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ABSTRACT

This handbook presents the fundamentals of successful study circle leadership. It also includes pointers for study circle organizers and participants, concluding with a comparison of dialogue and debate--a guide for distinguishing study circles from other types of discussion. The guide contains seven sections that cover the following topics: (1) What is a study circle?; (2) overview of a typical study circle; (3) tips for effective discussion leadership; (4) dealing with typical challenges; (5) the role of the organizer; (6) the role of the participant; and (7) a comparison of dialogue and debate. (KC)

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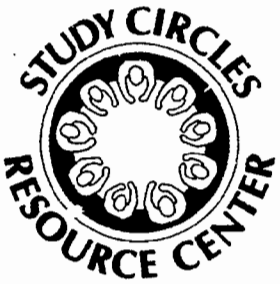

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The Study Circle Handbook

A Manual for Study Circle Discussion Leaders, Organizers, and Participants

A publication of the Study Circles Resource Center, sponsored by Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

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Contents

Introduction 1
What is a study circle? 3
Overview of a typical study circle 5
Tips for effective discussion leadership 7
Dealing with typical challenges 9
The role of the organizer 11
The role of the participant 13
A comparison of dialogue and debate 15

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The Study Circle Handbook: A Manual for Study Circle Discussion Leaders, Organizers, and Participants is a publication of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC). It is an abridged version of ***A Guide to Training Study Circle Leaders***, which also includes detailed suggestions for people conducting training programs. Both ***A Guide to Training Study Circle Leaders*** and this handbook are available at no charge for small quantities and at cost for larger quantities. You are also welcome to photocopy these programs as needed so long as proper credit is given to SCRC.

The Study Circles Resource Center is a project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc., a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC carries out this mission by promoting the use of small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as study circles.

In addition to providing how-to publications such as this, SCRC provides:

- **Consultation**, via phone or mail, for persons seeking advice on organizing and leading study circles.
- **Networking services**, including a comprehensive clearinghouse list of topical study circle material produced by a variety of organizations, a quarterly newsletter, and information exchange with thousands of individuals and organizations.
- **Topical discussion programs** on timely issues such as race relations, the death penalty, and foreign policy.
- **Assistance with material development**, by providing how-to publications and, where there is potential for wide use, direct assistance in developing topical study circle material.

For information, contact SCRC at PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258, (203) 928-2616, FAX (203) 928-3713.

Introduction

This handbook presents the fundamentals of successful study circle discussion leadership. It also includes pointers for study circle organizers and participants, and concludes with "A comparison of dialogue and debate," a piece that helps distinguish study circles from other types of discussion.

The study circle process is a simple and powerful method for learning that builds on the experiences and knowledge of group members and expands horizons by ensuring that a variety of views is considered. Since a study circle is small-group democracy in action, it requires a leader who can help give focus and, at the same time, encourage group ownership of the discussion.

The discussion leader is critical to the success of a study circle. This person does not "teach" in the usual sense of the word and doesn't have to be an expert in the subject being discussed. He or she must, however, have enough familiarity with the subject to be able to raise views that have not been considered by the group. The leader's main task is to create an atmosphere for collaborative learning, one in which each participant feels at ease in expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

Study circle leaders come from a variety of backgrounds, and many have had no formal training in discussion leadership. Whether you have the opportunity to participate in a training program or simply jump into the role of study circle leader, you'll find yourself constantly honing your skills as you gain experience and insights.

We invite you to call SCRC to discuss your study circle program with us. If you encounter difficulties, we'll do our best to help, perhaps by referring you to someone whose program is similar to yours. And if everything is going smoothly, we'll add yours to the growing list of study circle success stories.

We would also like to know what you find most, and least, useful about this handbook. Please call or write the Study Circles Resource Center to share your ideas.

What is a study circle?

A dozen people are comfortably seated around a living room or meeting room, one speaking, several others looking like they would like to make a point, one skimming an article as if searching for a particular item, another scanning the group, and the others listening attentively. This is a study circle in action.

A study circle is made up of 5–20 people who agree to meet together several times to learn about a social or political issue in a democratic and collaborative way. Complex issues are broken down into manageable subdivisions, and controversial topics are dealt with in depth. While single-session programs can result in meaningful and productive dialogue, multiple sessions generate continuity and camaraderie within the group. Reading material serves to catalyze the discussion and provides a common reference point.

Philosophy and background

As an informal, practical, and effective method for adult learning and social change, the study circle is rooted in the civic movements of 19th century America, and the use of study circles and similar small-group discussion programs is growing rapidly in the United States and many other places around the world.

