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Voluntary-based study circles and related municipal policies: international best practices

Edited by Chris Duke and Heribert Hinzen

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Voluntary-based study circles and related municipal policies: international best practices

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Edited by Chris Duke and Heribert Hinzen

Abstract These case studies are diverse in style, length and content. They approach this significant subject from different contexts and directions. They are presented here in the authors' own words and ways of seeing, edited only for ease of reading and understanding. Together they make a valuable contribution to a theme increasingly important for the evolution and effective development of adults' and communities' learning in a time of rapid and disruptive change. Their diversity may make it harder for governments and lobbyists at different levels to say what should be done there. However, they pose essential questions about what study circles mean to different countries, how they are evolving, and the different kinds of utility that they offer. There is no doubt that we are moving deeper and faster into a certain global crisis that has implications for all as it is a time where globalisation, digitalisation, migration and demographic change are moving and shaking our people and societies. What roles are there for study circles, for community learning centres, for learning cities and regions – all trying to get close to lifelong learning and related policies, strategies or even systems in this context? Where are we with this discussion in the arena and agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), especially when we do want to contribute to more than to goal four as quality education? These cases and their review show also that study circles may be helpful to be a viable source for the much needed debates on all the seventeen goals in a meaningful and participatory way by the people themselves.

Keywords: Case studies, learning in later life, university of the third age, sustainable development, self-help, demography, gender, non-formal and informal, local democracy, community learning centre



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1. Introduction

Chris Duke and Heribert Hinzen

This collection of papers sought evidence of the value of study circles in building a learning city. It was intended to secure ongoing support from policy-makers, government officials and other relevant authorities to make policy that supports study circles. A study circle was defined as

“a small group of people who meet multiple times to discuss an issue. Study circles may be formed to discuss anything from politics to religion to hobbies. They are differentiated from clubs by their focus on exploring an issue or topic rather than on activities or socializing. When they emerged in the early twentieth century they were based on a democratic approach to self-education and were often linked to social movements concerned with temperance or working class emancipation.” (cited from the concept note)

The papers gathered here were commissioned within a project sponsored by the National Institute of Lifelong Education (NILE) in the Republic of Korea (RoK). It followed a discussion with colleagues that joined the 14th PASCAL international conference in Suwon co-organized with Ajou University in September 2018, including from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Hamburg, aiming at a joint publication in English and Korean. UIL was involved because of the importance of the theme and against a background of encouraging the study and practice of two obviously related but different subjects: learning cities and community learning centres.

A five-part reporting structure was suggested, later not very closely followed by the case studies, but each study speaks in its own words and ways from diverse historical and geographical, cultural and governance contexts. It also becomes evident as one read the studies that their purposes and intended outcomes varied with the character of the county concerned.

The studies were gathered to inform and assist the Ministry of Education and NILE with Adult Learning and Education (ALE) policy development and its commitment to sustainable development and the evolution of learning cities. Some cases are more obviously relevant to the Korean situation than others; all offer lessons.

They reflect the emergence of ‘study circles’ especially in the Scandinavian region of Europe and through other parts of that continent and also Australia. They also include two cases from RoK, one example from another East or South-East Asian country, Singapore, in a continent where some countries have demographic and economic conditions somewhat similar, and such activity also exists.

The Bjerkaker study of the **Norwegian** Study Circle Method looks at and beyond that small and influential country where the long-standing ambition is ‘to produce active and skilled citizens’. It stresses both the - ‘idealistic’ - principle of members shaping their own studies and the central importance in practice of the leader appointed by local organizers. There are



many organizational and administrative tasks, as well as the socio-emotional function. The paper also stresses the desirability of activity and so applied as well as shared participatory learning, usually in circles of no more than 15 people.

In concluding with a note on the University of the Third Age, U3A, which started and spread from France to the UK and then many other countries; Bjerkaker shows how much the study circle tradition has grown through the changed demography of modern societies. These have increasing proportions of often well-educated and still very active people who – they and/or their partners – have retired from paid employment. We may note this fact, as a social-demographic driver of study circles, as well as the ambivalence or paradox over leadership. Several other of our case studies concern ‘retirement age’ citizens as members.

The **Swedish** study is different. To a purist it may not qualify as a ‘true study circle’ system. The life-span of an event and a particular study circle is shorter than usually implied; the work is more structured and directed.

Its purpose is explicitly and unapologetically political. It belongs to a political party in a country where these are a respected part of the structure of governance. It aims to empower people of intellectual disability to take part in elections. In other countries the ‘target group’ might be indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, prisoners, women, or others.

Whereas the idea of reducing gender, or other social or economic disadvantage might be acceptable to most governments, the idea of charging political parties and giving them resources to do this may seem dangerous and alien indeed. In the author’s words ‘we dared to make the politics very accessible’ – and to will the tools, but not to say how the vote itself was to be exercised.

The third case study, from **UK**, is about the largest recognised clientele of Study Circles, older adults or third-agers: a fast growing proportion of the population in many countries where birth-rates are low and life expectancy has significantly increased.

Osborne notes the 1982 origins of the UK Third Age movement U3A following on from the French *Université du Troisième Age*. The purpose is ‘empowering individuals and promoting social cohesion’ and ‘enhancing quality of life’. He sees older adults as ‘a particular part of society for which there has been declining state investment....clearly there is much evidence of benefits to both the individual, in terms of health and well-being, and to society at large in terms of improved civic engagement and in terms of reducing the economic burden in health care’.

The principles of self-help and mutual aid underpin what is now a big organised national system with a coordinating national Third Age Trust. Participants pay low fees. In this relatively wealthy country there is some, now declining, public funding. The emphasis is on participants choosing what they will study, within a light-touch organisational, infrastructure and leadership support system.

The only non-European case study outside Korea is from **Singapore** where, in a small, wealthy, well managed multi-cultural and multi-lingual society with good transport we have



the case of Seniors-Meet-Seniors (SMS): study circles supported within both national Lifelong Learning and Third Age Councils.

National policy supports ALE, and funds are drawn from both public and private sectors. Study circles receive a small annual core grant, and those who take part do not pay fees as rental charges for learning spaces are met by authorities. Singapore has a high PCI (per capita income) and it would probably be possible to charge modest fees, as occurs for some adult education and training activities but the strong ‘learning city’ commitment written into government policy makes this unnecessary. This may be a good model for Korean cities and the Korean government to consider. Note the broad ambition on older adults’ work here, with economic as well as social and health purposes.

The fifth case study comes from **Ireland**. It features a movement supporting study circles in a different setting, which originated and is most developed in Australia, since being followed elsewhere. Men’s Sheds, originated from the little tool and work sheds found across allotments in many countries. Stereotypically, the allotment for gardening, especially growing vegetables, is a refuge for men who having retired become restless, lonely, a nuisance around the house, and are sent off by their wives to the allotment. There is truth in this: many men after ceasing work and the social contact there become ‘lost souls’. Suicide is reportedly often high among men in their early retirement years.

Women, especially if unemployed but also more generally, develop stronger informal friendship support groups and networks: something older men may practise more superficially, and less if opportunities are based in the sporting activities of younger men. More superficially than in older times of common village and neighbour washhouses, city baths and street-level neighbourhoods, women contrive to find ways for ‘women talk’ and women support.

The focus of this study, which belongs with previous accounts in being for older people, is also different in being more focussed on a particular clientele, originally those from manual working lives rather than graduates and middle classes. Men’s sheds are also used by younger men in similar social-psychological circumstances. They attract small local authority and civil society organisation grants; and support in terms of free space for meetings and workshop-type activities. Rob Mark notes the power of local communities in reducing isolation and enabling new identities and self-confidence to emerge. The community spaces are diverse, informal, with minimal structure and organisation, and obvious direct social health and morale gains and spin-off benefits back in the home and elsewhere.

It will be interesting to see whether some men’s sheds evolve into less gendered spaces (as do some conventional allotments). This is one of many places and ways where different countries’ cultural differences and gender relationships create different solutions.

A European study away from the northern area of the continent where formally identified study circles grew up comes from the prosperous northern province of Tuscany in **Italy**. There are marked differences here, starting from 2001 European Commission guidance and with a distinctly economic (human resource development or HRD) purpose. Not



surprisingly, the system here is much more formal, even regimented, with control flowing down from province to local level and tight clear conditions for conducting study circles and running training activities through them which originate in citizen needs and ambitions. Study circles are funded through local and regional municipal funds that provide free premises. Some charge fees. All are expected to have a tutor. The whole system is arranged through national, regional and local levels. It works within clear rules and meets set criteria for ‘correct implementation’. The study circles are monitored and assessed.

The Tuscan example ‘requires an articulated system of organisational support’, the identifying of individuals’ needs to assemble them into groups, and a network of tutors and experts to serve them. Piazza emphasises that it is ‘a complex operation involving the convergence of multiple wills and competences, the activation of several levels of decision-making...[etc]’. It is a model that may appeal to a strongly managed, maybe more authoritarian-inclined, country. It contrasts totally with a mess of ‘study circle’ activities found for example in the UK and Australia which are so community- and citizen-based that they are almost invisible and quite informal, yet often strong and long-lasting.

From **Norway** we have a quite different example of study circle auspices and purposes. The ‘voluntary-base study circles’ system here belongs to a political party. Its purpose is political, and social-democratic. The Central Party Study Organisation (SpS) comprises three member organisations. It is a national approved adult study organisation, the work of which is designed to ‘maintain and strengthen democracy’: a ‘vibrant local democracy’ based in active citizenship. For this, each study circle gets a small per-study-hour government grant to work within Norwegian adult education law. It is hard to think of many countries where such direct support would go to a political party for this purpose – to keep those in powers on their toes, it can be said.

The study circle has a course operator or leader, an approved study plan, a course register with attendance lists, and course certificates for completion. In all essentials it echoes the structure and processes of a WEA tutorial class in mid-20th century England, with more precise prescription of the course sessions, seeking to balance members’ interests with what it held they ought to learn and know.

Another case study comes from **The Netherlands**. Here, it is vividly explained, the society and its governance are deeply anchored in its geography and history of fighting that great enemy, the sea. Individual ‘can-do’ practical resilience is combined with the necessity of working closely in local communities: centuries of ‘the power of doing together’ with ‘a tradition of citizen initiatives’.

The nature of study circles in this country can only be understood in the context of this land of polders. Centralisation could never have the hold that it has in many places, where it is sought for national security and for internal control in others. The Dutch ‘do it ourselves’ approach is cooperative: ‘in a cooperative people are active and responsible together, without influence of the government’. Study often combines with doing, and cooperatives cover the land.



Dutch-style study circles sometimes require some level of knowledge and government legal or financial help: ‘eventual money can be found at the local level especially, but ‘independency is strongly preferred’. People like to put the knowledge gained into practice, again without government assistance.

Two case studies from the **Republic of Korea** complete this project report on a set of ten case studies of learning circles sponsored from within Korea and by the Unesco Institute of Lifelong Learning. They focus on the detail of practice in study circle development in two different cities. They are contributed by the respective leaders of their learning or study circles.

They will be of significant interest for other cities and towns in Korea where there is not yet significant study circle or perhaps other community learning centre activity: for the way they explain and illustrate the work, and especially in showing how at local municipal level government can provide highly valued grant and logistic support. This enables meetings and flow-on activities, showing how purposes and benefits to do with quality of life within the family and community spill over into other spheres, for people of all ages from early childhood to later retirement-age years.

They should also interest other countries where Korea and other East Asian countries are rather little known and understood, beyond perhaps their rapid and still fast-rising prosperity, and their industrial, especially IT-driven, innovation in fields like robotics, artificial intelligence and use of both big and nano- data. The demography of longevity and low birth-rate, and so concern about care for the elderly is also perhaps now more widely recognised. There two studies also show that lifelong learning in Korea is interpreted to apply to much wider purposes - and perhaps now also already outcomes - than do only economic policies. They go for wider than human resources and the relative demographic shrinkage of working age adults, and so labour market supply.

This is not perhaps surprising. Korea has been home to many international meetings to do with adult learning and education (ALE) and lifelong learning in recent years. It plays a leading role in the UNESCO-sponsored Global Learning Cities Network (GLCN) movement. It contains a number of recognised ‘learning cities’. GLCN recognition is not however a prerequisite for having study circles. The Korean co-sponsors of this project, NILE and Ajou City, are anxious for more government support (at all and any level) to give study circles the oxygen of place and resources to grow.

This ALE need is familiar enough in many countries and in global ALE and LLL reviews. In some well-known to the editors, there is a very large hidden and invisible sub-structure - or rather non-structure - of entirely voluntary study circles like book-reading clubs and natural history and walking groups. These express rather than flaunt an active learning civil society flourishing without government knowledge or support.

This set of studies may suggest to Koreans that more inspiration and models exist and can be emulated in home-base Korean development than in what most other countries have to show. It is worth noting that private education at all levels is a major and competitive part of the



national education system in Korea. Yet municipal subvention proves easier to come by for grassroots community-based learning in this country and culture than in many others.

The eight non-Korean studies are diverse in style, length and content. They approach this significant subject from different contexts and directions. They are presented here in the authors' own words and ways of seeing, edited only for ease of reading and understanding.

Together they make a valuable contribution to a theme increasingly important for the evolution and effective development of adults' and communities' learning in a time of rapid and disruptive change. Their diversity may make it harder for Korean government and lobbyists at different levels to say what should be done there. However, they pose essential questions about what study circles mean to different countries, how they are evolving, and the different kinds of utility that they offer.



2. Study Circles as tools for learning in later life – Senior Circles

Sturla Bjerkaker

This paper is about the *study circle*, its origin, development, participation and pedagogical management, and the use of study circles as tools in learning, in a lifelong and life wide perspective. How can study circles be pedagogical tools for adult learning and education (ALE) and lifelong learning which is linked to empowerment, active ageing and active citizenship?

The paper aims to implement the “*Nordic Study Circle Method*” especially in non-formal and informal adult learning and education: The study circle is a learning method for promoting studies and learning sites concerning local development, citizenship; and for fostering and maintaining democracy, fostering further learning opportunities, self-directed learning, experiential learning, learning for participating in society. As such the study circle is a tool for learning in later life, through senior circles.

For more than 100 years school, workplace and community-based learning have each been responsible for their special curriculum in the large project to produce active and skilled citizens throughout life. The main issue in this shared responsibility has not been sharing content, or the difference between them in the way they perform – their pedagogy – but in the broadness that they together represent: the manifold appeal to the joy of learning which also has to do with variety in the social and physical learning environments.

So far, the study circle has often been linked to and associated with community-based and liberal adult learning. It might not necessarily be only so. When they are functioning at the best study circles may offer learning without humiliation, learning without guilt and bad consciousness, non-violent learning, a humble way of learning, and learning for self-confidence and self-esteem.

As a Nordic traditional method for liberal adult education, the *Study Circle* has been active since the beginning of the 20th century. 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. Even though study circles more or less passed away in USA, they have flourished ever since in Sweden and Scandinavia.

Nearly three million Swedes participate in more than 300,000 study circles annually, partly funded and subsidized, but not controlled, by the public sector and the government. Scandinavian communities have convened study circles to work through major issues facing their local areas and towns, with study circle participants turning into activists with a significant impact on events. In the last ten years, there has been renewed and blooming



interest in study circles also in the USA, according to *the Study Circle Research Centre* in New York.

The Study Circle evolved from the top-to-bottom approach for enlightenment developed in the 18th century, expressed 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, Swede Oscar Olsson, expressed it that ‘the emancipation of the working class should be a task for the workers themselves.’ For the people, by the people’ (Johansson, 1994) became the political slogan that influenced the Study Circle and the adult education system in Scandinavia for years.

The close links between Study Circle as *method* and Study Circle as a *tool for democracy*, may also be exemplified by the former Swedish Prime Minister Olov Palme: “Sweden is to a great extent a Study Circle democracy” (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*). Usually you cannot rely on a teacher or an expert joining in. Normally, the Study Circle is a group of equals. The leader is the managing *primus inter pares*. The pedagogical idea may be summarized as learning by sharing, relying on each member’s experience. The leader might be a teacher, but this is not mandatory.

Describing and analysing the experiences from methods of planning and organizing Study Circles, Brattset (1982) says that ‘the Study Circle, which voluntary organizations claim to be their special method, from both ideological and educational reasons, has very much been taken for granted’. Because the Norwegian Act on Adult Education (Ministry of Education, 1976) required students’ involvement in contents and method in the courses, Brattset thought it was of special interest to find out to what extent this is practised in Study Circles.

We usually date the Swedish Study Circle from 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”.

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

- 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 organizer 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 were: 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’ (Quoted in Brattset, 1982).

It follows that the leader should be more a *guide* to the students (*members*) than a traditional teacher. A practical consequence is the terms applied: *circle members* or *participants*, not *pupils* or *students*; *circle leaders*, not *teachers*, *circles* or *groups* and *meetings*, not *classes* or *lessons*. This use of terminology is important: participants should not associate study with bad experiences from their schooldays.

Historically, Study Circles and popular movements are inseparable concepts. Oscar Olsson’s Study Circle exemplifies the close links that have always existed between popular movements and the Study Circle; also that adult education has always been strongly associated with the voluntary sector in Scandinavia. Their aim was to promote changes in society according to their values. Therefore, adult education can be described as instrumental to reach their goals, and the Study Circle their tool to do so.

The Study Circle is flexible in method and even in understanding. Several terms are in use, such as circles with or without a teacher, circles combined with lectures, circles based on pre-produced plans, correspondence circles, combined circles; members taking correspondence courses individually, supported by circle studies with teacher, multi-media courses, studies integrated in a pre-produced scheme, including usage of media and most recently; e-circles, using web-based communication.

The Study Circle as a field of research has been rare. Most of the research in recent years is from Sweden and the University of Linköping. The most comprehensive study was conducted by Jan Bystrom (Bystrom 1976). His aim was to investigate and discuss the reasons why Study Circles develop differently, and to pay special attention to the situation and function of the circle leader. His starting point was the observation that in practice many circles do not correspond to the ideal.



According to Bystrom there are three main deviations: they might develop into a ‘school class’, with recipient pupils and an instructing teacher; or into a ‘coffee party’, with discussions that have nothing to do with the objectives; or they might develop into a therapy group, in which activities concentrate upon individual mental or social problems.

