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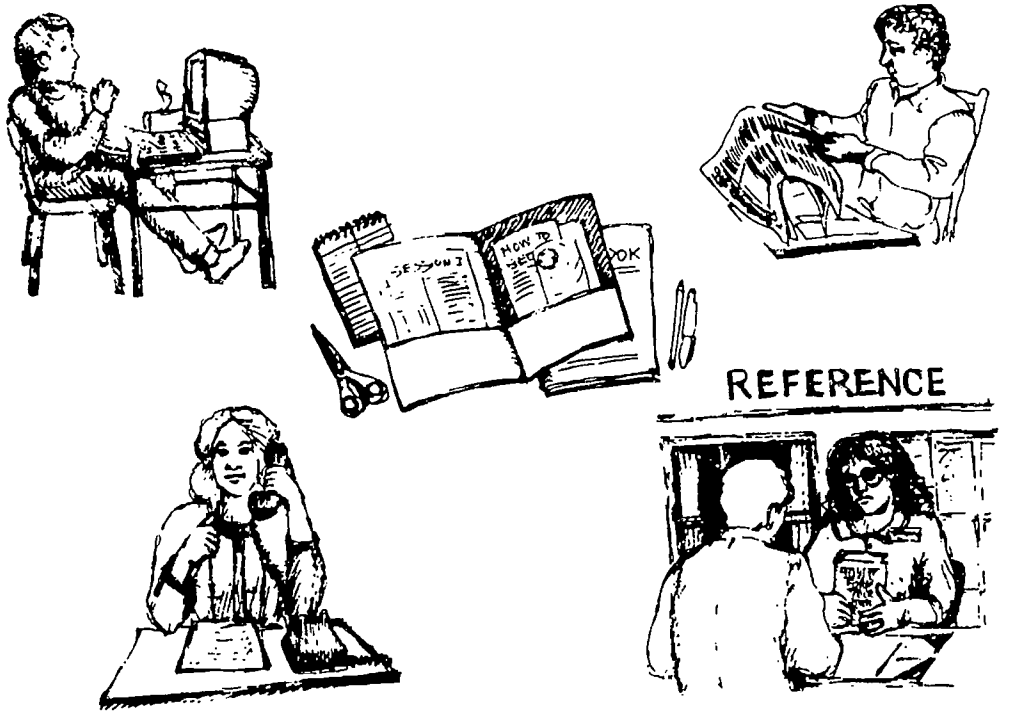
ABSTRACT

Guidelines present ways to create written material for small group, democratic, and highly participatory discussions of social and political issues. Twelve suggestions for creating effective study circle materials precedes consideration of study circle goals. The overarching goal of any study circle is to provide opportunities for people to learn together in a participatory setting. Six common goals explore issues for consideration in planning programs and materials. Although there is no rigid formula for the creative and varied process of material development, eight steps offer some general guidelines: (1) research and define the issue; (2) provide basic information; (3) incorporate people's concerns into the material; (4) organize the materials; (5) encourage diversity; (6) call attention to values underlying opinions and concerns; (7) develop thought-provoking discussion questions; and (8) pilot test the material. The next section discusses five common questions regarding material development. Four modes provide examples of effective study circle materials: (1) stand-alone discussion questions; (2) discussion questions to accompany an article, report, or television program; (3) adapting existing discussion materials; and (4) original materials written specifically for study circles. The final section lists five additional resources. (CK)

STUDY CIRCLES RESOURCE CENTER

Guidelines for Creating Effective Study Circle Material



A publication of the Study Circles Resource Center, sponsored by Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

Contents

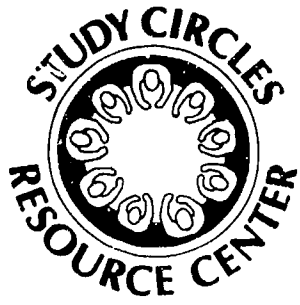
Guidelines for Creating Effective Study Circle Material is a publication of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC). It serves as a companion to ***The Study Circle Handbook: A Manual for Study Circle Discussion Leaders, Organizers, and Participants*** and ***A Guide to Training Study Circle Leaders***. All three publications are available at no charge for small quantities and at cost for larger quantities. You are also welcome to photocopy these programs as needed so long as proper credit is given to SCRC.

The Study Circles Resource Center is a project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc., a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC carries out this mission by promoting the use of small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as study circles.

