

# **Self-direction in Study Circles**

## **A Hypothesis in Support of Active Citizenship in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Europe**

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### LEARNING FOR ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Active citizenship can be defined as active participation (taking up social responsibilities and engagements) geared at taking part in societal organisation on a territorial or worldwide level. We refer to active citizenship in education as settings offering opportunities for active participation in learning that model and foster 'bottom-up' change in society, rather than teaching knowledge and skills that presumedly model and maintain conformity to decisions made by those in power. Active citizenship in education relies on a learning environment in which learners have the latitude to define their goals and means to attain those goals, plus control the different processes leading to self-empowerment. A considerable amount of research has been conducted on Self-Directed Learning [SDL] which addresses motivation and metacognition. Both are related to control the learner has on choice (self-determination) and on the learning process (self-regulation) in educational settings (Carré, 2003).

Within the general concept of self-direction in learning, distinction has been made between self-directed learning, as characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction, and learner self-direction, as characteristics of the learner (Brockett, & Hiemstra, 1991, pp. 24-25). Both these external and internal characteristics rely on the taking on of responsibility for the learning primarily by the learner (cf. The "Personal Responsibility Orientation" [PRO] Model, *Ibid.*).

Personal responsibility appears insufficient for active citizenship in democratic societies. Active citizenship also requires social responsibility and solidarity. This paper looks into the relation between learner self-direction in study circles and active citizenship. Study circles are thought to favour active citizenship, despite their relative success to fuel social change (Larsson, 2001b). If learner self-direction is greater in some forms of group learning than in others, namely in forms of co-learning like study circles, this may have implications on the propensity that citizens may have to affect governance as active citizens.

## ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Europe is challenged by the need to adapt to ongoing recomposition of societies due to demographic changes. Ageing of the population, mobility across Europe and immigration from countries out of the EU member states are some examples. Though migration has always been part of human existence, technology has changed the speed and ease for those that can afford to travel around the globe. It has also enabled the exchange of ideas and goods faster and to greater distances. All the while, the number of humans has increased drastically. These factors are changing the composition of societies at an increasing pace. They are also changing the nature of human activities, may they be related to leisure or to economic prosperity. Technology and the globalising it produces make it a necessity to readapt and develop ones skills, but also ones understanding of others and of ones surroundings.

Humans naturally hang on to their traditions, hopefully trying to maintain a status quo within their immediate environment. Due to the pressure for change that people are experiencing, many are reacting with forms of rejection. Amongst other phenomena, this produces hardening, immobility and obdurateness. Nevertheless, the so-to-speak objective reality is gradually accepted by some who adapt to these changes, while others feel increasingly marginalised. While interconnection and interdependence between different environmental levels is acknowledged, little is available in terms of space for interaction. In this context, we believe there is need for our societies to build on democratic social organisation that enables people to negotiate their understandings, build new meaning and feel they are in control of change. Through this attitude, responsibility is naturally assumed and action can follow. It is a case of enabling ourselves as humans to adapt to new realities in a progressive way without risking to face drastic, dangerous changes, imposed brutally by some. Active citizenship is a challenge in contemporary societies. The challenge is that of enabling future shaping of societies by all people, no matter their ethnic and cultural origins, their traditions and life outlook, their gender, age and lifestyle. The process of shaping future societies stems from learning that engages one not only as an individual, but also in a process that produces new shared meanings and understandings on levels associated to the different social communities one is part of, or shall we say – circles one takes part in.

An ongoing process of learning, as endorsed by institutions under the motto Lifelong Learning [LLL], has received some criticism. Intergovernmental organisations and governments usually focus on the vocational aspects of LLL as they are concerned with accreditation and

employment (Edwards, 2003, p. 6). Albeit, there are two other facets to LLL; personal development that is not geared to occupational needs, and social implication that may include a political facet. Field & Leicester (2003, p. xvii) suggest that LLL "goes beyond a blurring of boundaries to a recognition that these aspects of learning/education are, in practice, interrelated." Considering the above mentioned overlapping levels of communities in which people take part, the scope of LLL should be defined across the range of learning networks and communities of practice they participate in. These networks and communities that are identified by people, in turn constitute and shape peoples identities (Edwards, 2003, p. 9).

Given the twenty-first century's global economy and modifications in social organisation as populations and individuals move around the planet, learning can no longer rely solely on formal educational systems.

In consideration of this extended view of LLL, we make the assumption that lifelong learning is a condition for active citizenship.

