

# What is a Study Circle?

Study Circles are a simple and powerful process for democratic discussion and community problem solving. In these small-group, face-to-face settings, citizens address public concerns, bringing the wisdom of ordinary people to bear on complex issues. Cooperation and participation are stressed so that the group can capitalize on the experience of all its members. Study circles are voluntary and highly interactive, and give everyday people opportunities to express their voice in public life.

The study circle is small-group democracy in action; all viewpoints are taken seriously, and each participant has an equal opportunity to participate. The process – democratic discussion among equals – is as important as the content. Study circles seek “common ground,” but consensus or compromise is not necessary. Study circles provide a vehicle for citizens to work collectively to develop concrete action ideas to address community issues – action on an individual, small-group, institutional, and community level.

Study circles help citizens gain "ownership" of the issues, and to begin thinking of themselves as members of a community capable of solving its problems. Through the discussions, citizens gain deeper understanding of others' perspectives and concerns. They discover common ground and a greater desire and ability to work together- as individuals, as members of small groups, and as voters and members of large organizations in the community. In this way, participants in community-wide study circle programs practice a more vital brand of citizenship that includes taking action as well as voting.

The success of this decentralized, citizen-based approach has been touted by national figures such as former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) and Children's Defense Fund President Marian Wright Edelman. Civic educators Frances Moore Lappe and Paul Martin Du Bois call the community-wide study circle model "one of the most dynamic and successful democratic practices in America today."