SCRC provides:

- **Consultation**, via phone or mail, for persons seeking advice on organizing and leading study circles.
- **Networking services**, including a comprehensive clearinghouse list of topical study circle material produced by a variety of organizations, a quarterly newsletter, and information exchange with thousands of individuals and organizations.
- **Topical discussion programs** on timely issues such as race relations, the death penalty, and foreign policy.
- **Assistance with material development**, by providing this how-to publication and, where there is potential for wide use, direct assistance in developing topical study circle material.

For information, contact SCRC at PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258, (203) 928-2616, FAX (203) 928-3713.



Introduction

This manual presents guidelines for creating written material for study circles – that is, for small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions of social and political issues.

Study circles provide opportunities for the productive dialogue that is critical to our communities and our nation. They start with the belief that we must talk together in order to constructively address the issues we face. There are three critical ingredients in encouraging the kind of dialogue we need: skilled discussion leaders, participants who understand their role in the study circle, and good discussion materials.

Good study circle materials make people want to talk about an issue and to hear what others have to say. As you write the material, probably your greatest temptation will be to sound like an "expert" – no doubt a holdover from writing term papers or theses! But the most effective study circle material you can write is in understandable, jargon-free language. Your job is to take the abundance of information, arguments, and ideas that exist on a particular issue and to present it in an accessible, discussable manner.

Depending upon your goals, your time frame, and the resources that are available to you, you may spend a few hours, a few days, or several weeks in preparing the material. Good materials vary in length, in style, and in the depth with which they treat an issue. For some groups on some subjects, you may require only a few well-focused discussion questions for each session. For others, an article or two with some thoughtful questions can generate lively discussions. Or, you may choose to write completely original study circle material. If you are not already familiar with study circle materials, you may wish to turn to the end of this manual to familiarize yourself with the examples there.

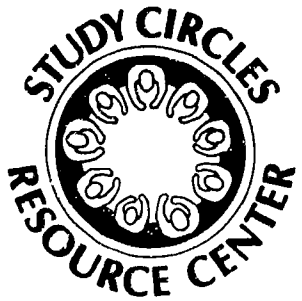
Whatever form they take, effective study circle materials do the following:

- inform participants about essential facts;
- connect the issue to participants' concerns;
- present or draw out, in a non-biased way, a number of perspectives on the issue;
- provide a structure for one or, more commonly, several discussion sessions;
- help the study circle leader, who generally is not an expert in the issue, to effectively facilitate the discussions.

We hope that you find this manual useful. If you use it as you produce study circle materials, we hope that you will share your results with the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) and tell us about discussions based on your efforts. In our mission to foster study circle activity, we document programs so that they can inspire and inform others who want promote dialogue in their communities and organizations.

We also invite you to call or write SCRC *while* you develop your study circle material. We can offer advice and perhaps put you in touch with others who are promoting dialogue on a similar issue. If you are writing original discussion material, we can review drafts of your material and offer suggestions.

Finally, we would like to know whether you find this manual useful and to hear your suggestions on how to make it more useful. We look forward to hearing from you.



Suggestions for Creating Effective Study Circle Material

The essence of good material is that it helps people engage in thoughtful conversation and dialogue. If you present the issue in way that helps participants relate it to their lives and to understand the larger context, you have gone a long way toward creating effective material.

Use this checklist as a reminder as you develop your study circle material. (Depending on the time and resources you can devote to developing the material, not all of these suggestions may apply.)

▪ **Be brief.** Most people don't take the time to do a lot of reading. In fact, oftentimes participants first read the materials after they enter the room and just before the study circle begins! We suggest limiting reading to an absolute maximum of an hour per session, and providing some easily distinguished key points that people can refer to during the discussion.

▪ **Make the material easy to read.** The material should be easily accessible to the people who will be reading it. Don't write with lots of jargon, abstract concepts, expert language, big words, or long, complicated sentences. Make it lively. Use the active rather than the passive voice.

• **Connect it to the concerns of the participants.** For example, materials that are suitable for participants who are already active on a particular issue would be different from materials for a group just setting out to learn about an issue.

• **Make the material personal.** Relate the issue to the lives of a cross-section of everyday people and encourage participants to share their own experiences, attitudes, opinions, and ideas.

• **Tell stories.** A story often conveys more than expository writing, because it *shows* rather than *tells* how people's lives are affected by the issue. Stories get people thinking about others' experiences and encourage them to talk about their own.

