Strategies for Ensuring Quality in Study Circles among Students of Open and Distance Learning: Implications for Counselling Practice

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Abstract
The use of study circle is a common practice among Open and Distance learning students but assuring quality of discussion in the process is usually ignored. In line with this assertion, the paper describes study circle, features and structures, and its application to Open and Distance Learning system. Some of the inherent challenges associated with study circle are lack of equal and adequate participation by members, honouring and accepting decisions, adequate preparation by members. Some of the proffered strategies that can be adopted towards ensuring quality study circle in ODL study centres involve training and building capacity of the participants on study circle skills through workshops and practice prior to commencement of the real study circle sessions. The training and capacity building in NOUN study centres focus on ability to target learning objectives and strict adherence to the principles of democracy and ground rules governing the operation of the study circles. Finally, implications for counseling practices focused on the role of a guidance counsellor in organising, coordinating and conducting capacity building workshops for participants, with the view of ensuring quality in study circle sessions.

Key words: Study Circle, Capacity, Skills, Democracy, Ground rules, Quality, Counselling and Practice

Introduction
Study circle is generically small but diverse democratic groups of individuals that range from 6-to 12, with common interest, who meet regularly over a specified period of time to harness their different perspectives into a common understanding of an issue or problem or share their knowledge, ideas, goals, practices and experiences, learn new information and test new approaches, thus widening their knowledge and develop new practices (Riel, 2002). The objectives of a study circle are fundamentally achieved via discussions, demonstrations, and presentations of reports on readings. Implicitly, the members of the study circle are usually united by democratic principles of equal participation, reciprocity, and harnessing of collective wisdom for effective learning partnerships and collaboration.

Study circles are participatory, interactive and experiential in nature. Study circles are typically created by persons especially students who discover a common interest; other study circles may be created to analyse and find solutions to social, political, or community problems (Ipaye 2005). The demonstration study circle (where participants can observe a skilled discussion leader in action)
and the practice session(s) (in which everyone participates in a study circle, and has a chance to practice facilitating) are the heart of learning circle in open and distance learning (Riel, 2002).

In ODL system, a learning circle provides learning situation, where a group can share ideas on a tutorial topic, teach each other and develop individual and group study skill through cooperative work, constructive criticism and shared experiences (Ipaye, 2005). A learning circle, serving as an avenue for peer teaching, gives essential feedback to learners from colleagues who are working on the same body of skills and information, and whose suggestions on techniques, approaches, styles and resources are particularly valuable. A learning circle offers the learner the opportunity to organise, demonstrations, hands-on activities and workshops for which individual student can share experiences and develop communication and other productive interaction skills with others.

A study circle makes learning more efficient in ODL, since reports, demonstrations and teaching experiences are shared among the members of the circle. According to Ipaye (2005), study circle is an avenue for:

- knowledge sharing
- knowledge re-distribution
- integration of learning
- circulating ideas, skills and know-how
- peer teaching and,
- development of learning strategies

While Riel (2002) identified the benefits of study circle to include:

I. Enhances Student Learning - Students gain rich insights from the geographic diversity and cross-cultural exchanges.

II. Encourages Ownership of Ideas- Each student group shapes a part of the interaction for the group

III. Develops Reading/Writing Skills - Students use written communication skills to exchange ideas with distant peers in terms of online study circle.

IV. Enhances Teaching Curriculum - Learning Circle projects provide an exciting and innovative forum for teaching traditional subjects.

V. Stimulates Teacher Creativity - Facilitators develop new instructional techniques by sharing project ideas with colleagues around the world.

VI. Expands Teaching and Learning Horizons - Learning Circle projects take students beyond the classroom to draw on family and community resources for information, making them more aware of their social and physical surroundings.

VII. Integrates Computer and Telecommunications Technology - Facilitators and students learn technical skills as they use tele-computing to work cooperatively with people in distant locations.

**Types of Learning Circle**

There are different forms of learning circles,—wisdom circles, circle time, study circles and quality circles—are all structures for face-to-face dialogues (Riel, 2002). In contrast, Online Learning Circles are groups of 6-12 classrooms that work together as a team using their diversity as a resource to understand a topic or problem they share (Dewer, 1994 and Roddick, 1983). Online Learning Circles take place over a network in an online or virtual setting. The idea of online learning circles which otherwise refers to an e-structure is to link students and their teachers from different countries to work together using their diversity as a resource to achieve deeper understandings.

