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The Study Circle – a method for learning, a tool for democracy Sturla Bjerkaker

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.

The Study Circle followed the “top-to-bottom approach” for enlightenment developed in the 18th century, expressed i.e. through the University Extension movements in France, England and Scandinaviaⁱ, (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”ⁱⁱⁱ (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 extent a Study Circle democracy”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ (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 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 members 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, page 13) on how to describe and analyse the experiences from methods of planning and organising Study Circles.

Because the Norwegian Act on Adult Education^{iv} (1976) require students' involvement on contents and method in the courses, she thought it was of special interest to find out to what extent this is practised in Study Circles.

Background

The Study Circle developed from late 19th 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”^v.

The most distinctive features of circle studies, as Oscar Olsson (quoted in Brattset 1982, page 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 or she 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, page 9).

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 former unpleasant experiences from school.

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 plans produced in advance, 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”, where the members communicate on Internet.

Research

The Study Circle as an academic field of research has been rare. Most of the research being done in recent years is known from Sweden and the University of Linköping.^{vi} 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 "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 "therapeutic group", in which activities concentrate upon individual mental or social problems.

The (idealistic) principle of circle members shaping their own studies is practised 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, firstly, guidance is given to potential circle members during the recruitment period, secondly, if training is given to circle leaders, and thirdly, attention is paid to designing appropriate study material, with a view to making all members active in the learning process.

In her study, Brattset (1982) 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 regarding the *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 more often the case 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* have 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 number 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 (Blid 2000, page 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 have 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 (Blid 2000 page 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 leader in this function might 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 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, page 28) has set up a series of main pedagogical principles for the work and function of the Study Circle, with emphasise 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 (Blid 2000, page 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 active 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 have 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 – are focusing on so-called effective learning methods. The Study Circle is considered to be too slow in many aspects. But there is also tendency to a renewal for the Study Circle today. At 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 flexibility, possibilities for 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.

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ⁱ Arvidson, Lars (1998) is writing about the University Extension movements in his book on the history of the Folk University in Norway.

ⁱⁱ Johansson, Inge (1994), a former leader of the WEA in Sweden, took this slogan as title of his book about liberal adult education history in Sweden.

ⁱⁱⁱ Olov Palme in his speech, opening the Nordic Folk Academy in Gothenborg 1998.

^{iv} 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 emphasise on the role of the voluntary sector and the role of the Study Circle and the function of democracy in adult education.

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

^{vi} See i.e. Andersson, Laginer, Larsson and Sundgren (1996).

^{vii} 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.