• **Make it fair and balanced, not partisan.** Don't present just one view of a problem or just one solution, but rather a diversity of views or possible solutions. Encourage participants to better understand and express their own views. Either present a broad

spectrum of well-developed choices, or offer a few alternative viewpoints and suggest that participants come up with others.

• **Encourage dialogue rather than debate.** Encourage participants to see that there are good, thoughtful people that have views that differ from their own. Help them to understand why others believe as they do, to maintain an open mind, and to consider and re-examine their own views. By acknowledging that different views have validity, the material encourages participants to express their true opinions and to seek common ground.

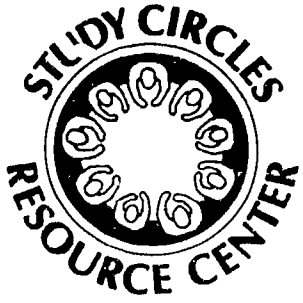
• **Encourage participants to recognize the values on which their ideas, and others' ideas, are based.** Help participants to identify what they hold most important about the issue at hand, and to identify what others hold most important. In this way, study circle participants will have the chance to understand the issue from several vantage points, and to understand why there is no one "easy answer." This will not only clarify why people differ with each other, but will also help participants see the tensions within their own values.

• **Help the leader structure the discussion.** Good materials help the leader focus the discussion, move it along, avoid tangents, and raise views that are not being raised by group members. Some material provides a rough outline for each of several sessions. Also, some material provides specific guidelines for the discussion leader.

• **Clarify the goals of the study circle.** As with any group, a study circle will work better if it is clear about its goals. This is particularly important because people are often unfamiliar with exploring an issue in a setting where learning together is the most important aim.

• **Present information that is appropriate for the level of discussion and the goal of the program.** Good material doesn't overload readers with more information than they need. However, if a study circle has a serious policy focus, it provides enough information so that participants can develop informed judgments.

• **Provide opportunities for people to consider what action to pursue.** Effective material may help participants discuss the various options for action. Even though the purpose of a study circle is not to reach consensus, it often empowers group members to take individual action. Or, if group members do reach agreement on some action they wish to take collectively, they may form a working group.



Your Study Circle's Goals: The Context for Material Development

The overarching goal of any study circle is to provide opportunities for people to learn together in a democratic, participatory setting.

Within that larger goal, you probably have several related objectives. If you clarify these as you begin to organize your study circle you will better understand what kinds of material you need to develop.

For example, if you want to engage participants in an issue that is new to them, the material should provide a concise core of facts and help them understand why it affects their lives. If your main purpose is to help participants grapple with a public policy choice, the material should help people understand the tensions and tradeoffs among the proposed policy solutions.

As you plan your own program and materials, consider some of these common goals of study circles:

• to help participants **increase their general understanding of a social problem, a public issue, or an organizational issue.** This may be your goal if you wish to stimulate more widespread discussion of an issue in a community or organization, or to help those who are already concerned about the issue to work more closely together by learning together.

• to help participants **grapple with public policy choices,** identify the values that underlie their views, make an informed decision on the issue, and find "common ground" with other participants. Often a linked goal is to provide feedback on the issue to elected officials or organizational leaders.

• to help participants **grapple with organizational choices.** This could include considering future directions for the organization, or examining the organization's position on a public issue.

• to **enhance communication and interpersonal understanding** within a community or organization, and to change the social climate or atmosphere by doing so. For example, study circles on race relations have proven to be effective in achieving this goal.

• to **address personal concerns which are part of larger social issues.** Examples include study circles on "voluntary simplicity," parenting, aging, and the mind-body health connection.

• to **explore or move toward political or social action**. Material that reflects this goal might describe several action steps that others have taken and ask participants to reflect on what they want to do. Participants should feel free to explore a range of personal and collective actions, without feeling compelled to come to consensus or to "buy in" to others' agendas.

Steps in Developing the Material

Developing discussion material can be as uncomplicated as making photocopies of a newspaper or magazine article and writing a few discussion questions. Or, it can be as involved as writing your own material from scratch. Whatever form the material takes, its ultimate goal is to prepare participants to engage in thoughtful conversation and dialogue.

Before you begin, find out whether there is already some study circle material on the issue in which you're interested. The Study Circles Resource Center catalogs discussion material on many issues developed by many organizations. In addition, SCRC itself has developed materials on a number of issues. However, even if you do find discussion material on your issue, chances are that it won't be exactly what you are looking for. If that is the case, you may wish to adapt or expand existing material. (See the "Models and Examples" section at the end of this manual.)