However, in contrast to the different forms of face-to-face meetings, the mode of communication differs in face-face meetings and online meeting. In online meeting, communication shifts from listening and talking to reading and writing. The participant changes from a single person to a collective, a whole class and sometime a whole school.
The outcome of the circle is a written document, a summary or collection of their collaboration. And the context of school with its complex set of institutional constraints shape a different phase structure for learning circles. The purpose of Online Study Circle is to share educational benefits (Riel, 2002).

Classrooms work together on the network for a relatively short period of time, but the links made when teachers and students share ideas and feelings often last longer than the Learning Circle. As a consequence of this collaboration, both students and teachers find their interest in learning renewed. Teachers have reported many lasting benefits from working in the Learning Circle environment (Riel, 2002):

**Study Circle in National Open University of Nigeria**

The concern of this paper is critique strategies adopted by National Open University of Nigeria so as to ensure quality in study circle. Though there seems to be no definite or single approach to study circle, one right way to do it is through discussion for deeper understanding, for weighing options and making choices, for making recommendations that lead to action, or for academic study. Study circles allow complex topics to be broken down into manageable parts.

In tendon with the principles of life-long learning, democratisation of learning and collaborative learning which are fundamental to open and distance learning, experiential learning plays an important role in actualising these principles in ODL through practical application of experience garnered over the years (Dewer, 1994 and Roddick, 1983). Open and distance learners learn without “teachers”, they study on their own and depend on their learning materials and other resources which take place outside of the “teacher”. Often, many of them feel bored while reading, studying and learning alone without hearing a voice of a teacher or seeing a face of teacher.

Many of them find it difficult in cultivating effective and efficient study and learning skills and comprehend adequately the contents of their learning materials. Many find it difficult understanding some of the concepts, and major ideas in the learning materials. Also, because of the nature of ODL system, many of them in most cases are isolated from the institution and from other students.

In congruence with the principles of ODL system of education, Study Circle has the objective of helping participants develop new practical skills or action plan they can easily adapt as a learning tool. In an effort to support students in their learning endeavour, as at December, 2013, NOUN established 54 study centres across Nigeria and provides occasional and non-compulsory attendance tutorial facilitation for the students. Tutorial facilitation is a support service in ODL and may be provided through face-to-face interaction or technological driven interface.

However, National Open University of Nigeria has in 2012, has put up a policy on face-to-face tutorial facilitation which makes study circle imperative. The policy states that, for facilitation to take place, there must be a minimum of 50 registered students in a course, and for students of 300 levels and above with the exception of Law students. With this development, an alternative means of addressing the students need for facilitation can be through well-coordinated study circle. One of the appropriate alternatives to facilitation is helping students to organise face-to face study circle at study centres, coordinated by student counsellors or tutorial facilitators in all the study centres.

As in the case of National Open University, face-to-face structure of study circle is adopted in all its 54 study centres. Student counsellors are expected to devise training strategies to train students on the study circle’s rudimental skills needed for effective planning, organisation, coordination, operation and active participation before the commencement of the students’ study circle. The
main aim of such training and practice is to ensure quality process in students’ study circle. These skills include active learning, facilitation, interpersonal, report writing and presentation, taking note with effective observation.

Assuring Quality Process in Study Circle

According to Peters (2013), in education, quality assurance is the systemic actions taken to prove and improve the quality of an institution’s methods, educational products and outcomes. He further explains that despite a growing successful track record, distance learning is still required to prove that the quality of students learning is at least equivalent to face-to-face teaching. For a study circle to achieve its objectives of harnessing the different perspectives of participants into a common understanding of an issue or problem or sharing of knowledge, learning new information and test new approaches, adequate training and practice of the skills are needed for effective planning, organisation, coordination and execution. Study circle is one of the means of improving quality of learning in ODL. For this reason, it has become important to improve the process of learning using study circle strategy. NOUN as an ODL institution needs strategies to make students study circles more effective and adoptable by other ODL institutions aiming at improving the process. These include of study circle include;

I. Training and practice of study circle basic skills
II. Democratisation of study circle
III. Monitoring and coordination of the study circle
IV. Evaluation of study circle
V. Reports of learning outcome

Training workshop Themes

The themes of such training workshops include:

i. Active Listening Skills training
One of the skills to be developed in the study circle skills workshop is active listening skills. Every participant requires active listening skill. Training workshop for developing active listening begin by explaining to the participants that, this exercise will provide the opportunity to practice one of the main skills used in study circles. The role of participants is to listen carefully and actively and maintain an open mind when discussion is in progress. They should speak freely on issues when it is their turn to speak and always ask for clarification if confused. They should ask questions, make comments, add new points, and...
express new opinions on the presentations. Each participant should feel confident in expressing their opinions and beliefs. Each should be encouraged to be positively critical, and ask at least one question after each presentation.