The ideal principle of circle members shaping their own studies is practised to a limited extent. This may be due to uncertainty among members as to how and when they should put forward their viewpoints. The leader has a central position in their concept of studies; the circle members show little tendency to link their studies with everyday learning and communal learning. They have little confidence in their own resources.

Jan Bystrom’s conclusion is that circle studies can be much improved if:

- Guidance is given to potential circle members during the recruitment period;
- Training is given to circle leaders;
- Attention is paid to designing appropriate study material, with a view to making all members active in the learning process.

Brattset (1982) undertook a survey of fifty-one Study Circles drawn from ten voluntary organizations in Norway. Her findings confirm that study work is characterized by diversity. Among her findings was that most circles were initiated by the organization, mainly in the local community. Circle members and leaders had little direct influence on this.

To the question why they took part, the main reasons for enrolling were, in order of priority: interest in the subject, need for social contact, and importance to their work. What motivated the leaders? The majority of circle leaders undertake the job because they had been approached directly by the organizers, according to criteria set by them. The most important reasons for undertaking the leadership of the circle are similar to members’: interest in the subject, followed by a desire to help the organization, need for social contact, and to work with adults and gain teaching experience.

The appointment of circle leaders and teachers were left to local organizers. The qualities the organizers in Brattset’s sample emphasized most in selection of leaders were experience from applying the subject in practice, and ability to mix with people. Next to these qualities came knowledge, skills and teaching experience.

Brattset's (1982) also shows that members to a certain extent were invited to take part in the planning of circles. This was the case more often in internally organized circle studies than in external activities. Consultations with circle leaders were more frequent in external than in internal circle studies. Most groups preferred member and subject-orientated planning. Organizers participate most in the educational planning, and circle leaders more than members. Independent of subject and recruitment, members and *leaders* have more influence than organizers on the methods of the circle. Regardless of subject and method or



recruitment, *organizers* have consistently much more influence on the aim and contents of the circle than members and leaders.

Still, according to Brattset, as with attitudes to planning there is in all groups a tendency to prefer member-centred methods. Descriptions of practice show a tendency to apply member-centred methods more than leader-centred, but less than expressed as desirable at the beginning of the circle. The trend towards using member-centred methods is more marked in more theoretical subjects in internal circles than in externally recruited circles dealing with practical subjects.

The most remarkable finding was that a large part of both members and leaders stated that this kind of discussion did not take place at all in their circles. That is: a large number of circles had not made use of the variations in the members' background and experiences. Bystrom's (1976) findings showed similar comments. Members in these cases had little opportunity to influence the development of the work in the circle. This must be regarded as a departure from one of the most essential principles of the traditional Study Circle. The ideal Study Circle is perhaps a myth.

Even though the Study Circle leader is *primus inter pares*, the role of the leader is most crucial for a Study Circle to become real. According to Henry Blid (2000) two main functions can be identified for the leader: to secure that studies progress as agreed, and to promote a positive social climate at the study circle meetings (lessons).

The first function implies that the leader is willing to set aside quite a lot of time for circle duties. This does not mean doing everything. The Study Circle works collectively, and each member has responsibility for the progress. The organizational role of leader falls between the roles of chairperson/president and secretary. According to Blid (2000), the most important *organizational functions* for leaders are:

- Prepare a draft plan for the studies to be considered by the Study Circle, presented together with a suggestion for study materials and their use.
- Prepare estimates for possible expenditure for the Study Circle and how such costs might be met
- Keep a list of the members together with notes on how they can be called to the meetings
- Arrange time and place for the meetings and prepare a meeting calendar
- Turn up in time to check upon the arrangements for the meetings
- Call the members to the meetings and ensure that he can be reached in case members should be unable to attend



- Arrange for the purchase/provision of study material and their distribution
- Suggest how all circle members can contribute actively to the meetings, for example by making summaries of or comments on sections studies
- Keep the members well informed of matters concerning the Study Circle and its work
- Make the necessary arrangements if experts are required.

Second, the *social and emotional function* is crucial to positive development of the circle work. Failures by the Study Circle leader will likely result in the loss of members, unless very strong ties keep them together. Leadership may be improved as follows:

- Be a good listener; listen to what the members want to say or try to say
- Learn who the members are, what they want, what they like or dislike
- Express the feelings and opinions of the circle – use “we” instead of “I”
- Promote co-operation and joint efforts
- Encourage all circle members to take initiatives
- Do not decide on behalf of the Study Circle without explicit authorization to do so
- Meet the confidence of the members by keeping promises and agreements
- Should it be necessary to contradict or criticize someone, allow that person to change his/her position or to accept the criticism gracefully.

Inspired by Oscar Olsson, L. P. Oliver (quoted in Blid, 2000) set up a series of main pedagogical principles for the work and function of the Study Circle, with emphasis on the role of the participants in the group:

- Equality and democracy among circle members, with all members acting at one time as both teachers and students, and with reliance on dialogue and conversation rather than on lectures, outside experts, or formal presentations.
- Liberation of members’ inherent capabilities and innate resources, empowering them to act, and to influence and be influenced by social reality.



- Cooperation and companionship, with members working together toward agreed-upon ends, finding “common ground” in their relationships and ideas.
- Study and liberty, and member self-determination of formats and direction, based upon their needs and wishes, and on the objectives of the sponsoring association.
- Continuity and planning, meaning enough time for conversations that overcome one-sidedness, withdrawal of individuals, and undue pushing of one’s point of view, along with emphasis on creating interest in further study after the circle ends. This also means planning by the members themselves, who have the ability to change plans as the need arises.
- Active member participation to encourage cooperation, joint responsibility, and conversation, without which there is no Study Circle.
- Use of printed study materials, from pamphlets, journal extracts, and newspaper articles to scientific texts. Printed matter should always be used to supplement circle conversations.

In this way, Study Circles differ from open-ended discussion groups and radio/TV listening groups, which often do not have systematic study as their main objective.

As Blid (points out, ‘members’ active contribution is the cornerstone on which are built not only Study Circles but also the far more important democracy.... People learn best when they are active.’ With groups that are too small it is difficult to maintain conversation; with larger groups, few actively participate. The ideal size of a Study Circles is said to be between 5 and 15 members.

Today, we find study and discussion groups in many places and sites - in voluntary organizations, at work-places, in neighbourhoods and among people sharing common values. These groups are usually organized much like Study Circles. There are recognized methods used in both organized and informal adult learning in many countries.

Is the Study Circle then unique? Isn’t it similar to ordinary group discussions?

What might be the unique Scandinavian touch is the way the Study Circle is linked to the philosophy of the providers and organizers of adult education, also the long tradition, the general acceptance of the method, and the outspoken importance of the Study Circle method as a tool for learning, active democracy and active citizenship in a lifelong perspective.

For those reasons, the method has hardly been questioned and criticized. It is only recently that the Study Circle has been subject to research, and the studies mentioned (Brattset 1982, Bystrom 1976) legitimate our right to question the method.



Study Circles have lost ground in recent years, for many reasons factors, some mentioned in this paper. The increased cost-benefit view of learning – that all learning should be useful for economic purposes – is focusing on so-called effective learning methods. The Study Circle is considered to be too slow in many respects. But there is also tendency to renew the Study Circle today. At present there is increasing interest in it as an educational method, and a will to examine the method critically.

The learning method/s in Study Circles can be summarized as: *learning by sharing*, or *experiential learning*. The method offers opportunities and possibilities for all participants to contribute with their previous knowledge and experiences. Through open and democratic dialogue the knowledge will be shared and further developed among them.

Knud Illeris (2002), Danish professor in adult education, set three rules for understanding adults' learning:

- Adults learn what they want to learn, and what is meaningful for them to learn
- Adults draw on the resources they already have in their learning
- Adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (and are allowed to).

This fits what we are saying about how study circles function, and why they are a suitable learning method for adults of all ages. In the study circles the adults themselves are the *knowledge managers*. To a large extent they themselves decide what to learn and how to learn it. Paulo Freire put it thus in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1996):

... As we attempt to analyse dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something, which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument that makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constructive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.”

In conclusion: some areas where the Study Circle has been used, or areas suitable for the Study Circle as a learning method. Some areas are more suitable for using the Study Circle method than others. These areas are built on Scandinavian and English experiences:

The Adult Community Learning Fund (ACLF) was a fund established by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in England and administered partly by the former National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), partly by the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The ALCF funded local and community based projects, which aimed to develop access and possibilities for adult learning for all. Some of the projects financed by the fund were much like Study Circles.



Examples from ACLF Projects include:

- The British Film Institute - older people came together to watch films, discussed the film and film-going and, eventually, they wanted to engage with young people to share experiences about film genres and experiences;
- MIND - Southampton and New Forest brought younger and older people together for exercise but their 'core group' was walking. They talked and walked and began to make decisions about other forms of exercise and sport - and had also began some healthy eating stuff...cooking and eating together....

Conflict-solving

When there is no single book or teacher that can help you all the way to the goals of *peace and conflict solving*, the Study Circle is a tool and a method where you may have the opportunity to test your ideas in this field with others, and can propose actions at local level. Peace work has to start in yourself, your family, your neighbourhood, among friends, colleagues and in your community. 'Think global, act local' is a slogan for discussions and problem-solving in Study Circles.

The Working Group on Education at the Thematic Social Forum, Porto Alegre in January 2012 in planning Rio + 20 pointed out that the role of education is to promote critical thinking to deepen *democracy*, in search of sustainable societies. Education has to promote autonomy. The right to education is interdependent with other rights. Democratization of education is necessary to respect diversity in a context of lifelong learning. The Study Circle could fit.

Conscious Critical Consumerism

Where does the food you eat come from, and what does it contain? Where is it produced? Who takes the profit? How is it transported? Are the farmers paid properly? What about genetically modified food – do you like it? Do you wish to promote ecologic and local production of food? What about goods other than food? Are you a conscious consumer, or do you wish to be? Consumer Groups acting like study circles could be a good tool to discuss and in the long run solve questions like this.

Family learning

We find examples of cross-generation learning in different cultures. But: The children are at school. The students are at the universities. Adults go to evening classes or the pub. In spite of this, we know that many family matters concern all generations and should therefore be discussed and solved with all ages coming together. Family Study Circles are here recommended, organised maybe by local community social workers, voluntary organisations or others.



The University of the Third Age - U3A – learning in later life is discussed in other parts of this study. A U3A might be similar to what we in Norway call Senior Academies or University for retired. All in all, the small group learning, the learning by using seniors' experience, is the main tool for these learning activities in later life. In U3A you normally don't have a paid teacher. A voluntary retired professor could be the leader of the knowledge transfer. In this way, many U3A learning activities are similar to the Scandinavian Study Circle.

You can learn as long as you live, and live as long as you learn.



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3. Mitt val – a project for supporting increased voting among people with intellectual disability (ID)

Kjell Stjernholm

Background and purpose

Before the election of 2010 Mr Pie Blume, an employee of FUB, The Swedish National Association for Persons with Intellectual Disability (ID) , published an article referring to research saying 8 out of 10 with an ID didn't take part in Swedish elections for government. Recent available research shows 6 out of 10 with an ID don't vote.

Vision and purpose

Kjell Stjernholm, coordinator at Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan (SV), saw the article. The analysis he did suggested a gigantic democratic deficit, considering that the group with the lowest attendance at the polls were the ones most dependent on agency and government programs in their daily lives. While other programs designed to promote voting often stopped at instructions on how to vote and arguments of why it is important to vote.

Kjell drew the conclusion that it's no use to instruct on how to vote, if you are not allowed to understand what we are voting about. A higher participation in the elections had to come with making the very politics themselves accessible. And – to assure that the person to cast the vote would be the one with the power to choose who to vote for - political information had to be made accessible on the issues of their choice, in a way suitable for their way of understanding. We were to develop a method where the study circle would empower citizens with ID to use their vote.

Membership and organizational structure

In time for the 2014 elections SV and FUB decided to cooperate and build a method for study circles on Swedish democracy, with a process securing that the participant could ask for and come by the political answers to his or her questions. We invited the easy read-foundation Centrum for Lattlast to join us.

They accepted our invitation to cooperate, taking two powerful media with them. One was the newspaper “8 sidor” (8 pages), an easy-read newspaper with a weekly edition. The other was a website called “Alla valjare”(all voters), an easy-read website for political information from and interaction with politicians of the parties of the national parliament.

The Speaker of Riksdagen, the Swedish parliament, granted us a meeting to discuss the project. He pointed out that the Swedish constitution makes the national government responsible for measures to support and administer our elections, while the parties monitor taken measures. We therefore both informed the officials at the government unit for democracy and held a meeting inviting the party secretaries of all parties represented in Riksdagen. All sides gave approval and/or support to our project.

The method was workshopped in a process between SV, FUB, the easy read-centre and yet another partner – Inre Ringen. Inre Ringen is a part of FUB where people with ID form national and local boards for self-advocacy. The role of Inre Ringen was to identify possible reasons for the low participation in elections as a base for design of a method and to monitor and give feedback to the proposed method.

Inre Ringen came up with some critical analysis of why the citizens with ID don't use their right to vote. Among other they spoke about “not understanding what the election is about”, “not understanding what the political parties/politicians say”, “not sure they have the right to vote”, and maybe worst of all “trustees saying we aren't allowed to vote”.

But they are, although many Swedish citizens do not know about it. When asked about when Sweden got voting rights equal for all citizens, most Swedes say 1919 or 1921. Both of them are correct in the sense that those are the years women got their legal rights as law (1919) and first election for women to vote in (1921).

But the answer is incorrect, since we asked for ALL citizens. Poor people and prisoners still had no vote. That changed in the 1960s, but not until 1989 was the law changed so that no citizens were ruled incapacitated.

Leadership structure

SV was made responsible for the project work, development and administration. A group of SV, FUB and Inre Ringen formed a board for guidance and support of project leaders.

Meeting places

Seven cities in Sweden were made pilot municipalities, and the rest of SV's regional branches were invited to follow and – if local funding could apply – start additional study circles. Activities were mostly hosted in SV venues, but sometimes also in other venues in cooperation with the municipality.

Major activities

Sweden had four elections in 2014. The election for the European parliament in May, and the three elections for national, regional and city parliaments in September. We designed a study material consisting of seven sessions.

Session 1 looked at how to vote and why we should vote, with instructions on how to role play the procedure of a polling station, with gear like voting booths and ballots included. Learning by doing to take away the fear of not understanding how to do it on election day.

Sessions 2-5 focused on the four different elections we could take part in, with basic information on what parliament holds responsibility for different areas. Since the study circle always takes its starting point where participants wants it to be, all discussions about different political issues were initiated and called for by the participants. After looking at what city council does, the participants could choose what they wanted to know more about. Together, the participants of the study circle (including the study circle leader) would use different

resources to find answers to their questions. It could be by using newspapers and other media, by directly contacting politicians to ask them, and in some cases through discussions of what they had comprehended from the general discussion that came with the election. But they also could use the resources of “8 sidor” and “alla valjare”. “8 sidor” having easy-read articles on the election, and for special questions they could use the “alla valjare” internet site to post questions and get easy-read answers.

Resources like the political parties own information in easy-read language were used, as well as the Centrum for Lattlasts easy-read folder produced together with the political parties in the national parliament. During these sessions the participants of the different study circle phrased questions for the upcoming easily talked about electoral discussions they were to take part in.

Session 6 was an electoral discussion in “easy-talked” (compare with easy read) language, where politicians were taught how to communicate with easy language, accessible for the participating audience with ID, before entering the discussion. Instructions to the politicians were for example to use an active form, avoid statistics, avoid special terms that calls for prior knowledge of what the term means, avoid metaphors, address directly to the one asking the question, avoid negations, be concrete instead of abstract. The electoral discussion (not a debate, since a debate means trying to triumph over your opponent through rhetoric, not a very user-friendly mode for people with ID) was set up with all participating parties on stage. Each one with a name and a party name and symbol attached to it to make sure everyone could register what party representative was speaking. The moderator would pass the word to the participants of the different study circles cooperating, for them to ask the questions, and would also allow follow-ups of a different kind, allowing participants to make sure they understood what was being said.

Session 7 was an evaluating event, evaluating the election, but more important evaluating the method, process and mutual learning of the study circle.



Expected results

The project focused on seven cities for its development of Mitt val as a tool for making general elections accessible for people with ID. Altogether more than 500 have completed the study circle Mitt val. More than 80% of Mitt val

participants voted in the national elections, equal to the overall average of voting attendance in Sweden.

External networking

The project also did an information folder on the theme “8 out of 10 don’t vote” to start discussions with politicians at the conventions of the political parties prior to the election. The SV officials manning these stands said they had never experienced such interest from the participating politicians as they did with this campaign. The low participation rate of people with ID was news to most of them, and met with respect for a situation needing immediate response.

In Sweden there is a yearly political event called Almedalen situated in the medieval city of Visby, on the island of Gotland in the Baltic sea. Every summer politicians of all parties, lobbyists, civil society organizations, companies, NGOs and all/any others who want to can join or arrange seminars. While the main focus is on the different party leaders’ speeches at night in an open park, every street, bar, stage, school or other venue holds events from morning till night, all addressing political issues. In spite of the murders of Prime Minister Palme and Foreign Minister Lindh Sweden has in modern times managed to keep its open society. In Visby, the prime minister and citizens walk side by side on the streets. Anyone can start a conversation with members of government, MPs and party leaders, and get a reply.

SV and its partners planned a project. We had a prop-maker from the film industry construct a light-weight polling booth that could be carried as a backpack. We asked Bengt Fredriksson, journalist at 8 sidor, to ‘do a reverse’. While usually working with making political messages accessible through rewriting it as easy read, he was now asked to take the parties’ main messages and transfer them to an even harder level of understanding.

The walking booth was prepared with ballots of every party in the national parliaments – written in hard-read Swedish. The mightiest politicians – the party leaders, secretaries of government and MPs – were asked to enter our booths and either find their own political party ballot, or to place all 8 ballots with the correct party, and through this get an experience of how hard it is for people with ID to get access to the political language.

The campaign was a success. Even if several MPs couldn’t find their own party among the hard-read ballots, they all appreciated the campaign and recognized the importance of our work with making elections accessible for voters with ID.

