Intergroup Dialogue
Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace

Edited by David Schoem
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Chapter 9

Engaging the Whole Community in Dialogue and Action: Study Circles Resource Center

Martha McCoy and Michael A. McCormick

Our democratic assumption is that we Americans, thinking, talking and working together, can solve our problems... The building of diverse communities is hard but doable, and it is surely essential to a nation constituted as ours will be.

—Roger Wilkins

Intergroup dialogue conjures up a different image for each of us, depending on our own personal histories and experiences. As other chapters in this book demonstrate, intergroup dialogue takes many productive forms, varying with settings, intended participants, structures, and goals. At the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), we work with people and groups that are organizing democratic dialogue and action throughout a geographic community—whether a neighborhood, town, city, county, or state. In this chapter, we describe the evolution of the process communities are using to organize dialogue and action, its key elements, some of the results and outcomes, and some of the lessons of their work that can be applied to other communities. We pay particular attention to study circle programs that are addressing racism and race relations, since those programs most directly reflect the themes of intergroup dialogue in this volume, and because of the importance of race issues to other public issues.

SCRC was created by the Topsfield Foundation in 1989 with the goal of helping citizens take part in face-to-face democratic deliberation on critical social and political issues. We set out to create accessible, replicable processes and tools for communities that want to bring about opportunities for face-to-face citizen discussion and problem solving. Many people and groups that contact us for assistance believe that the key to making a difference on critical issues is for all citizens to have these opportunities.

Our work with these communities has led to a vision of citizen discussion that is quite different from typical political discussions. Instead, it is
Fun and productive. It gives people a chance to tell their stories, to discover personal connections to the issues and each other, and to build community.

Face-to-face and sustained over time. It gives people a chance to sit down with people different from themselves, to go beyond “sound bites,” to really listen to one another, and to build trust.

Structured and facilitated, so that it gives everyone a voice and provides a place for all viewpoints to be heard with respect. Conflict and differences of opinion can be used to enhance people’s understanding of the issue.

Inclusive of the whole community. Instead of the typical political discussions among just the experts, or just those who are already involved in community affairs, the conversations not only welcome everyone’s participation but also actively work to make widespread participation possible.

Intentionally diverse—in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, age, educational background, and political beliefs. In most everyday conversations about public issues, we tend to talk with those who are most like us and most likely to agree with us. When public conversations are intentionally diverse, people can build relationships and work together across typical dividing lines.

Explicitly linked to opportunities for change and action that the participants create themselves. It validates action and change at all levels—personal, collective, institutional, and public policy—and allows people to choose how they can best make a difference.

Organized on a large scale. When citizen discussion is organized on a large scale, and when it leads directly to possibilities for community change and decision making, it results in new ideas for solving public problems. It also helps create new connections, policies, and energy for carrying out those ideas.

Ongoing and widespread. Public dialogue that connects to action can form the basis of how we work for social change and run our communities.

Using Study Circles to Address Racism and Improve Race Relations

More communities have used study circles to address racism and race relations than any other issue. Early in our organizational life, SCRC staff heard from community leaders who were asking for tools to bring diverse people together for productive dialogue on race. Those leaders saw the need for large numbers of people to have the chance to form multiracial relationships and to dispel stereotypes. They saw that racial divisions underlie almost every other public concern, and so it was critical for people to have ways to work together to address those divisions. They realized that the issues of race, of great importance throughout our country’s history, were becoming even more complex as divisions moved beyond the “black-white” paradigm. Because study circles help people form relationships, dispel stereotypes, and also take part in community problem solving, they seemed to be an ideal vehicle for addressing issues of racism and race relations.

