

TIPS FOR FACILITATING A STUDY CIRCLE

Contents

Materials from *A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators* (1998) by the Study Circles Resource Center:

- Key Facilitation Skills
- Good Study Circle Facilitators...
- Background Notes for Good Study Circle Facilitators
- The Importance of Neutrality
- Tips for Effective Discussion Facilitation
- Suggestions for Dealing with Typical Challenges
- Resource Brief: Leading a Study Circle

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Key Facilitation Skills

- **Reflecting** – feeding back the content and feeling of the message. “Let me see if I’m hearing you correctly...”
- **Clarifying** – restating an idea or thought to make it more clear. “What I believe you are saying is...”
- **Summarizing** – stating concisely the main thoughts. “It sounds to me as if we have been talking about a few major themes...”
- **Shifting focus** – moving from one speaker or topic to another. “Thank you, John. Do you have anything to add, Jane?” “We’ve been focusing on views 1 and 2. Does anyone have strong feelings about the other views?”
- **Using silence** – allowing time and space for reflection by pausing between comments.
- **Using non-verbal and verbal signals** – combining body language and speech to communicate—for example, using eye contact to encourage or discourage behaviors in the group. Be aware of cultural differences. Neutrality is important here, so that we don’t encourage some people more than others.

Good Study Circle Facilitators...

- are neutral; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.
- help the group set its ground rules, and keep to them.
- help group members grapple with the content by asking probing questions.
- help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.
- create opportunities for everyone to participate.
- focus and help to clarify the discussion.
- summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.

And

- are self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.
- are able to put the group first.
- have a passion for group process with its never-ending variety.
- appreciate all kinds of people.
- are committed to democratic principles.

Background Notes for “Good Study Circle Facilitators”

Study circles require a facilitator who can help focus and structure the discussion and, at the same time, encourage group ownership. The facilitator's main task is to create an atmosphere for democratic deliberation, one in which each participant feels at ease in expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

The study circle facilitator does not “teach” but instead is there to guide the group’s process. He or she does not have to be an expert in the subject being discussed, but must know enough about it to be able to ask probing questions and raise views that have not been considered by the group.

Above all, staying neutral and helping the group to do its own work are central to good study circle facilitation. This takes practice and attention to one’s own behaviors. Make sure to ask for the group’s help in making this work well for everyone.

The Importance of Neutrality*

- Act as if you are neutral; *practice* neutrality.
- Encourage and affirm each person.
- Explain your role.
- Be aware of your own “unconscious” behaviors.
- Resist the temptation to step out of the role of facilitator.

* Thanks to the RKI Facilitator's Work Guide.

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Tips for Effective Discussion Facilitation

BE PREPARED.

The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the subject, being familiar with the discussion materials, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help further the discussion.

SET A RELAXED AND OPEN TONE.

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
- Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps to build the group's connections.

ESTABLISH CLEAR GROUND RULES.

At the beginning of the study circle, help the group establish its own ground rules by asking the participants to suggest ways for the group to behave. Here are some ground rules that are tried and true:

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Share "air time."
- Conflict is not personalized. Don't label, stereotype, or call people names.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- What is said in this group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that.

MONITOR AND ASSIST THE GROUP PROCESS.

- Keep track of how the group members are participating—who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.

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- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.
- When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward non-intervention.
- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other.
- Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.
- Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.
- Remember: A study circle is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

HELP THE GROUP GRAPPLE WITH THE CONTENT.

- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.
- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs and the opinions of others.
- Help the discussion along by clarifying, paraphrasing, and summarizing the discussion.
- Help participants to identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

USE PROBING COMMENTS AND OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS WHICH DON'T LEAD TO YES OR NO ANSWERS. THIS WILL RESULT IN A MORE PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSION. SOME USEFUL QUESTIONS INCLUDE:

- What seems to be the key point here?
- What is the crux of your disagreement?
- What would you say to support (or challenge) that point?
- Please give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point.

- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?
- What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- What have we missed that we need to talk about?
- What information supports that point of view?

RESERVE ADEQUATE TIME FOR CLOSING THE DISCUSSION.

- Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.
- Thank everyone for their contributions.
- Provide some time for the group to evaluate the study circle process.

Suggestions for Dealing with Typical Challenges

Most study circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that study circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

Problem: Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.

Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact—it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a study circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the study circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

Problem: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.

Possible responses: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you *must* intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate; "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say." Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice—you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.

Problem: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

Possible responses: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?" If a participant goes into a

lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

Problem: Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts but no one present knows the answer.

Possible responses: Ask, "Has anyone heard of conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

Problem: Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible responses: This rarely happens in study circles, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case, the leader's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?"

Problem: Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a study circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: It is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and that encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will

support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

Resource Brief: Leading a Study Circle*

Once a study circle is underway, the study circle leader is the most important person in terms of success or failure. The leader guides the group toward reaching the goals that have been set by the organizer and the participants. It is the leader's responsibility to stimulate and moderate the discussion by asking questions, identifying key points, and managing the group process. While doing all this, the leader must be friendly, understanding, and supportive. The leader does not need to be an expert or even the most knowledgeable person in the group. However, the leader should be the most well-prepared person in the room. This means thorough familiarity with the reading material,

*Encourage interaction among the group.
Participants should be conversing with
each other, not just with the leader.*

preparation of questions to aid discussion, previous reflection about the directions in which the

discussion might go, knowledge of the people and personalities in the group, and a clear understanding of the goals of the study circle. The most difficult aspects of leading discussion groups include keeping discussion focused, handling aggressive participants, and keeping one's own ego at bay in order to listen to and truly hear participants. A background of leading small group discussion or meetings is helpful. The following suggestions and principles of group leadership will be useful even for experienced leaders.

BEGINNING

- *"Beginning is half," says an old Chinese proverb.* Set a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the start. The goals of the study circle should be discussed and perhaps modified in the first session, as should the ground rules for discussion. It is important that participants "buy in" right from the beginning.
- *Start each session with a brief review of the readings.* This is best done by a participant and will refresh the memories of those who read the session's material and include those who did not. Recapitulation of the main points will also provide a framework for the discussion.

* Excerpted from a 32-page pamphlet "Guidelines for Organizing and Leading a Study Circle." Write or call for more information on the Study Circles Resource Center, its services, and other publications.

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MANAGING THE DISCUSSION

- **Keep discussion focused on the session's topic.** Straying too far could cause each session to lose its unique value. A delicate balance is best: Don't force the group to stick to the topic too rigidly, but don't allow the discussion to drift. Most people do not regard a "bull session" as a valuable use of their time.
- **Do not allow the aggressive, talkative person or faction to dominate.** Doing so is a sure recipe for failure. One of the most difficult aspects of leading is restraining domineering participants. Don't let people call out and gain control of the floor. If you allow this to happen the aggressive will dominate, you may lose control, and the more polite people will become angry and frustrated.
- **Draw out quiet participants.** Do not allow anyone to sit quietly in the corner or to be forgotten by the group. Create an opportunity for each participant to contribute. The more you know about each person in the group, the easier this will be.
- **Be an active listener.** You will need to truly hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Listening carefully will set a good example for participants and will alert you to potential conflicts.
- **Stay neutral and be cautious about expressing your own values.** As the leader, you have considerable power with the group. That power should be used only for the purpose of furthering the discussion and not for establishing the correctness of a particular viewpoint. If you throw your weight behind the ideas on one faction in the study circle, your effectiveness in managing the discussion will be diminished.
- **Use conflict productively and don't allow participants to personalize their disagreements.** Do not avoid conflict, but try to keep it narrowly focused on the issue at hand. Since everyone's opinion is important in a study circle, participants should feel comfortable saying what they really think—even if it's unpopular.
- **Don't be afraid of pauses and silences.** People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help someone build up the courage to make a valuable point. Leaders who tend to be impatient may find it helpful to count silently to 10 after asking a question.