The steps in this section will be most apt if you are writing your own program from scratch. Although writing your own program is the most time-consuming way to develop material, it is probably the only way to obtain material that exactly suits your needs and goals.

Even though there is no rigid formula for such a creative and varied process, the following steps offer some general guidelines. Depending on your goals and the kind of material you envision, you may find yourself concentrating your efforts on only one or two of these steps.

Do your homework: Research and define the issue

Very early in your research you will need to write a clear definition of the issue or problem to be discussed in the study circles. Most importantly, how do potential study circle participants within your community or organization define the problem or issue? Strive for a statement of the issue that will give everyone a sense of inclusion in the conversation. As you draft statements of the issue, ask for people's reactions. Though you will take into account what you read about the issue and what the experts and policy-makers are saying, represent the problem in non-expert terms – in terms in which the ordinary person is talking about it. If you define the issue too narrowly or technically (for example, "the possible effects of land use policy on the environment of our county"), it won't lend itself to discussion. If you define it too broadly (for example, "the environment"), participants won't know where to begin to discuss it.

If you plan to write original material on a public issue that is national in scope, begin early. Good information is available on most issues, but it may be scattered among many sources. Read widely about the issue, both in the mainstream and alternative press. Watch TV discussion programs or listen to radio talk shows (of the PBS variety). Talk to people representing a diversity of political perspectives, including people who are involved in the issue and those who are not, and ask them what they think. One of the most effective ways to learn about an issue is to contact experts at universities or colleges, or staff at think tanks and non-profit organizations. Ask them to suggest articles for you to read. Often they will have documents they can send you or files that you can look through. Cooperative Extension staff (who are based at land-grant universities) may be especially helpful in providing information on policy issues.

If you will be writing original material on a community or organizational issue, you will not have as many resources to consult. Still, there are almost always enough parallels to a national issue or other local or organizational issues to find resource materials that will help you think about your issue. Interview local people or people in your organization, both those who make decisions about the issue and those who are affected by it.

What is usually included in a package of study circle material?

An outline of the sessions. Something as simple as a table of contents will give participants an idea of how the discussions will progress.

An overview of the issue or problem. Provide some history of the issue, some pertinent facts, and perhaps an overview of the current national, community-wide, or organizational debate on the issue.

Text and discussion questions for each session. The "text" can be articles you have selected, or text that you have written. It can include information about a sub-topic, a range of viewpoints, a range of possible solutions - anything that can spark productive discussion.

General information about the study circle process. Include information on the role of the leader, the role of the participants, and general ground rules. (You are welcome to adapt or photocopy information from SCRC - provided proper credit is given - or you may order multiple copies of SCRC publications and include them with your materials.)

Inform the participants: Provide basic information

On some issues your early research may uncover a brief article that summarizes the issue and notes a number of perspectives. On other issues, it may be necessary to develop this core information for your study circle material.

Strive for brevity; most people do not want to become experts on an issue, but want just enough information to be able to discuss it. Deciding what information is absolutely essential is challenging, but consider including:

• a brief history of the issue and what has been done to deal with it (whether by the nation, the community, or the organization);

• why it is of current concern;

• the alternative public solutions that are being proposed;

• public concerns and views that are not reflected in the discussions of experts or policymakers.

If you are concerned about seeming to oversimplify the issue, you may want to provide a bibliography or to reprint extra readings for those who are interested in delving into the issue more deeply. (If you will be distributing your materials widely, you will have to obtain reprint permission from the publishers of the readings.) You may want to provide a "bookshelf" of related readings for your study circle. If the program is community-wide, consider reserving a special shelf at the local library.

Personalize the issue: Incorporate people's concerns into the material

Think about your participants and your goals. Talk to people and ask them *their* idea of what the problem is. Your conversations don't have to be systematic, but listening to a cross-section of "non-experts" will give you vital insights into people's concerns.

To incorporate these insights into your material, *start with where people are*. Using stories that represent a diversity of experiences helps draw out participants' stories and helps them become aware of how the issue touches other people's lives.

When you write discussion questions, include questions that give participants an opportunity to share their experiences. The most useful question for beginning any discussion of a new issue is "What experiences have you or people you know had with this issue?" Even though participants will move beyond the realm of personal experience, the most effective learning experiences begin there. On some issues, it may be useful to devote an entire initial session to the discussion of people's concerns and experiences. This was done, for example, in SCRC's *Can't We All Just Get Along? A Manual for Discussion Programs on Racism and Race Relations.* (For a description of how that material is organized, see page 17.)