At SCRC, we first began to work on this specific issue in 1992, after violence in Los Angeles reverberated across communities in every region of the United States. In 1993, we developed the first edition of our study circle guide on race. That guide, now entitled Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations: Democratic Dialogue and Action for Stronger Communities (Flavin-McDonald and McCoy 1997), is in its third edition. Since the publication of the first edition, over eighty communities have
organized large-scale, community-wide study circles on racism and race relations. Thousands of people have taken part. Some communities that have sustained study circle programs over several years have continued to focus on racism, while others (recognizing the relationships between racism and other issues) have begun dialogues on violence, youth, education, and economic development. In addition to community-wide programs, hundreds of congregations, schools, government agencies, unions, and workplaces have used the study circle process to engage people within their organizations in dialogue on racism and race relations. Some of the specific outcomes that are coming from study circles on racism and race relations are included in the final section of this chapter.

Organizing Community-wide Study Circles

The community-wide organizing process usually begins when a few people in a community see the importance of an issue and the importance of widespread public involvement for addressing it. Successful programs are organized by broad-based, diverse coalitions of community organizations and individuals. This is especially important when organizing a communitywide dialogue on racism and race relations. In a racism and race relations program, the organizing coalition must reach beyond the “choir” and engage the organizations, groups, and individuals not typically committed to working on race. The involvement of schools, businesses, newspapers, television and radio stations, neighborhood groups, and public officials helps people from all backgrounds and beliefs to see that issues of racism and race relations require the contribution of the whole community.

The organizing coalition must also be racially diverse. Such a coalition models the essence of the entire program and is the most important factor in recruiting racially diverse participants. To build such a coalition, initiators often hold “pilot study circles” for community leaders who are considering becoming part of the coalition. This firsthand experience helps people understand the value of the process and motivates them to join the coalition. In the end, community members will get involved when they know and respect make it clear that their participation is important and that they will have a chance to make a difference on the issue.

It can take six months (and sometimes longer) for a coalition to take form and begin planning the full-scale program. A diverse coalition is the engine that drives successful study circle programs. Usually a smaller group within the coalition becomes the core working group. This core working group of leading organizations takes the heaviest program responsibilities, such as recruiting a wide range of community sponsors, recruiting and training facilitators, and setting up diverse study circles. It also works on fund-raising, setting up a kickoff event, evaluation, planning for action, and working with the media. Sponsoring organizations (a much larger number than the core working group) take responsibility for recruiting participants from their membership or networks, as well as other responsibilities, such as providing meeting sites or providing child care.

A typical “round” of study circles often involves hundreds of community members and is launched by a kickoff event that gains media coverage and galvanizes even more community participation. During a round, many diverse study circles happen at the same time across the community. Within each circle, a neutral facilitator helps group members abide by simple ground rules the members themselves established. Every study circle meets several times, for two hours each, usually weekly. The same group meets for several sessions, moving from a session on personal experiences with the issue, to examining different views about the nature of the issue and how to address it, and finally considering the actions they would like to take to make a difference on the issue. At the end of the round, a large-scale action forum provides a chance for participants from all the study circles to meet as a large group and to find ways to work on the action ideas they developed in their individual circles.

For effective recruitment, organizers must explain that participants will have the opportunity for both dialogue and action. The dichotomy of “talking versus acting” is misleading with any public issue, but even more so when it comes to race. When there is a framework that leads the dialogue to possibilities for taking action, people can experience the discussion and action as parts of a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. People should know that the study circle process will not lead them to a particular viewpoint or require them to take action, but will provide opportunities to move to action of their own choosing.

A Few Notes on Methods

Community-wide study circle programs are based on an inclusive organizing model that connects each study circle to the whole community and that connects dialogue to the potential for action. Without the change-oriented organizing context, the small-group dialogues would not have as strong a potential for making a difference at the community level. The flip
side of this is also true: without the transformational power of the small-group process, the large-scale program would not have the same kinds of impacts.

As described above, a diverse organizing group is at the heart of a successful program. Within its overall work to create a large-scale program, several processes are central.

The Small-Group Process

In a community-wide program, each study circle of eight to twelve diverse people generally meets weekly for five two-hour sessions. Group members are there because they have been invited to participate in a democratic, collaborative process to learn about the issue from each other, and to find ways to address it. They understand that their circle is one of many in a community-wide effort, and that they will have the chance to take their action ideas back to the community as a whole. During the course of the sessions, group members have the chance to uncover areas of agreement and common concern, but the study circle does not require consensus.