- ***Do not allow the group to make you the expert or “answer person.”***

The point of a study circle is not to come up with an answer, but for the participants to share their concerns and develop their understanding. Don't set yourself up as the final arbiter. Let the group decide what it believes and correct itself when a mistake is made.

- ***Don't always be the one to respond to comments and questions.***

Encourage interaction among the group. Participants should be conversing with each other, not just with the leader. Often questions or comments are directed at the leader, but they can be deflected to another member of the group.

- ***Synthesize or summarize the discussion occasionally.*** It is helpful to consolidate related ideas to provide a solid base for the discussion to build upon.

USING QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY

- ***Ask hard questions.*** Don't allow the discussion to simply confirm old assumptions. Avoid following any “line,” and encourage participants to re-examine their assumptions. Call attention to points that have not been mentioned or seriously considered, whether you agree with them or not.

- ***Utilize open-ended questions.*** Questions such as, “What other possibilities have we not yet considered?” do not lend themselves to short, specific answers and are especially helpful for drawing out quiet members of the group.

CONCLUDING

- ***Don't worry about attaining consensus.*** It's good for the study circle to have a sense of where participants stand, but it's not necessary to achieve consensus. In some cases a group will be split, and there's no need to hammer out agreement.

- ***Close each session with a summary and perhaps an evaluation.***

Remind participants of the overall goals of the program and ask them whether the discussion helped the group to move toward those goals. You will definitely want evaluations from the group at the midpoint of the course and at the final session.

NCSALL FEEDBACK FORM FOR STUDY CIRCLE FACILITATORS*

1. Name of study circle conducted: _____
2. Location/site of your study circle: _____
3. When did your study circle meet? Day: _____ Time: _____
4. How many times did your study circle meet? _____
5. Generally speaking, how satisfied have you been with your experience as a study circle facilitator?

Very satisfied Somewhat satisfied Not at all satisfied

Why?

6. What was your most satisfying experience as a study circle facilitator? Please provide an example.
7. What was your most frustrating experience as a study circle facilitator? Please provide an example.
8. In all, how many people participated in your study circle? _____
(Count everyone who attended at least one session.)
 - 8a) How many people started with the first session? _____
 - 8b) How many of those people attended all the sessions? _____
 - 8c) How many people attended only one or two sessions? _____
9. How satisfied were your participants with the study circle process?
 Most participants seemed satisfied
 Most participants expressed dissatisfaction
 Most participants expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction at various points in the process
 I couldn't judge their levels of satisfaction

Please explain:

* Adapted from Study Circles Resource Center Feedback Form.

NCSALL Feedback Form for Study Circle Facilitators (continued)

10. Did you have adequate support from the program organizers?

Yes No Not sure

Please explain:

11. What additional support would have been helpful?

12. If you were to facilitate another study circle, what factors would you change (for example, discussion materials, activities, etc.)?

13. What difference has taking part in this study circle program made in you personally?

14. Other impressions, concerns, and comments:

Your name: (optional) _____

Return to:

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National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

NCSALL's Mission

NCSALL's purpose is to improve practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma. NCSALL is meeting this purpose through basic and applied research, dissemination of research findings, and leadership within the field of adult learning and literacy.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort between the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement).

NCSALL's Research Projects

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English for speakers of other languages, and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) learner persistence, (2) instructional practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) professional development, and (4) assessment.

NCSALL's Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that practitioners, administrators, policy makers, and scholars of adult education can access, understand, judge and use research findings. NCSALL publishes *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly magazine for practitioners; *Focus on Policy*, a twice-yearly magazine for policymakers; *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices; and *NCSALL Reports and Occasional Papers*, periodic publications of research reports and articles. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative, designed to help practitioners and policymakers apply findings from research in their instructional settings and programs.

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