THE STUDY CIRCLE: A CASE STUDY FOR COMMUNITY SUCCESS

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Abstract

Communities across the nation are adopting Study Circles as a way for groups of people to discuss, share, and resolve problems affecting them at any societal level. A small community in northern Indiana decided to use a Study Circle on the topic of how to improve student achievement. This paper uses this particular Study Circle as a vehicle to describe the Study Circle method and compare it to the Case Method. We posit that the characteristics of the Study Circle match that of the Case Method.

KEY WORDS: Study Circle, case study, evaluation, implementation, democratic principles, action forum, change, culture, community organization.

STUDY CIRCLE DEVELOPMENT

The Co-Intelligence Institute [2002] reported that in the 1870s Study Circles were born in New York; by 1915, there were more than 15,000 Study Circles with 700,000 participants. Internationally, Sweden adopted Study Circles to reinforce democracy and to work through major issues facing its towns; the participants turned into activists who provided significant impact. Back in the States, in 1989 the Topsfield Foundation created the Study Circle Resource Center. The Center helped create Study Circles nationwide. It was a process of testing democratic principles and tools and it engaged the whole community in all its variety. It brought people together for public dialogue, and combined their ideas and resources to create and implement solutions. A Study Circle is a group of 8-12 people from different backgrounds and viewpoints who meet several times to talk about an issue or problem. In a Study Circle, everyone has an equal voice, and tries to understand each other's views. They do not have to agree with each other [Campbell, Malick, Landesman, McCoy, Holme-Barrett, and Scully, 2001]. The idea is to share concerns and look for ways to make things better. A Study Circle finds solutions and works for action and change [Roberts and Kay, 2003]. The aim of a program of Study Circles is to facilitate community-building through public dialogue and to involve people in networking and developing their community. A Study Circle provides participants with tools to organize productive dialogue and recruits opinions from representatives of a diverse population. The end goal is to help communities to develop a process for bringing people together for creative community change.

The Australian Association of Adult and Community Education [2003] articulated the strengths and weaknesses of Study Circles. The strengths it has are: (1) a social issue orientation, (2) motivates and activates participant involvement, (3) a non-threatening learning environment which encourages critical thinking and discussion, (4) makes existing groups stronger. The Association identified as weaknesses (1) logistical issues, (2) recruitment and Circle formation, (3) lack of good and expert facilitators to lead discussion.
The Study Circle Resource Center is the best source for information on how to implement Study Circles. It has delineated how the process works, who should be participants, the facilitator's role, what a community can gain from it, and action steps for success. All these components are compiled in the document entitled "Organizing Community-Wide Dialogue for Action and Change: A Step-By-Step Guide." There are seven basic steps in organizing a Study Circle: (1) get started, (2) clarify issues and think about discussion materials, (3) build a team, (4) develop a plan, (5) share the work of organizing Study Circles, (6) hold a round of Study Circles, and (7) sustain the program and expand the impact of the work. The seven steps describe in detail the construction and development of diverse and strong working groups, the establishment of clear areas of responsibility, the dissemination of information, fund raising, recruitment of participants, training of facilitators, handling logistics, and evaluation of outcomes [Campbell et. al., 2001].

Campbell continues with describing the five commitments communities have identified to guide creating successful Study Circles:

1. Create opportunities for everyone's voice to be heard.
2. Make the dialogue diverse.
3. Make the dialogue productive.
4. Connect the dialogue to short-term and long-term change.
5. Make democratic dialogue for action and change a routine part of public life.

In the U.S as well as many other countries, Study Circles are blooming. People from all walks of life have come together in diverse communities to deal with important issues such as:

- racism and race relations
- education reform
- crime and violence
- immigration
- diversity
- youth concerns
- police-community relations
- building strong neighborhoods
- neighborhoods supporting families with children
- student achievement
- substance abuse
- globalization
- environmental issues

STUDY CIRCLE EXAMPLES

Gloria Mengual [2000] reported that 780 residents participated in 92 Family Circles held in 30 neighborhoods. Participants identified goals, including new playgrounds, mentoring programs, after-school programs, and safe houses for teens. Mengual [2000] also described Study Circles created in an African-American neighborhood in Kansas which had strained relationships between the school system and the African American citizens because of a student achievement gap. To work on the problem, concerned citizens developed KCK Study Circles. During the process, neighborhood residents balked at the narrow topic. They pointed to other problems: prostitution, vandalism and crime – all barriers to community well-being. Finally, it was incidents of racially-incited spray painting that rallied organizations and residents in four Kansas City neighborhoods to work together.