In NOUN, the Student Counsellor plays the role of trainer and coordinator in the first two meetings of the study circle. Trainer (student counsellor) explains that the task for each listener is to give full attention to the person talking. The listeners speak only to ask questions, to understand better what is being said, not to give advice or express opinions. The listeners should demonstrate active listening either through body language or short phrases (“Uh huh,” “I see,” “Yes”). In most cases people who have never participated in such an exercise are often surprised to discover how challenging it can be to concentrate totally on another person, as well as how rewarding it is to be fully “heard” by their partner. Ask participants to reflect on what they have experienced:

### ii. Facilitation Skills training

Other important skills, all participants should develop before the commencements of study circle are facilitation. In this stage of the training, participants will concentrate on a few key facilitation skills – reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and shifting focus. A facilitator always tries to use learning material in the exercise that is concrete and real, and relates to the study circle program issue. The trainer explains and demonstrates how a facilitator begins the facilitation session by welcoming everyone, initiating introductions and explaining the impartial role of the facilitator. The facilitator will help the group set its ground rules. The trainer also explains and demonstrates how facilitators are randomly selected and assigned the study circle session using balloting process. Then, the discussion begins and continues for several minutes. During the discussion, the facilitator should introduce some typical opening session questions such as personal concerns about the issue, and also some questions that help people consider different viewpoints on the issue (typical of later study circle sessions). Fishbowl arrangement which is round table setting arrangement whereby the facilitator sit in the middle of the circle is often employed in NOUN. During the fishbowl session, the facilitator should demonstrate skills of paraphrasing, clarifying, summarizing, or other common facilitation techniques. The trainer should also involve the entire group in debriefing the exercise, using the questions. This part of the training allows the trainer to demonstrate how a study circle works, and what good facilitation looks like. In NOUN where many students are already experienced in group Tutorial facilitation, training for facilitation may be able to omit or shorten it.

### Practice Training Study Circle Exercise

Each practice group will need a timekeeper, someone need to volunteer to be the first facilitator, and an outside observer. Ideally, everyone will have at least 10 minutes to act as the facilitator. This depends on how much time you have in the training and how many people are in each group. If time is limited and there are too many people, have some people facilitate for a longer time, explaining that not everyone will get a chance. Ideally, each person has several roles: taking a turn as the facilitator; being a fully engaged participant; watching how other group members are doing; and monitoring the overall process – a tall order! When the timekeeper indicates 10 minutes are up, another person takes a turn at facilitating, picking up the discussion where it is, and continuing.

### iii. Observation skills training

An observer plays an important role in ensuring quality in study circle. The trainer should let the group members know that, there will be time for feedback at the end of each session, and they will all be able to offer insights to each other. One of the participants is designating as an “observer.” This will en-
hance the debriefing part of the exercise. There will also be feedback from the group’s observer. **Observers should sit outside the circle – to watch, listen, observe, and take detailed notes.** The observer should refer to the questions used during the session to frame feedback for the various facilitators.

The trainer should remind the trainees that this is an artificial setting, but it will provide at least a taste of real study circle facilitation. The participants may wish to schedule additional practice sessions to build on the skills learned at the formal training. A written evaluation of the training is often more helpful than an oral one, but both will give you insights to help shape future trainings. Be sure to save time to distribute a simple evaluation form and encourage your trainees to fill it out and give it to you before they leave.

iv. **Interpersonal Skills training.**

Interpersonal skills are the life skills we use every day to communicate and interact with other people, both individually and in groups. People who have worked on developing strong interpersonal skills are usually more successful in both their professional and personal lives. Study Circles can bring together participants from large urban settings and geographically isolated Students with a wide range of educational, physical, and social abilities to interact with one another without regard to debilitating little attention placed on educational labels. The trainer should explain and demonstrate how participants can improve and develop their interpersonal skills.