Organize the materials: Divide the issue into manageable pieces for the discussion

A basic consideration in developing study circle material is the number of sessions you'll be recommending to the program organizers. Sometimes the nature of the issue will dictate a natural division. In all cases, you'll need to balance the advantages of meeting together over several sessions with the risk of creating a program that doesn't fit into people's busy lives.

There are several possible progressions in study circles. One moves from a discussion of personal experiences to a discussion of community, national, or organizational policy. For example, the material on crime described on page 16, begins with a session on

personal experiences, moves to sessions on crime in the U.S. and the causes of crime, and concludes with a session on how to handle crime in the community. Another possible progression moves from personal experiences, to defining the problem, to examining alternative solutions, to deciding what kinds of action to take. Still other issues lend themselves well to divisions among sub-topics. For example, a study circle program on arms trade developed by Connecticut Peace Action includes sessions on nuclear proliferation, the U.S. economy, and the third world.

However you decide to break down your issue, the sessions should have a natural evolution. Each session must build on the previous ones, but the material should help avoid too much repetition. Also, define the focus of each session so that its scope is manageable: if the discussion is too broad it may overwhelm the group; if it is too narrow some participants will be bored.

Even if you are developing material for only one session, you'll still need to think about a natural progression for the discussion. The discussion questions might reflect, for example, an evolution from personal experiences to a definition of the problem, or from personal experiences to consideration of alternative solutions.

Encourage diversity: Incorporate a variety of views into the material

It is critical for participants to consider a variety of views in a study circle. They should feel that they have an opportunity to offer their views in a respectful setting, that they have a "place at the table."

You can incorporate a diversity of views in an informal way, by describing various views in your overview of the issue. Or you can do this more formally, through presenting a well-developed range of views. Both approaches lend credibility and effectiveness to the study circle process by confirming the program's impartiality and by helping ensure that a diversity of views will be expressed during the study circle. Making strong arguments for varied views introduces some creative tension and helps participants look beyond the level of personal opinion and to examine the core values upon which divergent views are based. It is on these core values that participants might also find common ground.

Any issue can be "framed" in many possible ways. (For examples of material that frames issues around formal choices, see the example on page 18). There is no such thing as one correct, objective, value-free, non-political frame for an issue. But if you make an honest attempt to be neutral and present the strengths of all major positions, your intent will be felt and accepted by the group.

One question, of course, is which views to present. Obviously, the dominant views in the public or organizational debate must be included, but you must judge which of the lesser-held alternatives to include. For example, if you include only those choices which are judged "politically feasible," the material will lead to a different kind of discussion than the one that will result if you include a wider spectrum of views. (See page 19 for additional resources on framing issues using a wide spectrum of views.)

Get at what motivates people: Call attention to the values that underlie people's opinions and concerns

Good study circle materials help participants identify and clarify the values at the core of their opinions – that is, why they hold their opinions. By talking about their deeper values, participants can go beyond the numbers and technical details that often lead to fruitless arguments about political issues. This can help participants to recognize the complexities involved in confronting the issue and to find some common ground.

When participants come to see the conflicts between competing values, they often recognize that these conflicts exist *within* individuals as well as among different people. For example, a person who supports local control of schools might do so because he or she places a high value on freedom of choice; a person who supports efforts to integrate schools across school lines might do so because he or she places a high value on equity. Each of these people might hold both values in some measure, and a discussion of core values will help them to see that.

You can call attention to core values in your material in a couple of ways. First, you might identify core values that are the most important to those who hold certain views. Second, you might include discussion questions that help participants consider the values behind their own and others' opinions. (For examples of discussion questions that draw out core values, see below).

Stimulate interaction: Develop thought-provoking discussion questions

Study circle questions help participants elaborate on the text and think more deeply about the issue. They also enable the leader to move the conversation along and to focus it on key points and issues.

Some questions that are helpful for focusing the discussion on almost any issue are:

Questions to Start the Discussion

- What experiences have you, or people you know, had with this issue?
- How is this an issue or problem in your community or organization?
- Why do you think it's such a problem? How does it affect you personally?

Questions About Key Points

- What is at the crux of this issue?
- Could you give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point?

