

THE STUDY CIRCLE

**A handbook about
a multicultural
learning tool**



The study circle, a learning tool of today!

The study circle might seem banally simple as a learning initiative. Seven or eight people come together to discuss a subject in which they have a common interest. Anybody can start a study circle. Traditionally, people who knew each other and who wanted to learn something together met. This form of learning is challenging for all participants. It requires commitment, respect and active participation. That is exactly what makes the study circle a learning tool that we can use today, valuable far beyond its traditional boundaries and at the same time meeting more challenges than previously.

The starting point in the study circle is that all are equal as human beings and that all experience and knowledge have equal importance with regard to new insight. That is why the method is especially suitable as a learning arena for people with different values and different cultural backgrounds.

With this handbook we want to provide a basis for setting up multicultural study circles in which there is a wish and a need to seek knowledge and cooperation.

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Learn where you are – a multicultural study circle

This handbook is a product of the project “Learn where you are - a multicultural study circle”. The project was carried out in 2004 and 2005 with support from The Nordic Council of Ministers.

The idea for the project arose because of the realisation that the Nordic countries are now more or less multicultural and that this process is accelerating. Nordic populations are composed of several ethnic groups, but at the same time people rarely meet others outside their own secure and familiar groups.

The question of how to develop a multicultural learning arena in which cultures, attitudes and values meet in the need for new and increased knowledge was the starting point for this project.

The aim was to create a place in which people could meet and exchange views in the local community across cultural, linguistic, religious and group affiliation; a meeting place that unites different peoples and at the same time develops commitment, participation and democratic abilities. With this project we wanted to contribute to the development of a study circle method by testing the method in several Nordic countries. With the support of The Nordic Council of Ministers we organised study circles in Denmark, Iceland, Lithuania and Norway. The study circle is a democratic, pedagogic tool – rich in tradition and especially known and used in the Scandinavian countries. Our study circles take their starting point in this experience. The circles had in common that the participants had different national origins, but it was up to each circle to decide the subject to be treated in relation to local needs and wishes.

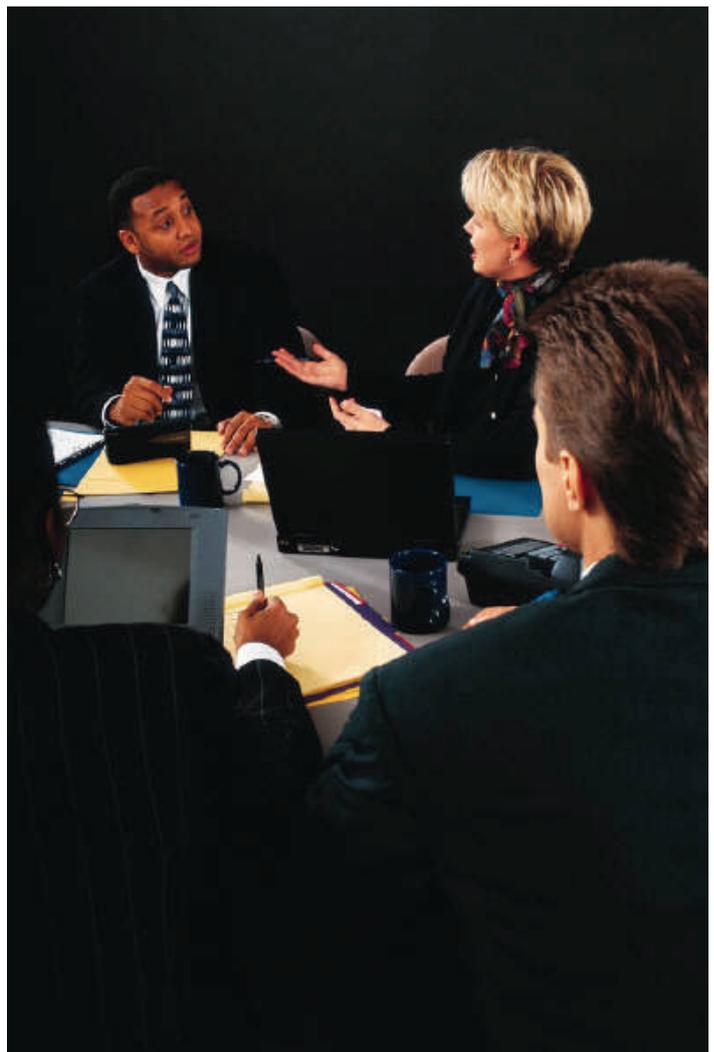
With this project we do not claim to have developed a perfect tool for organising a multicultural learning arena, but we believe that we have uncovered some possibilities in this method and that this tool is important in the effort to create equality and acceptance for the different people who live in a country, a region, a city, a village or a street.

