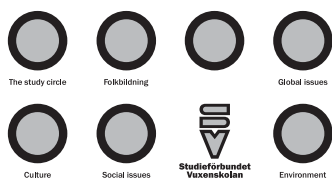


Welcome to the world of SV



Welcome to the world of study circles*

Aliona Velichko



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My personal acquaintance with study circles happened quite a while ago. And I immediately felt if not love then smth very warm towards this form of non-formal education. Study circles were introduced to us by Swedish organization SV Stockholm (Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan) who were our partners in Belarusian-Swedish project. Therefore the whole idea of study circles is strongly connected for me with a faraway mysterious Sweden which has always been associated for me with four things: my favourite childhood book "Carlson on the roof", Swedish family (this is how we call in Russian the family where there are three partners), Swedish table (this is how we call "buffet") and Swedish "wall" (this is how we call a special sport construction).

Though when we came for a short study visit to Stockholm to know more about study circle method it turned out that Swedish people have no idea about Swedish family and Swedish wall and our favorite character Carlson on the roof is far from being adored.

But we had a wonderful opportunity to see with own a lot of things about study circles some of which were really new for us. And though it is better to see once than to hear hundred of times I will start my story about Swedish study circles and what make them so special.

About roots...

The roots of the history of non-formal adult education go as deep as 150 years back in the history and lead us to the beginning of 19th century. It was an interesting time for Swedish society which was changing from agrarian one to industrial. These changes stimulated the development of a lot of political parties and movements which needed new members. In 1842 there was introduced the law about compulsory education which raised the question about illiterate adults. It was the time of spreading the enlightening ideas of Grundtvig, a very famous Danish philosopher and pedagogue who tried to change the situation and establish folk schools. Non-formal education with folk schools and study circles which appeared at that time were a good instrument to solve the problems in the society of that time.

Nowadays in Sweden adults have got a lot of opportunities to get non-formal education: municipality schools, folk high schools and study circles. It is impressing how many people are or have been involved in study circles. Organization SV Stockholm is one of the biggest and has got as many as 60 000 study circles. And they are not the only organization who is involved in this..

On the one hand study circles are 70% subsidized by the state and controlled by the national council of adult education which spreads out the subsidies and controls the activity of study circles. And on the other hand study circles are free in choosing the topics for study circles and are partly financed by participants fees.

About the trunk...

In spite of all the variety of study circles they all have common aims. It is like a lot of brunches have a common trunk. And when the society changes the aims of study circles also undergo some changes. If earlier they were aimed at spreading information and knowledge with time it became less relevant and more emphasis has been given to the development of democratic values and social changes.

How can these aims be achieved? First of all the communication in study circles among people of different social background, their discussion of various topics strengthens democratic and cultural processes. There have been made several researches on investigating the democracy processes in the study circles specializing in knitting.

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And the gained results showed that even in such study circles people learn to listen to the others, express their opinion through talking to each other while knitting or during coffee breaks.

One can immediately remember old women sitting near the multistoried building talking about everything in the world. Though it can remind a bit a study circle but just talking is not enough. There is a need for a leader who has got all the necessary skills to organize the discussion and the work in a study circle. And also there is a need in study materials. So when there is a leader, participants and study materials study circle can start.

Leaders can be different

Approaches towards choosing a study circle leader may differ. The first variant is when a leader is chosen from the members of a study circle and (s)he is not a trained one. As a rule such person is active and is considered by the other participants to be a good leader. The other approach is when a leader is known from the beginning ((s)he announces the topic) and then people apply for the topic and the leader. Such leaders have been trained as a rule and have some experience in working with the topic.

It is interesting that in both cases a leader isn't necessarily an expert in the topic of a study circle. Main thing about him (her) is that (s)he shouldn't be necessarily an expert. The main thing is that a person should have certain organizational skills to work with a group, interest in the topic and also a wish to create conditions for the group to reach the set aim.

Study circle principles

Speaking about the ideal study circle model I would like to enumerate the main principles.

- **Equality of study circle participants**, and absence of traditional hierarchy: a teacher - students. It means that not only a study circle leader carries responsibility for preparing materials for the classes, setting the aims and organizing the work but also the participants.
- Informal and friendly **atmosphere**.
- Lack of competition among the participants. Cooperation in reaching common aims.
- **Aims** in a study circle are defined by the participants and they bear the responsibility for reaching these aims. Here it is very important to negotiate the aims of the participants on the first meeting.
- Studying in a study circle is **organized and planned** since the very beginning and the topics are approved or composed by the participants.
- There is a **variety of methods** used which create a good balance between studies and communication.

Study circles as a rule consist of 7-12 people including a study circle leader. If there are less people there may arise difficulty with keeping the conversation going. If there are more people it can become more difficult for the participants to be active and express their opinions and be heard by the others.

In general there are 8-10 meetings in a study circle which are held regularly once a week or two weeks. The length and regularity of the meetings is also defined by the participants of a study circle. Usually it is not less than an hour and a half and not more than three hours.