Questions That Encourage the Expression of a Diversity of Views

- What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?
- Does anyone have a different view?

- What do people who disagree with that view say?
- What are the strongest arguments against what you just said?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?

Questions About Values

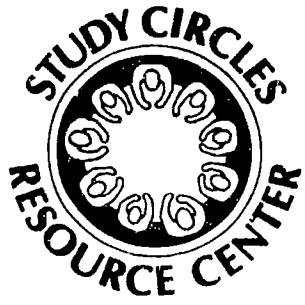
- What are the most important concerns that underlie your views?
- What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead decent and caring people to hold that view which is so different from your own?
- Are there any common values, concerns, or ideas that unite all or most members of our study circle, despite different views on the issue?

Questions That Lead Toward Next Steps

- With what approach, if any, would most of this group agree?
- What is already being done in the community to deal with this problem?
- What are some first steps in dealing with this problem?
- What might we do about this problem?

Try it out: Pilot test the material

Find a group of people who have not been active in developing the material but who have an interest in discussing the issue. Ask them to hold a study circle using the material. Listen to the group members as they discuss the material – you will learn what works, what doesn't work, and what needs clarification. At the end of the discussion(s), ask them what they think of the materials. Did they aid the discussion? The earlier in the process you do this, the more time you will have to benefit from the insights you gain.



Common Questions

What types of issues are appropriate for study circles?

Study circles can address any issue or problem faced by a community or an organization. But they are particularly useful for issues on which you can answer "yes" to the following:

- Does the issue have a significant impact on citizens, employees, constituents, members – that is, on the individual lives of potential study circle participants?
- Do people want to talk about it?
- Is there a social as well as a political component? For example, issues such as racism and race relations, welfare, immigration, and gender relations lend themselves particularly well to the study circle process.
- Are there implications for public or organizational policy? Is the issue important beyond the concern of the immediate study circle audience?

Study circles are effective because they straddle private and public worlds. They elicit personal experiences, reflections, and opinions, and then help group members move from a personal perspective to a larger perspective. They differ from forums, panel discussions, committees, task forces, and other programs in that they are collaborative and somewhat informal. People can try on new ideas, change their minds, say they're not sure. Also, study circles are small enough to allow every group member to participate.

How do I know if the issue I want to discuss is ripe for discussion?

Obviously, there needs to be enough interest so that people will want to discuss it. The issue needs to be broad enough to evoke interest, but not so broad that it's too overwhelming to deal with in the amount of time that you have.

Daniel Yankelovich, a leading analyst of public opinion research, has pointed out that issues have cycles in terms of awareness and interest. Early in an issue cycle, there is little sense of urgency and it will be hard to get people together to talk about it. Late in the cycle, when the issue has already been debated and received a lot of media attention, views tend to be polarized and it's once again difficult to get productive dialogue going. That time between the early and late parts of the cycle is an opening in which people are most likely to listen to each other and to consider a range of views. This is also the most effective time to engage people in productive dialogue.

Who can develop study circle material? How much do I need to know about the issue?

You don't need to be an expert on an issue in order to write material about it. In fact, you'll probably write more effectively for the general reader if you are not an expert. You should have a grasp of the basic facts and of the current status of the issue. Take into account the analysis of experts and the passionate arguments of advocates, but aim at informing and engaging the ordinary concerned person.

You must be able to put aside your own strongly held beliefs so that you can present diverse views, each in the best possible light – even those that you may detest. You must be committed to letting the participants in the study circle come to their own conclusions based on a presentation of the issue that is as unbiased as you can make it.

How much work should I expect to do?

There is no standard amount of time for preparing discussion material. You could spend a few hours or a few weeks. If you know an issue well you can easily come up with a dozen questions that can sustain a study circle. The SCRC clearinghouse catalogs discussion programs that you can quickly adapt for your own use. Full-fledged original study circle material could take weeks to develop.

In what ways should I involve other people in the process of developing the material?

Collaboration in the writing process is important, just as it is in the study circle itself. Usually, one person is the principal writer, while two or three others in the "core group" help define the idea, review drafts of the material, and make suggestions. Those with strong stands on the issue are not likely to be ideal members of the core group, but will offer useful advice.