They even asked to get copies of the ballots to test their friends, colleagues and political opponents, and turned out to be volunteers spreading the word. The campaign led up to a seminar with the speaker of the parliament on democracy and



accessibility, serving cake to all participants celebrating the 25th anniversary for equal voting rights for all Swedish citizens.

Every year there is a competition for the best campaign in Almedalen. This year 1.000 campaigns were nominated. Mitt val's walking booth for accessible politics and elections was selected as one of six finalists, never to have happened before for a low budget campaign from/for/by people with ID.

The parliamentary public enquiry for democracy issues also took notice of Mitt val, recognizing the importance of further work to be done to make elections accessible for all.

Sources of budgets and resources

One of Sweden's most substantial funders for disability and youth projects is Arvsfonden (the inheritance fund). Arvsfonden granted SV 4 million SEK over two years for the development of method and material, education of study circle leaders, pilot study circles nationwide, evaluation and final redesign of both material and method. MUCF (the Swedish Agency for Youth and Society) gave support through the national government allocation in support of voter participation, 465 000 SEK.

Empowering individuals and promoting social cohesion.

My name is Anna Hildingsson. I am 52 years old and live in a small rural town called Lidköping. I have voted before, but before attending My choice/my election, I always voted like my mother and father. Not because they told me to, but because that's how I decided what to vote upon.

After attending My choice/my election in 2014, several things changed. I voted for three different parties in the elections for city, county and national parliaments. I made this decision based upon the general idea of that party's policies for that political level.

I found the easy-to-understand electoral discussion especially helpful. Some of the parties acted and responded like they had listened to us. I also found the practice of asking and arguing my standpoints really helpful. I found that people listened to me, and that I could and liked to speak for myself and others.

I am now the national chairperson of Inner circle, a branch inside FUB (the organization for people with intellectual disabilities) where people with disabilities are in charge and pushing their own agenda. I now speak for people with intellectual disabilities in all of Sweden.

I presented My choice/my election at Inclusion international, and next thing to come is an international web-based seminar with Robert Martin of the UN from New Zealand to Sweden together with Vuxenskolan.

Promoting sustainable development

Two major outcomes of the evaluation of Mitt val were:

- It's hard to be a citizen voting every four years, if democratic processes are absent in between.
- The political parties only produce easy-to-read information at national level.

The local and regional levels are almost all lacking easy to read information on their local political platforms. This led to SV constructing an open online education for politicians on local and regional level on how to make themselves understood in easy-to-read language prior to the 2018 election. In 2018, SV held 109 study circles in Mitt val, and more than 50 easy-to-understand political discussions all over Sweden.

Key success factors

There are several, but to mention just a few:

- We dared to make the politics very accessible. This could be a sensitive issue due to some people fear of unwanted influence being inflicted. But the methods clearly build up on participant rule, participant questions and making the study circle leader accept the role of facilitating ways to get answers directly from political sources. All this made these fears disappear.
- We invited the political parties to join us, to understand the voters with ID and to interact with them.
- We had a thorough evaluation with more than 200 suggestions to improve details of the study circle. More than 80% of these were transformed into progress of the method.

Implications for policy-makers

Our democracy is defined by the way we make participation in it accessible. If we ignore a group of voters, there will be a hole larger than just missing votes.

Therefore, we believe, a method granting support and tools for people with ID to get the answers they want, on their terms, is a powerful resource for upholding respect and participation in our democracy.

The study circle Mitt-val has proven this.



4. The University of the Third Age in the UK

Michael Osborne

Background

The University of the Third Age movement U3A was started in the UK in 1982 and was loosely based on the already existing *Université du Troisième Age* in France. The important distinction between the model established in the UK and that of France was the ideal of its founders that the provision would be determined by learners themselves rather than being dependent on universities. Universities could be involved, but not as the leader of a programme.

Hence there have been established a range of programmes over the years some held in universities and integrated within a broader offer of education in the liberal adult tradition, but many more outside the confines of universities. The lack of involvement of the university sector has been exacerbated by the decline in the provision of adult education in that sector, which has been well documented (see Osborne 2004).

In relation to the idea of a learning city, U3AS can be viewed as contributing to ‘empowering individuals and promoting social cohesion’ and to ‘enhancing quality of life’. They very much focus on a particular part of society for which there has been declining state investment: older adults. Yet clearly there is much evidence of benefits to both the individual, in terms of health and well-being, and to society at large in terms of improved civic engagement and in terms of reducing the economic burden in health care.

Vision/Shared Value

The U3A movement has a set of principles that were laid down in 1981 by Peter Laslett, and can be found at the U3A [website](#), from which this extract is taken.

“The U3A movement is non-religious and non-political and has three main principles:

The Third Age Principle

- Membership of a U3A is open to all in their third age, which is defined not by a particular age but by a period in life in which full time employment has ceased.
- Members promote the values of lifelong learning and the positive attributes of belonging to a U3A.
- Members should do all they can to ensure that people wanting to join a U3A can do so.

The Self-help Learning Principle

- Members form interest groups covering as wide a range of topics and activities as they desire; by the members, for the members.

- No qualifications are sought or offered. Learning is for its own sake, with enjoyment being the prime motive, not qualifications or awards.
- There is no distinction between the learners and the teachers; they are all U3A members.

The Mutual Aid Principle

- Each U3A is a mutual aid organisation, operationally independent but a member of The Third Age Trust, which requires adherence to the guiding principles of the U3A movement.
- No payments are made to members for services rendered to any U3A.
- Each U3A is self-funded with membership subscriptions and costs kept as low as possible.
- Outside financial assistance should only be sought if it does not imperil the integrity of the U3A movement.”

Membership and Organisational Structure

There are over 1,000 separate local U3As groups in the UK and over 400,000 individual members. Each of these groups is set up independently, is self-managing and self-financing, and is linked to a national co-ordinating body, the Third Age Trust, to which it pays a membership fee. The link to the overarching Third Age Trust provides access to a range of resources and advice.

Typically each group is open to all who wish to join, subject to their not being in full-time employment. The group will typically be managed by a committee elected by its members at an Annual General Meeting, with positions such as a chairperson, secretary, treasurer and president being determined. This will be laid out in a constitution for each group.

An example of a constitution of just one of the groups can be found at this [link](#) for a small group in St. Ives, Cornwall,. Membership involves paying a small fee, in this case £10 per year with extra costs for attending certain meetings, of between £1.50 and £3.00.

Leadership

Each group is autonomous and makes its own decisions in terms of the programmes of study that it wishes to offer and how they are facilitated.

Major Activities

At a local level each U3A will run a range of activities as determined by its members. Amongst many examples that could be used, the case of a small U3A group in the far south-west of England, in St. Ives, Cornwall is used here by way of illustration of what happens in one of the very smallest of locations (population 11,000). The programme of activities for Autumn 2018 is shown below.

- September 11th: 'Social Meeting and Afternoon Tea'
- September 25th: 'Talking Horses - Bolenowe Animal Sanctuary' Michael Lord
- October 9th: 'Mousehole Wild Bird Hospital' Margaret Cass
- October 23rd: 'The Magic of Orchids' Ron & Kit Lindsay
- November 6th: 'The Queen's Flight' Trevor Smitherham
- November 20th: 'R.N.L.I.' Sarah Hall
- December 4th: 'Trewithen Dairy' Emma Stevens
- December 18th: Christmas Party with entertainment: Please bring food to share
- See <http://www.u3astives.co.uk>

In addition to these talks and events, the group organises a number of 'outings'. These are essential social events at external locations, including theatres, gardens and heritage trails in the vicinity. This is quite typical at the very smallest scale of a U3A group.

In a medium-sized town the range of activities would be greater. For example in [Peterborough](#) (population 200,000), there are a range of courses in Arts and Crafts, Exercise, General Interest, Literature and Languages, Music and Science classes, as well as Visits to Stately Homes, Museums and Music Performances. There are also one-off lectures. All in all there are 2700 members running 160 different activities which are described as crossing the academic, social, cultural and physical.

The U3As create interest groups outside the classes offered, which organise their own programmes of events. Again taking the example of St Ives, there are interest groups that cover classical music, history, computer self-help, drama, local heritage and petanque (a form of French boules, a leisurely sport that all can participate in on the beach). There is also a Readers Circle.

As well as at the local level there is activity which is supported centrally by the U3A Trust. This includes a variety of events: a national conference over a 3-day period, which is streamed live; a series of **workshops** to support groups; **summer schools**; and **major events**, mostly in London.

The **workshops** cover the following topics:

- **Running your U3A** – which explores governance issues, Trusteeship and organising an AGM
- **Managing Growth** – exploring issues around the effective growth of a U3A
- **Financial Matters** – budgeting, accounting and managing U3A monies
- **Interest Groups Matter** – how to run effective interest groups and inspire new groups
- **Communications** – how to communicate effectively with your membership and how to raise the profile of your U3A
- **Volunteers and Volunteering** – exploring issues around recruiting, valuing and managing volunteers
- **Keeping it Legal** – exploring issues of compliance including: insurance, GDPR, Safeguarding, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

They are run over a full day in various locations for between 30 and 50 people by staff at the national office and volunteers.

Summer Schools are residential, allowing members of U3A groups to spend time together for week and allow range of courses to be taken a modest cost (£110 tuition and £215 for accommodation). In 2018, two [summer schools](#) were offered, which together offer 19 separate courses to be taken. Each course is facilitated by a tutor, but the emphasis is on learning from each other, the peer learning which permeates the U3A tradition.

The events that are offered centrally are at prestigious locations such as the Royal Institution, the National Gallery and tend to carry more significant costs (around £20).

Major Achievements

This is a complex case at one level since it reports on a network of individual organisations all within the umbrella of a national organisation which provides support. However each individual U3A operates autonomously and manages its own affairs. Each acts along the lines of some of the best traditions of adult education in as much as participants decide what they want to learn and how they do so. Fees are modest. Learning is entirely voluntary and is not associated with employment or career advancement. Rather, learning is something that is engaged in for purely intrinsic reasons associated with cognitive development, social stimulation, friendship and support, and health and well-being, although these are not overtly part of objectives as publicly promoted.

Clearly the major achievement of U3A is to have expanded as a self-funded organisation established less than four decades ago to one with over 400,000 members, and its over 1000 groups. It has a national office of employed workers and a National Executive as well as

regional offices. It therefore has an enviable infra-structure and active membership offering those in later life considerable opportunity at low cost.

It is also very interesting to note that there exists a [U3A Research Database](#) which contains over 800 items, all of which the U3A is involved in. These entries in some cases are led by U3A group members, and in other cases in collaboration with other organisations.

Success Factors

It is likely that the main factor in the success is the fact that there is a considerable demand from older adults for learning and it is very low cost. This has to be set against the fact of a decline in publicly funded adult education from local and regional authorities, and a decline in traditional provision offered by universities. Also, provision now offered by universities is considerably more expensive.

The decline in public funding has in part occurred because of the austerity measures put into place by the UK government, and a political decision that in times of limited resources that funding which does exist for education needs to be focused on younger populations. The UK like many countries has relatively high levels of youth unemployment and under-employment.

The fact that the provision offered is flexible in its nature and led by those who are participating also adds to its attractiveness to older adults.

There has been a limited amount of research on the effectiveness of the U3A. However, Formosa (2014) has confirmed the motivation to participate in U3A being not simply about learning, but about being part of a support structure. Other research commissioned by the U3A itself is cited later.

It is also important to note that the model of U3A is not predicated on a model of deficiency and deficit, as is highlighted in one of the organisations own recent reports (Third Age Trust 2018: 19). Rather, it is one which emphasises mutual aid and reciprocity, seeing these as the key to increasing confidence, self-esteem and well-being.

Implications and suggestions for policy-makers

With an ageing population in the UK, as in many other developed countries, there are many implications for the work of the U3A groups. In the UK some 18% of citizens in a population of some 66m people are over 65, and it is clear that public services are strained across health, social services and other forms of support.

U3A is a network of voluntary groups which for some people not only provide learning possibilities in later life, but are an important form of social support at a time when more and more adults are no longer able to rely on the support provided by families and the state.

There is considerable debate in the UK about loneliness; so much so that the UK government has now appointed in 2018 a Minister for Loneliness, in part as a response to the Jo Cox Commission (2017). There are some 3.7m people over 65 living by themselves, of whom

1.2m have no children. These trends will increase over time. Research recently undertaken by the U3A (Third Age Trust) based on a sample of 801 respondents in U3A groups that the primary impact in participating as reported by some 91% of participants was to make new friendships and feel support.

There is also a good evidence base for the positive effect of learning on health and well-being something cited clearly in the Marmot Report (Marmot *et al.* 2010). There are others however, that have raised questions as to whether later lifelong learning does have a causal impact on health, and that more evidence is needed (Mestheneos and Withnall 2016). Nonetheless there are associations. In a recent Briefing Paper for PASCAL (also available in Korean), Mark, Talmage and Knopf (2018) rehearse a range of other benefits in terms of economic benefit, personal development, active citizenship and social inclusion. Clearly U3A offers benefits across each of these dimensions.

However, whilst over 400,000 participants is an impressive number, it represents only 3.5% of the UK population over 65. The U3A's own research indicates a range of benefits, but also signals concerns, for example in the representativeness of the participants, pointing to the need for example to include more people from ethnic minorities.

There are no overall data on how well U3A represents the diversity of the UK population, and as with other some other forms of later lifelong learning, it may be that it is those who are already advantaged socially who are most likely to participate.

There may therefore be a strong argument that says that whilst the U3A is an excellent model, there may be the need for state intervention in order to secure the participation of adults in the most deprived sections of society to participate.



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5. Seniors-Meet-Seniors: Singapore case study of the study circle

Chris Duke and Thomas Kuan

Introduction

Singapore is a city state where three major cultures (Chinese, Indian and Malay) live in a ‘smart’ society. Its older population is growing fast with 440,000 in 2015 and doubling that by 2030. Singapore has an older population (age 65 years and above) of 13.7% in 2018 (Statistics Singapore). More resources will be spent on older adults who are having ‘bonus years’ which is an addition of 25 years lifespan in third age (Poul Erik, 2018).

In urban Singapore, national policies on adult learning and education are supported by both public and private sectors; the main agencies are the [Lifelong Learning Institute](#), [SkillsFuture](#), the [LearnSG Seed Fund](#), the [Council for Third Age](#), and others (Kuan, 2018).

The ‘U 3rd Age’ or ‘University of the Third Age’ in Singapore is a not-for-profit organization modelled along the British’s model of U3As. It had contributed to the organisation of several U3A Conferences worldwide (from 2011-2016) and it is a member of the Team behind the virtual U3A newsletter [Signpost](#).

It operates as a social enterprise to encourage senior citizens (or older people) to participate in lifelong learning, which is a national effort. It does not collect membership fees as it believes that learning should be free when shared and learned among senior citizens. Today, it has a subscriber-memberships base of over 3,000 ‘friends’; almost 80% had attended courses on arts, crafts, writing, qigong exercises, intergeneration learning, SMS (Seniors-Meet-Seniors talks) and other activities.¹

Backgrounds and purposes

The ‘U 3rd Age’ (Singapore)’s SMS activity , which stands for ‘Seniors-Meet-Seniors’, is partly a study circle, and partly a knowledge cafe (developed by David Gurteen) format - where members meet regularly to discuss topics of common interest. SMS (Seniors-Meet-Seniors) are fun productive conversations to learn from one another and to make better sense of living in an urban community. The objective is to encourage peer-led, small group learning *for seniors, by seniors and with seniors*. Certain basic ground rules are essential, namely: no political canvassing, no racial and religious topics, no sales and marketing of products and services. There must be mutual respect for differing views and authentic sharing as (in nature) there are no right or wrong views.

Vision and shared values

Encourage seniors to find meaningful purposes in their life after retirement by embracing happiness, lifelong learning, active ageing and social networking. However, SMS does not try

¹ See www.u3rdagesingapore.org; www.facebook.com/u3rdage

to impress policy-makers, nor help them directly to develop a ‘learning city’ or a ‘smart city’, although the government provides funds for venue rental. SMS does showcase how community voluntary efforts can nudge fellow citizens into lifelong learning without governmental interference. It is a bottom-up demand for conversations that makes a ‘learning community’, rather than have cities with humans as inhabitants but without deep interactive sharing.

Our SMS is a unique experiment that works well in urban Singapore by getting like-minded senior citizens to learn from one another’s shared experiences. This concept has been commended by Tom Holloway, Chief Editor of the world U3A newsletter, and also attracted the attention of SU3A-Silpakorn, which consists of seven elderly schools and learning clubs with over 3,000 members in Thailand.



Sharing of SMS activities with SU3A-Silpakorn, Thailand Delegates on 1 August 2018.

Co-evolution: membership, leadership organizational structure

Thomas Kuan (Founder), Carol Kuan (Managing Director), 10 Core Group SMS Members, 20 facilitators teaching arts and crafts, and over 3,000 Friends of U 3rd Age.

With administrative support from U 3rd Age, Thomas Kuan and the 10 Core Group SMS Members take turns to facilitate SMS discussions. Their profiles are retired seniors previously from corporate sales and marketing, business entrepreneurs, public sector government, educators, authors, a short-film-maker, academicians and home-makers. A core group member also started his own ‘Relationship Banking’ group, now has more than 200 ‘Friends’ who attended his weekly Monday sessions conducted over ‘*kopi*’ (*coffee*) in a small group setting.



Meeting Venues

SMS study circles are mostly held at '10 Square' at Orchard Central in the heart of Singapore, and occasionally at 'A Good Space' at the National Volunteers & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) in Clarke Quay Central, both conveniently located in central Singapore.

Major Activities

Weekly meetings are on Thursdays, 2.5 hours each session followed by coffee time at another location after discussions, where further sharing takes place. Thirty sessions have been held so far since October 2017 (see list of SMS Topics below). The first topic had 8 participants; today there are at least 25 participants for each session. The largest number to attend was 42 participants for the topic 'Live, don't just Exit'. This list of topics was a useful guide for Thai delegates when they visited U 3rd Age in early August this year.

