

# One Circle, Two Circles... Three Hundred Circles – Is It a Lot Or a Few?\*

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Often the quantity indicator is objective and convincing criterion of an estimation of efficiency of any activity. It can be explained and analyzed. Therefore, we have decided to start conversation on a situation with study circles in Belarus from this point.

It is now hard enough to mention an exact figure of how many study circles has been lead since 2001 when the Swedish colleagues have decided to share with us a unique and very effective and popular in their country method of adult education. It is possible only to give an approximate data proceeding from quantity of the circles supported by educational public organizations. For the present moment it has been lead about 300 study circles in different cities of Belarus, the most active were Minsk, Gomel, Grodno and Lida. Approximately 2500 people were involved in them. Also it should be mentioned that some study circles have been leading without any support of public organizations. They are organized by leaders who have been trained at seminars, or read a manual for leaders of study circles in which they are described in detail.

Nevertheless, despite of impressive figure 300 and considering the period of five years, for the country with ten million populations there could be more study circles. Why have we received such a result? What promoted and what interfered with dynamics of development of study circles in Belarus during these five years? Let's try answering these questions and formulating problems which will be necessary to solve in the near future.

The period since 2001 to 2006 can be named the “development” of study circles in Belarus. It's characterized by:

- **Wide scope of target groups and themes of circles.**

After acquaintance with the Swedish experience of non-formal adult education some public organizations have been interested in adaptation and distribution of study circles in Belarus. They has been held a seminar on preparation of leaders were participants tried not only to understand and realize features of study circle, its difference from other forms of training, but to work out the program of “pilot” study circles, to define target groups, time and a place of carrying it out. There were no restrictions in choice of a theme and questions for discussion, as study circle supposes openness for participation of all the adults. So, public organizations and their leaders have been interested in receiving as much of various experience of carrying out of “pilot” study circles as possible.

The analysis of experience has shown that study circles mostly are popular among students and persons of advanced age. Basically women prevailed among participants.

The most popular themes of study circles were those connected with personal development and development of professional competence of participants of various professions, for example, “Relations between men and women”, “Methods of active learning in high school”, “How to find a good job?”, “Female leadership”, etc. Also themes which offered new knowledge in various spheres of living were popular, for example, “Aromatherapy”, “Chinese tea ceremony”, “Astrology”. Interest among population excited themes connected with studying culture of the city, education of children, studying languages.

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- **Carrying out study circles for leaders was a goal itself, but the leaders did not consider it as a mean for making changes in a social life.**

Initially the main purpose of leaders was to adapt study circle to the Belarusian conditions. Therefore, the primary goals of their activity were: definition of opportunities and restrictions of study circle as a method of non-formal adult education; satisfaction of cognitive needs of its participants, finding optimal means of work with target groups.

Such a situation is quite explainable and comprehensible to the initial stage. However, from a position of prospects and main principles it becomes clear, that activity of study circles should be directed to achievement of goals which public organizations have and which are connected with social changes. And such a tendency has already appeared in activity of leaders, owing to opportunities to exchange experience and to discuss the successes and difficulties at carrying out of study circles within the limits of seminars for skilled leaders, consultations with trainers and information-methodical coordinators of the Resource program of study circles in Belarus.

In this connection, it is possible to mark out two types of study circles which differently reach these purposes.

**The first type of study circles** supposes rendering indirect influence on changes in a society, promotes increase of activity of citizens. These are circles where participants examine the most different themes, and leaders, building their activity on such principles as tak-

ing responsibility, aspire at certain changes in a social life though it's difficult to reveal and back trace them.

**The second type of study circles** – the circles supported by public organizations and used by them as means for achievement of definite purposes and tasks which are connected with the activity of organization. For example, organization with ecological orientation makes circles on ecological subjects, solving problems of protection of the environment.

In the conclusion we should note that public organizations can play an important role in strengthening the tendency of development of study circles in Belarus. Their help could consist in constant coordination of activity of leaders, in searching and offering rooms for activity, materials for carrying out of study circles, in rendering methodical support, in gathering the participants, distribution of the information, and also in joint definition of a direction of development of movement of educational circles and their purposes.

- **Low activity of public organizations in use of educational circles in their activity.**

If educational circles are one of the forms of working with population as seminars and trainings, why so few organizations use this form of activity?

One of the reasons is that this method of informal education is slowly spreading among various public organizations, due to weak advertising company.

The following reason is probably the fact that on the presentations for various target groups advantages of





educational circles and its perspectives in work with the population are not vivid enough for participants.

Practice shows that absence of financing of study circles does not promote their carrying out, especially in those organizations where voluntary work is not developed enough or where there are no projects which suppose realization of activity by means of educational circles.

One more reason is a huge work load of those people who are active and ready to lead circles. Educational circles demand the certain preparation and time which leaders simply are short of. It's difficult also to organize circles one after another in a short period of time.

- **Absence of big customers on study circles (i.e. those institutions where study circles would be in demand as the form of work with people).**

Public organizations potentially could become one of big customers, however due to reasons set above, it has not occurred yet. At present moment there is no big customer on carrying out of study circles in Belarus. Though in Sweden, for example, the big customers are every possible movements: trade unions, associations of farmers, the church, parties and the State.