The Champlain Channel in Vermont [2003] announced that a series of Study Circles would be undertaken by the Substance Abuse Coalition to discuss issues related to drug and alcohol use and abuse in Chittenden County. The Circles were to be made up of eight to 14 community members meeting four times over the course of several weeks to talk about the growing drug abuse situation. A county-wide action plan was to be presented in January after all the Study Circles had met.

Six countries joined efforts to understand the process of globalization using the Study Circles concept. Australia, India, Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, and Taiwan introduced a technological international perspective on the mechanics and logistics of Study Circles. The internet became a major source of communicating, sharing, and interacting with ideas, viewpoints, and reflections on the
globalization issue. Six topics were discussed dealing with understanding globalization, features of globalization, effects of globalization on workers, changes in the workplace, and responses to globalization. In 1999, The International Federation of Workers’ Education Association (IFWEA) led the international Study Circles program. The Circles helped develop an understanding of what globalization is, including its different features, and the role of transnational corporations in the global economy. The Circles provided debate on the role and powers of national governments and the common problems faced by workers. There was discussion of strategies for building links and solidarity between workers in these countries and consideration of future activities. The final project was an evaluation of the Study Circle program in order to refine future implications and instrumentality.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A STUDY CIRCLE AND A CASE STUDY

The major characteristic of a Case Study is its qualitative research methodology. A Case Study fits the ethnographic movement. Most researchers using qualitative designs approach the Case Study as an activity involving individuals rather than a group per se [Stake, 1995]. Researchers interested in studying a group concentrate more on the activities developed by the group instead of identifying patterns of behavior exhibited by the group [Creswell, 2002]; this is the case of Study Circles. A Study Circle possesses all major features of a Case Study. It explores a challenging issue and reflects diverse experiences. It is real. The situations and events involved represent a larger set of ideas, opinions, and reflections of a diverse group of people. According to Miller and Kantrov [1998] a Case Study should be focused on analysis rather than evaluation, should promote inquiry into different perspectives, should reach common understanding, and should adopt a learned decision.

THE STUDY CIRCLE CASE EXAMPLE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A small community in Indiana was concerned about the lack of student achievement as seen by low grades, low motivation, and an increasing student drop-out rate. Schools, religious organizations, political parties, local coalitions, and the media were constantly bombarded by the public who complained about low quality schools as defined by these measures. A diagnosis of needs revealed that immediate action needed to be taken and academic reforms seemed to be an imperative. In searching for a program effectively adopted by other communities to solve social and educational issues, the Study Circle was identified. Three operating small Study Circles were created, one each in the East, West, and Central county communities Two organizations applied for financial aid to support the cost and implementation of the program and the program was funded for two years. A recruitment process took place in churches, schools, community based organizations, and through the media. A total of 36 volunteers applied to become members of the Study Circles.

Within this group, five persons volunteered to be facilitators at the three sites. They received training on how to facilitate a Case Study discussion, how to conduct interviews, and on conflict resolution techniques. The five White and one Hispanic facilitators were composed of four females and two males, with ages between 30 to 64, completed college and postgraduate work, and with diverse special knowledge or expertise about community envisioning, diversity issues, education of children and youth, adult training, religion and race relations. The facilitators’ occupations varied from public government officers and school-related posts to private business positions.