SMS Topics Discussed

1. Introduction to Knowledge Café.
2. The Gurteen Knowledge Cafe Tipsheet.
3. Discussion for future sessions: to select discussion topics.
4. Volunteerism.
5. Relationship Banking.
6. What is happiness?
7. End of Life.
8. Let's talk about Dementia.
9. The Language Every Body Speaks.
10. Midlife ~ Hoax or Real.
11. Establishing Relationships.
12. Conscious Ageing.
13. Reminiscing
14. Share Good Reads
15. Successful Ageing Attitudes
16. Healthy Communication
17. 'Live, dun just Exit'
18. The Golden Years ~ Luving it!
19. What is consciousness?
20. Myths of Ageing
21. Who am I when nobody's watching
22. Living a purposeful life after retirement
23. What is love?
24. Snippets~Listening, Sound, Hugggssss
25. Who you are, really?
26. Su3a-Thailand
27. Giver or Taker
28. What is your purpose in later life?
29. Movies & Me
30. Lessons learnt in life



31. Dealing With Fear
32. How Wired Are We?

Sources of budgets and resources

SMS is supported by means of venue rentals as part of government initiatives in the context of national lifelong learning policies which are among the most advanced in the Asian region.

The following organisations had and are supporting our venues: the [Council for Third Age](#), [LearnSG Seed Fund](#), 'A Good Space' at [NVPC](#) (National Volunteer Philanthropy Centre) and others. This has made it possible to organize talks with free admissions, and to encourage lifelong learning among seniors. Our speakers or facilitators are volunteers who curate their contents, with administrative support from the 'U 3rd Age'. Costs are thus kept low, support may be in kind rather than direct cash outlay, and thanks to the active contribution of volunteer leaders-teachers a little budgetary help goes a long way.

Major achievements: Empowering individuals promoting social cohesion, revitalizing learning in communities

A central function of SMS is to empower individuals and promote social cohesion, especially among individuals in a big city who can become isolated and lose confidence after retirement, loss of a partner, separation from younger family etc, in later years. This assists connectivity between individuals locally, revitalizes learning in communities bottom-up from the highly important local level. It thus enhanced quality of life for individual citizens, and strengthens communities and the neighbourhood's (or 'kampong's) spirits.

One senior who is passionate about his 'Relations Banking' is able to share his passions with others, including foreigners working in Singapore or passing through, to empower them to be savvy with relationships to balance money accumulation.

Our successful SMS has attracted requests from organisations to participate in their events and activities, thus connecting individuals into other social structures and groups. Another achievement is that some seniors who had attended our U 3rd Age activities received media attention and were featured in national English and Chinese newspapers.

Other seniors find happiness and satisfaction in attending SMS for a few hours, share their comments, ideas or even just to listen to others. We have long and short stay overseas visitors, retired persons who need some social networking, visually impaired persons, persons staying alone, non-English-speaking friends, academicians, artists and many other kinds of participants.

Other ad-hoc study circles to promote social cohesion are:

- a) '*Walk and Talk* - a walk-about' where seniors were paired up with youths to spark inter-generational conversations on themes like upcycling, recycling of plastic and waste materials, and cultural history in an eco-me event organized i-Light Marina By, 2017; see



photo below:



b) 'Civics Elective' - sharing of family values and experiences with students in schools; and to learn something about themselves and their place in relation to others and the wider society. Our seniors shared on topics like Volunteerism, Life at 65, Retiring from a seafaring career...



c) 'Paths To Happiness' a modified, life-sized board game of 'Snakes and Ladders' designed to educate and encourage positive mental health and intergenerational bonding through sharing moments



of gratitude, experiences and ideas; see photo below:



Enhancing cultural prosperity and quality of life

In all our arts and crafts sessions, there are no mentions of social cohesion or social status. Everyone attends as Singaporeans where sharing and learning is the norm. In one course, a Singapore-Indian had learned Malay batik paintings and taught it to a group of Singaporean Chinese ladies. This is a good showcase of inter-cultural arts learning, where one's traditional art can be used on another's traditional art. In this instance, batik paintings can be used to draw on Chinese calligraphic words (Kuan, 2017).

Singapore is a major global entrepôt, a hive of modernity and innovation with many people from every world region and many cultures passing through. The exchanges and co-learning that take place with overseas visitors joining SMS activities is culturally enriching and enhances multicultural and international understanding. At the same time it is a Chinese city with deep roots in traditional culture, philosophy, knowledge and wisdom. The study circles enable understanding, sharing and sometimes living and directly using this culture for public cultural prosperity and for individual personal and even economic gain. A good example is the kind of intergenerational activities referred to above.

Promoting sustainable development

SMS promotes volunteerism for its sustainable development. It is a voluntary platform to connect seniors who share their knowledge and family values as a group. Examples are visits to elderly homes, guiding young adults and students on starting their volunteer journey, and instilling the 'teach good before teach clever' value to the next generation.



Everyone needs to stay connected in this 4th IR society. Seniors need small goals especially after retirement to achieve life satisfaction and remain active contributors to society. SMS provides opportunities for everyone to be a speaker, regardless of wealth, health or academic qualifications. Homemakers can share their parenting skills; an ex-sales director shares his research on 'What is Love'? These activities help to create a strong and resilient society able to handle and move with the shocks of continuous change.

Key Success Factors in the case of SMS

The success of SMS in Singapore can be attributed to several factors:

- a) It allows seniors who are passionate about any topics to curate their learning and share with others. In the process they also gain new insights and information about their topics;
- b) There is no stress during sessions as basic ground rules applied and key persons are there to flag any deviations and misconducts;
- c) It is inclusive as homemakers, widowed, unmarried, as well as visually disadvantaged persons can attend to share their views. Overseas visitors who are on long-term stay in Singapore are also welcomed. Feelings of exclusion and disadvantage are reduced;
- d) There are no admission charges, as venue rentals are supported by the authority;
- e) Everyone attending is equal, as there are no right or wrong views;
- f) There is no fixed format; speakers are free to explore refreshing ways to engage the audience. Group discussions are encouraged before summaries are presented. Individual confidence grows.

Implications and suggestions for policy-makers

A suggestion for policy-makers is to recognise that lifelong learning is self-directed, and that there are two dysfunctional states in learning: independent and dependent (Confessor; 2009). Policies should nudge persons into active learning from choice.

Supporting SMS Study Circle formation will attract retired persons to share their skills, experiences and wisdom. It engages professionals, homemakers and overseas visitors to dialogues instead of wasting valuable time idling at home. From feedback, many older persons looked forward to SMS Study Circle as part of their weekly activities. Some even bring their favourite food to share, and in return receive appreciations. Where young adults are involved, they find the experience exciting and useful for their studies and careers development.



Dr. Poul-Erik giving a 'Training of Trainers Workshop' in 17 May 2018

Community learning starts from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Our learning topics were suggested and curated by seniors themselves instead of people being told what to learn. Active learning from choice generates energy, enthusiasm for life and good interpersonal relations, and makes for positive citizenship and collaboration. Policy-makers should support later life learning as people are living longer and need to find meaningful living.

The implication of this case study (and of similar developments with ageing populations in other countries) is that a modest amount of enabling government support yields high returns across several different policy portfolios. Small annual core grant helps efficient support to complement voluntary self-help efforts. Freeing public empty learning spaces in different locations for SMS Study Circles also signals the authority's support for the healthy well-being of its citizens.

More funding could be made more accessible for non-for-profit enterprises to carry out their missions. SMS Study Circles if properly conducted and managed will solve social problems, promote community participation and stability, and assist seniors to better appreciate social and cultural events around them. Staying engaged is a part of a 'Conscious Ageing' process.



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6. Men's Learning in Sheds: a new kind of study circle involving those who might otherwise be excluded from learning

Rob Mark

Introduction

Men learning in Sheds is an example of learning which focuses on engagement of men through sharing of skills in a self-organised 'learning circle'. At first glance it may appear puzzling why men might want to learn in study circles focussed on the needs of men. While the male sex may have in the past dominated the development of education, it is a strange irony that a growing number of men, particularly older men (though increasingly men of all ages), remains excluded from education and learning.

As a result concerns about men's attitudes to and involvement in lifelong and life wide learning and wellbeing are now coming to the fore in many countries. Many older men are vulnerable to social isolation and problems with health and wellbeing. There has been an increasing emphasis on finding programmes and practices that will contribute to men's learning and wellbeing in contexts and life stages outside and beyond paid work.

Men excluded from learning often choose familiar, non-threatening or stereotypical learning activities as a starting-point which gives them the confidence to progress to something different. Providing 'safe' first learning options has therefore been found a useful strategy for widening participation and helping people to develop other learning interests. These new learning opportunities, which take place in sheds, allow men to share skills with one another through what might be described as informal learning circles where there is no qualified teacher present.

The Men's Shed movement is a loose association of shed-based community organisations, organised for and by men. The movement began in Australia and has very quickly become the largest community association in Australia, the UK, Ireland and New Zealand focused on the needs, interest's health and wellbeing of men.

From individual origins in several southern Australian States, men's sheds organisations have grown from around ten sheds, all in Australia, in 2002 to over 1,000 today. In 2013, there were 30 Men's Sheds in the UK. Today there are over 400 Men's Sheds open and an additional 100 or more in planning at any one time. In Scotland there are 78, with 47 more in development.

Men's Sheds are a highly participatory and self-directed form of lifelong learning where the facilitator or person sharing their skills is also to be a learner themselves. The Shed is a 'learning circle' which is peer-led, and where there is no qualification or fee required to join.



The Sheds are funded in many ways. Most receive start-up costs from local authorities or voluntary bodies to get going. Ongoing costs are usually met from a grant which is used to purchase machinery and furniture, and to pay for daily costs such as heating and lighting where appropriate. Staff working in various community and health services also sometimes support the setting up of the sheds and can act as development workers supporting the ongoing development and providing a link with local funding bodies and support services.

Activities

Men's Sheds provide a safe, regular, social space for informal voluntary activity and programmes with very diverse possibilities and outcomes matching the men and communities in which they are embedded. Unlike personal sheds, they are available to groups of men, organised independently or with auspice arrangements through a wide variety of other community organisations including learning and health organisations. The activity usually but not always takes place in a group workshop-type space with tools and equipment in a public, shed-type setting. Because of these diverse settings, sheds are also as diverse as the men and communities they involve and develop from.

What is learned through men's sheds, often from and by previously poorly connected men, is far from unimportant. Men learn hands-on skills through practical, productive activity (see examples below which include making furniture, boat building, making children's toys and assisting in the organisation of local community events. They learn the positive value of leisure activity and friendships with other men. They gain new insights into the importance and ways to enhance fitness, relationships, healthy eating, identities as men and emotional wellbeing. They learn to cope with changes associated with not being in paid work, ageing, disability and retirement.



Most importantly, men develop, share and enjoy lives and new identities in a third place beyond paid work and home, bestowed through and by association with the shed. Learning which happens in men's sheds works largely because the pedagogies positively accommodate groups of men of all ages with a sometimes long-standing aversion to formal education and provision that is organised top-down.

The development of men's sheds in community settings was an idea that began in Australia almost 25 years ago. One of the oldest continually operating men's sheds, and one of the most influential in terms of the movement's early development, is the Lane Cove Men's Shed in Sydney, Australia, ironically located in a former car park underneath an age care centre. It was instigated in 1998 'to promote the health and wellbeing of older men in the community, and to provide a place to meet each other, network and make friends'.



The Lane Cove Men's Shed was particularly aimed at men in the community aged over 55, 'men who are retired, outplaced or job redundant, those who have downsized living arrangements and those who feel isolated'. This transformation of the shed from an individual, mainly private place for men to make and fix things, typically in their own backyards, to a collective, community space for men, with underlying and powerful wellbeing, group participation and social learning purposes and outcomes, is worthy of closer examination for four main reasons.

First it demonstrates the multiple social benefits of learning, including connecting with individuals who have similar interests through the creation of social networks outside of the workplace.

Secondly, it provides pointers to new ways of positively connecting learning with health and wellbeing.



Third, men's sheds incorporate alternative ways of perceiving and working with men as agents actively involved in transformation that goes well beyond themselves to include other men and communities, rather than seeking them as care home patients, clients, customers or students from deficit models of provision.

Fourth, it demonstrates the need for less conventional services for the one-third of men not in paid work who fall outside the dominant discourse about work and productivity that regards men not in work and older men as burdensome and problematic.

Chandlers Ford Men's Shed



Men's Sheds offer men of all ages a space to get together and

- **Share knowledge and learn skills**
- **Meet new people**
- **Work on DIY and woodwork projects**
- **Volunteer for your community**
- **Relax, chat, laugh and drink tea**

From 9th September 2016

The newly formed Chandlers Ford Men's Shed will be open on **Friday afternoons at:**

**The Hexagon Centre, Suffolk Close, Chandlers Ford
SO53 3GZ (Free parking available)**

Email chandlersfordshed@gmail.com or telephone Steve on 02380 260616 for more details of the next meeting

<http://menssheds.org.uk/>

Globally, the proportion of people aged 60 plus as a percentage of the total population trends upwards, from a low 5 to 12 per cent in all continents to a predicted 17 to 30 per cent by 2030 (except for Africa) and 24 to 34 per cent (again except for Africa at 11 per cent) by 2050.

This trebling of people in older age cohorts in one century within most parts the world is unprecedented in human history. It challenges notions about the nature and extent of post-retirement living and the age of retirement itself, originally set at the age of 65 in an era when most people who worked died soon after retirement. Also, these challenges are particularly relevant to the significant proportion of the population which is unemployed in many nations.



Major achievements

The Men's Sheds movement has created an innovative learning environment, and programmes that tend to engage men of all ages in diverse national and policy contexts. There are some important basics.

Sheds work because the men involved typically actively participate, belong to and identify with the shed. Men enjoy and benefit from gathering socially, regularly, voluntarily, happily, and safely to do hands-on 'stuff' together. It is less important what that 'stuff' is than the principles embedded in the men's shed concept. It works best when it is grassroots, by, for and about the local men. It is more about men helping one another and the community than men helping themselves or being 'serviced'. 'Shedders' as they call themselves are active and equal participants in the activity. The irony is that by not naming the activity, the sheds provide the freedom and agency to talk informally, 'shoulder to shoulder' about other important things going on in their lives that would not otherwise be shared.



A serious mistake would be to discuss sheds on the assumption that they have only one primary function premised on addressing deficit, namely targeting men's perceived need for learning, education, training or employment, during issues with health, retirement, unemployment, depression or dementia: seeing them as a convenient place for 'tacking on' top-down services and for professionals to address men's perceived need for socialisation, psychological support or nutrition; for addressing some men's issues with drugs and alcohol or suicide, or as an alternative to community corrections.

While all these things are possible through sheds, there are many more obvious, positive intentions and outcomes including activity, fun, relationships, friendship and giving back to the community.



There are social and health benefits of Men's Sheds in reducing isolation and empowering local communities. This is achieved through various communication channels, including public events, online and in the media. Empowering men with the desire and opportunities to learn and contribute to families, partners and communities across the life course, including beyond paid work, is clearly beneficial to individual men's quality of life, with obvious and direct benefits to women and children as well as to other men, along with society at large.

Implications for Policy Makers

This case study presents an analysis of the Men's Sheds movement that confirms the ability of diverse men, particularly those beyond the paid workforce, to take responsibility for several of the key social determinants of health, including their learning and wellbeing through establishing circles of learning.

They are also flexible and diverse as a bottom up, 'grassroots' movement to work in very diverse cultural and community contexts, and informally connect otherwise very disconnected men - unemployed, retired, disabled, withdrawn from the paid workforce - to a range of services without problematising and patronising them. This includes some men with ambivalence and significant negativity to learning.

On the one hand, sheds are conservative in that they reinforce and celebrate some traditional ways of being a man and doing things together, 'shoulder to shoulder'.

On the other hand, they are radical in that they are based on models of community involvement that are democratic and inclusive, which eschew negative and hegemonic masculinities, are respectful of women, promote good health promoting behaviour and encourage learner autonomy.





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Men's Sheds Association Australia <https://mensshed.org/>

Men's Sheds Association England <https://menssheds.org.uk/>

Men's Sheds Association Scotland <https://scottishmsa.org.uk/>

Men's Sheds Association Ireland <http://menssheds.ie/>

7. Study circles in Tuscany: an Italian case study

Roberta Piazza

Introduction

In November 2001, the European Commission published the document *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, which in its introduction underlined that

the Feira European Council in June 2000 asked the Member States, the Council and the Commission, within their areas of competence, to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all. This mandate confirms that lifelong learning is a key element of the Lisbon strategy to make Europe the most competitive and knowledge-based economy in the world (EC 2001, p. 6).

The scenario in which lifelong learning policies were set was made up of a growing economic model which, in order to stabilize and accentuate the growth, needed to be redirected towards innovation (knowledge economy).

In order to achieve this objective, it would have to focus on human resource development as a continuous process, throughout the course of life. From these assumptions arose:

- the need to cover "the full range of formal, non-formal and informal learning
- the learning objectives including "active citizenship, personal fulfilment and social inclusion and employability/adaptability
- the importance of the "centrality of the learner" (Ibid p. 9).

This opened the way for integrated policies for education, training and employment and demand-centred educational policies, more focused on the needs and choices of citizens, engaging in 'local-level partnerships, which are essential for on-site strategies'. Study circle methodologies are considered particularly useful and innovative approaches to realize that shift from 'knowledge' to 'competence' and from teaching to learning, placing the learner at the centre (Ibid p. 23).

In this regard there are useful experiences that can be drawn from study circles in Tuscany, the first region in Italy to have started this initiative². From 2000 to today study circles have become a formative path recognized and visible throughout the region with in some areas significant diffusion and penetration of the practice: in some municipalities more than 6% of the population have asked to participate to study circles (Mannucci 2008, 33).

² The official website of the study circles in Tuscany is: <http://www.regione.toscana.it/-/i-circoli-di-studio>. Many experiences are still working in Tuscany as well as in a few other regions (Liguria, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Campania).



The Tuscany Region, uniquely in Italy, started this work through the *Regional Operational Program 2000/063* of the European Social Fund, through which pilot projects of regional interest could be activated in the field of adult education, and started to plan study circles as non-formal opportunities for adult learners. The aim of the Tuscany Region has been to support and promote, in line with European directives, an operational modality able to respond to the need to provide more opportunities for the exercise of the personal right to lifelong learning.

