

Study circles and the Dialogue to Change Program

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Background

The origins of study circles can be traced back to the Chautauqua movement in the USA in the late nineteenth century. However, interest diminished in the USA and the Swedes discovered and enthusiastically imported the study circle idea as a remedy to their problems of poverty and illiteracy and to educate the broadest possible spectrum of society in the art of democracy.

Over the next 100 years, Sweden developed the process to such an extent that the Government now subsidises this form of education and uses it not only to educate people about government policies, but to receive feedback from the public. The late Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme is often quoted as having said that ‘Sweden is a study circle democracy’.

Today, over three million people participate annually in 350,000 study circles in Sweden. Over 75 per cent of Swedes between 15 to

75 years of age have participated in study circles at some time in their lives. In recent decades, the use of study circles has spread throughout the world from the United States to Bangladesh—and now Australia.

Based upon the Swedish model, study circles re-emerged in the USA in the late 1980s through the work of *Everyday democracy* which has developed and refined the process to address challenging community issues such as racism, multiculturalism, terrorism, educational reform, student achievement, small rural town poverty, the environment, religious and inter-faith tensions and community development, often with hundreds and even thousands of participants.

The Australian Study Circles Network has recently been formed and is founded on the 100-year tradition of study circles in Sweden and the last 20 years of development by *Everyday democracy* in the USA. The Australian Study Circles Network has fine-tuned the US community-wide study circle program process to meet the Australian context.

Historically, study circles have been used in Australia, frequently with great success. For example, the work of Helen Sheil, who researched study circles in Sweden and who now works with rural communities in Victoria, Denise Hagan with remote Indigenous communities in Queensland, Mary Hannan from Adult Learning Australia and Liz Suda who researched Spanish dialogic study circles.

In Australia our sporadic experience and understanding of this unique method has not been pooled. Many different iterations and adaptations have been used over time. We now need to build a systemic capability to make use of such a powerful program. The significant study circle activity in Australia's past demonstrates, and is testimony to, the need to bring together in an organised manner the experiences of the current and past study circle activity.

The Australian Study Circles Network has developed the necessary local and international study circle links and partnerships, developed a model for Australia and has started to deliver workshops for many organisations and communities across Australia.

In 1995, Len Oliver, who was instrumental in introducing study circles to the United States, asked in his article, *'Is the United States ready for a study circle movement?'* He suggested that study circles 'may possibly be the most powerful adult education format for small group democracy ever devised'.

Organising a Dialogue to Change Program

A Dialogue to Change Program is a type of community dialogue process that can help people explore complex issues, make some decisions and begin to take action. At the heart of the Program are study circles, where people come together to have deliberative dialogue on an issue. A Dialogue to Change Program is a community-driven process that recruits from all community sectors. The process begins with 'community organising' and is followed by facilitated, small group dialogue that leads to change. The process does not advocate a particular solution. Instead, it welcomes many points of view around a shared concern.

A Dialogue to Change Program is organised by a diverse coalition that reflects the whole community. It includes a number of study circles with participants from all walks of life, uses easy-to-use nonpartisan discussion materials and trained facilitators who reflect that community's diversity. It results in specific opportunities to move to action when the study circle stage concludes.

A Dialogue to Change Program requires significant organising. Before the round of study circles commences, it is important to organise the logistics, the recruitment of participants, the training of facilitators, a communications strategy, development of a discussion guide and

establishing how the final action ideas—that will emerge from the process—will be addressed. Planning for the action ideas starts at the beginning. This stage can take two to three months.

After the organisational stage, the round of circles begins with an opening session where individual participants tell their own story and offer personal experiences about the issue that concerns them. This gives members the chance to hear, listen to and empathise with authentic stories, real people, real scenarios and real experiences. In further sessions, members then look at how the issue evolved and how others have dealt with the concerns. Subsequently, members examine and discuss alternatives for action, after which, in the final session they work toward common solutions. A Dialogue to Change Program is based upon five separate study circle groups, each operating once a week for four weeks.

Initially, some people are a little hesitant about a Dialogue to Change Program due to the length of time for the process to unfold. However, this is one of the key strengths of the approach. Sessions build on each other, allow participants to work through the issues, and work on finding solutions that they then work to implement. With fewer sessions, the ‘buy in’ and participation in the action outcomes lessen. Shorter formats also face the risk of reactionary ideas coming forward. The more time spent on the dialogue and careful deliberation, the higher the quality of the action ideas that emerge.

Furthermore, even with a round of study circles that runs for four sessions, invariably participants will state that the time passed quickly and they would have preferred more time!