Study circles are voluntary and highly participatory. They assist participants in confronting challenging issues and in making difficult choices. Study circles engage citizens in public and organizational concerns, bringing the wisdom of ordinary people to bear on difficult issues. Cooperation and participation are stressed so that the group can capitalize on the experience of all its members.

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.

Roles

The study circle leader is vital to the group's success. The leader makes sure the discussion is lively but focused. He or she models respectful listening and encourages participants to share their knowledge, experiences, and opinions. Some people find it helpful to share leadership tasks with a co-moderator.

The study circle organizer – who may be the same person as the leader – selects the reading material, recruits participants, arranges the logistics for the meetings, and chooses the discussion leader.

Participants, whose commitment and interest are essential for a study circle's success, ultimately "own" the study circle. Their clear understanding of both their role and the leader's role helps create a democratic and collaborative environment.

Goals

The goal of a study circle is to deepen participants' understanding of an issue by focusing on the values that underlie opinions. Perhaps the most important question a study circle leader can ask is: "What experiences or beliefs might lead decent and caring people to support that point of view?" The group works through difficult issues and grapples with the choices that society or their organization is facing. Study circles seek "common ground" – that is, areas of general agreement – but consensus or compromise is not necessary.

Study circles differ from typical meetings in that they do not begin with a specific desired outcome. *Deliberation* is the goal. However, study circles often lead to social and political action, both by individual participants and by the group. In the final session, leaders may encourage participants to share information about what is going on in their community or organization and to discuss action they might take after the study circle ends.

Suitability to a variety of organizations

Churches and synagogues, civic and community groups, businesses, advocacy organizations, schools, and unions have all used study circles to help their members consider vital issues. Sponsorship of study circles provides opportunities for members to gain knowledge, empowerment, and improved communication skills in an enjoyable and challenging setting.

Variations on the basic format

There are many variations to the basic format for a study circle. Though ideal study circles meet once a week for at least three sessions, other schedules can also work well. Some groups may want to combine a study circle with their regular monthly meetings. For those groups that cannot meet regularly, a workshop format can be used at a conference or a retreat, with the entire study circle taking place in one or two days.

Videotapes or audiotapes as well as written material can be used to spark discussion. Small-group activities and exercises are included in some study circles to add variety to the sessions.

The strength of the study circle is its flexibility. Every group's situation is unique, and study circle organizers are encouraged to adapt the basic format to the needs and goals of their community or organization.

Overview of a typical study circle

What follows is an outline for a single study circle session. It may be helpful to have this handy for reference as you lead a study circle.

1. Introductions. Start by giving group members the opportunity to briefly introduce themselves. If you've already met several times, at least go around the room to give names.

2. Ground rules. Remind everyone of the ground rules for study circles, and ask the group for their consent or possible additions to these ground rules. Be more elaborate in your first meeting, but even in subsequent meetings the leader can provide a brief reminder by saying, "My role is to keep discussion focused and moving along. Your role is to share your concerns and beliefs and to listen carefully to others. You should be willing to examine your own beliefs in light of what others say."

3. Discussion of personal connection to or interest in the issue. Ask group members to discuss why this issue is important to them. "Why are you concerned about this issue?" "How have your experiences or concerns influenced your opinions about this issue?" This is especially useful if this is your first session, or if the topic of discussion is a new one for the group.

4. Laying out a range of views. If the reading material you are using lays out well-defined and distinct views on the issue, this part will be straightforward. One useful way to make sure all the views are adequately presented is to ask for an explanation of each view. To accomplish this you can divide the participants into small groups of three to five people. Give each group the task of preparing a brief presentation of the best possible case for one of the views; when time is called, the small groups reassemble to make their brief presentations. This exercise may call for some degree of role playing, but it helps make sure that a variety of ideas will be considered in the discussion. Make it clear that this is just a way to give each view a fair hearing, that this isn't yet the time for an open discussion of the views.

If the reading material does not distinctly lay out a range of views, you may wish to ask participants to volunteer what they see as the main views on the issue based on the reading material and their knowledge of the issue. Here the leader's acquaintance with the subject will be necessary, so that he or she can help to raise views that did not come forth from participants.

5. Discussion and deliberation. This part of the study circle is devoted to wide-open discussion. Encourage participants to explore their true beliefs, as opposed to those that might have been assigned in small groups. One useful way to proceed is to ask group members to comment on what they find appealing and unappealing about the various views that have been put on the table for discussion: "Do you find yourself more in agreement with a supporter or a critic of that view, and why?" If the group neglects a major point of view, the leader should raise it for consideration and ask, "What are the concerns that underlie this view?"

6. Summary and common ground. Ask participants to summarize the most important results of their discussion. "Did any common concerns emerge?" "In what ways do you see the issue differently as a result of considering others' views?" Participants will likely have some common concerns and goals even though they have different ideas about how to address or achieve them.

