



STUDY CIRCLES
RESOURCE CENTER

Helping People Work Together For Creative Community Change



Training Young People to Facilitate Study Circles

Version 1.0

Study Circles Resource Center — A project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.



Training Young People to Facilitate Study Circles

The Study Circles Resource Center is dedicated to finding ways for all kinds of people to engage in dialogue and problem solving on critical social and political issues. SCRC helps communities by giving them the tools to organize productive dialogue, recruit diverse participants, find solutions, and work for action and change.

Using this guide

This training guide will help you train, evaluate, and support young people who volunteer to facilitate study circles.

Part 1 lays out the *Training agenda at a glance*. This is a simple overview of the agenda, with approximate times.

Part 2 is the *Annotated training agenda*. This section covers the detailed content of the training, instructions for all presentations and exercises, and approximate times for each element.

Part 3 includes several *Appendices*. The appendices contain documents that are designed as handouts for your trainees, to reinforce their learning. A training evaluation form and a list of SCRC resources are also included.

NOTE: A companion publication, *A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators*, is available from SCRC. It provides information on training adults, a comprehensive annotated training agenda, background notes on the content, an outline for training trainers, and information on evaluation and documentation. You can view and download the guide at www.studycircles.org, or you can order a copy. For more information, contact SCRC at 860-928-2616.

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Introduction

In schools and communities across the country, young people are organizing, facilitating, and participating in study circle programs. In the process, they are learning skills — such as active listening and critical thinking — that will serve them well in all aspects of their lives. And as engaged members of their schools and communities, they are developing habits that will enable them to make meaningful contributions to public life. In short, they are finding their voice, and learning that they can make a difference.

Successful study circle programs depend on effective discussion leaders, or *facilitators*, who help the group have a productive conversation. Young people play this role, often working in pairs, and sometimes with the help of an adult mentor. Good facilitators need adequate training and skill building, plenty of practice, ongoing support, constructive feedback, and formal recognition for their contribution to the program.

How to make your training successful

Study circles are all about participation. Facilitator training should be, too!

Keep these principles in mind as you prepare:

- Make the training interactive, experiential and fun.
- Model what you are teaching.
- Emphasize practice and feedback.
- Evaluate the training.

As a trainer, remember to model the role of a facilitator in everything you do. The entire training, not just the practice study circle session, should be as interactive as possible. Participants should do most of the talking; turn questions back to them. You can provide guidance by filling in key points that don't come up spontaneously.

The training program in this guide is designed to take six-and-a-half hours. *That is really the minimum.* Plan for more practice times to follow the formal training.



Part 1: Training agenda at a glance

Goals for the Training

By the time people have completed the training, they will ...

- understand what a study circle is.
- understand the impartial role of the facilitator.
- experience a study circle, both as a participant and a facilitator.
- learn and practice facilitation skills.
- know how and when they will be using their new skills.

Training Agenda	6-½ hours total
Welcome	20 minutes
Introduction to study circles	40 minutes
BREAK	15 minutes
Demonstration study circle and debriefing	30 minutes
Basic facilitation skills	1-¼ hours
MEAL BREAK	45 minutes
Refresher exercise and instructions for practice	15 minutes
Practice study circles and debriefing	2 hours
Closing	30 minutes



Part 2: Annotated training agenda

Welcome, introductions, and review agenda — 20 minutes (total)

(a) Welcome and introductions

Welcome participants and introduce yourself. Invite participants to join in an opening exercise to help us get to know one another. After this exercise, invite trainees to say what they hope to get out of the training.

15 minutes

GET ACQUAINTED EXERCISE

Materials: Flip chart, marker

Preparation: Before the training, write the following questions on the flip chart:

1. What is one of your most favorite things to do?
2. What is something you don't like to do?
3. What are you good at?
4. What do you worry about?
5. Why did you want to be trained as study circle facilitator?

Process: Put people in pairs or groups of three, and ask them to answer these questions for each other. After 10 minutes, bring the whole group together again. If the group is not too large, ask participants to say their name and something they shared about themselves.

5 minutes

(b) Review the training goals and agenda

Preparation: Before the training, write the training goals and agenda on the flipchart (see preceding page).

Process: Review the goals of the training. Go over the agenda to explain what is planned for the day. You may also invite someone from the sponsoring organization to explain the program these facilitators will be involved in.

