useful for economical purposes – is focusing on so-called effective learning methods. The Study Circle is considered to be to slow in many aspects. But there is also tendency to a renewal for the Study Circle today. At the present there is an increasing interest in the Study Circle as an educational method, and a will to examine the method critically.

In the present Norwegian debate, the Study Circle are said to be a Third Arena for learning (Baatnes 2002), in addition to schools and work places. And the strength of the Study Circle is still considered to be the flexibility, possibilities to spontaneous establishment, local base, a way of valuing people as equals and a way of valuing experience based knowledge. At its best, the Study Circle is learning without humiliation and a sense of guilt.

In the future...

So, what could be the features of the future study circle, looked upon from the year 2003? According to the Norwegian philosopher and pedagogue Per Inge Baatnes, ten principles could be set up as a pedagogical foundation for study circle work in the future:

The future study circle:

- Aims to develop pedagogy for questioning. It is the questions that touch people. The answers bring us – to quote Paolo Freire - to sleep.
- Looks upon theoretical and non-theoretical knowledge as equals. It values the non-formal knowledge.
- Gives priority to learning needs before learning schemes. The participants get motivated from the learning processes more than from learning products such as exams papers and diplomas.
- Activates your real skills and competences and stimulates acknowledgement and consciousness of the skills you really have.
- Promote a pedagogy that is challenging and that motivates and inspire the individual participation to be a learning person throughout life
- Gives space and opportunity also to the visible, physical conversation. Body language, experiences and confidential learning surroundings are important recourses in the work of learning.
- Stimulate social and voluntary learning and develop a lifelong learning which is oriented to life.
- Create interplay between human beings in different phases of life. It recruits heterogeneous commonship.
- Promote self-management and empowerment, so that human beings are able to be responsible for their own lives and their own learning, and for development of good life conditions in their communities.
- Offers rehabilitation to the slow thoughts and the patient wisdom.

Learning by sharing

The learning method/s in study circles can be summarised in three words: learning by sharing. The method offers opportunities and possibilities for all participants to contribute with their previous knowledge and experiences, and through open and democratic dialogue the knowledge will be shared and further developed among them.

The Danish professor in adult education, Knud Illeris, has set up three thumb rules for understanding adults’
learning;

- Adults learn what they want to learn and what is meaningful for them to learn
- Adults draw on the resources they already have in their learning
- Adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (and they are allowed to).

This rules fits what we are saying about how study circles function, and why they are a suitable learning method for adults. In the study circles the adults themselves are the knowledge managers. To a large extent they themselves decide what to learn and how to learn it.

“... As we attempt to analyse dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something, which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more then just an instrument that makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constructive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is scarified – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. ...” Paolo Freire in “The pedagogy of the oppressed”, Penguin Books London 1996.

References

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The Study Circle

Could help you arriving to public judgement through this roads:

1. Awareness – people become aware of the issue
2. Urgency – people feel a sense of urgency about the issue
3. Choicework – people begin to explore choices for a solution
4. Resistance – they resist facing the trade-off and become wishful
5. Deliberation – they begin to weigh the pros and cons
6. Interpret – they take a stand intellectually
7. Judgement – they reach a moral and emotional decision

(Daniel Yankelovich, the founding father of public opinion research)
Olov Palme in his speech, opening the Nordic Folk Academy in Gothenborg 1998.

A separate Act of Adult Education was launched in Norway in 1976, coming into action a year later. It was said that this was the "first Adult Education Act in the world". The act has a special emphasis on the role of the voluntary sector and the role of the Study Circle and the function of democracy in adult education.

In April 1902 Oscar Olsson published two articles in the Temperance Movement's magazine "Reformatorn" ("The Reformer") in Sweden, calling then "The questions of studying". The articles proposed a model and a way of organising "Study Circles".

See i.e. Andersson, Laginer, Larsson and Sundgren (1996).

Blid, Henry (2000). He is writing about Study Circle leadership (and Study Circle principles) in both his books (see reference list), and are referring to both Oscar Olsson and L. P. Oliver (see reference list), so all three men should have credit for this, I think.

Partly quoted from Per Inge Batnes, a Norwegian pedagogue and philosopher.