You'll need feedback on your material at three critical junctures:

1. *At the very beginning of the process.* Talk informally with people as you define your issue;

2. *When you have an early draft of your material.* Share the draft with friends and neighbors and members in your organization – whoever is interested in the issue but is not an expert in it. Also share it with advocates and experts who have a diversity of stands on the issue;

3. *When you think the material is almost complete.* Pass it by experts and non-experts, for a final check on crucial facts and to find out whether the document makes sense to the general reader.

If you are developing a major program that will be used throughout your community or organization, it's also a good idea to test an early draft of the material in a pilot study circle.

Models and Examples of Effective Study Circle Material

As Robert MacNeil has said, we need information that is "accessible, understandable, and discussable." In fact, that is the definition of good study circle material!

In this section we present four different models of ways to create effective material. They range from material that can be created quite quickly to full-fledged original material that will require more time and effort.

With each model we include one or two examples of study circle material created by communities and organizations around the country.

Model One: Stand-alone discussion questions

If a group is accustomed to democratic, collaborative learning or if group members already have some knowledge about an issue, questions alone may be sufficient for several productive discussion sessions. A dozen questions is usually plenty for one session.

The questions help to structure the discussion. As was mentioned in the steps to creating material, good questions will: bring out participants' experiences, opinions, and ideas; generate discussion of a range of views; bring out the values that underlie opinions; and help participants seek areas of agreement.

Somerville, MA: A neighborhood study circle based on a list of questions

A neighborhood study circle in Somerville, MA, discussed a variety of issues, usually for one or two sessions per issue. Joel Bennett developed a list of questions for a discussion of homelessness. His questions generated an excellent discussion, and have been used successfully with other groups as well. He asked:

- *Have you ever been homeless?*
- *Do you know anyone who's homeless?*
- *What experiences have you had that might help you imagine what it's like to be homeless?*
- *Have you ever spoken with a homeless person? If yes, why, and what was it like? If no, what prevents you from talking?*
- *Are there homeless people that you are familiar with (see at your subway/bus stop, or in your neighborhood)? Do you imagine why they may be homeless?*

- *Do you give money to the homeless? Why or why not?*
- *Why are there homeless people?*
- *Does anyone benefit from there being homeless people?*

Model Two: Writing discussion questions to accompany an article, report, or television program

You can build a discussion guide fairly quickly by developing questions to go with an article, a book, a video, or an internal document or position paper. Use questions to bring out people's reactions, to raise views which may not have appeared in the writing or video, and to help people clarify their views.

New Haven, CT: Study circle material on crime

When Leona Peterson of New Haven, CT, wanted to gather friends and neighbors for a discussion of crime in the area, she put together a program called, "Study Group on Crime in the Community." By writing an introduction to each of the four sessions, followed by articles from both local and national sources and a few thoughtful discussion questions, she was able to quickly put together a very credible program for her neighbors.

Church of the Brethren: Focusing discussion on an internal document

When the church wanted their members to read and talk about their document on peacemaking, they supplemented it with discussion questions and with how-to information on study circles developed by SCRC.

National TV: A Viewer's Guide to help create active viewers

The Fetzer Institute (in Kalamazoo, MI) wanted to promote discussion of the TV series "Healing and the Mind with Bill Moyers." It provided funding for a Viewer's Guide and packaged it in user-friendly "study group packets." Each packet included a synopsis of the five programs, discussion questions for each, suggested readings and activities, and how-to information on study circles developed by SCRC.

Model Three: Adapting existing discussion materials

Though the SCRC clearinghouse lists over 100 discussion programs -- with several programs on some topics – the chances that you'll find something ideally suited to your community or organization are slim. Adapting the available material can be an effective way to prepare material for your study circle.

For example, some religious denominations and ecumenical groups have adapted discussion material developed by secular organizations by adding their particular faith community's perspective on the issues. Similarly, some local groups have adapted material written from a national perspective by adding their particular state's or community's perspective to the material.

Catholic educators: Incorporating a faith perspective

Jack McBride of the Diocese of Madison, WI, heads projects called Study Circles in the Catholic Community and NIF in the Catholic Community. He writes supplements to SCRC's discussion programs and to the issue books of the National Issues Forums. The supplements provide scripture and Catholic social teaching pertinent to the issues. They are designed to help parishioners examine public policy in light of their faith.

Hamden, CT: Incorporating a local perspective

Robert Weisselberg of the Institute for Learning in Retirement in Hamden, CT, supplemented SCRC material about welfare reform with some articles and discussion questions about Connecticut's proposed policy changes on general assistance.