The definition of the programme established the following criteria:

- study circles are part of adult education. Users are therefore all those over the age of 18;
- study circles are short-term. The average length of the circles was around 30 hours;
- study circles are a response to demand. This is undoubtedly one of the most innovative aspects that reverses the communication cycle of the demand/supply of training strategies;
- users do not choose from a series of pre-packaged training products. Circles are training activities centred on users' needs and their motivation;
- study circles are characterized by being structured in small groups that support and strengthen communication between all the participants.

The Tuscany experimentation was divided into two phases: a first phase from 2000 to 2002 was managed at regional level; a second phase, in which the competence was entrusted to the municipalities, in 2003-2006.

After the first phase of experimentation, the Tuscany Region, assessing the successful completion of the experimentation carried out under the first regional calls, decided to assign the management of study circles to the Provinces³ with the constraint that they should allocate 50% of the resources of measure C4 (*lifelong education*) of the Regional Operational Programs for the Right to Learning to the realization of study circles. It was an experimentation that became a system.

From 2000 to 2004, 677 study circles were set up, with a total of 4,900 students in the fields of art, history and culture, computer science, workshops, foreign languages, music and dance, psychology, medicine and social life, theatre, cinema and fashion shows. Less used, and in that first experience completely absent, were the issues most closely linked to employment and economic development. The study circles spread throughout the territory, and they became part of the common language (*why do not you make a circle? You find yourself here tonight at the circle ... of study*), a language that became a new reality.

³ A province is an administrative division of intermediate level between a municipality (Comune) and a region (Regione). There are currently 110 provinces in Italy. The provinces have diminished functionality since 2015.



Moreover, a regional call in 2004 provided the creation of a regional association for the development of study circles and the birth of a real educational movement for the diffusion of this innovative training modality in the field of adult education. The [Onlus Idee in Rete Association](#) was created with the function of promoting systemic actions and supporting the creation and development of study circles, especially in the areas of disadvantage and its functions consolidated in the period 2006-10.

This was consolidated through a regional law in 2007 promoting participation in the development of regional and local policies with specific funding over a five year period to enhance knowledge and skills, and commitment widely in society.

Nowadays many different municipalities in Tuscany have active study circles funded by regional and local funds. Each Municipality provides its premises free of charge to allow groups to meet.

Major activities

The study circle is a self-training activity based on the expression of the learning question posed by the participants, gathered in small groups, using a tutor or expert, for a short duration and for the purpose of training with respect to a topic chosen by the participants themselves.

In particular, a study circle as a rule:

- has no more than 10 participants (8 would be the ideal number in respect of the practices of group work, but there may be exceptions depending on the type of study circle. In the literature there are references to study circles with 20 participants, cases which imply a more complex methodological management and frequent recourse to sub-groups;
- the theme of study is freely chosen by the participants;
- the location can be in any facility that meets some basic accessibility rules, but private homes can also be used;
- registration costs can be expected or not. The most common methods are the free participation, expenses charged to the promoter, and cost-sharing through the payment of a registration fee, normally not higher than 1/30 of an average salary of an employee;
- the duration ranges from between 20 and 24 hours. Given that the average duration of each meeting does not exceed two hours, a study circle meets on average 10 times;
- has a tutor with the functions of being a member, leader, facilitator and secretary of the study circle;



- can be supported by a disciplinary expert. This figure is not central; normally its use is preceded by some preparatory meetings and is therefore limited to 2 - 4 hours (depending on the type of study circle).

The Tuscan study circle model has three levels, each having one or more reference points: political and strategic issues; management; and delivery of training services. At each level the system supporting bodies have a function to perform in terms of delivery:

- induction and expression of the demand for training, users' advising and guidance, collection of the applications;
- matching supply and demand on the basis of expressed requests in order to stimulate aggregation by identifying issues of common interest - also included are the SC preparatory activities and those for creating an educational project;
- assistance, monitoring, evaluation and dissemination of the study circles. These activities are aimed at assessing the correct implementation of the study circles, preventing dropouts, evaluating and developing the demand for training after the conclusion of the activities.

Considering the results of the experiences gained in Tuscany (Federighi 2008), a typical study circle meeting has some characteristics that are normally present in all sessions. A typical study circle session has the following characteristics:

- *Opening session* with a brief speech by the tutor or leader dedicated to welcoming the participants, and to introduce the objectives of the meeting. If this is the first meeting, the tutor explains why he has convened the meeting, what has been planned and what is expected of the participants.
- Presentation and discussion of the *rules of participation* defined through the discussion with those present and through the explanation of the rules that apply generally to discussions in study circles (for example, no interruptions, no long interventions, need to stick to the object of the discussion, use of examples, punctuality, establishing confidential relations between participants etc.).
- *Start of the dialogue* within the group and, therefore, the implementation of approaches to ensure the ability of each participant to listen, to avoid the temptation to want to give answers to every problem and, on the contrary, to be able to keep judgment suspended until a possible emergent 'truth', to be open to the possibility of being influenced by the opinion of others, to speak from their own experience, and to recognize differences as a group's wealth.



- Development of *cultural experience*, or concrete use of educational and cultural materials and products (a video, for example). In the first meeting participants can use a piece of a film that highlights the problem of dialogue between people, problems and difficulties in communicating. The objective of this phase is to bring out the obstacles that each of the participants might have in the practice of dialogue. In this phase, it is also possible to proceed with roleplaying through conversational models, distributing the various roles of leader, supporter, opponent and coach among the participants.
- *Dialogue and reflection*, which refers to attention to the actual conversation on the chosen theme. However, attention must also be paid to the way in which the conversation itself is proceeding, on its development trends and its return to points apparently resolved, on its pauses, on its leaps forward.
- *Summary, evaluation and final development* of the content discussed during the meeting, of the decisions taken with respect to development. Appropriate time is then dedicated to the assessment of the meeting, to how each of the participants has experienced its dynamics and content. This is in order to adopt changes for the continuation of the activities. The last part of the meeting is dedicated to organizational and logistical agreements for the next meeting.

The role of the participants in study circles has a pivotal position both because the circles constitute putting into practice the theories and methods of self-directed learning, and because the circle, as an instrument of democratization of educational relations, tends to transfer to participants decision-making powers concerning the learning processes. Participating in a session of a study circle requires each participant to know how to exercise or acquire some skills: knowing how to openly expose their ideas, listen to others carefully, respect the decisions of others, strive to understand the position of those with different opinions. The absence of such skills makes it impossible to develop activities according to the study circle method.

The system of study circles corresponds to the ways in which the different agents in charge for system delivery relate to one another. The Tuscan system is based on a prevalent public presence due to the need to ensure that society has such an opportunity, to ensure that the availability of the asset also extends to those of the population who have a low propensity to invest in learning networks (citizens and producers).

Following Paolo Federighi's analysis (2008, p. 25), a system of study circles can be divided into three levels:

1. *the national level* - focused on determination of the strategies, policies and basic resources, on which the decisions are made relating to:



- the public and private nature of the system and the strategies for increasing spending for study circles by individuals;
- priority tasks of the system (territorial areas, problems, targets, economic sectors, etc);
- quality standards;
- identifying the basic resources to make the service exist and its distribution.

2. *the regional level* - aimed at service planning and management of system actions, on which a study circle depends:

- provision of support services to study circles discussed in the next section;
- financing particular experimentation or promotion activities.

3. *the local level* - organising, planning and management of activities on which a study circle depends:

- planning the interventions;
- their implementation;
- the economic and financial management of the activities;
- personnel management.

The existence of regional support services reduces the tasks of local managers of study circles and allows them to focus on specific functions of promotion of the offer. The functions of the local managers are the following:

- elaborating implementation of local interventions at an executive level
- analysis of potential demand, ie the identification of potential participants in a district, a company or an organization in general;
- interventions to seek expressions of learning demand, that is realizing activities that enable the public to express their study interests;
- local publicity;
- collecting individual applications for enrollment in study circles;
- organizing groups based on interests and problems;
- finding the tutors and the possible offer of training activities;



- finding the sites for carrying out the activities;
- preparing the first meetings;
- development of training activities;
- finding the experts;
- creation and updating databases relating to the tutors, experts and offices;
- activity monitoring and data communication;
- evaluating the experiences and projects promoted.

Current and future major achievements

In the Tuscan experience, the Study Circle has been seen as a tool that, within the regional system of lifelong learning, allows public institutions to meet new learning needs. The advantages that such a system ensures are mainly to be found in the ability to bring to light learning issues not previously identified by other educational institutions; rather, these are born when groups of people feel the need, and this is considered to be much more effective. The agility of the system, based on very limited time cycles, is aimed at ensuring the continuous renewal of demand. This is also realized through pedagogical tutoring. In implementing this method, the aim of Tuscany Region, together with other interventions foreseen in the field of lifelong learning, has been to make the Study Circle an opportunity to increase regional capacity for economic, social and cultural development.

The study circle experience ensures the following results:

1. development of self-management skills of participants in planning personal learning processes; and,
2. development of skills to learn in collaboration.

Participants develop self-direction and self-management of learning processes, making themselves responsible for their own learning. The self-direction skills of the learning processes concern the ability to determine the objectives and use of the results of one's own learning.

This ability produces an effect both with respect to the transformations in one's daily life and work, and with respect to the type of transformative actions to be promoted together with others in order to drive social innovation and changes in the world of work. This occurs because participants are responsible for the decisions with respect to the different key moments of the training activity.

Another achievement of the Study circles in Tuscany may perhaps be seen in the increase in the employment rate in the early years of the intervention. In the Tuscan experience from



1998 to 2004:

- the employment rate rose from 57.1 to 63.7,
- the unemployment rate decreased from 7.8 to 5.2,
- the employment rate among women rose from 44.5 to 52.9,
- the female unemployment rate decreased from 12.3 to 7.3.

The following years, from 2008 onwards, were years of economic crisis (data refer to 2013):

- the unemployment rate, while still well below the national average, reached 8.7% (12.2% in Italy),
- there were almost 22,000 less employees and 65,000 more unemployed, totalling 150,000 units (the highest value in recent history),
- the effects of the crisis were felt in virtually every group of the population.

The study circles were given the opportunity to expand so as to include workplace issues (e.g. the improvement of company organization and security) in order to enhance economic and employment aspects. Through this methodology young and adult populations were given the opportunity to improve, through the exchange and integration of knowledge, existing and perhaps unexpressed resources.

Another innovative element concerns management of Study Circles based on collaboration of the partners at institutional level and the establishment of a territorial network made by all the partners involved in adult education (Mele, 2005).

Key Success Factors

The need to bring out instances of training not previously identified by educational institutions, makes the Study Circles an important opportunity at local level to detect and satisfy training needs that have remained unexpressed or otherwise dissatisfied within the traditional learning offer.

The promotion of Study Circles as a learning tool is based on reversing the traditional approach to the relationship between supply and demand. It presents itself as a possible answer to the need for innovative ways of systematically identifying needs and paying attention to the policies of access to training, so as to guarantee equality of opportunities.

Flexibility and adaptability of the model to multiple areas make it able to adapt to the continuous evolutions and cultural transformations that characterize our society. Some of its characteristics (the solicitation of request from potential participants, the brevity of programmes, their low cost, the proximity to the places of residence, the speed in responding



to the training questions, the social aspect) make it suitable for most members of public, encouraging the participation of citizens who encounter obstacles in taking advantage of the educational offer of the territory.

The study circle expresses the need to identify operational methods that allow reach to the most marginal segments of the adult population usually excluded from learning opportunities - immigrants, prisoners and former prisoners, physically and mentally disabled, elderly. Given the importance of the induction phase and the expression of demand, the model allows development of a flexible and agile system and experimentation in developing a support structure that is stable and with continuity.

Among the positive aspects of the circle, that should certainly be emphasized is that it is a pedagogical tool capable of responding at different levels to the needs of a region: for the citizen, for the community, for the construction of working methods functional to local development. Through the promotion of networks, local people learn to cooperate in finding innovative answers to the needs that the territory expresses (Del Gobbo 2008).

The study circles also represent a local mechanism for institutional spaces for lifelong learning, which are also carried out through the exercise of planning and management functions of the learning system. This type of intervention has led to the concrete objective of offering socio-economic and cultural development programs on the basis of analysis and responses to local needs formulated directly by the local community. It also supported the assumption of responsibility of territorial stakeholders in terms of investment in knowledge and integration of financial resources as a response to local development problems.

Implications or suggestion for policy-makers

The Study Circle model requires an articulated system of organizational support that covers: identifying a widespread regional system for all the advertising activities; soliciting demand; defining opportunities for individualized guidance for learners; creating learning environments; and setting up of a network of tutors and experts.

The Model of the Study Circle therefore urges the establishment of institutional and social partnership networks, able to enhance the training structures of a territory, to achieve planning, management, monitoring, evaluation and development of training activities.

Needs analysis, programming and management of services become indispensable elements to provide an integrated response to the problems of individuals and the community, guaranteeing real participation and local management of the integrated territorial learning system. The Study Circle therefore presents itself with a strong strategic political value if it is deeply integrated into the local context. It allows the planning that integrates the needs of citizens. To provide integrated responses, the study circle system needs a network that allows enhancing, implementing and awareness of operational methods directed towards responsibility of all actors, and local participation.

In building such a learning system capable of providing adequate responses to individual needs and achieving development objectives, Study Circles require the valorisation of all



stakeholders in the local context - public bodies, social partners, schools, associations, etc. This means a complex operation involving the convergence of multiple wills and competences activating several levels of decision-making, and a range of different skills and different institutional areas.

It is necessary really to know how to work in a network and create conditions so that all the actors involved in the creation of adult education programs can dialogue and overcome lack of communication that is usually at the origin of fragmentation, duplication and overlap of services and skills.

Study on a territorial basis can encourage experimentation with networks and partnerships, and promote the creation of a culture that guarantees not only the success of the project, but also the consolidation of ongoing integrated work methods.



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8. Voluntary-based study circles and related municipal policies – Senterpartiets Studieforbund, Norway

Kristin Madsen/s

Background information

Senterpartiets Studieforbund (SpS), the Centre Party Adult Study Organisation – is a national, political study organisation with three member organisations: Senterpartiet (The Centre Party), Senterkvinnene (The Centre Party Womens Organisation) and Senterungdommen (The Centre Party Youth Organisation). SpS is a national approved adult study organisation, working under the Norwegian Adult Education Act, The Law of Adult Education (2010).

The main goals for SpS as a political adult study organisation are to maintain and strengthen democracy. SpS does so by giving each course participant opportunity to gain knowledge and insight into active community involvement, and a stronger sense of responsibility for social and sustainable development.



Most courses and study activities are held in local communities, through local organizers in study circles. The work of the local organizers is non-profit and voluntary, carried out mostly by the local organisation (or branch) of the Centre Party. These local branches are located in every municipality in Norway, and are run voluntarily. Even so, the study circles as such get a small government support, at the moment 75 NOK (app. 10 USD) per study hour. The study circle can use this money for study material etc. SpS have to approve the work of the study circle. This work must satisfy the regulations in the [Norwegian adult education legislation](#).

SpS creates and develops study material and booklets on a variety of topics connected to politics, local community work, leadership and organizational skills. Most of the study material is offered free of charge from our website called [Senterpartiskolen](#) (The Centre Party School).



Voluntary-based study circles on local political Programme Processes

The study circle material *Good Local Programme Processes* is designed for use in local programme processes in the Centre Party, both in the municipalities and at county level. The election programme has two functions: to inform the voters how the Centre Party wishes to develop the municipalities and the county, as well as informing the voters of the issues and groups the Party wishes to prioritize in its political activities.

That is why the programme is our most important trademark, in addition to being our contract with the voters. The programme is also an important guide for our elected politicians who are tasked with following up the programme and ensuring the best possible execution.

The programme is not supposed to tell people what is best for them, but rather to show how we will facilitate the promotion of inhabitants' interests. This may seem obvious, but is actually difficult because we have to balance the totality of the inhabitants' interest against our knowledge of what is possible to achieve.

A programme which informs people of all considerations and restrictions that we as politicians must take into account does not give the inhabitants enough support. When we develop an election programme it is therefore important to focus more on the wishes and expectations of the people than on the considerations the administration needs to take into account.

The Centre Party must show its will to achieve something, and this must be made visible in the local environment and in the county. The election programme must show how the Centre Party wants to promote the development of the society through democracy, long-term administrative responsibility and sharing of welfare benefits.

It is easy for a ruling party to become defensive and dare too little. However it then becomes difficult to show why we are involved in politics. That is why we must dare to be visionary, while at the same time being concrete when we develop the programme. This means that we have to spend time developing the election programme, and that we must focus both on the Centre Party values, as well as good practical Centre Party solutions to local challenges.

Shared Values

Local democracy: A vibrant local democracy is a pre-condition for the Centre Party principle of assuming responsibility for the development of the individual as well as of the local community.

The Centre Party wants to develop society from the bottom upwards, hence to decentralise power, settlement patterns, job opportunities, capital and competence. The aim to decentralise is ideologically rooted in the conception of participatory democracy. The need to share power and influence between various parts of the country is the basis for an active democracy.

The Centre Party is of the opinion that all citizens shall have the right to settle where they wish. Good and efficient transport and communication options as well as targeted district and



regional political means will lead to growth outside the regional centres. The development of local communities in the countryside, villages and towns is important for both livelihood and well-being.

The Centre Party is also of the opinion that a different development than the government's centralising policies is both possible and necessary: More responsibility and authority must be placed at local level where people are living and where services are produced. Reduced government administration and hence more resources to the production of local services will increase both the quality and the volume of everything from police to health services. In addition, the individual must be given more responsibility and power over their own life and property. To be exempted from applying or reporting to the central government or the municipality is decentralisation in practice.

The Centre Party will further develop an efficient public service supply all over Norway. Health, school and welfare must be developed all over the country, and thus ensure that people are getting equal services regardless of where they are living. In order to achieve this, it is necessary that all municipalities in the country are receiving sufficient funds. The Centre Party is pushing for sufficient funds for financing nurseries, schools, homebased services and care homes. When these are well functioning, the need for more specialised services will be reduced.

Public services should be available near where people are living. All the important services must be available where people are living. Access to nurseries, schools, care of the elderly and care homes is a precondition for the development of a local community and for allowing people to settle where they want. That the quality must be equal all over the country should be taken for granted. (Centre Party Principle and Action Programme 2017-2021).