What is a study circle?

The study circle is a known and accepted basis for Scandinavian democracy. Since the beginning of the 20th century, it has been actively used in the effort to spread knowledge and enlighten people. But the circle is also known as a tool anybody could use when new needs for knowledge arose. It was free of charge, easy to administer and it had a cosy and motivating atmosphere. In the study circle, the participants' own knowledge is passed on, shared and developed. Sometimes experts can be invited to supply the group with extra knowledge.

But the study circle is not only a means of sharing and communicating knowledge. Traditionally, it has a democratic basis of values and stimulates learning that arises socially and voluntarily, and it develops learning that is life value-orientated.

It is a dialogue in which body language, experiences and the surroundings are resources in the work of learning. The circle creates interaction among people in different phases of their lives and recruits heterogeneous communities. It is a tool that promotes equality, dialogue, respect and tolerance. The study circle is also a meeting place; it is a place where information is spread and meaningful communication established. The study circle can break isolation and loneliness and be a social arena for gathering, but it is also informal in a positive way. The arena requires commitment, openness and understanding but not close friendship or enforced relationships.



The leader has a very important role – the leader of a study circle is responsible for the democratic process of the circle and must provide for a confident and learning environment but must at the same time control the process. Without firm control, the circle will quickly be experienced as meaningless and will create more frustration and dislike than joy and development. (See: How to lead a study circle?)

The weighting of equality and respect for different outlooks on life and values is fundamental in all study circles. Nevertheless, it is an extra challenge and requires an active effort to be a participant in a multicultural study circle.

A multicultural study circle consists of:

5 to 8 participants with different ethnicity

A subject

An objective

A work plan

A result

A leader

Each study circle should not have more than 5 to 8 participants. Everybody participates on equal terms. In a study circle, no participant is above or below any other participant and therefore the number of participants should not be greater to ensure that all participants are visible and audible.

The philosophy of the study circle is that human beings learn when their knowledge is put into a context, when you meet others with the same interests and curiosity, and when you are open to others' experiences. In the study circle, every participant is his own teacher and has the possibility to both provide and gain knowledge in a learning community.

The study circle as a learning arena and a method of involvement

Many adults approach the learning situation with previous bad experiences and with scepticism. Learning can be experienced as difficult and impossible. The study circle is a counterbalance, the threshold is low, the school situation is eliminated, and teachers are non-existing. The grounding of knowledge is different and so it should be. A study circle should not expose anyone. On the contrary, it is up to every participant to make his knowledge visible. The study circle has only one clear demand. Commitment and respect for other people's opinions and values. The study circle is characterised by being an arena where new competences are developed through processes, in which reflections, actions, and experiences from one's own life meet reflections, experiences, and actions from other people's lives. The method is horizontal – everybody learns from everybody.



Through dialogue, one's own thoughts and knowledge will be met by questions and contrary conceptions in the meeting with new perspectives and other ways of thinking. In the study circle, importance is given to the fact that everybody's knowledge is equally important. In this way, the individual will also get new experiences and insights into their own knowledge. Often, a group is established on the basis of common interests and need for knowledge.

The study circle is:

- Learning by listening to others
- Learning through dialogue and discussion
- Learning through movements and experiences
- Learning through documentation

The way the work is done is decided in common, but to make the learning arena work, the process must be led; either by a leader selected from the participants at each meeting or a person will be given the role for the whole period.

Which subjects are relevant to a study circle?

The multicultural study circle has two aims that are closely intertwined with each other: It should provide new knowledge, and it should be a meeting place for different cultures. The topics can be and should be current and originate from challenges in the local community and the need for new insight. Anything can be discussed – the only condition is that somebody wants greater understanding about a matter or a subject.