The group sets its own ground rules for the discussion. Facilitators begin by eliciting common ground rules from the group, which frequently include confidentiality, sharing “air time,” speaking up if you are offended, refraining from personalizing disagreements, seeking first to understand and then to be understood, and speaking for yourself and not for others. Facilitators then review the agreed-upon ground rules at the start of every session, and the group members know that everyone shares responsibility for keeping this agreement. Throughout all their meetings, the facilitator helps move the discussion along and helps to ensure that participants have the chance to consider all points of view. The facilitator also refrains from disclosing her or his own point of view, in order to help group members feel safe in expressing their opinions.

Small-Group Facilitation

The most important factor in the effectiveness of the small-group dialogue is the quality of the facilitation. An effective study circle facilitator is one who remains neutral, is comfortable with diverse perspectives and the possibility of conflict, and can draw out quiet people or manage those who try to dominate the discussion. In many study circle programs, particularly those on race, organizers provide biracial cofacilitators for each study circle. This has been very effective in helping the group establish a level of comfort and honest expression (RKI 2000).

In some cases, organizers recruit facilitators from those people in the community who have facilitation or mediation experience. Facilitators are often drawn from clergy, teachers, professional or volunteer mediators, trainers, and human relations or organizational development specialists. However, previous formal training is not a prerequisite for being an effective study circle facilitator (RKI 2000). The best facilitators are good listeners and relate well to people of all backgrounds. With training and practice, this kind of person can make a good facilitator regardless of previous professional facilitation experience. In many communities, study circle facilitation has provided leadership opportunities for people who never previously thought of themselves as community leaders. Facilitators play a critical leadership role outside the study circle as well, since they often become “ambassadors” for the study circle program.

There is almost always an organization or person in the community with the skills and experience to take on the role of ongoing facilitation training, quality assurance, and support. SCRC works closely with this individual or organization.\(^3\) SCRC has also developed additional facilitation tips for leading discussions about race (Flavin-McDonald and McCoy 1997, 45).

Large-Group Processes

When a round of study circles is about to begin, programs benefit greatly from kickoff events to which the whole community is invited. These events increase levels of participation and the visibility of the program. They usually include testimonials by people who have participated in study circles; recognition of sponsoring organizations; and endorsements by prominent people who are identified with the issue. For example, the community-wide program in New Castle County, Delaware, has had Maya Angelou, Cornel West, and Bernice King speak at separate kickoff events (RKI 2000). Usually, the kickoff offers a demonstration of a study circle and an opportunity to sign up as a participant. Often, these events draw media attention and help inspire community members to participate.

Another important large-group meeting is the “action forum,” which culminates a round of study circles. In the forum, people have the chance to report on the action ideas that have come from their study circles, and to join with those who have similar ideas. At the forums, people often establish task forces around specific action ideas. By giving people a chance to speak to the whole group, and to reconnect with others who have similar visions of change, this large-group process carries forward the momentum that was generated in the small groups, builds on it, and connects it to the larger community.
Learning from Successes and Challenges

While the study circle process can seem fairly straightforward in this brief chapter, it requires a lot of hard work and visionary leadership to engage large numbers of diverse community members in face-to-face dialogue and action. At SCRC, we continually strive to learn with and from communities, to improve both the study circle model and our advice. Although each community faces unique challenges, no one should have to reinvent lessons already learned.

Accordingly, we work with organizers to help them build learning processes into their programs. In our largest formal learning collaboration with a community, SCRC and the YWCA of New Castle County, Delaware, coproduced a report on focus groups drawn from participants in the Delaware study circles on race (Flavin-McDonald 1998). In addition, we are working with various independent researchers who are conducting studies of study circles on race, examining their effectiveness and impact.