Practical information, and how SpS organizes work in the study circles

The study circle leader is responsible for informing all participants that they will be registered in an attendance list as part of a course/training activity, in order for them to be able to state that they agree to this. For course and study activities which receive governmental support according to the Law of Adult Education, the course operator is tasked with producing attendance lists which include dates of meetings, how long they last, the name, year of birth and the address of each participant.

Attendance lists must be kept available for at least 10 years. (Law of Adult Education, regulation para 9). The Centre Party Adult Education Organisation administer and keep the attendance lists in compliance with the Law of Administration of Personal Information (see also www.senterpartiskolen.no and our *Manual for Study Circle Leaders*).

This is how we do it:

- The *course/study circle* activity is [registered](#)
- The *approved study plan* must be checked



- The *course/study activity* must last at least 8 hours where at least two participants are present at least 75% of the total time.
- The *study hour is defined* as one hour inclusive of a break
- *Attendance lists*: after the end of the course/study activity, attendance lists must be registered at www.senterpartiskolen.no/registrering. (The attendance list may also be sent in by postal mail.) After registration and approval, the study circle group/course operator will receive a training grant.
- *Payment* of training grants is effectuated quarterly. According to The Law of Adult Education, training grants paid will be based on the approved hours of study, regardless of the number of participants.
- *Course certificates*: Everybody who completes the course by being present for 75% of the total approved hours has the right to receive a course certificate. The certificate is available [online](#) or can be ordered from Senterpartiskolen.

SpS also gives some simple pieces of pedagogical advice to the course /study circle leader:

- Think through how you handle the start-up and introduction to the study activity, and consequently the work with the programme. Create a pleasant environment, it should be fun doing study activity and programme development.
- Ask clear and simple questions which allow for discussion, conversation and reflection.
- Make sure everybody is heard in discussions, and make use of the resources of each and everyone.
- Try to stimulate and give support to the group if the discussion gets stuck. You may just skip to the next question if complete silence occurs. Listen closely, be aware, and make sure to “see” each participant.
- Remember to take breaks! We wish you the best of luck with your work!

Work methods and time use

Work methods may vary, for instance a study circle combined with dialogue/debate meetings, introductions and presentations. The study circle material may for instance be divided into six meetings of two to three hours each, following the plan below:



The year prior to elections	Suggested time and work plan for the programme process in the study circle
March/April	Meeting 1. Preparatory meeting. Programme Committee study circle meets, plans the work, work methods, time plan, suitable resource persons. How should the work on the programme be utilized externally?
May	Meeting 2: Meeting between the Programme Committee study circle members, local board and the municipality board group, or the county board and the county parliament group. Analysis of the political situation. What has the Centre Party achieved in the period? What needs further follow-up? Any new themes to be included? Any takes on themes needing reappraisals?
June - August	Meeting 3: Information collection: Contact with members, groups/associations and others to get their input into the programme process. Feel free to use social media.
September	Meeting 4: Contact with groups associations, partners, interest groups, the Association of Parents of Pupils, business community etc through meetings, email, telephone etc. This is important to involve the local community in the work, ask what people are concerned with, and ask for input.
October	Meeting 5: Selection of themes which should be included in the programme. Make a disposition. Have in mind already at this point which should be the main themes. Distribute areas of responsibility, formulations and writing phase.
November/December	Meeting 6: Debate, discussion, review of the totality. What should be left out? What is missing? Layout and presentation. How should the programme be an efficient and active tool in the election campaign? The Local Party Group approves the election Programme.

A Local study circle: Gran Senterparti

The local study circle started to work in spring 2018, according to the study material and plans described, and the suggested time and work plan. There have been four meetings in the study circle as far as November 2018. Four more meetings are planned. There will be approximately 20 study hours when the study circle is completed.

The members of the study circle were given the study booklet *Good Local Programme Processes*, to read for preparations before starting the work. All sorts of community issues are being discussed freely in the study circle, like health care, health care of the elderly, school, day-care for children, culture, church, integration, environmental issues and sustainability, local infrastructure, local business and entrepreneurships.



Every issue is connected to local challenges, as seen in local politics and by inhabitants in general. The study circle members are following local debates in the newspaper, on the internet and in the Municipality Council closely.

Questions concerning local tasks and challenges are taken to the study circle group and discussed, to see if it is possible to suggest ways of working with these challenges, and maybe suggest solutions for solving problems. In the meeting of October 8th, the study circle also discussed the political debate climate in the local community, concerning a tendency that the climate seems to be getting tougher.

Over some time now, this tendency has been growing not only in social media but also in local debate and even in the local Municipality Council. Questions concerning debate climate and democracy were therefor raised. The members also discussed the possibility that people will avoid local politics, and not choose to stand for local elections because of the harder debate climate.



Gran Centre Party – local study circle in action, October 8th 2018

If so, this will be a major threat to local democracy and to the further development and maintenance of democracy as such. This is mentioned here as an example: dialogue and discussion in the study group are wide and of great variety, concerning the local community.

Further on, the study circle will invite interest groups like local trade union organisations - nurses, health care workers, teacher etc -, Association of Parents of Pupils, local environmental groups, culture organisations, local business etc. to meetings and dialogue. This is an important part of the work in the study circle, to get inputs, views and proposals from different groups and stakeholders in the local community.



When the study circle finishes after their eight meetings, they will collect their work into a concrete proposal for a local political election programme. This proposal will be debated by the members in Gran Centre Party, and voted over. Creating a local, political election programme through voluntary-based study circles is a democratic way of developing good practice and municipal policies. It is an open process, where anybody can ask questions or give input. This goes even for members of opposite political parties.

Throughout the work, members of the study circle will share values, and promote leadership and adult learning in the local community. The result of the work in the study circle, as we see this in SpS, is a strength to the local community, a support to developing and maintenance of our local democracy – and good, community-based learning activities for adults.



9. Study circles and the power of doing together: a tradition for centuries of citizen initiatives in the Netherlands

René Clarijs

Historical cultural background

The Netherlands (literally the low lands) is a country where during the last millennium water has been plentiful 24 hours a day. Situated on the lowest location of Western Europe, several rivers like the Rhine from Switzerland and the Meuse from France meet there. Then there was the daily danger of the hostile North Sea. The Roman author Gaius Plinius (23-79 AD) describes the Netherlands thus: ‘two times a day the ocean arrives with huge water masses and floods all the land’.

From around AD 1000, the Dutch started to build dikes and polders. Dikes rapidly became a phenomenon that visitors from many countries came to see. Even the Italian Dante Alighieri dedicated the first sentences of the 15th song of The Hell in his *Divina Comedia* to the Dutch dikes. International water tourism was intensified when the first windmill was built around 1400. Despite the fact that, during the centuries, the Dutch created a water management system that could protect them against the water, the situation still was amazing for many foreign visitors. In the 17th century, the English poet Marvel wrote that the Dutch are ‘people who live half under water’. In the 18th century, the Swiss author Hess stated that ‘Dutch people are more amphibians than human beings’.

Nowadays 60 percent of the Netherlands is below sea level. Dikes have been built along all the rivers and the seaside. They are so big that it is impossible for one person to build, to check or to repair them if some parts are damaged. In the last millennium the conclusion was very clear: the people in the Netherlands need each other, otherwise they will drown together. In the 4,000 Dutch polders (the land which is surrounded by dikes) the water level can be managed artificially. For that, consultations are needed. Since the 13th century, that process has been in the hands of the 21 Water Authorities; its boards are democratically chosen every four years (the fourth democratic level in the Netherlands next to the local, regional and national level).

These Water Authorities levy their own taxes to make them and our safe water system independent from the policy of the government. The danger of the water is so great that politicians, who can constantly have other priorities, cannot take decisions on it.

Because of the system of polders and dikes the Dutch are obliged to consult with one another, because they depend on one another. Decisions should be taken together and the polder and the people who live there can only survive when co-operation is dominant and citizens support one another.

Now we can understand why the Netherlands has never known centralism as have the United Kingdom and France. The Water Authorities, the regions, the cities and its citizens always



showed the same attitude: we are all equal; a collective, joint policy will only be possible as a result of negotiations. From the very beginning of this water-land the mode of self-management of the citizens was crucial.

This historical geographical situation has insinuatingly and permanently influenced the Dutch egalitarian behaviour and mentality, so also the Dutch political system. The over 1000 years old polder mentality has become an administrative heritage. The Dutch have a consensus democracy, where democracy is not related to the power of the majority, but where the majority takes into account the interests of the minority. They need each other. The Netherlands was an inclusive society from a millennium ago (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

It is important to know that two main ideas still rule the society and its politics in the Netherlands, where the two religions of Protestantism and Catholicism are dominant:

- the idea of subsidiarity. That means that the government will only evolve activities if individuals or societal organisations cannot solve the problem. This is a vertical ranking, in analogy to the hierarchical order in the Roman-Catholic Church;
- the idea of sovereignty in the own circle. This protestant doctrine regards the society as a whole of equal and independent circles of family, church, societal organisations up to and including the state itself. That is a horizontal ranking that matches the anti-hierarchical protestant culture.

In both approaches the government, independently on each level, does not play an important role. It is up to the people.

Daily practice for the citizens

From that historical point of view - citizens always took care of themselves - it is no surprise that many activities are undertaken by the citizens themselves. There is no need to wait for activities organised by (subsidised) organisations or (local) authorities. Where in 2013 the national government officially tried to change the welfare state into a participation society with the motto 'You can do it yourself', the people changed this motto into: 'We can do it ourselves'. The difference is very meaningful. The Dutch consider themselves as not just a collection of gathered individuals: they are a group of human beings who belong together. The Dutch collaborate, they solve their problems together, they learn together, they implement activities together.

With this knowledge it is easy to position the phenomenon of study circles. Now it is also understandable

1. that the (local) government hardly plays any dominant role,
2. that the initiatives are mostly taken by the citizens themselves, and
3. that studying nearly almost is combined with doing.



It never was and still is not sufficient just to talk (about the danger of water). The Dutch like to become active; when there are two or more persons together - right away they will set up a club or association. Because the Dutch like to 'do it ourselves' so much, they like the form of a cooperative. In a cooperative people are active and responsible together, without influence of government.

Cooperatives and study circles

In the Netherlands cooperatives cover 18 % of the GPD. About 8,000 cooperatives are registered in the Chamber of Commerce, with all together over 30 million members (the Netherlands has 17.5 million inhabitants).

The many cooperatives in the Netherlands can be differentiated in several ways. We have cooperatives in the traditional sense, previously often used in the agricultural and bank sector, nowadays also active for the health and care sector, and for energy and well-being. Such cooperatives are often organised on a professional basis. The movie [*The cooperative landscape in the Netherlands*](#) (2018) gives an idea of the importance of cooperatives in and for the Netherlands. These professional cooperatives are very successful, according to their umbrella organisation, the NCR, which is an abbreviation for the national cooperative council. Over the past year, their combined turnover was 111 billion euros.

The cooperatives employ up to 166.000 people. On an average, every Dutch person is a member of 1.8 cooperatives. Every year, the NCR (see also NCR 2018; 2018a) organises a national cooperative day. It implements the Youth Leadership Academy, the council publishes. It has arranged a special Governance code. It organises courses for chairpersons. The NCR offers a consultation hour for people who want to set up a cooperative etc. Last year, the priority was *Generation [X]change*, where cooperatives were made aware of the golden combination between young and old, and how they could facilitate the dialogue between these generations (Generation [X]change 2018).

The NCR is not the only Dutch umbrella organisation for cooperatives. Another example is the LVKK, the national association for small rural villages, which represents over 4,000 local initiatives (LVKK 2018). For the Ministry of Internal Affairs the LVKK is a serious consultation partner when the activities are related to innovation of democracy and reinforcement of bottom-up democracy, and also the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport is an important discussion partner regarding new initiatives in the field of care and welfare. Last year, the LVKK gave special attention to the theme of people who had, because of a combination of factors, less chance to take part in the society.

The LVKK members, situated in rural areas, have nothing to do with turnover and employed people like NCR members. They are small groups of people, mostly interested in one item, which will be discussed during a certain period. Slowly we arrive at the phenomenon of the study circles.

Next to NRC and LVKK there are many other associations of cooperatives. Some of them are specialised in cooperatives for villages, for areas, for labour participation, for housing, for



care and health, for energy, et cetera. We describe below some examples of these cooperatives (not specially related to the LVKK). These umbrellas have the same goals: they share experiences and knowledge, and they advocate for the interests of cooperatives in general and their members in particular.

The definition of a study circle

One can try to define study circle in a specific way, but the unavoidable different international connotations make it impossible to work with such one global definition. To compare: a few years ago, we made an inventory of the word non-formal education in Europe. In a short period of time, we found 23 variants in over 30 countries, meaning more or less the same or a bit different (Clarijs 2017).ⁱ

One might call a cooperative a study circle, but often it is more. Often a cooperative is a study circle plus an extra: the activities as the follow-up. For the practical Dutch in many cases it is not enough just to discuss issues. If they discuss the climate change, some of them might finish the course with the construction of a local windmill. If they discuss the French culture, it might be possible that at the end they will go to France by bus. If they are interested to know more about the stock exchange, they might form a small investment club just for fun later. In the Netherlands not many study clubs are created just in order to gain more theoretical knowledge or just for discussions. In a study circle Dutch style it is clear that first a certain level of knowledge is needed, and later many people like to put this knowledge gained into practice. Sometimes some legal or financial help from the local government is necessary; but in general the citizens prefer to implement their knowledge and competences without help from the government side.

The following model shows different forms of study circles.

<u>Type of involvement</u>	<u>Intention to behaviour</u>
1. Affective	-----
(feeling)	-----
2. Calculative	
(financially driven)	----- <i>Intention to stay</i> <i>Willingness to extra</i>
	<i>member of the circle</i> <i>effort for the circle</i>
3. Imperative	-----
(no alternative)	
4. Normative	-----
(values and norms)	-----

Scheme 1. Different forms of study circles



In this scheme we can see that all four types of involvement can serve an intention to stay as a member of the study circle. However, the members who belong to type 1 and/or 4 are ready to perform extra tasks for the study circle. These two types of involvement dominate the Dutch study circles.

First we show some general examples of study circles in the Netherlands; secondly we will focus on the small municipality I live in, Hilvarenbeek. In this second part we will split up the study circles into two groups: for young people, and for adults and elderly people.

Some general Dutch examples

There are no limits to the variety of topics that can be discussed in study circles. When some people in Amsterdam are interested in gardening, they start a study circle where they get information on all different kind of flowers. They invite specialists who can teach them and they can exchange information to one another. This is the private initiative. Of course a certain moment will arise when people want to put this knowledge into practice. Not all people in the centre of Amsterdam have gardens, so they ask the local government for a piece of unused land where they can start to grow flowers. In Amsterdam, dozens of these garden study circles are active.

Because of religious tensions in society, more and more people are interested to know more about Islam. They set up courses where volunteers like imams and professors in the field of Islam of a university inform citizens about the background, history and nowadays meaning and function of Islam for people in the Netherlands. It is a small step to discuss the position of refugees from e.g. Iraq, and then a group is formed to become active: let us help some of the Iraq people. Let us try to teach them Dutch, let us help the children play with our children, etc. Sometimes they will ask for help - a place where people can meet each other, where they can cook together, financial help - from the local government.

When young parents are interested in upbringing, they organise their own study circle *Upbringing*. They read and discuss together, see some movies, invite experts, exchange information, et cetera. Certainly the information will be spread that many of the children are too heavy and that, because of television, computers, tablets and mobiles, they move too little.

A further step is easily made: an attempt will be made to create a playground for their children in the neighbourhood. The local government is asked to buy playground equipment and to allocate a small piece of land for this specific goal; the parents promise to do all the work. In the 520 playgrounds that are member of NUSO, the Dutch Playground Umbrella Organisation, over 11,000 volunteers are active (NUSO 2018).

People are increasingly worried about the diminishing quality of the environment. They study the Global Environment Report of the United Nations. In the northern region of the Netherlands people are very active in study circles to discuss the horrible consequences like earthquakes and uninhabitable houses of gas extraction during recent decades. In the Randstad the problem is discussed about the unstoppable decline of the soil because of



desiccation etc. It is important to keep the environment in a good “condition”, we only have one environment. As a result of this kind of study circle people often become active in nature as volunteers: they want to clean the environment of plastics, they plant trees with children, they pollard the willows, they clean the beaches, etc.

The policy of study circles in Hilvarenbeek

Hilvarenbeek is a small municipality of six small villages in the southern part of the Netherlands of altogether 15,000 inhabitants, three kilometres from Belgium. Mayor Ryan Palmen of the municipality of Hilvarenbeek writes in the preface of a recent brochure *The power of doing together! Inspiring stories of initiatives that have set up by residents of the municipality of Hilvarenbeek* regarding initiatives of residents in his municipality: ‘Hilvarenbeek is a community where the inhabitants pleasantly live, work and reside. The municipal administration wants to preserve that, and if possible to improve it. The residents know best how they prefer to live in their communities. That is the reason why we cooperate. The municipal administration likes to collaborate with the cooperatives, foundations, residents and volunteers in the six small villages in our municipality. The inhabitants want to improve their living environment, and we like to give them space in order to pick this up.’

As the mayor states, ‘the municipal administration sees where it can support in all the various initiatives. Sometimes we help financially, now and then we share knowledge and experience, or we show a more flexible approach in giving permits. Therefore is needed that our civil servants increasingly come off the restrictions of rules and laws, and think in opportunities instead of thinking all kind of limitations.’

‘More and more residents see the opportunity to get to work with all kinds of subjects. If they need some support, they will contact the municipality administration. Then we will sit around the table to see how we can contribute in elaborating the ideas and how we can help each other with our talents. That is the power of doing together.’