7. Evaluation and next steps. Ask participants for their thoughts on the group process. What did they like or not like about the discussion? You may wish to ask for this in writing to give participants the opportunity to respond anonymously. If you'll be meeting again, remind the group of the reading for the next time. If this is your last session, give participants the opportunity to discuss how they could become further involved in the issue.

Tips for effective discussion leadership

Be prepared

The leader does not need to be an expert (or even the most knowledgeable person in the group) on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the goals of the study circle, familiarity with the subject, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparation of discussion questions to aid the group in considering the subject. Solid preparation will enable you to give your full attention to group dynamics and to what individuals in the group are saying.

Set a relaxed and open tone

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
- Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps people focus differences on ideas rather than on personalities.

Establish clear ground rules

At the beginning of the study circle, establish the ground rules and ask participants if they agree to them or want to add anything:

- All group members are encouraged to express and reflect on their honest opinions; all views should be respected.
- Though disagreement and conflict about ideas can be useful, disagreements should not be personalized. Put-downs, name-calling, labeling, or personal attacks will not be tolerated.
- It is important to hear from everyone. People who tend to speak a lot in groups should make special efforts to allow others the opportunity to speak.
- The role of the leader is to remain neutral and to guide conversation according to the ground rules.

Stay aware of and assist the group process

- Always use your "third eye": you are not only helping to keep the group focused on the content of the discussion, but you will be monitoring how well the participants are communicating with each other – who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't yet received a fair hearing.
- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.

• When wrestling with when to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention.

• Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other. The most effective leaders often say little, but are constantly thinking about how to move the group toward its goals.

• Don't be afraid of silence. It will sometimes take a while for someone to offer an answer to a question you pose.

• Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.

• Remember: a study circle is not a debate but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

Help the group grapple with the content

• Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem. In this way, the tradeoffs involved in making tough choices become apparent.

• Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.

• Don't allow the group to focus on or be overly influenced by one particular personal experience or anecdote.

• Either summarize the discussion occasionally or encourage group members to do so.

• Remain neutral about content and be cautious about expressing your own values.

• Help participants to identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

Use questions to help make the discussion more productive

Some useful discussion questions:

• What seems to be the key point here?

• What is the crux of your disagreement?

• Does anyone want to add to (or support, or challenge) that point?

• Could you give an example or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point?

• Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?

• What experiences or beliefs might lead decent and caring people to support that point of view?

• What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?

• What would be a strong case against what you just said?

• What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?

• What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?

• Are there any points on which most of us would agree?

Reserve adequate time for closing the discussion

• Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.

• You may wish to ask participants to share any new ideas or thoughts they've had as a result of the discussion.

• If you will be meeting again, remind the group of the readings and subject for the next session.

• Thank everyone for their contributions.

• Provide some time for the group to evaluate the group process, either through sharing aloud or through a brief written evaluation.

Dealing with typical challenges

Most study circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that study circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

Problem: Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.

Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues to see if they want to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a study circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the study circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

Problem: An aggressive person dominates the discussion.

Possible responses: As the leader, it is your responsibility to restrain domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you must intervene and set limits. Start by reminding him or her that you want to hear from all members of the study circle. Next, you might ask him or her not to talk until everyone else has had a chance to talk. Interrupt if necessary: "Charlie, we've heard from you, now let's hear what Barbara has to say." If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to interrupt: "Joan, we are wandering off the subject and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

Problem: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

Possible responses: Responding to this can be a hard call – after all, the discussion belongs to the group members. Yet it is the leader's job to help the group stay with the subject at hand. The leader must give some leeway to participants who want to explore closely-related topics. However, if only a few participants are carrying the discussion in a new direction, the others are likely to feel frustrated, resentful, and bored. The leader should try to refocus the discussion, perhaps by asking, "How does your point relate to _____?" or stating, "That's an interesting point, but I'd like for us to return to the central issue." If, on the other hand, most or all participants are more interested in pursuing a different topic than the one planned – perhaps one that has just become prominent in

current events – the leader should be sensitive to that and bring it to the group's attention in order to give them a chance to reconsider their goals.

Problem: Someone puts forth misinformation which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts but no one present knows the answer.

Possible responses: Ask, "Has anyone heard of conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree, and there may be no generally accepted answer.

Problem: Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible responses: This does not happen often in study circles, but it may occur if the leader talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond after posing questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle so that everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you will have a group of people who are tired or who have had a bad day. Another possible reason for lack of excitement in the discussion may be that the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case, the leader's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they see as the strongest criticism of the views that you have expressed?"

Problem: Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, a participant gets angry, yells at another, or puts another person down.

