

# Troubleshooting

## Problem

## Possible Response

*Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.*

Try to draw them out but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact to remind them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues that they want to speak. Often, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions and will begin to take part. When that happens, show genuine interest and ask for more. It always helps to talk with people informally before and after the session and at coffee breaks.

*An aggressive person dominates the discussion*

It's your responsibility to intervene and set limits. Remind him/her that you want to hear from everyone. Next, you might ask him/her not to talk until everyone else has had a chance. You may want to use a "talking stick" or any object that can be passed from person to person. Only the person holding the talking stick may speak. If someone goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to interrupt to get back on track.

*Discussion suddenly stops, or doesn't even get off the ground.*

Acknowledge that this is occurring. Ask, "What is happening here?" "Maybe we're not getting at your real concerns. What do you think people really need to talk about here?"

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

This is a hard call - after all, the discussion belongs to the group. Yet, it's your job to focus the discussion and move it along. Allow room to explore closely related topics but if only a few are taking the discussion in a new direction the others are likely frustrated, resentful and bored. Try to refocus by asking, "How does your point relate to.....?" or stating, "That is interesting, but let's return to the central issue." If, on the other hand, most or all of the group are more interested in pursuing a different topic than the one planned, you should be sensitive to that and bring it to the group's attention in order to give them a chance to reconsider their goals.

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

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

*Too large a group or too many people with too much to say; or you feel it's getting away on you.*

Consider co-moderating. Often if one facilitator is stymied the other will have a good response to a situation, or an insightful question.

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

Are you talking too much or not giving enough response time after posing questions? People need time to think, reflect and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle so everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you will have a group of people who are tired or who have had a bad day. There may be a lack of excitement if the group seems to be in agreement. In this case, try to bring up other views. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they have against the views that you have expressed?" If all else fails, end the meeting early.

logue vs. debate

# Dialogue vs. debate

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



- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.
  - *Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.*
- Dialogue remains open-ended.
  - *Debate implies a conclusion.*

Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR).



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# Role of the participants

Participation is what study circles are all about. Participants must be willing to "own" the study circle, to set goals and work toward them and to take responsibility for their own learning. The organizer sets up the study circle and the facilitator guides the discussion while the participants cooperate to make it work.

Here are some suggestions to help you get the most out of your study circle experience. They apply to a range of study circle situations.

- \* Make a good effort to attend every session of the program. The group process works best when the members become familiar with each other. You will get more out of it if you keep up with the discussion and the reading.
- \* Listen carefully to others. Make notes so you can concentrate on listening rather than on what you want to say next. You learn from listening to the others and you have to listen to keep up with what's being said.
- \* Take your turn and pass it on. Give others a chance to speak. It is important for everyone to be heard.
- \* Help keep the discussion on topic. Make sure your comments are relevant and make them while they are pertinent.
- \* Address your remarks to the group rather than the facilitator. Question other participants to find out more about their ideas.
- \* Communicate your needs to the facilitator. He/she is responsible for summarizing key ideas and seeking clarification of points. You will not be the only one who doesn't understand what someone has said.
- \* Do take part in the discussion. Everyone in the group has unique experience and knowledge. This variety makes the discussion interesting. Don't feel pressured to speak before you are ready but realize that your contribution is valuable.
- \* Engage in friendly disagreement. Challenge ideas and opinions you disagree with and expect to have to explain your own. Humour and a pleasant manner help you make your points and keep the disagreements friendly. There is no place here for rudeness or belligerence.
- \* Respect the position of those who disagree with you. Strive to understand their point of view. Making a good case for positions you disagree with makes you better understand your own.
- \* Keep an open mind. This is your chance to explore ideas you may not have considered before. You gain nothing by stubbornly sticking to the points you made earlier.



# Overview of a typical study circle

## A cue sheet for the facilitator

### *Introductions*

- Introduce yourself and explain that you are a facilitator rather than a teacher and interested in the topic rather than an expert.
- Ask the participants to introduce themselves and explain ' their interest in the topic.
- In subsequent meetings at least 90 around the circle to give names.
- Folded name cards in front of everybody may be helpful.

### *Ground rules*

- Typical ground rules are:
  - Everyone is encouraged to participate.
  - Allow everyone to be heard
  - All views will be respected.
  - Disagreements will not be personalized.
  - Confidentiality will be maintained.
- Ask for consent and possible additions to the list on the flip chart.
- Be more elaborate in your first meeting but even in subsequent meetings you can post the list and provide a brief reminder by saying, "My role is to keep discussion focussed and moving along. Your role is to share your knowledge and ideas and to listen carefully to the others."