## THE STUDY CIRCLE MODEL

In some Scandinavian countries Study Circles [SC] have been in use since the end of the nineteenth century as a form of ongoing education. Sweden has an impressive record of SCs attracting a large proportion of the population. They have since inspired educators around the world. Norway, Slovenia, the USA and Australia are some examples of countries using the format with a particular interest in the potential SCs hold for intercultural exchanges and community-wide implication.

Recent documentation on SCs, sometimes called Learning Circles, organised in the USA and in Australia, describes learning contexts with specific societal goals geared to foster reconciliation between people of different ethnic background.

SCs are described as a method of adult education (Byström, 1996) in which adults team up in small groups and meet on a regular basis to study a topic related to their personal or collective centres of interest. Topics chosen are sometimes related to local needs in the community, or related to larger problems experienced on personal or societal levels. In most cases topics are chosen out of those proposed by an organisation supporting study circles. The span of topics may range from ones not usually found in formal education curricula to topics that are more academic. Usually each SC has a guide who is not necessarily more knowledgeable

than the other participants in respect to the subject studied.

Study circles' principals stem from humanist and constructivist orientations that are central to many adult learning models. SC participants are all considered knowledgeable through their life experiences. Their resourcefulness is pooled for the larger benefit of the participants' learning and perhaps later to bolster action in the larger community. Study Circles function on the principle of equal chances to express oneself. Dialogue is the mediator to build shared meaning and understanding. These principles are underpinned by the self-governing nature of SCs. Circle members choose their topic and the means they use to achieve their goals. They are also self-regulating and can decide to reorient their efforts and their objectives as they go along. Nevertheless, some SCs tend to slip away from study circle principles (Byström, 1977, p. 94). The most common deviation from the principals is a sliding back to leader-directed situations reminiscent of the school class (Brattset, 1982, p. 32).

#### WHO IS DIRECTING IN DEMOCRACY AND IN LEARNING?

Study circles are naturally linked to democratic values, as can be perceived through their principles. Several authors have linked SCs and democracy (Oliver, 1987; Larsson, 2001a; Gougoulakis, 2001; Gougoulakis, & Bogataj, 2007). Slovenia's choice to implement SCs in 1991, the year of its independence, was "in order to contribute to the democratisation of society and to develop adult education" (Gougoulakis, & Bogataj, 2007, p. 208).

Study circles are also community based. Through their traditional face-to-face activities they are more appropriate in respect to local democracy, with greater inclusiveness of people that may have barriers to using media such as information and communication technologies [ICTs].

In the USA, SCs were introduced after the Swedish model as a means for renewed vitality in popular movements. The Domestic Policy Association's National Issues Forum used pilot SCs starting in 1985. A year later, SCs were introduced for the first time in a trade union in the USA and Canada, in The International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen. Reports speak of considerable success, though they are predominantly related from the point of view of the organisers. Citizenry and strong member education were concerns for these organisations that differentiated themselves from the Swedish implementation by building feedback to decision-makers into their larger programmes. SCs in the USA have been gaining credibility for community building since 1989 when the Study Circles Resource Center was founded. Focus has

been on creating a climate for community change (Oliver, 2002). The concern has often been around fighting discrimination in multicultural settings. Australia has also seen SCs develop as a tool for Aboriginal Reconciliation, and on subjects related to land care (Suda, 2001).

These examples are far from covering the diversity of learning taking place in SCs, but they are representative of the potential SCs have in defining public policy. Some challenges though have been pointed out:

- Inspiring those who do not ordinarily engage in learning as adults to do so, remains a challenge despite the LLL rhetoric (Suda, 2001, p. 4).
- Without institutions taking ownership of the SC model, little can be expected in terms of effects for community change (Oliver, 2002, p. 242).

Reports on SCs show that they are organised by associations and other organisations that are dedicated to supporting them. Needless to say, we have no account of SCs organised in informal settings, where participants are the initiators of their circles and do not register their activity with an organisation. Study circles as we know them, have relied on support from organisations and on public policy. Initiating them has depended to a large extent on others than the circle members. In a study conducted in Norway on a sample of 51 SCs, only 13.7% were initiated by the circle members (Brattset, 1982, p. 19.). The study also shows that leaders and organisers were satisfied with the method of running the circles, whereas members found it too leader-centred. They would have preferred more control and varying of methods. Considering our interest in learner-direction we refer to the SC as a model, in contrast to the definition given from the organisation's perspective as a method.