Living environments are often composed of people with different attitudes, different values, and beliefs but with the same problems in relation to their own life situation and to society. Many have a limited knowledge about other groups. A study circle is a tool by which a meeting place and site of learning are established. In the care sector, many cultures meet. Different languages and experiences make communication difficult. A study circle

Subjects:

Diversity at the working place

Health environment and safety

Traditions

How to live with a teenager

Care for elderly people

A new road

Road safety in our local environment

that is open to dialogue and respect for values can provide a common platform in the work with elderly people. Many adults with different ethnic backgrounds want an education and meet in systems where many things are fixed already. A study circle can provide new knowledge about study techniques and a common knowledge concerning thoughts about education. In a local community, you want to gain insight into decisions affecting the individual. A study circle under

municipal administration is a good starting point. However, it is important to remember that the study circle should have two dimensions: a subject-related one and a social one for a meeting between fellow citizens with different cultures and backgrounds. The study circle should never take up current subjects in such a way that it appears as if some values are better than others or that some members are ascribed others' values and attitudes.

How to motivate for participation in a study circle?

Many people are only concerned with themselves. At the same time, we live in close communities where we are more or less dependent on each other and on the way society functions. In this society many things have changed, many people have moved to the country with hopes for a better life, and at the same time it can be decisive for identity and dignity to feel that what you bring with you also has a value. Many people are afraid of what is new and incomprehensible. Good meetings often take away this fear. The person or persons who want to set up a study circle must still meet the challenge of attracting other people. It does not happen automatically – especially not if the aim is to involve groups that are not normally in contact with each other. In the motivation for setting up a study circle it is necessary to state precisely that a study circle is not an ordinary school. In the circle, the participants decide how they want the circle to function; when, how often, how long, which subjects to discuss, when to involve experts, etc. It is up to the participants to determine whether this will be a good learning place or not. Clarification opens up for the desire to participate.

Where can we be?
At home
At the library
At a café
In the class room

The message has a decisive importance. Most people grade commitment according to how much a situation means to them. This means that the subjects discussed must be relevant for more than just the initiator and must be presented as interesting, important and well defined. It is important to specify that activity is transitory, but it gives a long-term advantage. In order to reach many different people as your target group for a multicultural study group, the message must have an

Oral information
Poster at a central place
Inform at meetings
Advertisement in the local newspaper
Leaflet in the mailbox

oral and open form. It must be regarded as a personal invitation. It can also be necessary to make use of promoters and networks trusted in the community to overcome contrary views and cultural barriers.

Who can organise a study circle?

Anybody can set up a study circle, but the circle must have a specific subject matter and a plan for how the work is to be done. The originator must have knowledge about what is required of the leader and assure that the tool is used appropriately. Apart from that, it is up to the participants to determine whether it will be a successful learning arena. The study circle is traditionally used in voluntary organisations and adult education associations as a tool for mutual sharing and development of knowledge. As a method for multicultural learning arenas, the study circle can be used in new contexts. In many municipalities, it is strongly felt that the distance between groups of citizens is increasing. At the same time, there is a wish to develop and strengthen the knowledge and the cooperation of the population in relation to current matters in the local community. The citizens in a local community often have the need to obtain more knowledge about each other as well as about matters concerning society and can set up a study circles on their own initiative. The study circle is not, however, an action forum.

At school and in kindergarten, the diversity in ethnical background is increasing among the parents as well as among the employees. How many misunderstandings and how much fear could have been avoided if they had had insight into each other's way of thinking and choice of values? Parents' meetings and staff meetings do not cover the same intention as the study circle because they do not focus on learning but on information.



A study circle must have a subject matter and a plan as a basis for discussion and the aim is to achieve learning and development.

The working place

Increasingly, the working place is becoming an important ethnic meeting place. There, people with very different backgrounds work side by side without knowing each other. That is not uncomplicated in relation to languages, values, culture, and myths. At the same time, the working place is a lifelong learning arena. Working groups with different competences have a unique possibility to provide each other with knowledge by way of the study circle.