### *Identify the goals*

- Make sure you all know why you are there.
- Ask for a list of questions the participants want answered.
- Lay out a range of views. Ask the participants to volunteer what they see as the main view on the issue based on the reading material and their knowledge of the issue.
- Keep these lists and post them each meeting for reference.
- Review the agenda or study plan and adjust it to suit the group.

### *Personal connection or interest in the issue*

- Ask participants to talk about why this issue is important to them.
- Telling their story is a good ice-breaker at the first session.
- Anyone may pass.

### *Discussion and deliberation*

- This is where you practise those facilitation skills.
- Have questions prepared to help you in any possible situation.

- Remain neutral.
- Guide the discussion without controlling it.

### *Summary and common ground*

- Ask the participants to summarize the discussion from time to time.
- Use their words and phrases, not your own.
- Look for common concerns in different approaches.
- Check your lists of goals and questions

### *Closing*

- With about 20 minutes left, let the group know that the discussion is about to end.
- You might ask each participant for a closing comment.
- Ask participants to summarize what has been covered.
- Establish direction for the next session.
- Ask for comments on the group process.
- What did they like or not like about the discussion?
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Acknowledge that it has been hard work.
- On your last session, ask for suggestions on further involvement or action on the issue.
- On your last session, gather evaluation forms that have been worked on throughout the study circle.
- Ending with a pertinent quotation is an effective closing.



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# Study circle material

Developing discussion material can be as simple as making photocopies of a newspaper or magazine article and writing a few discussion questions. In turn, it can be as involved as writing your own material from scratch.

The kind of study material you need depends on the subject of your study circle. You want to match the goal, the number of meetings, and the depth of the study with the most suitable type and amount of material.

## Goals

To increase general understanding of a social problem, a public issue an organizational issue

\* To examine public policy choices:

- understand underlying values
- make an informed decision on an issue - find common ground with others
- provide feedback to officials or leaders

\* To deal with organizational issues:

- future direction
- public position on an issue

\* To address personal concerns which are part of larger social issues:

- parenting
- ageing
- health

\* To learn something new:

- academic
- job related
- general interest

\* To explore or move toward social or political action

## Material

\* A few well chosen discussion questions

\* An article or two with some thought provoking questions

\* Books, videos articles and discussion questions

\* Original material

# Assembling effective study circle material

Depending upon your goals, your time frame, and the resources that are available to you, you may spend a few hours, a few days, or several weeks preparing the material.

You don't have to be an expert in order to select study material but you should have a basic understanding of the subject and the goals of the study circle. You can always reach out for help with this task. It is a good idea to involve the facilitator and a content expert.

When preparing for a controversial topic you want to present diverse views, each in the best possible light. You are committed to letting the participants come to their own conclusions based on a presentation of the issue that is as unbiased as you can make it.

Encourage participants to go beyond materials provided in the formal program. The point is to stimulate active curiosity and independent learning.

Whatever form they take, effective study circle materials do the following:

- inform participants about essential facts;
- connect the issue to participants' concerns and experience;
- present a number of perspectives on the issue;
- provide structure for one or several sessions;
- help the facilitator to effectively guide the discussion

Use the following checklist as a reminder as you develop your study circle discussion material. Not all of these suggestions will apply to all programs.

## Be brief

Most people don't take the time to do a lot of reading. Some may look at it for the first time just before the study circle begins. Many want to know just enough about a topic to be able to talk about it. Supply extra handouts and suggested readings for those who want to spend more time and effort.

## Clarify the goals

Getting a clear definition of the purpose of the study circle written down helps you choose topical information.

## Make the material easy to read

Use plain language in your writing. Take care with photocopying. Enlarge extra small print and carefully arrange chppings on pages. Include cartoons if suitable.



## Connect it to the participants

Materials that are suitable for participants who are already working on a subject would be different from materials for a group just setting out to learn about it. Circles aimed at participants with high levels of education and literacy skills require different materials than do circles aimed at new readers.

## Use stories and examples

A story often conveys more than an explanation does and gets people thinking about their own experiences.

## Make it fair and balanced

Present a wide range of views in material for a circle dealing with an issue or a problem.

## Encourage dialogue rather than debate

By acknowledging that different views have validity, the material encourages participants to express their true opinions.

## Help the facilitator structure the discussion

Good materials help the facilitator focus the discussion, move it along, avoid tangents and raise points that are missed by the group. You can provide a rough outline for each of several sessions or you may choose to provide specific guidelines for the facilitator.