Introduction

Introduction to study circles — 40 minutes (total)

The purpose of this part of the training is to present an overview of study circles. A flip chart or overhead projector and slides can help illustrate the basic points you are covering. Pause frequently to invite questions from the group.

10 minutes

(a) Background

Use the following information to give people a little background:

Study circles provide a way for people to talk about important issues in their schools and communities, and look for ways to make things better. While study circles have been around for a long time, they have grown in popularity recently. In the last 10 years, thousands of people, in communities all over the country, have used study circles to address a range of important issues, such as race relations and diversity, improving public education, police-community relations, strengthening families, and many other issues. Now, more and more young people are using study circles to talk about issues they care about, and figure out ways to make a difference.

Invite participants to join in an exercise to illustrate the value of people talking together about community issues.

PENNY EXERCISE

The goal of this exercise is to demonstrate that we generate more ideas together, than any of us can do alone. Study circles are about tapping the power of the group.

Materials: Flip chart, markers, pencils and note paper for participants

Process: Ask participants to write down, in a numbered list, all the characteristics of a penny they can think of. Each person does this alone. Allow about 30 seconds. Then ask who has a high number of characteristics. Identify the person in the group with the highest number of characteristics, and write that number at the top corner of the flip chart. Then, ask people to call out their list of characteristics. Write down on the flip chart what people say, numbering as you go. When you get to a number that is twice the number in the corner, stop and debrief, using questions like:

- What happened when we worked together?
- How does this relate to study circles?

5 minutes

(b) What is a study circle?

Talk about the characteristics of a study circle using a flip chart or overhead slides.

A study circle ...

- is a small, diverse group of 8 to 12 participants.
- meets regularly to address an important social or political issue.
- sets its own ground rules for a respectful, productive conversation.
- is led by an impartial facilitator, who manages the conversation but is not an “expert” or “teacher” in the traditional sense.
- considers an issue from many points of view.
- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement.
- offers an opportunity to move from talk to action.

5 minutes

(c) How are study circles organized?

Talk about the various ways study circles can be used.

Study circle programs ...

- are organized by a diverse group of people.
- usually involve many study circles happening at the same time in a community or organization.
- usually begin with a kickoff and end with a meeting where participants share their ideas and begin planning for action.
- can be organized in a state, county, community, neighborhood, or institution/organization.

15 minutes

(d) Overview of a typical study circle

A study circle usually lasts one to two hours. The following exercise illustrates the basic elements of a study circle.

ELEMENTS OF A STUDY CIRCLE EXERCISE

Materials: 5 pieces of 8-½" x 11" paper, tape

Preparation: Before the training, copy each of the elements listed below on a piece of paper with the title on one side, and its description on the back.

Study circle elements

1. Welcome and introductions

Purpose: **Participants** introduce themselves and say why they are participating in the study circle. The **facilitator** describes his or her role as a neutral person who helps manage the discussion. The facilitator also tells the group about the larger study circle effort they are part of.

2. Ground rules

Purpose: Under the guidance of the facilitator, the group establishes agreements for how they will talk and interact with each other.

The ground rules ...

- help the group manage disagreements.
- make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
- ensure a respectful, safe, and productive conversation.

3. Discussion

Purpose: This is the centerpiece of the study circle. People talk about the issue, consider many different views, and learn from one another. In the final session, the group reviews earlier conversations, and thinks about ways to make a difference on the issue.

4. Summary and common ground

Purpose: With the help of the facilitator, the group summarizes the most important themes in the discussion. Participants may note areas of agreement or disagreement. They may also talk about ideas for action.

5. Evaluation

Purpose: People have a chance to think about how the discussion went. They can talk about the ground rules, and decide if they want to change anything for next time.

Process: Divide the trainees into five groups. Give each group a sheet of paper with one of the elements of a study circle. Working in small groups, trainees will have a few minutes to read their paper, and talk about why this part of a study circle is important. Then bring everyone together.

Beginning with #1, "Welcome and introductions," and going in order, ask for volunteers (one from each group) to describe the purpose of their part of a study circle and explain why they think it is important. As each group reports, write the element on the flip chart to reinforce the message. If you have time and space, you may want to post the five papers on a wall where everyone can see them during the rest of the training.

5 minutes

(e) What makes a good facilitator?