The training of the facilitators was evaluated using the Study Circles Facilitator Training Evaluation instrument which solicited the opinions of the facilitators. The facilitators found that their training (1) was an extremely valuable experience, (2) met their expectations, (3) gave them a good understanding of the ideas behind the Study Circles, (4) was very rewarding as “pioneers” of the county circles. Based on evaluation data the facilitators were effectively trained and able to apply Study Circles principles in the actual facilitation of groups.
SELECTION OF GOALS AND MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

Three goals influenced the implementation of the Study Circles. Each one contained measurable objectives that served to guide the entire process. The goals were:

To build bridges of understanding and respect in the county by addressing issues of common concern by having:
- At least half of participants from ethnic groups other than Caucasians
- All income levels represented
- Participants from all political spectrums
- Two of the three Study Circles bilingual or trilingual

To suggest ways to improve student success by having:
- Each Circle prepare an “Action Idea” for and a brief presentation during the Action Forum
- Each Circle report their action ideas during the Action Forum
- Appropriate geographic (CN, EN, and WN) “task forces” and network with the appropriate groups and persons to incorporate the various groups
- Reports of the final Action Forum results given to the entire community via mass media

To gain familiarity with, and evaluate, Study Circles by having:
- Three circles of 36 participants (12 each)
- An independent evaluation of the county Study Circles
- The Community Committee “Step Ahead” evaluate and suggest new future Study Circles.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from participants, facilitators, and administrators through ethnographic observations, structured interviews, and questionnaires. The external evaluator collected extensive field notes from observations and informal interviews, averaging one visit to each of the three Study Circles. During each visit the evaluator observed participants’ responses: active involvement, issue complexity levels, idea feasibility, and motivation level. The administrator periodically informed the external evaluator, via e-mail, of events and possible actions, changes, or modifications taking place during the Study Circles process.

The quantitative analysis adopted the descriptive research design. By definition, a descriptive research finds out “what is” [Borg and Gall, 1999; Creswell 2003]. Observational and survey methods are frequently used to collect descriptive data. That was the case in this study. Descriptive research characterizes the responses of a sample or a group of participating subjects in one or more variables. In this Case Study, descriptive research was used to present data collected from demographics and survey responses. No cause and effect or correlations were sought. It was a simple quantitative analysis to show what the respondents thought about Study Circles components.

The qualitative analysis involved an ethnographic design. The Case Study design was researched for its appropriateness to this Study Circle. Theoretically, the Case Study is compatible with the needs and resources of the investigator in a small scale [Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 2000]. It allows concentrating on one example. It focuses on reduced number of individuals or on the analysis of an institution, etc. The researchers used the Case Study because the origins of the phenomenon “student achievement” were difficult to trace and separate from its context.

Selection of Instruments

All measures or instruments were provided by the Study Circle Resource Center’s “Step-by-Step Guide” [Campbell, et. al 2001]. Four questionnaires were administered: Participant Questionnaire, Performance Appraisal for Study Circle Facilitators, Facilitator Profile, and Study Circle Facilitator Training Evaluation.

Data Collection and Analysis

The unit of analysis was the smallest independent unit of data: the target group of participants. The reliability and validity of the instruments were difficult to determine. The instruments were the only source of data for determining achievement of objectives. They were provided by the Study Circle Resource
Center and it was assumed that all instruments were valid and reliable. The participants and facilitators filled out the instruments right after completing the last session of Study Circles meetings. The evaluator observed the implementation of the meetings and how the process evolved into possible actions. Field notes were used as sources of data collection.

**STUDY CIRCLE EXPERIENCE**

Four surveys were administered at the close of each of the three Study Circles. The purpose was (1) to ascertain the perceptions of the participants about their immediate experience with Study Circles; (2) to appraise the value of the Study Circle from the facilitator viewpoint; and (3) to assess the Study Circle facilitator training process.

**PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE**

The participant questionnaire was intended to collect some information about the participant's experiences with Study Circles, the discussion guide, the facilitator, and the overall program. Eighteen subjects, some from each Study Circle, responded to the questionnaire. It is not the total population of the participants who were involved; often the participant did not return the completed questionnaire to the Study Circle Coordinator. This type of sample is known as a convenience sample, a non-probability method of selecting subjects who are accessible or available. It is not a representative sample in that it was chosen randomly from a population, but does include a large number of subjects who participated in the three different locations implementing the Study Circles. Forty-four subjects participated in the Study Circles distributed as follows:

**TABLE 1 - NOBLE COUNTY STUDY CIRCLE PARTICIPANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Circle</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West Study Circle</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Study Circle</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Study Circle</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the Study Circle Coordinator, participation was open to anyone in the county. Invitations were delivered through congregations, schools, chamber of commerce, and community-based organizations. The attendance of participants was high from the beginning of the process. The majority of the participants who responded to the survey were white male, ages between 40 and 59 years old, with college degrees, moderate political views, and annual incomes between $25,000 and $100,000. It is important to mention that some question items were not answered and therefore the participants cannot be fully described.