- **Aspiration to reduce to the common denominator understanding of features of study circle and its carrying out by different public organizations which support them in their activity.**

In the period from 2001 to 2006 many seminars and trainings of leaders of study circles were led by different public organizations engaged in informal education of adults. Among trainer's community there was an attempt to make a succession of programs, trainer's experience, and also a coordination of approaches in understanding of the concept of study circle. And still ... It was not always possible, so as trainers of different organizations had different views of purposes and problems of study circles, different approaches to activity in frames of their organizations. All this has an effect on

result of adaptation of study circle to the purposes and problems which stand in our society and in front of our organizations. Therefore, there is nothing surprising that each organization sees the development of study circles in Belarus in its own way.

The seminars for skilled leaders helped much in coordination of difference in understanding of concepts of study circles, in discussion of their development in our country. Such seminars were a platform for an experience exchange and coordination of views at many questions connected to preparation and carrying out of study circles, their purposes and problems.

It is very important to keep to the main principles incorporated in activity of study circles in order not to lose the idea of educational circles as form of development of civil activity of participants, despite of all variety of nuances in vision of development of study circles in Belarus. And the principles are: respect of opinion of participants, acute topic or questions, and also a role of a "leader" as one of participants, instead of a role of a "teacher".

- **Adaptation of the Swedish model of study circles to conditions of Belarusian reality, and arrangement of accents between new and already known in educational circles.**

Process of adaptation of study circles to Belarusian conditions occurs slowly and has its own features.

For example, participants of seminars for leaders, having got acquainted with the given method, do not use it completely, but embed its elements into the other forms of educational activity. For example, lecturers use some elements of educational circles in the organization of self studies of students.

Educational circle is often compared to children's out-of-school circle, for example, on needlework. The invitation from leaders to study circle is followed by the reaction: "We have already passed it, we have already known it! It is so similar to....", "Will we embroider there?"

The main distinction of study circles from children's circles is that there is no teacher here, there is the leader, and the responsibility for preparation of meetings and achievement of the purposes lies on all participants.

Unfortunately, tradition of regular meetings in free time in order to solve problems, to study, to discuss, to reach goals by joint efforts is practically lost in our society. That's why the potential participants not always see necessity to come to an educational circle and to do something.

Those who are familiar with psychotherapy tend to compare educational circles with psychotherapeutic groups. But the main characteristic of the first is their social orientation though the psychological component also is important in its activity.

Those who do not have associations neither with children, nor with psychological groups, have suspicions

– is it a sect? Sometimes it is possible to hear such a reaction: “People gather in unknown place, in houses, do not take money, speak about goodwill”, “Free-of-charge cheese you know where lies. There’s something dirty about it”. And it is possible to understand the people intimidated by different sects. But the study circle is not a sect first of all because a sect is easy to enter, but it is difficult to leave. Educational circle you can leave at any moment. Here one doesn’t impose values though its activity is constructed on development of such values as respect, activity, and the responsibility.

There is also a resistance to a manner of organization of activity in study circles. Participants say to the leader: “We do not want; we do not know how to prepare a material. Better you tell everything, and we will write it down”. Such a reaction often happens at first two-three meetings of an educational circle, but gradually participants start to be involved in process, and they like to prepare meetings together. Time should pass to realize one’s own responsibility for the behavior and activity.



Leaders often should answer the question: “And what is the difference between a sit-round gathering on kitchen which is always popular by us and the gatherings were every possible question and problems are discussed?” The study circle differs from a kitchen sit-round gathering, first of all by presence of a specific goal and the curriculum; they are discussed not to “wag one’s tongue”, but to find the decision, to coordinate positions, to construct strategy and to reach the common planned result.

• **Gradual promotion of idea of educational circles into the Belarusian society**

Carrying out study circles works for popularization of this method of informal adult education among the society. It’s evident because some members of circles start to organize them, not having special training. Or participants continue to meet each other simply having thought up a new theme.

Presentations of educational circles and seminars for leaders, positive responses of participants, writing articles, carrying out of the festival of study circles – all this promotes distribution of the idea of study circles to a society. Let it even sometimes be called not “circles”, but simply turn to initiative groups on studying foreign language, watching films or groups of support of young mothers.

Such a situation tells that people study to communicate, discuss. They rally, and it is one of the most important goals of the study circle.

Now some leaders of circles work as lecturers in high schools and try to integrate circles into the work with students. It can be considered as gradual, slow integration with commercial and public sector.

Proceeding from features of a first stage of development of educational circles in Belarus and results of the round table which happened within the limits of Festival of study circles, the following directions of their development appeared:

- The organization of a constant advertising campaign of study circles, using various opportunities: radio, newspapers, the Internet, CDs with the information about results of activity of an educational circle. The original idea which sounded on a round table is invitation of journalists to meetings in a role of participants who in the further will publish notes and articles about circles.
- In parallel with distribution of the information on educational circles it’s necessary to explain what democracy is by clear for the population language, for example, through such words, as responsibility, activity;
- Search of public associations which could become “providers” of educational circles and which will render various support to its leaders: methodical, distribution of the information, granting a premise, setting participants, discussion of the further development of educational circles in Belarus;
- Search those who are interested in carrying out of study circles among not engaged population, among parties, trade unions, public organizations;
- Continuation of preparation of new leaders of study circles;
- Continuation of improvement of professional skill of leaders through carrying out of seminars, round tables, conferences, consultations, and electronic communication. Result of their constant interaction will promote creation of community of leaders of educational circles;
- Putting educational circles in system which will result in creation of the social institute, carrying out various functions, including, strategic and tactical development of educational circles at different levels: local, regional and republican;
- Results of the study circle should have a resonance in a society, for example, to make an action according to a theme of a circle, to organize a holiday with attraction of new people, to make a CD with results of work and to distribute it among interested people.

Translated by Alena Lugovtsova