According to Mayor Palmen it also works the other way around. In that case ‘residents and local entrepreneurs affiliate with the goals of the municipal administration, e.g. in the case of achieving the climate goals or the wished regional economic growth’. (Municipality of Hilvarenbeek 2018)

Examples of study circles for children and young people in Hilvarenbeek

We give some examples of the initiatives of the younger residents and add some information of the extent to which the municipal administration was and/or is involved.ⁱⁱ

Especially in the area of youth work the principle of study circles can be found. That happens in a different way in comparison to the way adults prefer to learn. Young people often have the learning style of doing. This is strongly related to non-formal and informal learning. Next to that, young people prefer to organise their study circles as ‘light communities’, which means there is always the option to leave. The light communities we find are the opposite of ponderous communities, by which we mean heavily regulated. In light communities the



exclusivity we find the openness and non-commitment of the modern network. Next to that young people are fans of 'feathery light' communities, which are linked to modern media.

About ten years ago, an important goal for young people in Hilvarenbeek was to get their own place. They organised many meetings with many children and youngsters, so they could collect ideas and opinions. They visited places for young people in other cities and villages to get an idea about the possibilities. They had discussions with architects, town planners, financial people, etc. After three years this study circle had an elaborated plan when and how to build their 'castle'. The youngsters named this building The Box. After two years of voluntary constructing work assisted by some adults, The Box was finished. The local administration of Hilvarenbeek did not need to pay any money for the work and the materials; in return it arranged that The Box did not need to pay the costs for official permissions etc.

The Box is used several days per week. The youth worker organises (next to fun meetings) study circles for children and young people. Last year, in connection with the children's book week, the youth worker organised during six months of weekly lessons by vlog experts for children how to vlog. At the end there was a competition of the best vlog about a special book with the theme "friendship"

Every year there is a study circle on how children and youngsters can develop their talents; at the end they can show the results during a special evening "Shine On Stage". In order to teach children and young people about democracy and politics, a monthly meeting is arranged together with the mayor and the aldermen during the so-called pizza-sessions as pizzas are served during the discussions. A nice way to teach youngsters inclusiveness is to put them in touch with refugee youngsters. Each Thursday evening a special activity is organised where African, Syrian, Iraq and Afghanistan youngsters can meet Dutch youngsters. These evenings are filled in very differently: sometimes they go to a movie together, they play sport together, they make music together, etc.

To help young people understand that they can help their peers, there is a monthly study circle with young caregivers. Normally young people are not aware of the problems in other families and the sometimes difficult role their peers have to play in such families. Now they listen to the daily problems of the other youngsters - like less time for school and homework, often no time for sport activities, the heavy mental pressure-, and of course the question will arise: how can we help you?

Because of the fact that we talk about children and young people it is necessary to be flexible with the structure of study circles. It will not be very successful to inform children and young people during the study circles only on theoretical level.

Generally speaking we can conclude that children and young people have many ideas and want to learn a lot. But they need more than only theoretical information, otherwise they easily get bored. Nearly all activities are done or organised by the youngsters themselves. The coordination is done by the youth worker. This job twelve hours per week is paid by the municipal administration. That is all, a relatively small investment for large effects.



Examples of study circles for adults in Hilvarenbeek

A few pages is not enough to describe the many study circles in this small municipality. We will try to summarize some of the main study circles and the role of the municipal administration.ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to reach the climate goals for 2020 of the municipality, several citizens have set up study circles.

Study circle number 1 was interested in using solar power in order to prevent CO₂ emissions. After some years, they wanted to build a park with solar panels. This study circle discussed a lot and found finally a perfect place to put the solar panels. The municipal administration helped getting national subsidies.

Study circle number 2 had a different idea: they studied and discussed a lot, and became a big fan of using wind as an alternative energy source. After some years of discussions they took the decision to build four huge windmills. They started a campaign to sell to the citizens 8,000 shares of 250 euro each. Within a few months all the shares have been sold, and in 2019 the four windmills will operate. The windmills are of and for the citizens. The sustainable generated electricity results in lower CO₂ emissions and contributes to a sustainable living environment.

Study circle number 3 was created by some people in the hamlet of Haghorst near the old sluice in a canal. There was some running water and there was some water pressure, so what kind of inventions could they create? After four years of discussions and study they invented a special system. The old sluice is now like a small power plant. It produces more energy than can be used by the families in the hamlet, so the rest is sold to the electricity company.

These three examples of active study circles help to achieve the climate goals of the municipality without any significant costs. Sometimes the volunteers need some support in order to find the right people for a part of the project, and then the networks of the mayor or an alderman might be helpful. The citizens together, thanks to their study circles, can acquire enough knowledge and power, even in such complex and complicated topics as climate goals and sustainability (see also Surowiecki 2005).

In Esbeek, one of the small villages in the municipality of Hilvarenbeek, a study circle of art is active. For many years these people did research, discussed new ways of presenting people art, etc. Now they took the decision to bring art in the midst of the nature, in the hope that more people would go for a healthy walk. In a special hiking and art route they have built after the etchers and water-colours of Andreas Schotel, an artist from Rotterdam who worked



in Esbeek in the early 20th century, a huge cow eight metres high, that is a milk factory from the inside and an interactive experience. 80 volunteers collaborated for two years to build this gigantic cow. The municipal administration provided a subsidy of 5,000 euro.

Esbeek is an active village with many study circles, despite the fact of having only 1200 inhabitants. 600 people are involved in study circles. Nowadays, with such a small number of people, it is not easy to keep the minimal level of liveability. During the last decades the gas station, the butchery, the drugstore, the bakery and the post office closed their doors. Some years ago, the last pub could not survive any longer. This was too much for the people in the study circle Community and Living Together. They wanted to put their knowledge into practice and started a movement to preserve the pub and to extend the pub into a community centre. People could buy shares between 100 and 5,000 euro, and hundreds of volunteers have rebuilt the old pub. Now there is also a museum about Andreas Schotel. The municipal administration did not need to pay any money for the idea and implementation of this study circle concerning social cohesion.

Also the church in Esbeek languished. A special study circle was created. After seven years, people bought the church and started to build a kindergarten, a day-care centre and a primary school inside the church. In this way the building of the church is kept, which is important for the many elderly in the village, and they are happy with the idea that it will be used for the very young. For this plan the municipal administration will invest about 3 million euro in total.



The start by children of the rebuilding of the church into a kindergarten, a day-care centre and a primary school, organised by a special study circle

A very active study circle is about nature. In the municipality of Hilvarenbeek there are some domains with forests and lakes. This study circle looked for sustainable solutions how to attract visitors to the nature reserves and at the same time to respect nature. They decided to



build a 24 meters high watchtower. With the help of amongst others a local steel enterprise, the scouting and the local history study circle, this tower of 55,000 kilo was built. The tower lies on hiking and biking routes and a wheelchair route. For one euro one can enter the tower. The municipal administration only paid the legal and administrative charges.



The watchtower, realised by the study circle “Sustainability and nature”

In another village, Biest-Houtakker, the little school could not exist any longer: too few children for a guaranteed good quality of education. The study circle “Liveability and Inclusiveness” had seen nice examples in the Netherlands of multifunctional accommodations with a societal purpose. Now it was time to contribute in a different way, and to become active in their own community.

Eight years ago they started to create a centre with a meeting place, a gym, a primary school and a day-care centre. The building of the little old school became part of this centre.

Youngsters meet here, there is a weekly ‘living room meeting’ for people who need extra care and attention, the elderly cook and eat together, etc. It is all done by 125 volunteers, of the 870 inhabitants of the village. For these buildings, figured out by the citizens themselves, the municipal administration have invested about 3.5 million euro.



The multifunctional accommodation with a meeting place, a gym, a primary school and a day-care centre in Biest-Houtakker, organised by the study circle “Liveability and Inclusiveness”

Especially for the elderly in the municipality of Hilvarenbeek there are special study circles concerning philosophy, art, literature, music, etc, with no costs for the municipal administration. The investment for the municipal administration concerning the realisation of the ten most important ideas of the study circles in Hilvarenbeek is seven million euros.

Political consequences in Hilvarenbeek and the Netherlands

In politics it is common to have government and opposition, regardless of the level. Politicians often have the tendency to attack all the proposals from the other political side. This might be called politics, but it is clear that it is not very clever. This kind of destructive competition of power is not conducive to the best solutions.

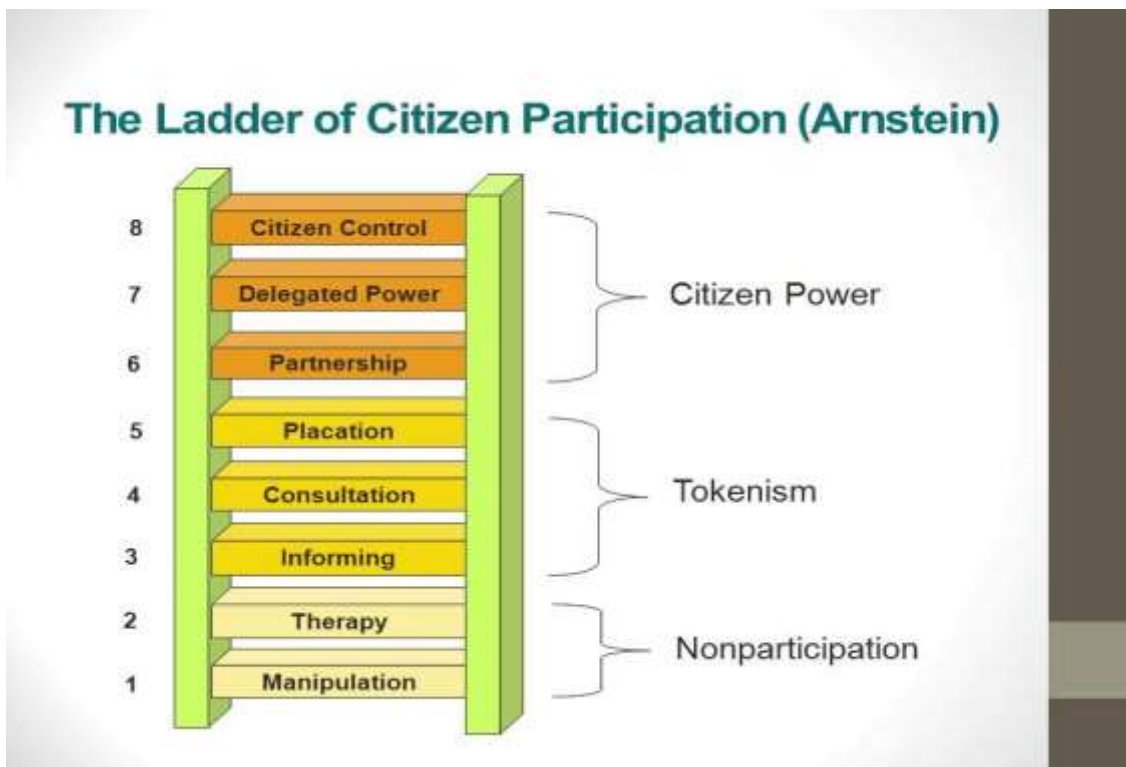
If the citizens show a big preference for co-operation, it is remarkable when elected politicians show opposite behaviour. For this reason, after the recent local elections, Hilvarenbeek started a political experiment with no opposition in the local council (the same experiment also started in other municipalities). In crowded meetings with citizens the political parties were forced to make an agenda for four years. This agreement is about the “what”. About the “how” the political parties will decide later, together with the contribution of the citizens. After all, these citizens are used to discuss different opinions in their study circles and to determine what should finally happen. Political games between the citizens are not customary. ‘Citizens want to live, work and reside in their community pleasantly’, as



Mayor Ryan Palmen wrote. Therefore it is unacceptable that political games are used in the local political arena.

This way of making politics reflects the contemporary state of mind of Dutch citizens, and the politicians have to adapt. No less important: in this way of making policy the citizens keep a prominent say during the period between elections.

It is clear why local government want to use the influence, knowledge, experience, power and ideas of citizens. When the citizens have a say in design, process and implementation, effectiveness increases immensely. To have a say is one of the lowest stairs on the famous participation ladder of Arnstein (1969). The highest step is self-government, self-management, self-steering.



For citizens to participate in politics is not always easy. Since 2000, the local council of the municipality Peel en Maas chose self-steering by citizens as its leading principle. That means that inhabitants, even unasked, get many tasks to do. Also when inhabitants desire a ring road around the village or new houses, they have to make very detailed plans, with e.g. consequences for nature and environment included.

In 2012, the Council for Public Administration (ROB 2018), an advisory body of the Dutch government and parliament, preferred a turned Arnstein ladder as the participation ladder for the authorities. There the first step is let it go, then facilitate, stimulate, direct and regulate. This ROB ladder is focussed on the role of the authorities, while the Arnstein participation ladder is orientated to citizens.

Citizen participation is also not easy to handle for civil servants. Civil servants are trained to act, and not to wait for solutions from citizens. It is hard for them to sit on their hands and to



see that untrained inhabitants have even better ideas and elaborated solutions in comparison with the results of the department of the town hall. Mathews (1999) states that connecting civil servants with their relational power enables them to set up productive, cooperative relations with strategically chosen partners.

So, study circles Dutch style have huge direct and indirect societal consequences. They prefer the highest step on Arnstein's ladder. That is why the Dutch like the study circle: the power of doing together is in their own hands.

Conclusions

The Netherlands, because of its decentralised administration and cooperative forms, is a consensus democracy. On the question to Wim Kok, the former Dutch prime minister who died a few weeks ago, what the most important lesson was that he had learned, he answered: 'You should never try to win with 6 to 1. A sip victory is enough: 1-0 or even better 2-1' (Webeling 2010). Depending on the business cycle the polder model is as mentioned a Dutch miracle or a Dutch disease (Hendriks 2006).

The many Dutch study circles – for each 1,500 adults in the Netherland there is a study circle – are a direct result of the Dutch historical geographical situation. The fight against the national enemy number one, the water, made and makes permanent fruitful co-operation necessary. Because of this background the study circles have an important characteristic. For many people it is not enough just to study or discuss in the study circles; they also prefer to be(come) active afterwards. After a study circle there seems to be a human need to put the learning into practice: the art historians will make a trip to Rome, the bird watchers will publish a book about the local birds, people who are interested in the environment can become environmentalists, people who are interested in an inclusive society become volunteers to teach refugee children to read Dutch, etc.

The Dutch love their study circles. An infra-structure, like umbrella organisations for cooperatives, exists. Money can be found eventually, especially at the local level, but independence is strongly preferred. Study circles have the same structure in most cases: from knowledge via competences to activities. Maybe this is an interesting distinction compared with study circles in other countries.

A basic question is if the activities after the study circles do actually form a part of the study circles. We believe this question needs to be answered positively. Yes, these activities, resulting from study circles in a narrow sense, belong to the study circles as such because the essence of the study circle - to gather knowledge, to discuss, etc, is also continued during the activities. For that reason, the name study circle is a bit misleading. This is why the Dutch prefer to use the word cooperative. Happily there are international variants in the phenomenon of study circles. Thus we can also learn from one another.



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Notes

- (i) E.g. non-school education, out-of-school activities, additional education, non-formal upbringing, non-certificated education, personalised education, subsidiary education, leisure (time) activities, interest-related education, extended education, open education, hobby schools, individualised education, extra-curricular education, unofficial learning, et cetera.
- (ii) The information on the first set of examples have been gathered by interviewing Michelle La Vallette, the youth worker of Hilvarenbeek.
- (iii) The information on the second set of examples have been gathered by interviewing Ryan Palmen, the mayor of Hilvarenbeek and by reading the brochure Municipality of Hilvarenbeek (2018).



10. Uijeongbu Mom Sam Atelier, Uijeongbu city, Republic of Korea

Mi Kyung Yoon

1. Introduction

Background and purposes

Mon Sam refers to Mother teacher. Sam means teacher in Korean.

Uijeongbu Mom Sam Atelier is a learning club formed in 2006 by mothers who dream of ‘pleasurable childcare and happy education’. Mothers who worry about childcare and child education gather to reinforce their expertise through continuous learning. They raise and educate children of their village neighbors, not just their own. Through talent donation, various social contribution activities are carried out for the community and practice of the learning community culture where ‘the whole village is a school’.

Vision / shared values

Under the vision of ‘creating a community of learning cultures for happy co-parents’, Uijeongbu Mom Sam Atelier shares the following values;

- Share one another’s arms to give local children a variety of educational experiences, foster intimacy, cooperation, creativity and a sense of community
- Be an exemplary parent to children growing up through service
- Create a learning community culture in which parents can learn and share lessons.

Membership and meeting places

Any Uijeongbu citizen who agrees on the purpose of establishing a club and doing voluntary social participation can sign up as a member. Currently, it is composed of 141 members. The president and the vice president of each team (a total of 11 teams) are managing their teams and provide detailed team activities such as reading discussion, education service, and guidance on career experiences. With an active partnership with the department in charge of Uijeongbu City, regular free study room is supported from the Uijeongbu Lifelong Education Vision Center.

Leadership structure / dynamics of circles and coevolution of members

The Mom Sam Atelier is operated as a horizontal consultation system among the members, based on the president and the team representative. They share experiences and suggestions through the website and the Social Network Service (SNS), and hold regular evaluation meetings to find improvement points and the direction of activities.

2. Major activities and expected results

Regular learning meetings to enhance professionalism

A regular learning group is run for each team as class preparation for child development learning research and for creating parishes. Ideas and activities are actively shared through online (cafe.naver.com/aiatelier). Also, in connection with the Uijeongbu City government, they provide upskilling education for Mom Sam instructors, in order to foster citizen instructors and enhance professionalism in play-learning centers for women who have interrupted their careers. This builds a warm trust relationship like a mother's womb, and presents a model of learning where everyone is happy with their children.

Uijeongbu Mother's Play School Project

A variety of play programs are provided, such as ecology classroom, traditional play, board game, and art play by visiting dual-earner couple and low-income family children using care classrooms in local elementary schools. At the Uijeongbu Lifelong Learning Exhibition they



operate a family play camp where all families enjoy various activities and offers lectures on *Maternal Parent Mentoring Classes* and *Lecturers' Job Training* to promote a play-learning culture. Through this project, club members realized a mechanism of co-evolution that creates learning-type jobs as citizen instructors, and provides an opportunity for communities to have specialized urban competitiveness.



Happiness of Sharing, various social volunteer activities

One of the important shared values of the club is the realization of a vibrant learning community where smiles bloom together with your fellow neighbours. To this end, members provide various volunteer activities for the local community, including cooking services, eco-learning instruction, child care, history and culture, and the experience of guidance for those who are considered to be multicultural, disabled, single, or elderly people living alone and in orphanages.