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# Study circle handout

<p><b>What are they?</b></p>	<p><b>Who needs them?</b></p>	<p><b>What can they do for YOU?</b></p>	<p><b>How do they work?</b></p>
<p>Small groups of five to twenty people, talking, listening, and sharing their thoughts on a topic of mutual interest. Each person is heard, acknowledged, involved, challenged and connected. The aim is not to win arguments but to share ideas in an amicable, non-threatening atmosphere.</p>	<p>Anyone who believes we must talk together to constructively address the issues we face. Busy adults who want to get involved but can only make a short term time commitment.</p>	<p>Help you develop good listening skills, speaking skills and well thought out opinions; skills everyone needs in order to participate effectively in our rapidly changing society.</p>	<p>An organizer selects or develops the study material, recruits participants, arranges the meetings and selects a facilitator. He/she moderates the discussion, encouraging full participation while keeping on the topic. The participants listen carefully and speak thoughtfully, reflecting their own experience and values. The group learns from the shared wisdom of ordinary people.</p>

**"We are wiser than we know." - Ralph Waldo Emerson**

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# What is a study circle?

## The organizer:

- selects the topic and the study material
- recruits the participants
- arranges the meetings
- chooses the facilitator

## The facilitator:

- moderates the discussion
- encourages full participation
- keeps the discussion on topic

## The participants:

- listen carefully
- speak thoughtfully
- share their opinions
- respect themselves and others

All viewpoints are respected and everyone is encouraged to take part in the discussion so the group can learn from the shared wisdom of all its members.

Study circles are not about just telling stories. Everyone strives to understand what the others in the group think and to share their own knowledge and honest opinions. Real learning can happen in an easy and friendly atmosphere.

A small group of people who agree to meet several times to learn together in a friendly and democratic way. They follow ground rules and guidelines that are simply good manners.

There is no teacher in a study circle. There is a discussion leader or facilitator whose job is to get everyone to talk and to stick to the topic.

The learning comes from group discussion about the topic and the prepared study materials in terms of individual values and experience.

The topic can be dealt with using a few key questions to spark discussion. Magazine or newspaper articles, books or in depth, original material are all good resources.

A STUDY CIRCLE IS SMALL GROUP DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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people you know had with this issue?"

## Divide the issue into manageable pieces.

A basic consideration in developing study circle material is the number of sessions you will have. Sometimes the nature of the program will dictate natural divisions. Sometimes you have to work out the progression. However you decide to do this, the sessions should have a natural evolution. Each session should build on the previous ones but avoid too much repetition. Also, define the focus of each session so that its scope is manageable. If the discussion is too broad it may overwhelm the group; if it is too narrow some participants will be bored.

## Incorporate a range of views

It is critical for participants to consider a variety of views in a study circle. They all should feel that they have an opportunity to offer their views in a respectful setting. You can describe various views in your overview of the issue or you can present, more formally, a well developed range of views. This lends credibility to the study circle process by confirming the program's impartiality. If you make an honest attempt to be neutral and present the strengths of all major positions, your intent will be felt and accepted by the group.

## Call attention to the values that underlie opinions

Making strong arguments for varied views introduces some creative tension and helps participants look beyond personal opinion to core values. It is in these core values that participants might also find common ground.

When participants come to see the conflicts between competing values, they often recognize that these conflicts exist within individuals as well as among different people. For example, a person who supports local control of schools might do so because he or she places a high value on freedom of choice; a person who supports regional or provincial control of schools might do so because he or she places a high value on equity. Each of these people might hold both values in some measure, and a discussion of core values will help them to see that.

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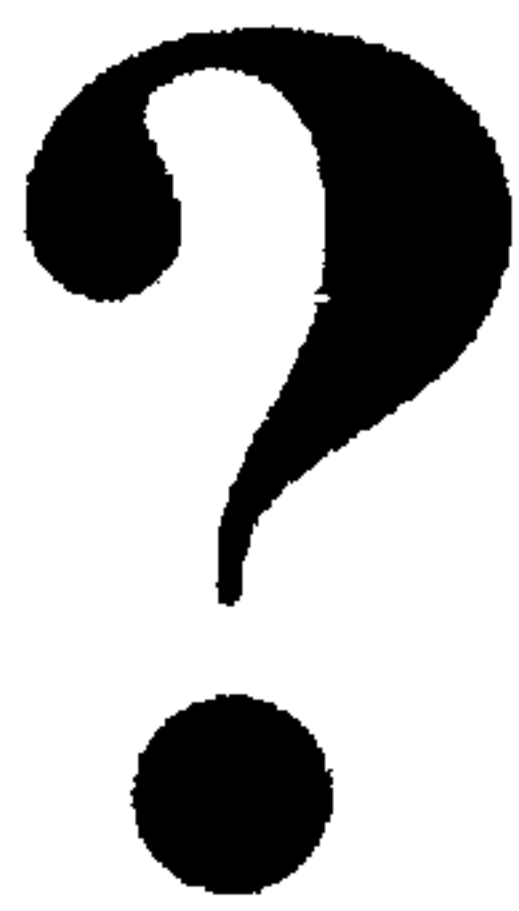
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# Questions