Possible responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a study circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but it is not acceptable to challenge them personally. *You must interrupt personal attacks, name calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur.* You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and that encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you.

The role of the organizer

The study circle organizer is the creator of a study circle. The organizer selects the print (or video) material that provides the framework and the substance for discussions (if this is not already done by the program's sponsoring organization), recruits participants, chooses the study circle discussion leader, and attends to all the logistical details surrounding the group's meetings. The organizer sets the tone for the program and must convey its purpose and goals to the leader and to the participants.

If you have organized a public program or a group activity of any kind, you can organize a study circle. Of course, the task will be easier if you are involved with an organization from which participants can be drawn.

There is no one model for organizing a study circle: shape the program in your community to meet the needs of the sponsoring organization and the participants. While the following suggestions are appropriate for most situations, special circumstances may call for modifications.

Selecting reading material

Some study circle programs have material that is expressly tailored to their purposes. However, many study circles use readings or videos that are not prepared with the particular interests and goals of your group in mind. You can easily make such material more interesting and useful for the members of your study circle. Some suggestions:

- Add discussion questions that emphasize the way the issue affects your community or organization.
- Use op-eds, letters-to-the-editor, or short articles from a local newspaper or your organization's newsletter.
- Ask participants to bring relevant clippings.
- Contact people in your community – such as teachers, cooperative extension agents, or public officials – who have an interest in the issue and may be able to share materials.
- Ask the Study Circles Resource Center for assistance. SCRC maintains a clearinghouse list of discussion material on many issues, developed by a variety of organizations. SCRC can also help you develop reading material suitable for specific discussion programs.

Remember, the reading material is important, but a good study circle does not require original or top-quality, professional-looking material. The key ingredients of a successful study circle are the leader's skill and the participants' energy and commitment to the program.

Recruiting participants for your study circle

Personal contact is the key to successful recruiting. Invitations are most effective when they are made on a personal basis: the key is conveying to potential participants that they have unique contributions to make to the discussions. Be sure to explain the goals of the study circle, and ask people to make a commit-

ment to attend each session, not only for the sake of continuity, but also to create a high level of familiarity and comfort within the group.

If initial response is small, it may be better to begin the study circle rather than waiting for more people to sign up. Ask participants to invite others. Try to get publicity in the local media or your organization's newsletter. Once the study circle is rolling, others are likely to hear about it and become interested.

Selecting the leader

Choosing the leader may be the most important decision that the organizer makes. A poor leader can ruin a study circle and a good one can make it a wonderful experience. The most important consideration in selecting a leader should be his or her skill and experience in leading discussions. Try to assess how the person would handle the most difficult aspects of leading a study circle. Would she keep discussion focused? Could he draw out the quiet people and restrain the aggressive ones?

If the person you are considering for the role of study circle leader has not been part of a training program, you will need to describe your program and explain how a study circle works. Be sure to share this handbook with your potential discussion leader.

Organizing the meetings

Find a meeting place that has minimal distractions and where participants can chat informally following the sessions. Someone's living room or a meeting room in an office or church can all be appropriate places.

The organizer must decide – preferably with input from the participants – on the date and time for the sessions. Most groups choose evening sessions, but some find that early morning or weekend gatherings are more convenient.

Unless reading material is very brief, participants should receive it several days in advance of the first session. You should also distribute ahead of time any introductory material about study circles or about the sponsoring organization.

Establishing feedback mechanisms

Once the study circle actually begins, the organizer's role becomes secondary to the leader's. However, the organizer is in the best position to provide feedback to the leader. For multi-session programs, you may want to conduct an evaluation at the end of each meeting, or at least at the halfway point and at the end of the study circle. By taking part in the study circle and being available before and after the sessions, the organizer can learn about any problems and help the leader correct them before the next session.

Be sure to share your study circle story with the Study Circles Resource Center so that it can be documented as part of a growing trend. Your comments on what went well and how you plan to modify future programs will help the SCRC staff advise others who are conducting similar programs.

The role of the participant

The goal of a study circle is not to learn a lot of facts, or to attain group consensus, but rather to deepen each person's understanding of the issue. 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.

• **Listen carefully to others.** Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak.

• **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.

• **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. 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.

• **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.

• **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.

• **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.

• **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.

• **Value your own experience and opinions.** Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all. Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that 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.

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 reevaluation.
Debate defends assumptions 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 positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an 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 submit's 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 Berman, 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, Lally 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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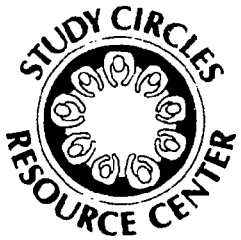
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