External networking

The clubs are growing by sharing ideas and maintaining cooperative relationships among all local residents by linking the Uijeongbu City government, local educational institutions, social welfare institutes, learning clubs, and civic activists. The Uijeongbu City government supports finance, space, program consulting, and public relations. Schools and welfare centers operate social contribution activities and education programs in cooperation with administrative support, management, places, and cooperation with other learning clubs and civic activists.

3. Major achievements including current and future

Enhancing economic development of members

Club activities have increased the level of self-esteem and create learning-based jobs for women whose career has been cut off due to marriage and childbirth. In cooperation with the specialized lifelong learning project utilizing their expertise, they fostered mothers' play schools and dispatched their members to 16 elementary schools to create jobs directly. This created economic incomes through mentoring parents and teaching vocational training. In addition, the social capital of local residents was enriched through the expansion of play-learning culture.

Enhancing cultural prosperity

The club invoked local residents' interest in co-education, expanded the culture of the learning community and promoted the sociality and cooperation of the children in the community, thereby increasing the consciousness of solidarity and reducing the sickness of individualism. In addition, this contributed to creating a woman-friendly urban culture for happy co-parenting.

Promoting sustainable development

The club pursued the possibility of sustainable development through sharing economy and growth, by forming a culture of sharing and using human resources in the region, revitalizing talent donation activities, and expanding lifelong education infrastructure through active utilization of idle space. The schools that participated in the mother's play-learning school expanded from just 4 schools in 2015 to 16 schools in 2018. An evaluation system for active opinions gathered information through monitoring and evaluation meetings.

Revitalizing learning in communities

The club has strived to enhance its members' professionalism and exchange between its members through continuous deepening learning. Members have thereby acquired an average of at least five certificates for professional play education, and contributed to the promotion of a local learning community by spreading the business model through the transfer of co-play-learning instruction law.

Enhancing quality of life

The club's activities have contributed to the self-realization of women who cut off their career, through active social contribution activities, strengthening family ties, This promotes intimacy between local residents, respect for diversity of members, and the formation of local activists by promoting active citizenship.

Improve local child relationships and foster emotion

The work is contributing to the social development and creativity of children through friendly trust and continuous exchange between the citizen lecturer and the local children. Warm educational instruction is like a mother's heart, rather than the discipline of education. It also strengthens communication skills between family members, through play and conversation.

Expanding co-education culture and reducing private education costs

Through the educational presentations and mentoring, parents not only at Uijeongbu City but also at other cities can transfer their know-how, spread the play-learning culture and contribute to the reduction of private education expenses by providing regular programs for children of dual-income families and single parent families.



Practice sharing for living together

The club contributes to self-realization by raising awareness of members' participation in society through the practice of volunteering or talent donation; and by learning and sharing



through various community service activities. It is also enhancing social integration and solidarity through active exchanges and communication with local residents.

4. Key Success Factors

The reasons for the club's success are as follows:

Continuous reflection

They shared the details of class review and activity reporting by teams on the online website and SNS, and sought improvement and development plans through collective review through regular evaluation meetings.

Clear vision

They share the value of the joy of living together under the goal of *Happy Parenting, Pleasant Education*, and have a clear vision for the future such as is expressed in the publication of books and the establishment of a play-learning center.

Leadership structure

All members are practising learning and sharing the reality that they can always do things together with everyone. They have established a leadership structure of equality and harmony by creating an environment of leading and voluntary clubs.

Co-working system

Members are building a collaborative system through active networks. They operate specialized projects in cooperation with Uijeongbu City government, schools, related organizations, and learning clubs. By sharing roles through an active collaborative system, they maximize the efficiency of their business and achieve win-win results.

5. Implications or suggestion for policy-makers

Implications

We can see through the Mom Sam club activities a positive improvement in the relationship of local children and a heightened sense of emotion. It has also been revealed that the educational efforts of private education, which is competitive in private education sites, is contributing to the development of social skills and creativity of children through the formation of close trust, and the continuous exchange of local children through warm educational guide like a mother's heart. In addition, this has helped strengthen family communication skills through play and conversation with mother teachers such as parents.

The Mom Sam club has a *helping-each-other* system. As a result this type of educational culture has spread. It has also had the effect of reducing private education expenses, which are one of the chronic social problems of Korea. Ultimately, the Mom Sam club is growing into a community that practices sharing for living together.

Steps to sustainability

We offer policy-makers the following suggestions for sustainable activities:

- Provide space support for continuous learning for learning clubs
- Provide budget support to strengthen the capacity of learning clubs and promote their activities
- Support a network system of related organizations for the community contribution of learning clubs
- Support the development and operation of city-specific lifelong learning projects mainly based on learning clubs
- Support events to promote achievement and share performance, such as learning club performance presentations
- Establish partnerships for learning clubs and regular consultations with policy-makers
- Create a publicity system for spreading learning activities and providing information.





11. Osan City Lifelong Learning Circle: Literacy Education Lecturer Group. 'Osan City Literary Workshop'

Su Jeong Moon

1. Introduction

Background and purposes

To study and practise adult literacy education that is appropriate to the characteristics of Osan in 2016, a group of volunteer literacy lecturers formed the learning circle entitled Osan City Literary Workshop. This circle aims to help illiterate people live a rich personal subjective life and to revitalize literacy education in the city of Osan.

Vision and shared values

The ultimate goal of the Osan City Literary Workshop is to improve the quality of life of illiterate citizens in Osan City. To this end, members of the Osan City Literary Workshop have continuously conducted in-house and off-site networking. This also aimed to give high quality education to illiterate citizens, and to literacy instructors who are the members of the circle. These are growing in skill through continuous competency development training.

Membership and leadership structure

A total of 15 members are made up of volunteers, including the president, vice-president, general affairs, and secretary. They select leaders (executives) according to the rules of the learning circle. The president of the workshop is currently selected by a majority vote of members.

Source of budget and resources

There are two operating budgets for a learning circle, the Osan City Literary Workshop circle membership fee; and a subsidy by Osan city through the City's public offering projects.

2. Major activities and expected results

Regular meetings to enhance professionalism

The first activity of the Osan City Literary Workshop was to promote experiential learning including field trips to raise the level of passion for learning of illiterate learners. For learners at a later age than others who attended literacy classes offered by the learning circle, the only learning opportunity until them has been to learn Korean language in the classroom. The instructors who are members of the Osan City Literary Workshop wanted to give these learners a chance to see, hear and feel on the ground, through various real-experience classes.

To answer the question *What activities will help improve the learners' motivation to learn?* and to promote adult literacy education, regular meetings are held once a week. Additionally, all the literary lecturers in Osan city, city officers in charge of the literary education, and staff of the relevant organizations attend the meeting once a month.



Development of supplementary teaching aid materials

For the consideration of adult learners and for iterative learning, members of the Osan City Literary Workshop developed supplementary teaching materials through the collaboration of its members. The person who is in charge of literacy education in Osan City has informed the public of projects which the learning circle can utilize. The learning circle submitted a proposal for developing literacy teaching aid material to a public offering project, and secured a budget. Finally, the circle published a supplemental textbook for literacy education in Osan City, under the name of the Osan City Literacy Teachers' Association in 2017.



Running literary classes

Because the workshop is composed of literary instructors, they knew well the situation of literacy education in Osan. The literacy educators in Osan and other cities in Korea use literacy education textbooks developed by the National Institute of Lifelong Education (NILE). Because continuous iterative learning is very important to literary learners, the instructors made sure to give sufficient consideration and repeat learning to adult learners.



External networking

Every year, the members have participated in the National Literacy Teacher Conference, learned adult literacy education in other cities, and shared effective teaching methods with adult literacy instructors in other cities.



3. Key Success Factors

Over nearly five years, from September 2014 to the end of 2018, three main factors have allowed the Osan City Literary Workshop to grow into a successful learning circle.

Shared common goal

The Osan City Literary Workshop members have common interests and common goals. Interests in adult literacy education. A common goal is solving illiteracy.



Consideration among members

The Osan City Literary Workshop members are made up of people aged from their thirties to their sixties, with various ages and diverse backgrounds. It is important to complement one another's weaknesses, to learn strengths from one another, and to care for members.

Strong supporters

Close cooperation with the city education office has been a very important success factor in the growth of the Osan City Literary Workshop. Local government officials have given unsparing generous support to promoting the learning circle, so that the ideas of the Osan City Literary Workshop can be realized in business. This enabled members of learning circles to be encouraged.

4. Major future plan

Approaching its sixth year as a learning circle, the Osan City Literary Workshop plans to establish an advanced lifelong education model that gets together adult literacy education efforts in Osan City, by utilizing the education institutions' lecturer pool. Finding new learners through the 'Visiting Korean Language Classroom,' which opens illiteracy classes in places where learners can easily access, has been promoted for the first time this year. This will continue till the last day, when there is no illiterate person left in Osan city, and the learning circle and the Osan City Literary Workshop will be in this together.





5. Implications and suggestions for policy-makers

For learning circles to grow, there are five key resources required: budget or subsidies; learning space and place; competency-building training; community activities; and consulting.

Budget (subsidies)

The Osan City Literary Workshop applied for a public offering project offered by Osan City to support the learning circle in the City. Without the information provided by the City government official, the learning circle could not apply for the project from the City. In other words, it is important for City officers to provide information to the learning circles, so that they can obtain the necessary resources from the City and other public organizations for various learning activities to promote illiteracy education activities.

Learning space and place

There are 254 'Stepping Bridge' classes throughout Osan. A Stepping Bridge class is a place which can be used free of charge for citizen's learning meetings, by utilizing idle space in Osan City. This helps the learning community to have regular learning sessions or meetings. The provision of a place at city level for learning circles is a great help to activate and to vitalize learning circles.



Competency-building education

Not only is educational support needed to enhance the personal skills of each member. Also there are education needs to strengthen the capabilities of the entire membership of the learning circle. It would be better if the city government can provide education to strengthen the capacity of all members of learning circles.



Community activities

If opportunities to utilize the results derived from learning circle activities are not provided, the activities of learning circles will be meaningless. Thus, it is important to provide opportunities for learning circles to develop their talents so that they can feel a sense of achievement and fulfilled.

Consulting

If there is a problem which is difficult for members to solve within a learning circle, members can find a solution through consulting with outside experts. Actively using consulting advice on the direction and contents of activities that learning circles seek can greatly help the learning circles to grow. At that point, the most important factor in the growth of learning circles is the attention of the government official and close communication with the learning circles.



12. Review – some key issues and implications

Chris Duke and Heribert Hinzen

Where did study circles come from and where are they found?

‘Adult education’ in the sense most widely used, and with methods employed from the late 18th and the 19th centuries, was developed and practised mainly in Scandinavia, where it remains strong in a context and tradition of active participatory citizenship. It spread with the emergence of modern democratic European States through to the present day,

So it is not surprising that three of the eight non-Korean studies here are from Norway or Sweden, and a further three from other North European countries: Ireland, The Netherlands and Scotland. The idea that people can and need to learn throughout their lives can be found in many if not most societies, some going back centuries and millennia in some. It is also well known that they do this better if they make the essential choices about what, where and how they learn themselves. Partly for this reason we tend to prefer talking about learners and learning rather than education and students. That does not mean learners need no help or resources. In these studies it is useful to compare the amount and detail, or the absence, of strong framing – rules and regulations, facilities and course schedules – compared with a very non-directive learner and local group emphasis.

As with learning cities, learning centres and other arrangements, such local self-directed group learning has come to feature in the policies of many of the intergovernmental, national and civil society bodies which frame policy formulation today. In many countries voluntary-based study circles are becoming recognised as the most basic and local level of active communitarian learning; the level at which grander schemes and ambitions for learning societies come to flourish or crunch to a grinding halt.

This project was conceived and completed within a few months period as a NILE initiative with UIL and involvement of other international colleagues (thus global-national-local). It raises issues of interest and importance for the successful growth of study circles in different national and sub-national soils: different in history, culture, traditions and the practice of politics and governance, also different economic circumstances. The purposes and sought-after outcomes also vary greatly, as we see here: some are concerned with people excluded by intellectual difficulty, isolation and other obstacles to sociable learning; others more with economic development; others again for robustly active and participatory democracy.

The flow of ideas and perhaps study circle ‘models’ tends to follow old colonial ‘north-to-south’ routes. In general, if slowly, this is changing, as this project focusing on Korea may show. Globally speaking, the countries represented and referred to here are all wealthy in terms of GDP and PCI. A larger study would not only show how inequality and disadvantage feature among concerns for study circles (or essentially similar arrangements under different names) in these generally literate and affluent countries, but also how ‘study circles’ occur and what they do also, in poorer countries. This may be a subject of more pressing and



immediate interest to UIL than to RoK, but it is universally relevant too, as the years 2015-2030 for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) slip by.

Shaping this study to help inform and encourage support for study circles in Korea within tight time and resource constraints presents a problem despite the clear and precise definition adopted. There are other kinds and uncountable numbers of learning groups that qualify as ‘study circles’, often running for many years as some members leave or die and others join. They are unseen and entirely self-directed; all but invisible to those who do not belong; but important to people’s living and learning. Very important to one of us who knows three OECD countries well are book clubs or reading circles, music groups, walking groups, and eco-oriented natural history and similar groups. All these interest-focused kinds of study circles are self-organising and entirely without budgets, grants or paid-for resources. They are usually (but not always) groups of well-educated middle class later-life people with keen artistic, cultural, historical, intellectual interests. They greatly enrich the quality of life of local communities, building webs of mutual support and active civic life.

Another ‘hiding place’ of study circles is within larger organisations for adult learning and education such as many local authorities provide or assist. Their remit may be wider, including skill training (like computing and IT, languages, professional updating) and hobby courses for the many things that people enjoy doing. By being in such an organisation study circles enjoy support and the often unpaid use of premises and facilities. Depending on national culture, traditions and personal wealth, fees may also be paid. Strong mixed-identity and mixed-method places, often collectively called Community Learning Centres (CLC), thus add to the total of hard-to-see self-directed study circles. One intended Australian case for this project was an iconic long-established community centre in industrial far-north Melbourne, the Hume Global Learning Village (HGLV). Even as early as the 1970s there grew up in some Australian State Neighbourhood Centres for women’s mutual support self-affirmation, self-organisation, and subsequent social action.

It is not at once obvious what for example an interested Korean city will make of this. The lesson may not be directly to try building study circles, but to ensure that every neighbourhood had some facility where people can meet freely, confidently and informally, and a culture and environment of self-directed personal growth can lead to study circle formation. In the right political environment, such ‘community learning centre’ settings can be flowerbeds for study centres to blossom.

In conclusion and looking wider.

This modest study opens a window onto an important, fast growing locality- and interest-based movement towards building an active, confident well-informed and enabled citizenry. Such a people will be stronger and more able to cope with and help direct rapid and unsettling change into which the high-tech ‘4th industrial revolution’ thrusts us.

The world that we are moving into, and are even already in, is so unfamiliar that policy-making and the new understanding that needs to precede it, and must be widely shared, is lacking. Those labouring away to enrich the learning and life of the community and all of its



members cannot share what they do not themselves understand. It is well recognised by most thought leaders and other interested in these dynamics that many trends are accelerating and coming together faster. As this happens the new demands that they put on all societies at different rates become ever more complex, interactive and serious. This is so unfamiliar and often frightening that many political leaders and other power-brokers prefer to deny their existence or their seriousness. Climate change deniers are one prominent example.

This means that there is a strong case to deepen and widen the present study, and to see far how largely self-directed gently enabled and supported study circles can be a key means to civic understanding and capability that will underpin more social, economic and individual healthy, enjoyable and productive living, prevent conflicting and social decay. Whether and how it can be nurtured in diverse countries and settings, and with what success in the face of rising urgency we really do not know. What we do glimpse through these studies is a huge level of quiet community activity: community learning which attracts few public resources and little public and political notice.

Whole nations though countless minimally organised learning groups or study circles address myriad personal and political questions across the full cultural, social and economic, political and ecological spectrum. We note with approbation that there is no requirement for a recognisable ‘study circle’ to be lodged within a nationally or internationally recognised ‘learning town or city’; although such a location may create a benevolent environment where such self-starting and self-fuelling study takes place more freely and naturally.

It may not be a surprise how much several of the voluntary-based study circles and their studies are going all out for support - financial, local or national government, institutional, professional or for infrastructure including buildings and places to meet. A certain form of support can be useful and make a difference as long as the main principals of voluntary and participatory approaches are respected in their actions and activities. This is very close to the debate we currently have in many countries where they are more centre or institution-based in respect to CLC or Adult Education Centres (AEC). Could we open such a debate wider into the direction - are study circles and institutions/centres in competition or do we have to search for appropriate ways of potential cooperation?

We note also, and with perhaps some puzzlement and concern, that a focus on study circles, and a quest to support them with money and other resources (facilities, trained facilitators, consultants, study materials and even accreditation of outcomes) may have two unintended consequences. It may put them under constraint to conform to particular rules in order to attract funds and other support, thus sucking the spontaneous volunteered life and reward out of them that makes them so successful. It may also put them into competition for resource and attention with another local-level trend: the CLC or AEC movements that by these or similar names have recently emerged as important forms and indispensable components of local-level lifelong learning.

We see these as two complementary and very desirable tendencies and note that some forms of CLC can informally support essentially self-directed study circles that extend the reach of



community LLL in ways those more formal Centres and methods cannot do. Big government in big States running big systems to standard regulations cannot do things that local passions – individual and local-group – do. Society needs this kind of active citizenship to flex itself in fast-transforming times. It will be good if more participatory action research can underpin this recognition and assist the growth of active local citizen-driven learning.

There is no doubt that we are moving deeper and faster into a certain global crisis that has implications for all as it is a time where globalisation, digitalisation, migration and demographic change are moving and shaking our people and societies. What roles are there for study circles, for CLC and AEC, for learning cities and regions – all trying to get close to lifelong learning and related policies, strategies or even systems in this context? Where are we with this discussion in the arena and agenda of the SDG, especially when we do want to contribute to more than to goal four as quality education? These cases and their review show also that study circles may be helpful to be a viable source for the much needed debates on all the seventeen goals in a meaningful and participatory way by the people themselves.



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