Study circles—the heart of the Dialogue to Change Program

A single study circle is a small, diverse group of five to eight participants who meet for about two hours weekly for a ‘round of study circles’ over four weeks where they address a critical public

issue in a democratic and collaborative way. Led by a neutral facilitator, people consider an issue from many points of view. The discussion progresses from personal experiences, to sessions examining many points of view on the issue, and on to a session that considers strategies for action and change.

Study circles are not typical meetings in which members feel unheard and worse still, feel that nothing is resolved or acted upon. On the contrary, a round of study circles is designed to lead to collaborative action. In contrast, when people debate, they often never listen with intent to understand, because they are so busy preparing a counter argument and are eagerly waiting to interject.

Quite often, many contentious community issues are dealt with by either a focus group, which usually consists of only invited, similar thinking or homogenous groups of people, or forums in which a handful of 'experts' express their opinions and only a few people are allowed to have a voice. Alternatively, often 'experts' are engaged to devise solutions and plans that are then imposed on everyone else.

Study circles are effective due to the small, safe and supportive nature in which the dialogue occurs, allowing members to feel comfortable about expressing their true feelings. Members begin to actively engage, participate and experience connection. One begins to understand that we are all interdependent, and the well-being of each of us affects the well-being of all. The process results in the critical reflection of ideas and the development of new knowledge and insights.

No instructor teaches or controls the circle. They are led by the neutral facilitator trained in group dynamics and study circle concepts; the participants make all the decisions. Due to this inclusive process, individuals benefit in many ways including confidence building and gaining real voice. The group is able to move forward because they know that their contributions are valued and heard, the

decisions are owned by the members and the core fundamentals of a study circle ensure that all participants' knowledge and experience are given space and used as the basis for initial discussion.

Learning from others is another essential element of the study circle. Understanding and learning is built upon through the contribution from each member's experience and knowledge. As members study and discuss their issue, they learn from each other and horizons are expanded as everyone's views are being considered through open and democratic dialogue. The process results in the critical reflection of ideas and the development of new knowledge and insights. Based upon this new knowledge, members are empowered to act in whatever way the group sees as appropriate.

This approach aligns with much of adult and student learning research that demonstrates the need for authentic purpose and ownership of the learning process. In day-to-day work and community settings, much of the process of generating, distributing and applying knowledge actually occurs best in team settings. The more effective the team works together, the more understanding and learning occurs. The educational ideas behind the success of the study circle approach align with many fundamental adult educational principles—that is, adult education is a living, active process that relates knowledge to action, creativity, as well as to collective and personal development.

Study circle principles also align to social objectives that aim to encourage individual participation and ownership of the community. Understanding the fundamental principles of study circles is important for recognising the context and the content that study circles ultimately deal with. A study circle is an environment where:

- It is accepted that people fundamentally have an innate desire to learn.
- Individuals meet and share their experiences.
- People learn in a participatory environment.
- Knowledge is built upon by listening to the experiences of all members.
- Everyone's views are considered.
- Life and learning belong together.
- The learning is self-directed and experiential.
- Learning is democratised.
- Outcomes can be personalised for each individual member.

With deliberative dialogue, study circle members deliberate, cooperatively investigate, explore and clarify different views, use critical thinking, evaluate ideas and decide on solutions. The dialogue is constructive, all types of discourses are accepted, stereotypes are dispelled, members are honest, and they listen and try to understand each other.

Creating ownership is an important characteristic of study circles. Even though the study circle format is simple in design, it encourages democratic participant-directed, group-directed, experiential learning through open discussion in several sequential sessions, developing tolerance for differing views, equality in participation and collectively arrived at outcomes. Study circles are always voluntary, highly participatory and totally democratic.

More details are available at: <http://www.studycircles.net.au/>

About the authors

Mary Brennan is a Director of the Australian Study Circles Network and Deliberative Dialogue Practitioner, helping communities organise their own Dialogue to Change Programs. She is an experienced teacher, lecturer and workshop facilitator. Mary also contributed to the design of the unique Australian Dialogue to Change Program. She is a lecturer at Victoria University and Director of her own private practice which has included the delivery of workshops across Australia on the Commonwealth Government's Ministerial Declaration on Adult Community Education.

Dr Mark Brophy is the founder and a Director of the Australian Study Circles Network. Mark's 15 years of research developing his understanding of the application of study circle methodology, as it is used internationally, has resulted in the unique Australian Dialogue to Change Program. He has created many resources, written extensively, presented workshops and training in Australia and overseas. Mark is internationally considered to be the key study circle authority and exponent in Australia. While working in education, training, public service and community engagement areas for over 22 years in Australia and abroad, Mark was awarded a PhD from Victoria University for an extensive participatory action research investigation into the study circle process.

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