Adult learning in culturally diverse communities can no longer be designed with the dominant group's epistemic outlook, if one wishes for active participation of all people. Social integration has to give way to mutual understanding leading to shared action. Shannan & Ward (1995) "point out that many of the excluded do not wish for incorporation but rather if given a chance to reflect and act collectively, would want to change that system and to make it their own by addressing structural issues of their choice." (as cited in Pimparé, 2005). This comes as an illustration of a needed balance between the bigger social project as oriented by governments and institutions and the smaller social circle of SC members, as "Sustaining the dialogue requires some degree of institutionalization of the study circle process, which in turn requires integration of the study circle model with the philosophy, mission, and programs of organizations and

government decision-making bodies" (Oliver, 2002, p. 242).

## THE TENSION BETWEEN EXTERNAL-TO-SELF AND SELF-DIRECTION

Learner self-direction as opposed to direction coming from the outside raises the question of the degree of balance between the capacity to be self-leading within a framework shaped by collective choices. Motivation, which is predetermining in self-direction, is a function of the perceived capacity to act and to attain projected results (Carré, 2000; 2003). The capacity to play an active role in the shaping of society depends on the degree of perceived self-efficacy. In this respect our present concern is less in terms of latitude for action given by the institution. Rather, considering the interaction between the SC participants, as citizens, with their communities outside of it, the question we are interested in is: What differences in SC implementation are susceptible to influence self-direction positively, and in turn foster active citizenship?

## LEARNER SELF-DIRECTION IN STUDY CIRCLES

SCs, in face of challenges in respect to LLL, have potential advantages. They were chosen for our research as they are culturally embedded in Sweden and have been in use for over a century. This has a significant advantage to conducting research in open and distance learning [ODL] settings such as technology enhanced learning environments [TELE] which may share some characteristics with SCs but that lack the invariability of SC principles.

At Paris X University in Nanterre, research headed by Carré (2000; 2005) has been investigating and providing further understanding of self-direction in adult learning, while focusing on the conditions and personal dispositions of learners that support SDL. Regarding learning in SCs, we hypothesise that different degrees of self-direction are dependant on variations in SC implementation by organisations supporting them. Building on cooperative learning theory and co-learning models (Kaplan, 2006), research is now being conducted at Paris X University to establish a link between learner and group self-direction within three variations on SCs. Our research on learner self-direction, as perceived by the learners, will include implementations of SCs that comply with the ideal i.e. with a leader amongst its members who is not a specialist on the subject studied. Two other variations are being studied. The first, in which a leader who is recognised by the participants as a specialist on the study topic takes part, and a second variation in which no pre-designated leader is present.

## LINKING LEARNER SELF-DIRECTION IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING TO ACTIVE

### CITIZENSHIP

Social and political shaping of society by those concerned requires active citizenship in education as a model for governance. This is quite a radical change from the way we understand LLL as it is conveyed as a political catch-all concept aiming at fuelling development measured in GDP growth. The fact that LLL remains a discourse of intentions is perhaps merely the result of limited scope of action citizens perceive, starting with education. The catch at present can be paralleled to telling someone to do something of their own will. Our prognosis is that LLL will develop in parallel with societies opening up to social structures that are more in line with participative democratic values. A better understanding of self-direction in study circles may help building confidence to learn and decide through action leading to propositions emerging from the citizens as active players.

Study Circles present several advantages in respect to equal opportunities. SCs appear to suit women, as reports often show they compose the majority of participants. On another level, the challenge of active democracy in our multicultural environments must take into account other understandings of knowledge construction. SCs may better suit collectively constructed forms of knowledge, such as those put forward from an Africentric perspective (Alfred, 2000). Social structures on local levels and their harmonious interweaving through different levels into encompassing identities (interest centre based, ethnic, national, European and World Citizenship) are based on mutual respect that can only be achieved by mutual understanding. Enhanced self-direction in SCs is prone to contribute to learners' capacity to reflect and act together. The research is also taking into account learning-culture backgrounds of learners, with the intent to correlate learning cultures with learner self-direction.

In respect to institutions taking ownership, having public officials invited to participate in SCs, and organising forums where study circle representatives meet with them to share the results of SC work, are some ways to embody community action.

Our research results will hopefully inspire further inquiry challenging implications to communities of learners, especially as they emerge through ICT use in learning, training and education. The exploration of learner self-direction in SCs is an attempt to explore SC implementation with foreseen implications for active citizenship in the twenty-first century.

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