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Resource Brief

Student Circles Resource Center ▪ Route 169, P.O. Box 303 ▪ Pomfret, Connecticut 06258

The Role of the Participant

The participants are the most important ingredients in a study circle. Their interest, enthusiasm, and commitment, along with the skill of the leader, ultimately determine the success of the study circle.

The goal of a study circle is not to master a text or to learn a lot of facts, but rather to deepen understanding and judgment. This can occur in a focused discussion when people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints. The process – democratic discussion among equals – is as important as the content.

The following points are intended to help you make the most of your study circle experience and to suggest ways in which you can help the group. Although this advice will be self-evident if you have experience in discussion groups, these points will be a valuable reminder to even the most experienced participant.

Make a good effort to attend all meetings. The comfort level of the group depends upon familiarity with other participants, not just as acquaintances or members of the same organization, but as peers in this particular group with its own special history and fellowship.

Communicate your needs to the leader. The leader is responsible for guiding the discussion,

summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all.

Help keep the discussion on track. Make sure your remarks are relevant; if necessary, explain how your points are related to the discussion. Try to make your points while they are pertinent.

Address your remarks to the group rather than the leader. Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant; especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may

have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

Listen carefully to others. Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak. Keeping a pen handy to jot down your thoughts may help you listen more attentively since you will not be concerned about losing the point you want to make.

Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion. If you tend to talk a lot in groups, leave room for quieter people. Be aware that some people may want to speak but are intimidated by more assertive people.

Don't withdraw from the discussion. You have a responsibility beyond that of listening. Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all. Failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

Engage in friendly disagreement. Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with. Don't be afraid to play devil's advocate, but don't go overboard. If the discussion becomes heated, ask yourself and others whether reason or emotion is running the show.

Remember that humor and a pleasant manner can go far in helping you make your points. A belligerent attitude may prevent acceptance of

your assertions. Be aware of how your body language can close you off from the group.

Maintain an open mind. You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or failed to consider in the past.

Use your critical faculties. Don't accept without question the statements made by authors of the readings, the leader, or other participants. Think about whether statements are provable; decide whether assertions are based on fact or opinion, feelings or reason, primary or secondary sources; and be on the lookout for deceptive argument techniques such as bandwagon or scare tactics, personal attack, faulty deductive reasoning, and vague generalizations.

Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you. Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do. It is important to respect people who disagree with you. They have reasons for their beliefs which are usually not dumb or unreasonable. You should be able to make a good case for positions you disagree with. This level of comprehension and empathy will make you a much better advocate for whatever position you come to.

Excerpted from a 32 page pamphlet, "Guidelines for Organizing and Leading a Study Circle." Write or call for more information on the Study Circles Resource Center, its services, and its other publications.

A Comparison of Dialogue and 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 assertion 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 position as the best solution and excludes other solutions.

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude - openness to being wrong and an openness to change.

Debate creates a closed-minded attitude - a determination to be right.

In **dialogue**, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' 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 Bennan, which was based on discussions of the *Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR)*. Other members included Lucile Burt, Dick Mayo Smith, Lilly Stowell, and Gene Thompson. For more information on ESR's programs and resources using dialogue as a tool for dealing with controversial issues, call the national ESR office at (617) 492-1764.

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