

The Study Circle Process

The study circle process is not magic or mysterious. It's simply a tested set of democratic principles and tools for engaging the whole community in all its variety, bringing people together for public dialogue, and combining their ideas and resources to create and implement solutions.

A STUDY CIRCLE:

- is a small, diverse group of eight to twelve participants.
- meets regularly over a period of weeks or months to address a critical public issue in a democratic and collaborative way.
- sets its own ground rules for a respectful, productive discussion.
- is led by a facilitator who is impartial, who helps manage the process, but is not an "expert" or "teacher" in the traditional sense.
- considers the issue from many points of view.
- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement and common concern.
- progresses from a session on personal experience of the issue, to sessions that examine many points of view on the issue, to a session that considers strategies for action and change.

An Overview of Communitywide Study Circles

All communities, neighborhoods, small towns, medium-sized, and large metropolitan regions—face a wide array of complex challenges. Addressing those kinds of challenges calls for innovative and inclusive approaches to community problem solving.

Most people care about their communities and would like to make a difference. Many would like the chance to work with others in productive ways. Yet, it can be difficult to know where to begin and how to make progress. Often, when communities try to work together on a public problem, communication and trust break down between people and groups from different backgrounds and sectors.

People have different perspectives and experiences, and so they see the issues differently. The solutions that make sense for one person or group may not meet the needs of others. And, there are usually lots of people on the sidelines, not invited into problem solving or not knowing how to take part.

This is where communitywide study circle programs come in. These large-scale programs are designed to help all kinds of people work through the issues with each other and solve public problems through more productive ways of working together.

Many leaders and citizens are drawn to communitywide study circle programs because they provide what is usually missing in community life—a process of meaningful, face-to-face give and take between people from different backgrounds and views. The communitywide scope of study circle programs and the ways they link dialogue to change help ensure that many people from across a community will come to the table, and that their participation will make a difference.

Communitywide study circles can make a unique contribution to strengthening the community and solving public problems, but they are not “the only game in town.” Effective communitywide study circle programs value and build on existing community work and resources. They help to multiply and strengthen other community-building efforts. Many communities are finding ways to connect their programs to other civic processes such as strategic planning, visioning, service learning, and shared governance.

The Basic Principles of Study Circle Programs

Communitywide study circle programs embody democratic principles of equality, inclusiveness, and collaboration. This approach is based on these ideas:

- People care about the communities they live in and want to make them better.
- Complex problems call for many kinds of solutions.
- People from all backgrounds and all segments of society have something to contribute.
- When everybody is included in public life, everybody benefits.
- When all kinds of people develop trust and relationships through face-to-face dialogue, new ideas and approaches emerge.
- When people consider different points of view on a complex issue, they uncover common ground and find better solutions.
- When people have a voice in the public conversation, they are more likely to take part in creating and carrying out ideas for community change.
- The more people that are involved, the bigger the impact.
- Community change is more likely to last and deepen when individual and collective actions are tied together.

A COMMUNITYWIDE STUDY CIRCLE PROGRAM:

- is organized by a diverse coalition that reflects the whole community.
- includes a large number of participants from all walks of life.
- uses easy-to-use, nonpartisan discussion material.
- uses trained facilitators who reflect the community's diversity.
- results in specific opportunities to move to action when the study circles conclude.

The Impact of Communitywide Study Circles

Organizers of communitywide study circle programs and others in their communities are seeing the powerful results of people really talking with each other and finding ways to work together to solve public problems.

The most immediate kinds of change happen when people gain new understanding of an issue and form new relationships—across the barriers of race, background, political ideology, income, and geography. These changes can readily translate into new individual or small-group commitments to action. Some people take their new ideas and approaches back to their organizations and sow the seeds of institutional change.

Sometimes, people envision and create solutions that take the form of new community projects or collaborations. Or, they decide to add their energies and ideas to efforts already underway in the community. When government is part of the organizing, and elected officials take part in the study circles, this paves the way for more effective policy making and collaborative work.

Still other kinds of change that come from study circles are more complex and can take longer to take shape. These include changes such as new policies, new decisions, changes in the allocation of resources, and new processes for involving the public in solving problems.

One study circle organizer recently summarized the impact of the process by saying, “A community that talks together is alive!” People are finding ways to lend their hearts, hands, and minds to solving public problems and building stronger communities.

STUDY CIRCLE OUTCOMES

- New learning (participants see a more complete picture of the issue and of others in the community)
- New relationships and networks (across typical barriers)
- New ownership of the issue (the issue is no longer “someone else’s problem”)
- New leadership
- New collaborations
- New policies
- New processes for community problem solving

To read stories about the impact of some communitywide study circle programs, visit the Study Circles Resource Center Web site: www.studycircles.org

Source: Sarah vL. Campbell, Amy Malick, and Martha L. McCoy, *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change: A Step-by-Step Guide* (Pomfret, CT: Topsfield Foundation, 2001).