

## Study circles as tools for learning in later life – Senior Circles

How can study circles be pedagogical tools for adult learning and education (ALE) and lifelong learning which is linked to empowerment, active ageing and active citizenship? This Paper aims to implement the “*Nordic Study Circle Method*” especially in non-formal and informal adult learning and education: The study circle as a learning method for promoting studies and learning sites concerning local development, citizenship, fostering and maintaining democracy, fostering further learning opportunities, self-directed learning, experiential learning, learning for participating in society, and, as such, the study circle as a tool for learning in later life – senior circles.

For more than 100 years the three – school, workplace and community based learning – have been responsible for each their special curriculum in the large project which is to produce active and skilled citizens throughout life. The main issue in this shared responsibility of educational work has not been the sharing of content, nor the difference between them in the way they perform – their pedagogy – but the broadness they together are representing, the manifold appealing to the joy of learning, which also has to do with the variation in the social and physical learning environments.

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So far, the study circle often has been linked to and associated with community based and liberal adult learning. It might not only be necessarily so. This Paper will connect the study circle to research and examples where the method also has been in use for projects on responsible living, social entrepreneurship and other forms of sustainability. But first and foremost the Paper is about the phenomena *study circles*, its origin, development, participation and also pedagogical management.

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Study Circles – when they are functioning at the best – may offer learning without humiliation, learning without guiltily and bad consciousness, non-violent learning, a humble way of learning and learning for self confidence and self esteem. But before this...

As a Nordic traditional method for liberal adult education, the *Study Circle* has been active since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 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. 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 subsidized, 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, according to *the Study Circle Research Centre* in New York.

The Study Circle followed the “top-to-bottom approach” for enlightenment developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 close links between *the method* Study Circle and *the tool for democracy* Study Circle, may also be exemplified with the expression by the former Swedish Prime Minister Olov Palme: “Sweden is to a great extend a Study Circle democracy” (Nordic Folk Academy, 1968).

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 usually you cannot rely on a teacher or an expert joining in. Normally, the Study Circle is a group of equals, the leader the managing “*primus inter pares*”. The pedagogical idea may be summarized as “learning by sharing”, relying on each member’s experience. The leader might be a teacher, but this is not mandatory.

”The Study Circle, which voluntary organizations 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) on how to describe and analyze the experiences from methods of planning and organizing Study Circles.

Because the former Norwegian Act on Adult Education (Ministry of Education, 1976) required students’ involvement on contents and method in the courses, she thought it was of special interest to find out to what extent this is practiced in Study Circles.

The Study Circle developed from late 19<sup>th</sup> 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) described them, were:

- 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 organizer 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. (Quoted in Brattset, 1982).

From this definition it follows that the leader should be more a *guide* to the students (*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 experiences from their previous schooldays.

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 known as a flexible method. Several terms are therefore in use, such as circles with or without a teacher, circles combined with lectures, circles based on preproduced 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 web-based.

The Study Circle as an academic field of research has been rare. Most of the research being done the recent years is known from Sweden and the University of Linköping. The most comprehensive study was conducted by Jan Bystrom (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 (Bystrom 1976) there are three main deviations. First, they might develop into a “schoolclass”, 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 is paid to designing appropriate study material, with a view to making all members active in the learning process.

In her study, Brattset (Brattset, 1982) used a survey consisting of fifty-one Study Circles, drawn from ten voluntary organizations in Norway. The findings of the survey confirm the pre-supposition that study work is characterized by diversity. Among her findings was that most circles were initiated by the organization, 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 organizers, 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 organization, 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 organizers. The qualifications the organizers in Brattset's sample emphasize 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.

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 organized 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, organizers 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 organizers on the methods of the circle. Regardless of subject and method or recruitment, *organizers* have consistently much more influence on the aim and contents of the circle than members and leaders.

Still according to Brattset (Brattset, 1982) similar to the attitudes to planning, there are in all groups a tendency to prefer member-centered methods. Descriptions of practice show, that there is a tendency to apply member-centered methods more than leader-centered, but to a less extent than expressed as desirable at the beginning of the circle. The trend towards using member-centered 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 (Bystrom, 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....

Even though the Study Circle leader is just a “*primus inter pares*”, the role of the leader is most crucial for a Study Circle to become a real Study Circle. According to Henry Blid (Blid, 2000) 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 study circle meetings (lessons).

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 organizational role of the leader falls in between the roles of a chairperson/president and a secretary. According to Blid (Blid, 2000), the most important *organizational 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.

