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## Changing Communities. The Study Circle – for learning and democracy

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### Abstract

This paper covers study circle history, tradition, research, practice, development and challenges for the future. As a method for “liberal adult education”, the study circle (SC) has existed in 100 years. The SC is a democratic and emancipatory method for learning. “For the people, by the people” became the study circle slogan influencing adult learning in Scandinavia for years. The article is based on the paper “The Study Circle – a method for learning, a tool for democracy” which was presented at the FACE Conference in July 2003.

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Study Circles – when they are functioning at the best – may offer you: Learning without humiliation, learning without guiltily and bad consciousness, non-violent learning, a humble way of learning and learning for self contain self confidence and self esteem. But there was a long way to go to here...

As a Nordic traditional method for liberal adult education, the *Study Circle* has been active for more than 100 years. From the beginning, the Study Circle is seen as a democratic and emancipatory method and arena for learning, particularly among adults. Study Circles were born in New York in the 1870s. By their peak in 1915, 700.000 people were participating in 15.000 study circles in the USA. People close to the union, co-op, the temperance movement and the Social Democratic Party to educate their followers carried the idea to Sweden.

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Even though study circles more or less passed away in USA, they have ever since flourished in Sweden and Scandinavia. Still, nearly three million Swedes participate in more than 300.000 study circles annually, partly funded and subsidised, but not controlled, by the public sector and the government. Scandinavian communities have even convened study circles to work through major issues facing their local areas and towns, with study circle participants turning into activists who then have a significant impact on events. The last ten years, there is a renewed and blooming interest in study circles (also) in the USA<sup>i</sup>.

The Study Circle followed the “top-to-bottom approach” for enlightenment developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, expressed i.e. through the University Extension movements in France, England and Scandinavia (Arvidson, 1998) to become a “bottom-up” method. The so called founder of the Study Circle, the Swede Oscar Olsson, expressed that “The emancipation of the working class should be a task for the workers themselves”, “For the people, by the people”<sup>iii</sup> (Johansson 1994) became the political slogan that influenced the Study Circle and the adult education system in Scandinavia for years.

The close links between *the method* Study Circle and *the tool for democracy* Study Circle, may also be exemplified with the expression by the former Swedish Prime Minister Olov Palme: “Sweden is to a great extend a Study Circle democracy”<sup>iiii</sup> (Nordic Folk Academy 1968).

The Study Circle is a human, easy and fearless way to learning for adults with low self-esteem and self-confidence. But the Study Circle method is also demanding. It claims activity and dialogue between its participants (*members*), and just occasionally you can rely on a teacher or an expert joining in. Normally the Study Circle is a group of equals, the leader the “primus inter pares”. The pedagogical idea may – in my words - be summarised by “learning by sharing”, relying on each members experience.

“The Study Circle, which voluntary organisations claim to be their special method, from both ideological and educational reasons, has very much been taken for granted”, says the Norwegian researcher Hallgjerd Brattset in her study (Brattset 1982:13) on how to describe and analyse the experiences from methods of planning and organising Study Circles.

Because the Norwegian Act on Adult Education<sup>iv</sup> (1976) requires students’ involvement on contents and method in the courses, she thought it was of special interest to find out to what extent this is practised in Study Circles.

## Scandinavian background

The Study Circle developed from late 19<sup>th</sup> century Sweden. We are usually dating it to 1902; the year Oscar Olsson, “the father of the Study Circle” started his first circle in the Lund branch of the International Order of Good Templars, and named it a “Study Circle”<sup>v</sup>.

The most distinctive features of circle studies, as Oscar Olsson (quoted in Brattset 1982: 8) described them, was:

- People studied in small groups, often at home.
- Study material was rare.
- Teachers were not considered a necessary prerequisite of study. The leader of the group was an organiser and he possessed no theoretical qualifications.
- People supplemented their group studies by attending lectures or meetings.
- Circle members had no previous theoretical qualifications, but a good deal of practical experience.
- They learnt to discuss, argue, show consideration for others, accept defeat and share responsibility.
- They experienced a sense of community and identity.
- The knowledge they acquired could be directly related to their everyday lives.
- Studies began at the initial cognitive level of the members and were guided by their needs.

According to Oscar Olsson, the most important features of the Study Circle was that they operated independently of teachers, were based on the reading of fiction, and used conversation and discussion as method. His definition of a Study Circle was: A circle of friends who come together to discuss problems or subjects of common interest.

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