The following table summarizes the data from the survey respondents about their Study Circle participation experience.

**TABLE 2 - EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATING IN A STUDY CIRCLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to discuss freely</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 (61.11%)</td>
<td>7 (38.8%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding of own attitudes and beliefs</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 (61.11%)</td>
<td>7 (38.8%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding of others’ attitudes and beliefs</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 (88.8%)</td>
<td>2 (11.11%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to communicate with people</th>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 (66.6%)</td>
<td>6 (33.33%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The greatest area of change for the participants, 88 per cent, came in increased understanding of others’ attitudes and beliefs. The data also show higher percentages of increases in free discussion, effective communication, and understanding of their own beliefs.

The following table provides a summary of the responses given to the item requesting information about where the participant learned about the existence of Study Circle in the County.

**TABLE 3**

**INFORMATION SOURCES ABOUT THE STUDY CIRCLE PROJECT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Count (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At School</td>
<td>1 (5.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From a friend</td>
<td>7 (38.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through community group/organization</td>
<td>4 (22.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News media</td>
<td>6 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (5.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“From a friend” and the “news media” were the main ways participants learned about the Study Circles. Although schools, community groups and organizations are traditionally the vehicles for recruiting and motivating volunteers, in this County other ways of promoting and recruiting were more effective.

The responses to the item asking for actions the respondents had taken about government and politics can be condensed as follows:

**TABLE 4**

**ACTIONS TAKEN ABOUT GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written to one of your elected representatives</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a rally or speech</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a public meeting on town or school affairs</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed a petition</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served on a committee for some local organization</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted in an election</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written a letter to the paper</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked for a political party</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Served as an officer of some club or organization</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked informally with others to solve a community problem</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most participants of the Study Circles responded with some type of activity they had performed about government and politics. Percents were not estimated because each participant was given more than one option to respond to this item. And the participants did express multiple methods they had used.

A continuous Likert-scale was used to request information on the discussion guide. Participants could agree or disagree with the statements presented. The findings follow:

**TABLE 5**

**DISCUSSION GUIDE SUMMARY OF RESPONSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Agreements</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagreements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Different points of view presented without pushing a view</td>
<td>72.22 %</td>
<td>22.22 %</td>
<td>5.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used by all kind of people</td>
<td>83.33 %</td>
<td>16.66 %</td>
<td>0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulated meaningful discussion</td>
<td>88.88 %</td>
<td>5.5 %</td>
<td>5.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presented the right amount of material</td>
<td>77.77 %</td>
<td>5.5 %</td>
<td>16.66 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The vast majority of the respondents agreed that the Discussion Guide was an instructional resource for leading Study Circle discussions. It is interesting to note that 88.8% indicated that it stimulated meaningful discussion. The overall evaluation given to the Study Circles relating to meeting time, length, and number of participants in the Circle is reported in Table 6.

**TABLE 6**
OVERALL EVALUATION OF STUDY CIRCLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Too Short</th>
<th>Just Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of meeting</td>
<td>22.22 %</td>
<td>77.77 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of meetings</td>
<td>44.44 %</td>
<td>55.55 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people attending</td>
<td>5.5 %</td>
<td>94.44 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time and number of meetings are always of concern for most people. The responses obtained for the Study Circle showed that participants did not have negative feelings about the time and number of meetings they attended. When the group was asked to provide an overall rating of the Study Circle, seventeen (94.44%) participants showed a high degree of satisfaction with the concept of Study Circles. They all responded between good and very good. Only one negative response was given, representing only 5.5% of the opinions. In general, the data indicated almost all participant respondents saw a wide variety of factors as valuable in their Study Circle experience.