Parents/relatives

To be a parent is a demanding and exposed role. Own experiences and attitudes are deep-rooted in us and are a kind of foundation for our choices in child rearing. Our children meet quite different challenges from what we did ourselves, challenges with which we have no experience. Among other things, they meet fellow pupils with other languages, other upbringings, and other values. This creates fear and worry – we hear and read about it every day. A study circle is a simple and secure tool for knowledge, insight and information about each other's attitudes. It takes about five weeks, a few hours each time. The subject matter can be as simple as "Help, there are teenagers in the house!" Each individual can tell others about his/her experiences, values and aims. This will provide new and interesting knowledge, and in addition the confidence that comes from sharing and learning. At the same time, the parents will get to know each other across all barriers. This will increase the insight and the understanding of the values and actions of children and adults.

In Vilnius, teachers from different schools and with different ethnic backgrounds set up a study circle. They met four evenings and discussed subjects within the field of intercultural cooperation. In the evaluation, the participants express the view that myths and untruths shut off communication and cooperation and that the aim must be to break these down. The population of Lithuania consists of Lithuanians, Russians, Belo Russians, and Poles. For historical reasons, these groups have a complicated relationship with each other.

Voluntary organisations

Voluntary organizations are a necessary and valuable part of a democracy and a welfare state. Many of us often participate in several organisations. In spite of their value basis of openness and accessibility, organisations may not be readily accessible and seem closed to those standing outside. Seen from outside, the members form a social group in which they work together with the same values and attitudes. It is difficult to understand “the language,” and it requires courage to knock on the door. The study circle can be a noncommittal door opener. The study circle is also a tool that can function as a bridge builder between organisations.



Participants with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds were asked if they wanted to participate in a study circle on human rights. All were members of voluntary organisations with their own ethnic group as members. An Iraq, an Iranian, a Columbian, a Dane, a Sri Lankan, and two Norwegians were interested, and the group met five times. Apart from gaining valuable knowledge on human rights, the group, through the knowledge and the insight they shared, concluded that the human rights that are universal clearly are based on western culture and way of thinking. At the same time, they got to know each other and got a better understanding of the reasons for the various points of view.

Educational institutions

Educational institutions have become a multicultural challenge: There, students with very different backgrounds meet. The educational tradition, the language, and the values of a new country can be difficult to access. Resources and the ability to use the students' experiences and knowledge are often limited among the staff and within the system. It is easy to take for granted that everybody understands!

The study circle offers a unique opportunity to meet across cultural boundaries. Obviously, group work is not unknown to many of the students, but as such it is often connected with academic demands and pressure. A study circle will be a meta-learning arena. The students will get to know each other in a new way; no one is cleverer than the any one else, and the subject matter chosen meets adult standards.

The participants in the study circle “Care for elderly people in my own country – and the values behind” are students at The Social and Health Care College in Aarhus, which offers short vocational training programmes. The students represent a wide range of religions, cultures, skin colours, and social backgrounds. The reasons why they live in Denmark are also quite different: some are refugees, some are married to Danes, some came to study, and some arrived as a consequence of family reunion. In the evaluation, it is noted that “they got a better understanding and a higher consciousness of their own background and why things are like they are in their own country and in Denmark”. Another interesting point was that one of the participants stressed that he had got a better understanding of the Danish educational system. Previously, he had not appreciated (and not been good at either) the discussions in the classroom during the lessons, whether it was the teacher discussing with the students or the students discussing with each other. He thought that it was a waste of time. He did not like group work either. Now he understands that it is a question of democracy – not a waste of time.

How to lead a study circle

A study circle must be democratic in its point of origin – meaning that the participants have an equal role. In any case, the study circle must have a leader, and it is important to stress that the leader is not a teacher. The leader's role is to lead in such a way that the circle functions according to its stated purpose. What then will be the leader's most important functions?

Organisationally: Take care of invitations, determine the meeting place, perhaps write reports, order materials, and make agreements with invited experts, make a plan for the work process, and see to it that there is a progress.

Management: To start (commonplace, but important): a study circle as a forum must be informal, but the framework should nevertheless be formal. The study circle must start and end as agreed. The speaking time must be shared so that everybody gets the experience of being seen and heard.

The leader should not be a person who controls things and puts himself in the centre but a person who listens and shows empathy. The leader must also maintain the main line

“The participants expressed the opinion that the study circle should have a leader who could structure the discussion and prevent one or two persons from dominating the discussion” (from the Danish report)

of the subject matter so that the dialogue is related to the subject agreed upon. The leader can make simple conclusions but with a question mark: Do you agree? The meeting must also be rounded out and concluded: Place and time for next meeting must be confirmed with proposals for the agenda. multicultural study circle is a special challenge for the leader.