With funding from the C. S. Mott Foundation, the Topsfield Foundation contracted with Roberts and Kay, Inc., of Lexington, Kentucky, to carry out a two-year study of “best practices” in study circle programs. Within the “Best Practices” study (RKI 2000), there is an emphasis on documenting programs that address race, and examining the role that race plays in programs that address other issues. The multiracial research team is studying seventeen study circle programs in depth.4

The following analyses of successes and challenges are drawn from this varied body of research, including some preliminary lessons drawn from the “Best Practices” study.

Calling something a success is inherently a question of evaluation. Does the process live up to the goals and expectations of the organizers and of participants? Is it widespread, diverse, inclusive, and participatory? In terms of impact, does the process achieve what it set out to achieve—is it creating solutions at the community level? Is it addressing racism? Is it improving race relations? Is it addressing racial inequities? Even the most thrilling program successes are mixed with challenges, failures, and a need to learn from mistakes. Thus, an indicator of success is creating a learning process and applying the lessons learned to the next round of study circles.

The Process

Many study circle programs have succeeded in involving large numbers of diverse participants, of many racial backgrounds, educational back-
before, or who have never had a conversation on race in a multiracial setting. In Syracuse, New York, organizers regularly attend different community and neighborhood functions to give people a chance to take part in a sample study circle. This has been an effective strategy for helping people overcome their fear or hesitation to take part.

Related challenges are the following:

It can be difficult to organize the program in such a way that it draws people from all backgrounds and views, and lets them know that they can start "where they are." By naming the issue both broadly and specifically, people will know why they are participating, and what they can expect to come from the program. For example, in Syracuse, New York, organizers came up with an all-encompassing working title for the program—Community Wide Dialogue: Racism, Race Relations, and Racial Healing—which helped potential participants understand the purpose of the program (RKI 2000).

Differing levels of knowledge and experience on racial issues between whites and people of color are evident in the study circles and can hamper the quality of the dialogue (Flavin-McDonald 1998). By creating study circles that are at least one-third people of color (some communities say it should be one-half) organizers have at least partially met this challenge (RKI 2000).

A growing number of programs are successfully linking dialogue to action. When program organizers plan deliberately to help link the study circles to action/change opportunities, success is much more likely. A good example is Decatur, Georgia, where program initiator Jon Abercrombie asked the city commission to invest in the study circles, participate as they could, and take seriously the outcomes. The commission promised their support and agreed to invest in the work. This made movement to change more likely, as well as helping to convince skeptical community members that the program was not window dressing or "just talk." Another good example is Springfield, Illinois, where program initiator Mayor Karen Hasara made an up-front commitment to work with community members to implement recommendations coming out of the study circles. Even in programs that did not have the benefit of such a commitment, the explicit connection to change has been key to diverse recruitment.

Related challenges are the following:

While numerous study circle programs have generated effective action, we (SCRC and the communities we work with) are still grappling with the challenges to effectively connect the dialogue to action and policymaking. The sheer amount of work it takes to bring large numbers of people into the dialogue can make it difficult for program organizers to plan the next stage of moving to action. Some programs are beginning to designate key people to deal just with the action phase. In Hartford, Connecticut, the program has hired a full-time "action coordinator."

A far greater challenge is whether action steps that come from the program should continue to be explicitly linked to study circles. There is a concern that this could compromise the neutral convening role of the program; and yet without the action connection, many people will not participate in the first place. This is of greater concern for some communities than for others. Some communities have seemingly met this challenge: they publicize or support the numerous action task forces that emerge, but (perhaps because of the great variety of those actions) still remain capable of bringing diverse participants to the table.

The Outcomes

Study circle programs are leading to changes and actions at individual, group, institutional, and community levels. Some of these outcomes are linked to the personal transformation that happens within the small-group sessions, while others are generated by the creation of intentional "actions" that happen after the dialogue sessions are completed. Still others come about because personal learning and new community connections generated in the circles helped to quicken or deepen change that was already under way.