The qualitative aspect of the questionnaire requested opinions on two open-ended items: "what you liked most about the program" and "what you liked least about the program."

"What You Liked Most About The Program"

Participants were asked to state what aspects of Study Circles appealed to them. Many came up with the following (randomly listed):
- Community improvement concept
- Group decision making
- Freedom of opinions
- The discussion of meaningful topics
- The opportunity to build relationships
- Collaboration level
- Facilitation of the process

An important finding emerging from this question is the effectiveness of Study Circle in promoting a greater sense of community participation and involvement.

"What You Liked Least About The Program"

Despite the positive assessment by the participants in the earlier question, they were not without criticism of Study Circles. Listed randomly below are the critical areas that they felt needed improvement:
- The time for meetings and discussions was constrained
- More data and facts should be included in the discussion of issues
- The frequency of absences of participants
- The lack of time to finish the discussion of important issues
- The lack of research-based data
- The time convened for meetings
- Some "monopolizers" of the discussions

Some of the "dislikes" about the program could be put into the positive side of responses. Asking for more time for discussions, more data and facts, complaining about absenteeism could be seen as legitimate demands to improve the Study Circles. The other issues relating to lack of research-based data, convening time, and the monopolizers are good suggestions for improving future Study Circles.
ACTION FORUM

According to the Study Circle Resource Center Step-by-Step Guide [Campbell, et al., 2001], an Action Forum is a vital aspect of the Study Circles concept. It is the last step that leads toward the development of social actions in order to offer concrete and sound solutions to the issue discussed. The Action Forum is a public forum in which all Study Circles created come together with their final ideas converted into feasible actions to be put into practice. For the Action Forum, the three County Study Circles met. This large-group meeting at the end of a round of four meetings of the East, West and Central Study Circles was designed to pool the action ideas from individual Study Circles. During this process, each Study Circle shared their original actions ideas. After discussing the feasibility of the action ideas, each group selected one main action idea to be implemented over the next year in a task force setting. The action ideas reported and shared by Study Circle were:

- West Study Circle
  ✓ Mentoring program formed by school and community successful leaders
  ✓ The development of bilingual activities to attract bilingual communities
  ✓ The design of a summer program beyond athletics

- East Study Circle
  ✓ Using community resources to meet all students’ needs
  ✓ A tutoring program for students
  ✓ Curriculum changes driven by the acquisition of life skills, the improvement of academic achievement, and the attainment of basic skills as the primary emphasis

- Central Study Circle
  ✓ Access to Alternative School
  ✓ Development of life skills curriculum
  ✓ Quality and affordable day care before and after school

During the discussion segment about actions, considerations and options were raised. The group decided upon the three actions most relevant to the Study Circle goal, helping increase student achievement in the County. The three actions selected were: mentoring program, tutoring program, and access to alternative school. All choices had merit and worth. Merit refers to the valued characteristics intrinsic to the practice for which there is relatively consistent agreement among peers and groups [McMillan & Wergin, 2002]. The worth of a practice is considered in adoption decisions and requires extensive knowledge of the potential adopting site.

STUDY CIRCLES OUTCOMES

The Study Circle was transformed into a case that the community developed, implemented and utilized to make plans to solve the issue of student achievement. As in a Deal and Peterson case [1999], the culturally-shared beliefs and values helped knit the community together. All the steps that a Case Study utilizes were followed. The dialogue existed to the extent that most participants were given the same opportunity to voice their concerns, to express their needs, and to agree with the solutions. Based on the process of the Action Forum, the group’s evaluation led to one feasible and practical option: the mentoring program. This final decision of the Study Circle Action Forum had both attributes of value and practice. Following the decision made by the three groups, volunteers formed a Task Force. The Task Force was in charge of promoting, organizing, and coordinating the process of creating a mentoring program countywide which would research methodologies appropriate to support the increase of student performance. The Case Study process through the Study Circle definitely served as a vehicle to offer a viable and vital plan for solving a community problem.

REFERENCES