The role of the facilitator in a study circle is key to its success. The facilitator is there as a neutral person, to guide the conversation, and help participants have a successful discussion. Invite the group to brainstorm a quick list, answering the following question: “What would make someone a good study circle facilitator?” Record the group’s ideas on the flip chart.

Here are some points that may come up in the brainstorm:

- able to read body language
- good listener
- can keep opinions to oneself
- is very self-aware
- comfortable with all kinds of people
- makes people feel welcome and at ease

BREAK (15 minutes)

Demonstration

Demonstration study circle and debriefing — 30 minutes (total)

This part of the training is a demonstration of how a study circle works, and what good facilitation looks like. The demonstration happens as a “fishbowl” exercise, where a small number of people in the center take part in the exercise, while other participants stand or sit outside and observe the process.

20 minutes

FISHBOWL EXERCISE

Materials: Flip chart, markers

Preparation: Select discussion materials from the opening session of a study circle discussion guide to use during this exercise. If you are preparing facilitators for a particular program, use the same discussion materials that participants will be using in their actual study circles. You can use these discussion materials in both the fishbowl, and in the later practice circles. (See Appendix E, *Resources*, for a list of SCRC discussion guides.)

Process: Ask for a few volunteers (5 to 7) and seat them in a circle with an experienced facilitator inside the “fishbowl.” Make sure this group is diverse. The other trainees can sit or stand around the small group to observe.

- **Welcome and introductions:** The facilitator begins by welcoming everyone, initiating introductions, and explaining the impartial role of the facilitator.
- **Set ground rules:** The facilitator then explains ground rules, and invites suggestions from the group. Record these as they are agreed to. (An alternative is to post some “sample” ground rules to jump-start the discussion.) The facilitator needs to watch the time carefully, to be sure there is also time for the discussion.
- **Hold discussion:** Then the group begins the discussion and continues for several minutes. During the discussion, the facilitator can intervene as necessary, using paraphrasing, clarifying, summarizing, or other common facilitation techniques. After about 20 minutes, the facilitator summarizes major themes, thanks the group, and closes the discussion.

10 minutes

Debriefing

Involve the entire group in debriefing the exercise. You may direct some questions to the participants, some to the observers, and some to the entire group.

Use these questions to help the group reflect on the experience:

What did the facilitator do to:

- set a positive tone?
- explain, and help the group set the ground rules?
- help people connect their concerns and values to the issue?
- help connect participants and their various perspectives with one another?
- manage the discussion process? *For example*, what interventions did he or she use? Were those techniques effective? Would another approach have been better? How did the participants do? Were they comfortable? Did everyone have a chance to speak? Did anyone dominate the discussion?

Skills

Basic facilitation skills — 1- ¼ hours (total)

In this part of the training, participants will practice some basic facilitation techniques and discuss the meaning of successful discussion leadership. Remember that 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. Begin with a brief presentation on the role of the facilitator.

10 minutes

(a) The role of the facilitator

Talk about the characteristics of effective study circle facilitators, using this information:

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 the group talk about the issue by asking probing questions.
- help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- bring out points of view that haven’t been talked about.
- help everyone participate.
- focus the conversation, and keep things moving.
- summarize the discussion, or ask others to do so.

Neutrality above all!

- Explain your neutral role.
- Pay attention to everyone in your group.
- Be aware of your body language and other signals that might indicate your feelings.
- Resist the temptation to step out of the role of facilitator.

10 minutes

(b) Key facilitation skills

Present the following facilitation skills to the group in preparation for the skill-building exercise.

- *Reflecting and clarifying* — feeding back the content and feeling of the message.
“Let me see if I’m hearing you correctly...”
- *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 sensitive to cultural differences.
- *Brainstorming* — quickly assembling a list without stopping to evaluate or discuss
- *Prioritizing* — arranging ideas in order of preference

20 minutes

Next, participants will practice a few key facilitation skills.

SKILL-BUILDING EXERCISE

Preparation: Before the training, think of a question to be used in this exercise and write it where everyone can see it. Use subject material that relates to the topic at hand. For example, “Why do you think study circles on _____ are a good idea?”

Process: Divide the group into pairs, with each pair designating a person A and a person B. First, ask the A’s to respond to the question for 3 minutes, while the B’s listen. Call time after three minutes, and ask the B’s to reflect, clarify or summarize the main themes for their partners. Now switch roles. The B’s respond to the question for three minutes, while the A’s listen. Call time, and ask the A’s to reflect, clarify or summarize the main themes for their partners.