To help the facilitator guide the discussion

to start the discussion



What experiences have you or people you know had with this issue?  
How is this issue a problem in the community or organization?  
Why do you think it's such a problem?  
How does it affect you?

that encourage the expression of a diversity of views



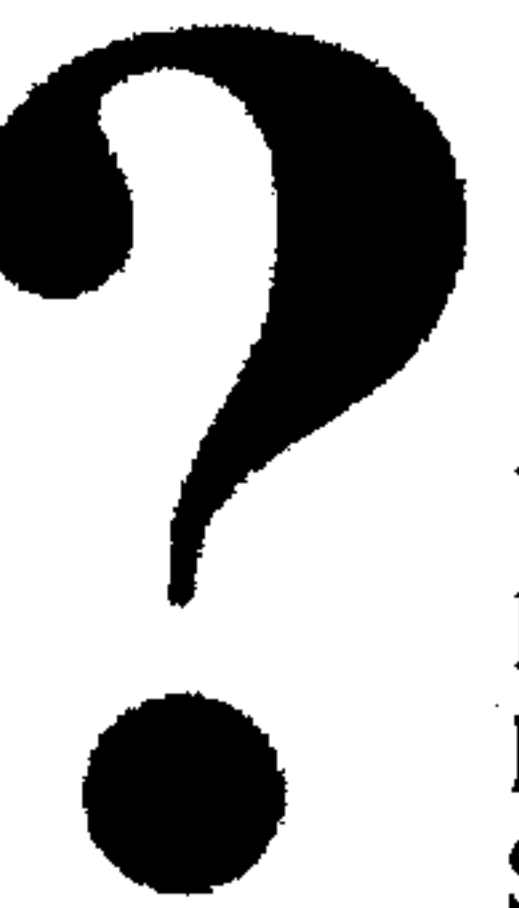
What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?  
Does anyone have a different view?  
Does anyone want to add to or support or challenge that point?  
Could you give us an example to illustrate that point?  
What do people who disagree with that view say?  
What would be a strong case against what you just said?  
What is it about that position that you just can't live with?  
How might others see the issue?

about values



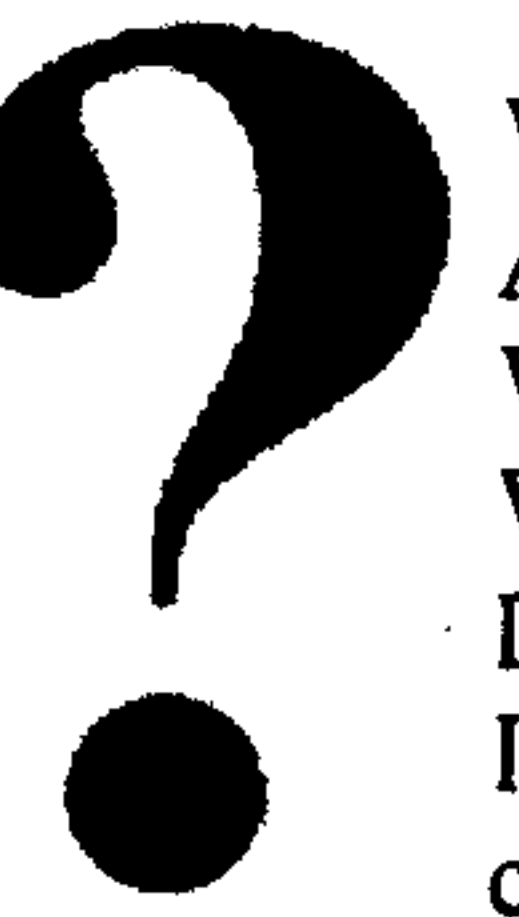
What are the most important concerns that underlie your views?  
Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?  
What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?  
What experiences or beliefs might lead people to hold that view?  
Are there any common values or concerns here in spite of different opinions on how to deal with them?  
What motivates that choice?

that promote deliberation



What might be the consequences of that choice for others?  
If push came to shove, what would you do and why?  
How might others see the issues?  
Supposing you can't have everything, what would you choose?

that sum up



What seems to be the key point here?  
Are there any points on which most of us would agree?  
What is the crux of your disagreement?  
What have you learned about this issue?  
Did any common concerns emerge?  
In what ways do you see the issue differently as a result of considering others' views?

that lead toward next steps



With what approach would most of this group agree?  
What is already being done to deal with this problem?  
What are some first steps in dealing with this problem?  
What might we do about this problem?