Model Four: Original materials written specifically for study circles

You may wish to develop material particular to your organization or community's concerns. Though writing your own material is time-consuming, it allows you to present the issue just as your organization or community will find most useful, and in the most appealing and appropriate way for your study circle. Original material may also lend seriousness and purpose to your program.

The Study Circles Resource Center: From the personal to the public

After the civil unrest in Los Angeles, SCRC produced Can't We All Just Get Along? A Manual for Discussion Programs on Racism and Race Relations. *The manual includes background information on the state of race relations, material for five suggested discussion sessions, and questions for each session. It also provides additional readings and suggestions for adapting the material for your community or organization.*

The five sessions are:

1. *Race relations and racism: experiences, perceptions, and beliefs*
2. *The prevalence and power of racism in America*
3. *Changing racist attitudes*
4. *Public policies for ending race-based inequality and injustice*
5. *Moving from words to action*

The National Issues Forums: "Choicework" material developed for study circles and forums

The National Issues Forums (NIF) produces three or four issue books each year, along with starter videotapes, to be used as the basis for discussion in both large forums and small study circles.

Each issue book focuses on several basic policy choices and the values underlying each of those choices. An introduction and a conclusion surround the presentation of the choices. Energy Options: Finding a Solution to the Power Predicament, *for example, lays out the following choices:*

Choice #1 Domestic Sources: Taking Advantage of America's Fossil Resources
Choice #2 Remarkable Renewables: Harvesting the Sun's Energy
Choice #3 Atomic Power: A New Era for Nuclear Energy
Choice #4 Energy Conservation: Doing More with Less

The American Rehabilitation Counseling Association: Original material for a professional organization

Martha Lentz Walker, then President of the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association, worked in conjunction with the National Rehabilitation Counseling Association to develop a study circle program to solicit informed judgment from members and other interested people on the question of "What is our nation's responsibility to persons with disabilities?" The program presented four policy choices for the general direction of federally funded rehabilitation services, and included substantial background information and guidance for the discussion.

This exceptional material was the basis for 28 study circles held around the country; the results of the study circles were then shared with the congressional committees responsible for disability services.

The International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen (BAC): Original material for examining issues within a union

Len Oliver, author of Study Circles: Coming Together for Personal Growth and Social Change, *has assisted BAC in developing several study circle programs for member education. The BAC program on the future of the masonry industry and the union includes these five sessions:*

1. Where We Stand: Challenges to Our Jobs and Our Union
2. The Masonry Industry Today
3. The Broader Context (which includes information on public policy, business policy, and public attitudes toward the unions)
4. What We Can Do: Building a Stronger Industry
5. What We Can Do: Building a Stronger Union

Additional Resources

For more information on how to frame issues around the use of choices, contact:

Dr. Jon Rye Kinghorn, The National Issues Forums, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459-2777, (800) 433-7834.

NIF and the Public Agenda Foundation (PAF) have developed a detailed method for framing national issues around the use of choices. NIF has several documents to guide you through this process: *How to "Frame" a Problem for Community Discussion* is a 15-page draft document that provides guidelines for developing an issue booklet in a "choices" format. "Developing and Writing an Issue Book: A Semester Project," excerpted from *National Issues Forums in the Classroom: Public Policy Institute 1993*, offers a more concise set of guidelines as well as an analysis of the NIF issue book format. In addition, NIF sponsors Summer Public Policy Institutes (held in several locations each year) that provide additional insights into the issue-framing process.

Ron Hustedde, Community Issues Gatherings, University of Kentucky, Sociology Department, 500 Garrigus Bldg., Lexington, KY 40546-0215, (606) 257-3471.

The Community Issues Gatherings, a program of the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky and an outgrowth of NIF, is developing a document called *How to Frame Local Issues.*

For general resources on writing clear, engaging prose, see:

Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process.* Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1981.

V.A. Howard, Ph.D., H.H. Barton, M.A., Philosophy of Education Research Center, Harvard University, *Thinking on Paper: Refine, Express, and Actually Generate Ideas by Understanding the Processes of the Mind.* William Morrow and Company, New York, 1986.

William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn: How to Write – and Think – Clearly About Any Subject At All.* Harper & Row, New York, 1988.

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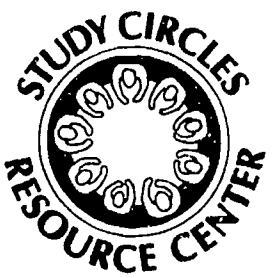
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