When everyone is finished, debrief the exercise as a whole group.

Use such questions as:

- How did it go?
- What did you notice in particular?
- Did you find any part of this exercise especially challenging?
- Did the speaker feel listened to?
- What did you notice about body language?
- Does anyone want to share something effective your partner did during this practice?

5 minutes

(c) Brainstorming and prioritizing

This part of the training focuses on two additional facilitator techniques: brainstorming and prioritizing. Tell trainees that you will be demonstrating both techniques in the next section. They will have a chance to practice these skills later in the day.

Start by talking about how brainstorming works, using the information below.

Brainstorming

Purpose:

- To come up with many different ideas in a short time.

Guidelines:

- All ideas are OK
- Don't stop to talk about ideas
- Don't judge ideas
- Build on others' ideas

How to do it:

- Anyone can offer an idea; you don't need to wait for your turn.
- The facilitator records every idea in the speaker's words.

15 minutes

BRAINSTORMING EXERCISE

Materials: Flip chart, markers, colored stickers

Preparation: Refer to Appendix B, "Suggestions for dealing with typical challenges," for background information.

Process:

- Write "Facilitation Challenges" at the top of your flip chart paper, and divide the paper into two columns.
- Explain the process of brainstorming and invite the group to brainstorm a list of facilitation challenges. *Ask the group:* What are your biggest fears about facilitating? What kinds of situations are you worried about?
- List their ideas in the left column.
- Once everyone's ideas are listed, go back to the top of the list and address the challenges one by one. *Ask the group:* How would you handle this situation? What are some ideas or techniques you could use?
- Write their responses in the right column, opposite the challenge. This completes the brainstorm.

NOTE: This is the time in the training to address what might happen if a participant becomes upset or emotional. The trainer should prompt this discussion, if it doesn't come up on its own. What is the role of the facilitator in such a situation? It's OK for people to express strong emotions, especially if something is painful. Usually, the group will take care of such a situation by offering consolation and support to the person affected. It's important for the facilitator (and the group) to honor and acknowledge a person's expression of emotion. If necessary, the facilitator can always interrupt the study circle with a short break, to give everyone a chance to regroup.

10 minutes

(d) Prioritizing

In study circles, sometimes it is necessary to narrow down a long list, and choose the ideas with the broadest support. This often happens when groups are thinking about action ideas they would like to work on.

Process: Work from your brainstormed list of challenges.

- Go through the items on the “challenges” list, and ask if there are any duplications or closely related ideas that can be grouped. Mark these clearly on the list.
- Invite the trainees to choose the items (challenge plus corresponding tip) they think will be most important to remember.
- Give each person three colored stickers and ask them to go up to the flipchart and vote, by putting the stickers next to their top ideas. They can use all three stickers on one challenge, or they can spread them around. (If stickers aren’t available, ask each person to tell you their choices, and mark their preferences with a check by the item.)
- When the voting is complete, clearly indicate the top two or three “winners.”

5 minutes

(e) Wrap up before meal

Let participants know they will have a chance to practice these facilitation skills after the meal break. Hand out study circle discussion materials and ask participants to review them during the break. Also, hand out the training evaluation form (see Appendix D), and let participants know they should fill it out before they leave the training.

MEAL BREAK (45 minutes)

After the meal, do a quick “refresher” exercise. Here is one example. Use this exercise, or one of your own that you think is well suited to your group of trainees. The idea is to do something quick and fun that will re-energize the group in preparation for the next part of the training.

5 minutes

REFRESHER EXERCISE

Materials: Paper with a simple shape drawn on it (such as a heart, triangle, question mark, etc.)

Process: Have all participants form a line or circle, facing in one direction. Without letting anyone else see, show the person at the end of the line the shape on the paper. Ask that person to trace the shape on the back of the person in front of them, using a finger. That person does the same to the person in front of them, and so on, until you reach the front of the line. Ask the last person to draw the shape on a piece of paper. Compare with the original shape.

Practice

10 minutes

Practice study circle and debriefing — 2 hours(total)

This is the heart of the training. Everyone will have a chance to participate in a study circle, to practice facilitating, and to observe the process. If you have shortened or eliminated earlier parts of the training, add the extra time to the practice session. Remember, the more practice facilitators have, the better prepared they will be.