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The language used can be a barrier for clear and simple communication. It is important to make sure that what is said is also what is meant but without forcing the participant to repeat too often. This would create uncertainty and a feeling of insecurity. The ways people express themselves often create misunderstandings. We take it for granted that what we understand that a person has said is what the person means. In homogeneous groups, people often know each other's sense of humour, understatements, and expressions, and it is easy to discuss and communicate. In multicultural groups, everyone will have his own individual way of expression. In addition, the value basis and the attitudes will be different and maybe even unknown to other participants. All these aspects must be united by the leader into a positive and developing arena of knowledge.

Some of the participants will come from more authoritarian educational systems than the Nordic and therefore will not be so familiar with the equality in learning and the horizontal perspective that is characteristic for the Nordic study circle model. Already in the start-up phase, it is important to define and agree upon a framework for the work of the group, some ground rules for the completion of the study circle, and to clarify the expectations with regard to both the study circle and the other participants. Afterwards, it will also be easier to evaluate whether the aims were achieved.

The leader must be:

- **Clear**
- **Determined**
- **Listening**
- **Assure that all are heard**
- **Keep the main line in the discussion**
- **Have the ability to interrupt without seeming disruptive**
- **Have a positive and fraternal manner.**
- **Be an equal participant**

Challenges

The biggest challenge in the work with a multicultural study circle is to make it known and to motivate participation. This is especially the case when we want to recruit participants of different ethnic backgrounds who are not used to either meet or be together in the same group.

The study circle is an arena in which it is easy to feel comfortable, but it is a challenge to attract people because it does not provide any formal competence. It will also require some free hours or possibly even some hours of the working week.

It can be difficult to describe what happens among the participants when they meet. The study circle is a tool for self-development that must be met with and experienced as a quite different learning platform.

Fundamental differences of values can hinder communication and give rise to conflicts if the leader of the circle does not have empathy and the ability to listen and understand what is happening. Difficult subject matters should not be avoided but made understandable. It is also a challenge to accept each other's values, although it is not always possible to agree.

It might seem easy to start a study circle, but the challenge is to take seriously what is happening so that the circle really provides knowledge, insight, and understanding. When people from different cultures meet,

Information
Lack of time
Qualities of leadership
Values
Attitudes
Equality

different levels of values easily arise, i.e., that some feel that they are not important enough or that some regard themselves as better than others. Hierarchy does not belong in a study circle. Equality among the participants must be a matter of course, but it is the leader's responsibility to make the respect - though not the acceptance - for all values visible.

The leadership role is a challenge in itself because the leader's position is absolutely necessary, but it should not be controlling or determining. The leader must see to it that the circle is functioning according to the premises and aims agreed upon.

How to end a study circle

Learning in a study circle is a non-formal form of learning. The learning follows a plan and has an aim, but it is not a part of or to be compared with formal learning. Still, those who participate should have some kind of acknowledgement that they have participated and gained knowledge. For the participants, it can be an important competence and experience to refer to in several connections. The ability to understand other cultures and cooperate with other values is a competence increasingly needed for everybody today: A certificate should contain facts, such as, the subject matter and aim of the study circle, the method, and the period of time. A study circle is not ended before the leader and the participants have summed up what has been learned and what has been achieved both in relation to the subject matter and socially with a special view to appreciation, visibility, and respect for the values of the participants. The circle should also determine whether to continue, and also why to continue.

Summing up dialogue

Aim

Result

Certificate

Evaluation

Whether the study circle should be evaluated and how depends on the circumstances. An oral discussion related to the subject-related results, the learning arena, and the social arena should always take place. Did everybody feel they took part, became involved? Did they contribute with their experiences and knowledge? If the evaluation is written, it must be simple, easy to understand, and easy to answer. But as a starting point, one of the aims of learning in the study circles is that it also encourages an open and honest dialogue about experiences and results.

Notes

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work)

Notes

This handbook can be ordered from:
Voksenopplæringsforbundet (The Norwegian Assosiation for Adult Education) tlf.
0047-22410000, or you may download it for free from our website: www.vofo.no



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