Secondly, the *social and emotional function* is crucial to a positive development of the circle work. A failure by the Study Circle leader in this function, will likely result in 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 authorization to do so
- Meet the confidence of the members by attempting to keep promises and agreements
- Should it be necessary to contradict/criticize someone, try to allow that person to change his/her position or to accept the criticism gracefully.

Inspired by Oscar Olsson, L. P. Oliver (quoted in Blid, 2000) has set up a series of main pedagogical principles for the work and function of the Study Circle, with emphasize on the role of the 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.
- *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.

As Blid (Blid, 2000) 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 is said to be between 5 and 15 members.

Today, we will find study and discussion groups many places and sites – in voluntary organizations, at the work places, in neighborhoods and among people charring common values. These groups are usually organized much like Study Circles. These are recognized methods, and are used in both organized and informal adult learning in many countries. *Is the Study Circle then unique?* Isn’t it similar to ordinary group discussions?

What might be the unique Scandinavian touch is the way the Study Circle is linked to the philosophy of the providers and organizers 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 and active citizenship in a lifelong perspective.

For those reasons, the method has hardly been questioned and criticized. 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 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 Study Circle is considered to be too slow in many aspects – “slow learning”. 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.

The learning method/s in Study Circles can be summarized in three words: *learning by sharing*, or as *experiential learning*. 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 (Illeris, 2002) 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 of all ages. 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. Paulo Freire puts it like this in his famous book “The pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1996):

“... 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 than 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...”

Last but not least, I will mention some areas where the Study Circle has been used, or areas suitable for the Study Circle as a learning method. Some areas might be more suitable for using the Study Circle method than others. These areas are built on Scandinavian and English experiences:

#### *The Adult Community Learning Fund (ACLF)*

The Adult Community Learning Fund was a fund established by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in England and partly administrated by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), partly by the LSC. The ACLF was funding local and community based projects, which aimed to develop access and possibilities for adult learning for all. Some of the projects financed by the fund was more or less like Study Circles. Examples from ACLF Projects might include:

- British Film Institute – older people came together to watch films, discussed the film and film-going and, eventually, they wanted to engage with young people to share experiences about film genres and experiences.
- MIND – Southampton and New Forest brought younger and older people together for exercise but their 'core group' was walking. They talked and walked and began to make decisions about other forms of exercise and sport – and had also began some healthy eating stuff...cooking and eating together....

#### *Conflict solving*

When there is no single book or no single teacher that can help you all the way to the goals of *peace and conflict solving*, the Study Circle is a tool and a method where you may have the opportunity to test your ideas in this field with others, and where you can propose actions on local level. Peace work has to start in yourself, in your family, in your neighborhood, among your friends, colleagues and in your community. “Think global, act local” is a slogan for discussions and problem solving in Study Circles.

The Working Group on Education at the Thematic Social Forum, Porto Alegre in January 2012 in planning Rio + 20 points out:

The role of education is to promote critical thinking to deepen *democracy*, in search of sustainable societies. Education has to promote autonomy. The right to education is

interdependent with other rights. Democratization of education is necessary to respect diversity in a context of lifelong learning. The Study Circle could fit.

### *Conscious Critical Consumerism*

Where does the food you eat come from, and what does it contain? Where is it produced, and who takes the profit? How is it transported, and are the farmers paid properly? What about genetically modified food – do you like it? Do you wish to promote ecologic and local production of food? And what about other goods than food; are you a conscious consumer, or do you wish to be? Consumer Groups – acting like Study Circles – could be a good tool to discuss and in the long run solve questions like this.

### *Family learning*

We can find some examples of cross generation learning in different cultures. But: The children are at school. The students are at the universities. Adults go to evening classes or to the Pub. In spite of this, we know that many family matters concern all generations and should therefore be discussed and solved with all ages coming together. Family Study Circles is hereby recommended, organised may be by local community social workers, voluntary organisations or others. It is easy to set a study circle on the water!

### *The University of the Third Age – U3A – learning in later life*

The U3A Movement started in France and continued in the United Kingdom and other countries. Today, we will find U3A or similar learning organizations for seniors in many European countries, but also e.g. in Australia and Canada. In some countries and cities, the U3A are connected to the university, in others they are independent or an integrated movement in the Popular Universities (Norway), Adult Education Centers or Folk High Schools (Germany, Austria). A U3A might be similar to what we in Norway call Senior Academies or University for retired. All in all, the small group learning, the learning by using senior's experience, is the main tool for these learning activities in later life. In U3A you normally don't have a paid teacher but a voluntary retired professor could be the leader of the knowledge transfer. In this way, many U3A learning activities act similar to the Scandinavian Study Circle. Because you can learn as long as you live. And live as long as you learn!

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