For this part of the training, participants will be working in groups of 6 to 8 people. Plan to have someone with facilitation expertise act as an outside, silent observer for each practice group. Divide everyone into diverse groups, and go over the instructions for the practice.

Remind the trainees at the beginning that this is an artificial setting, but it will provide a taste of real study circle facilitation.

2 hours

PRACTICE STUDY CIRCLE EXERCISE

Each practice group will need a timekeeper, someone to volunteer to be the first facilitator, and an outside observer. Figure out how much time you can allot to each facilitator, building in time to debrief after each person's turn. Trainees should have at least 10 minutes to facilitate, with a 5-minute debrief. The more time you have, the better.

- Remind everyone that they will have several roles: taking a turn as the facilitator; being a fully engaged participant; watching how other group members are doing; and monitoring the overall process.
- When the timekeeper says to begin, the first volunteer facilitator begins by welcoming everyone, doing quick introductions, setting ground rules, and then starting the conversation, using Session 1 of the discussion guide.
- When the timekeeper indicates the allotted time is up, stop the conversation and spend a few minutes debriefing the first facilitator. The facilitator begins by reflecting on his/her own process; then group members offer comments and observations. Finally, the observer offers comments.

Use these questions in your debrief:

- What worked well?
- What would I do differently?

Feedback should be specific, concrete and helpful. Whenever possible, offer an alternative strategy for a particularly challenging situation. When the debriefing is over, someone else takes a turn as facilitator, picking up the conversation where it left off, and continuing. Move through the discussion materials, *sampling each session*. This helps facilitators understand how the sessions progress, and also gives them a chance to practice various skills, including facilitating viewpoints, brainstorming and prioritizing.

NOTE: Whether trainees will be working alone, or with a partner, it's a good idea to schedule additional practice sessions, after the formal training is over. Facilitator teams need time to get to know each other, and figure out how they will divide the work.

Closing

Final comments, training evaluation, and closing — 30 minutes(total)

10 minutes

(a) Final comments on the practice

When the practice session is over, bring the whole group together and spend a few minutes talking about how the practice went.

- Ask everyone to think of one word that describes their facilitating experience. Go around the room and have each person say their word out loud. It's OK to pass, and duplications are OK.
- Ask the trainees to think of a word that describes their experience as a participant in the practice study circle. Again, go around the room and have each person say their word out loud.

10 minutes

(b) Discuss next steps

This is a good time to go over instructions about the upcoming program. Have someone available who can answer any questions.

Here is the kind of information to cover:

- the time and place of the study circles
- the time and place of a kickoff (if there is one)
- what will happen when the study circles are complete, such as a concluding event
- the kind of information (if any) facilitators are expected to collect from study circle participants
- other scheduled practices
- plans for the facilitator teams to get together to decide how they will work
- facilitator support while the circles are underway

10 minutes

(c) Closing

Close the training by asking the entire group to reflect on the day.

Use questions like these to help you.

- What is something new or interesting you learned today?
- Does anyone have a final comment or observation to offer?

Remind participants to fill out their evaluation before they leave.

Finally, thank participants for attending and participating. Wish them well in their upcoming project!



Part 3: Appendices

Appendix A

Tips for facilitators

In a study circle, the facilitator ...

- manages the discussion.
- helps the group set its own ground rules.
- makes sure the conversation is respectful and productive.
- does not join the conversation or take sides.
- helps the group look at the issues from many different points of view.
- helps everyone in the group participate in the dialogue.
- helps the group think about what they can do to make a difference.

Remember, you don't have to be an expert, but you do need to be prepared.

This means you should ...

- understand the goals of the study circle.
- prepare carefully for each session. Know the discussion materials inside and out!
- think ahead of time about what might come up in the discussion.
- think about how you might handle challenges.

Stay neutral!

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
- The most important thing to remember is that you should *not* share your personal views or take sides.
- You are there to guide the discussion, not to join it.

Help the group have a good conversation.

- Explain the purpose of the study circle and help the group set ground rules.
- Be sure all the members of the group have a chance to share their ideas. Help quiet people join in.
- Try not to interfere with the conversation unless you have to.
- Don't speak after each comment or answer every question.
- Encourage people to talk to each other, not to the facilitator.
- Don't be afraid of silence!