Many individual participants come out of study circles with changes in personal attitudes and behaviors and a new commitment to work on racial issues. For example, participants in one study circle in New Castle County, Delaware, formed a summertime "buddy system" to continue their person-to-person effort to advance understanding among people of different races (Flavin-McDonald 1998). In Hartford, study circle partici-
pants joined with the local chapter of the National Conference for Community and Justice in the first annual Walk as One walk-a-thon, to raise money for youth leadership programs that will promote racial, religious, and cultural understanding (RKI 2000).

Many programs have generated new grassroots collaborations, a direct result of the diversity in the study circles and a process for developing new working relationships. In Lima, Ohio, an interracial community choir was one of the first outcomes of the study circle program. Also in Lima, participants got together to help expand the Daily Bread Soup Kitchen, by adding tutoring and recreation activities. Interracial teams of study circle participants from Springfield, Massachusetts, traveled to South Carolina to help rebuild a church that had been burned (Study Circles Resource Center 1998).

Programs lead to changes in local institutions such as police departments, school systems, the media, and businesses. Sometimes, the institutions change the way they connect to the larger community. For example, in Springfield, Illinois, the program has led to a strengthening of community policing. Sometimes, community institutions change their internal operations. Business often change their hiring policies (RKI 2000). In Fort Myers, Florida, the study circles led to a new minority recruiting and mentoring program in the police department. Also in Fort Myers, study circle participants helped push for the creation for a new shopping center in an underserved area of the community, on which planning had long been stalled. The ground for the new shopping center was broken in the winter of 2000.

Some changes take place at the level of local government. The city of Springfield, Illinois, has established a Race Relations Task Force, made up of study circle participants and public officials, to respond to racial incidents in the city.

The Ultimate Challenge: Taking the Risk

Sometimes, community-wide programs break down before they begin. This happens when initiators fail to reach out beyond the organizations that typically address race issues. When it happens, a program might never get off the ground or draw only a small numbers of participants. In other cases, initiators from one racial background may fail to form a multiracial coalition. Especially when initiators are white, this creates an insurmountable barrier to effective organizing. This can happen when people do not take the risk and time of beginning to communicate with others from different backgrounds. They may issue distant invitations for participation, which fail to bridge long-standing divides.

There is no substitute for personal, face-to-face trust building. A good example of this was Lima, Ohio, the site of the first community-wide study circle program. When the program was in its early planning stages, black and white clergy members knew they wanted to draw the community into dialogue, but didn’t even know one another. The mayor first brought them together, but they had to find ways to create relationships and build on those relationships. This was very difficult at times, because they had never established trust with each other. This changed because of the mayor’s leadership and the persistence of two trusted community leaders, one black and one white, who kept listening to everyone’s fears and misgivings, bringing people back to the table, and helping the group build enough trust to work together. Eventually, they expanded to other sectors throughout the community. By now, thousands of city residents have engaged in study circles, with outcomes at all levels.

To return to Roger Wilkins’s words at the beginning of this chapter, building diverse communities is hard and is doable. As we continue to learn with communities that are doing this difficult work and continue to disseminate their lessons, we believe there is continued hope for facing the challenges of racism and race relations, and for addressing seemingly intractable public issues.

NOTES

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1. The largest workplace applications of study circles have been organized in the Ohio Department of Health and Human Services, the Delaware Department of Labor, and the General Services Administration of the federal government.

2. The sessions from Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations (Flavin-McDonald and McCoy 1997) are as follows: session 1: Race relations and racism: experiences, perceptions, and beliefs; session 2: Dealing with race: What is the nature of the problem? session 3: What should we do to make progress on race relations? session 4: What kinds of public policies will help us deal with race relations? session 5: How can we move from words to action in our community?

3. The Study Circles Resource Center publishes A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators (Campbell 1998) that includes the content of the training and tips for establishing a training program.

4. Some of the previous text refers to early drafts of these reports, but final reports are available. Please contact SCRC at P.O. Box 203, Pomfret CT 06258. Tele-