How to set a conversation going

In a study circle it is very important for a leader to arrange a cooperation among the participants. A very important role in this case belongs to the methods that are used for working with a topic. Here are some methods that are mainly used in study circles.

• Individual work

Participants are given time to think over a question for 3-5 minutes and then share their thoughts with the others. The main ideas may be fixed on a big sheet of paper. Here it is very important for every participant to be heard.

• "Busy bees"

A group is divided into pairs which are given one question to be discussed for a couple of minutes. The discussion as a rule is very noisy - like humming of bees. And then every pair presents the results of their work which are written down on a big sheet of paper.

• Group work

Similar to the previous method but the discussion goes in small groups and the results of group work may be commented from other participants.

• Talk

Talk is organized for the whole group to discuss some topic in a constructive way. It is good to discuss in such way a book or a film. This all may be combined with drinking tea or coffee.

From theory to practice

Change from theory to practice always faces certain difficulties. Mainly due to the lack of experience in it, peculiarities of our mentality and also previous educational experience.

We couldn't avoid all these difficulties when implementing Belarusian-Swedish project "Development of civic society" whose main objective is spreading the knowledge in the sphere of civic education through study circle method. Swedish side in the project is represented by SV Stockholm and Belarusian side by the Association of Civic Education. The project covered around 800 non-associated in NGO activity citizens. The first results of organizing study circles showed that though it is not that easy as it seemed in the beginning but still possible. The study circles which were organized by ten NGOs covered various target groups: women, unemployed, deputies, students.

As for me I organized a study circle for young women on the topic "New horizons in the life of a woman". The study circle program was negotiated with the participants at the first meeting and included such topics as "free time", "men and women relationships", "educating children", "image", "literature and music", "decorating the house", "building up self-confidence". Each topic covered 1-2 meetings and the emphasis was given to changes in life,

how to see perspectives, define areas of interest. During these meetings the group united, shared their experience, supported each other.

Sharing responsibility for organizing meetings among the participants was a very good thing. Every participant tried herself in the role of a leader and it helped to build up self-confidence and improve skills of working with the group.

As a leader I faced certain difficulties which I would like to divide into two groups.

Style of leadership

Swedish study circles are similar to the circles that we have in our non-formal education. Mainly in the way that there is also a group of people who get together to spend their free time on learning to do smth, usually connected with handicrafts.

But there are several very important differences and one of them is the role of the leader and participants. A leader in study circles creates conditions for self-fulfillment of the participants, and works not as a teacher but as a facilitator. Besides any participant can try to be a leader at one of the meetings. The style of a leader is close to the democratic style of seminar leader and the methods which are used are very close to the methods used at a seminar. And for those who have got the experience of teaching or training other people it is difficult not to build a meeting of a study circle as a lesson at school or day at a seminar. It is very important to remember about the non-formal role of a

study circle and its balance between getting knowledge and building a communication.

Conditions

In Sweden the tradition of study circles is supported by the state and they are very well organized on a regular basis. It is very different from our situation where the whole idea of adult non-formal education is not supported by the state.

Though it is difficult to find a place for holding study circles as not every flat is big enough for 12 people but it is possible. And also there are some offices of organizations which are used for organizing study circles. My study circle for example was held in my flat.

There are problems also with finding the participants for study circles. First of all we face the difficulty because people don't know what study circle is and they are very careful with everything what is new. But after participating in study circles the participants find them very effective and good and want to participate more. Every organization as a rule involves mostly participants from their target groups, for example from the members of organization or participants of the trainings and seminars. And it works.

Financing is also the matter that should be considered carefully. In Sweden people pay a small fee for participation in study circles and the leaders get paid from the state. How it will be here – the time will show. In our study circles the participants as a rule collect money for tea, biscuits and materials that they need for their activities.

From the questionnaires of the study circle participants

- "...I enjoyed this form of education a lot. It is quite democratic, without stamps, with a lot of opportunities to show the initiative. You can influence the process and the result and it is very important!" **Natasha**
- "...I learned a lot of interesting and useful information in an interesting communicative form. In the result I am satisfied a lot with talking with interesting people. Besides I have got new friends and I hope to continue our friendship." **Anna**
- "...I tried to participate actively in the discussions, was open and sincere in communication with others." **Ilona**
- "...the form of organizing meetings was very free – in talking, discussing, with sense of humour – it is great. It is very important that in the beginning the leader emphasized that every participant is responsible for preparing material for some meeting. And in my opinion it worked. May be this is the main difference of this form of education from the others." **Natasha**
- "...all members of the group were active, friendly and open and everybody tried to achieve the common aims." **Tatiana**
- "...at the study circle there is no need to touch very theoretical things, it means the talks should be clear, open, interesting and with the sense of humour. The contacts should be informal and friendly." **Olia**

To promote the idea of study circles there has already been created a center for educating adults and study circles are one of the main directions of its activity. May be during the work with study circle method and its adaptation to our reality it will undergo certain changes. But we would like to preserve the main democratic principles and values on which it is based.

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