- Remember that a study circle is about sharing ideas. It is not a contest to see whose ideas are best.
- Help the group summarize and identify differences and common themes.
- Keep careful track of time!

Ask open-ended questions.

Open-ended questions are questions that can't be answered with a quick "yes" or "no."

Examples:

- What seems to be the key point here?
- Do you agree with that? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about that statement?
- Could you talk a little about why you feel the way you do?
- What experiences have you had that would help us understand how you formed your opinion?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What do you think is really going on here? Why is that important?
- Do you think others see this the way you do? Why or why not?

Be aware that people from different cultures communicate in different ways.

In study circles, different kinds of people need to be able to understand each other. Here are some ways you can help:

- Listen actively. Help the group think about what it feels like to be in the other person's shoes.
- Don't assume that there is only one way (yours!) to communicate.
- In some cultures, people tend to be quiet, and to think before they speak. In others, people will jump into a conversation right away. Help everyone participate in a way that feels good to them.
- Look for the things that everyone in the group has in common.
- Have FUN learning about new ways of thinking and talking!

Suggestions for dealing with typical challenges

Most study circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and care about the conversation. But there are challenges in any group process. Here are some common challenging situations, along with some possible ways to deal with them.

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 them by showing 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. Use the ground rules to reinforce the message. You might say, "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 invite others to speak."

Problem:

Someone puts forth information that 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 other information about this?" If no one offers a correction, you might raise one. Be careful not to present the information in a way that makes it sound like your opinion. If 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 and bring it to 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 asking everyone to respond. Or, pair people up for a few minutes, and ask them to talk about a particular point. Then bring everyone together again. 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 airing different 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 OK to challenge someone's ideas, but attacking the person is *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 encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members have bought into the ground rules, they will support you. You might ask the group, "What seems to be the crux of this dispute?" This question shifts the focus from the people to their ideas. 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.

A comparison of dialogue and debate

Dialogue	Debate
Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.	Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
In dialogue , finding common ground is the goal.	In debate , winning is the goal.
In dialogue , one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.	In debate , one listens to the other side(s) in order to find flaws and to counter arguments.
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.
Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.	Debate defends assumptions as truth.
Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.	Debate causes critique of the other position.
Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.	Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: openness to being wrong and an openness to change.	Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
In dialogue , one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.	In debate , one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
In dialogue , one searches for basic agreements.	In debate , one searches for glaring differences.
In dialogue , one searches for strengths in the other positions.	In debate , one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other positions.
Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.	Debate involves a countering of the other position, without focusing on feelings or relationships, and often belittles or deprecates the other person.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.	Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate implies a conclusion.

Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Other members included Lucile Burt, Dick Mayo-Smith, Lally Stowell, and Gene Thompson. For more information on ESR's programs and resources using dialogue as a tool for dealing with controversial issues, call the national ESR office at (800) 370-2515.

8. What would you like to see the trainers do the same way next time? Why?

9. What, if anything, would you like to see the trainers do differently next time? Why?

10. Other comments:

Your name: (optional) _____

Resources

SCRC discussion guides

**A Community for All Generations — Teens and Adults Working Together: A Guide for Public Dialogue and Problem Solving, 2002.*

Building Strong Neighborhoods for Families with Children: A Guide for Public Dialogue and Problem Solving, 2000.

Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations: Democratic Dialogue and Action for Stronger Communities, 3rd Edition. 1992, 1994, 1997.

Helping Every Student Succeed: Schools and Communities Working Together, 2002.

**Reaching Across Boundaries: Talk to Create Change — A Mix It Up Handbook, 2003. (Topsfield Foundation, Inc., and the Southern Poverty Law Center)*

Toward a More Perfect Union in an Age of Diversity: A Guide for Building Stronger Communities through Public Dialogue, 1997. (Topsfield Foundation, Inc., and Marci Reaven)

**Youth Issues, Youth Voices: A Guide for Engaging Youth and Adults in Public Dialogue and Problem Solving, 1996.*

SCRC “how-to” guides

A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators, 1998.

Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change: A Step-by-Step Guide, 2001.

Organizing Study Circles with Young People: A Hands-on Guide for Youth and Adults, Version 1.0. 2003.

*guides designed specifically with young people in mind

For more information, or to order any of these publications, please visit the Study Circles Resource Center web site (www.studycircles.org), or call SCRC (860-928-2616).