Ways of Improving and Developing Interpersonal Skills include:

- Learn to Listen, choosing of one’s words, understanding why communication fails, try to stay calm, asking questions and seek clarification, remains positive and cheerful, see things from their perspective. You may learn something whilst gaining the respect and trust of others, learning how to recognise and manage stress, express your feelings and beliefs in a way that others can understand and respect, learn from your mistakes and successes, effectively negotiate with others paving the way to mutual respect, trust and lasting interpersonal relations and working in group by learning all about the different types of groups and teams. (http://www.skillsyouneed.com/interpersonal-skills.html/ixzz2rOClOIpq)

**Democratic Principles**

Democratic principles of equal participation, reciprocity, and harnessing of collective wisdom must be adhered to. Just as in the workplace, team work and good interpersonal skills are crucial ingredients for the success of study circle projects. Each participant is a vital part of the group effort and accepts a degree of responsibility for the overall success of the study Circle. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for different aspects of the group work. Their ability to work with others to accomplish this goal increases their confidence and self-sufficiency. High expectations by student peers from other locations motivate student achievement. Working on themes, teaching others, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds are important work skills. Students are encouraged to respect and learn from the diversity of backgrounds represented in the Circle (Ipaye, 2005).

v. **Report Writing Skills**

The trainer is expected to explain and demonstrate how to write a report on each session of a study circle, capturing precisely and concisely the salient decisions arrived at during discussions. Captivating study circle reports make a lasting impression on students because time is spent on the important step of reviewing and evaluating the learning experience. This process occurs in each study circle session through the cooperative production of a study circle report. This report summarizes or collects all the work that was done on the different topics in the study circle session.
Organizing study circle issues or topics into a section for the circle report will help the students review and evaluate the exchanges they had during the circle session. The choices the students make about what to include in the report and how to organize the information helps them to mentally organize what they learned. The Circle report demonstrates the quality of learning that takes place when students work together as a team.

vi. Expected Outcomes of a Study Circle
The Study circle is a tool that encourages all participants to speak, listen and take part in problem-solving and decisions. Participants observe, interpret and experience not only their own feelings and viewpoints about an issue, but also broaden their knowledge base by considering many viewpoints around them. A successful learning circle according to Bonner (2004), can achieve a number of outcomes vis-à-vis ensuring quality, including but not limited to the following:

- Efficient and effective action planning of all its activities
- Performance enhancement in Tutor Marked Assignments and Examinations
- Affirmation of participants views
- Answering a question or addressing issues concerned to the satisfaction of the participants
- Building common ground on issues or topic discussed
- Fostering and enhancing collaborative learning
- Enhancing fun and stress free discussions
- Setting achievable and realistic short, medium and long term goals
- Setting achievable objectives
- Adopting Problem-solving mechanism
- Proffer implementable and realisable recommendations
- Building relationship among participants beyond the study circle
- Building trust among participants

Ground Rules for a Successful Study Circle
Other strategies in ensuring quality in study circle is setting ground rules and adhering to these rules. In NOUN, these ground rules include:

1) Study circle can be 8 – 12 participants, depending on the topic or intensity of emotions, number of participants could be lower.
2) Reading materials may be distributed two weeks prior to the commencement of study circle but their use should be minimized during the circle so as to give every participant opportunity to present his/her view on the topic being discussed.
3) One person is democratically elected as the facilitator or moderator. The person poses the topic or questions to the circle, gives encouragement, and keeps the circle moving in an orderly fashion.
4) Participants sit in a circle with no obstruction blocking their view of the other members.
5) The process begins with the presentation of the topic for discussion for that day from the assigned presenter
6) After the presentation, the facilitator poses the question or issue for discussion.
7) One person in the circle volunteers and responds with his/her thought on the topic.
8) The person sitting by the right or left of the first respondent speaks next followed by one around the circle until everyone has spoken on the subject without interruption.
9) Participants may choose to pass rather than speak. After everyone else in the circle has taken their turn, the facilitator goes back to those passed and allows them another opportunity to respond.
10) It is only after everyone has had a chance to speak, is the floor opened for general discussion.
11) Average length of time for a learning circle may be 1 – 2 hours without interruption, but the length will depend on the topic or needs of the group. Closure should be by group consensus (Bonner, 2004).

How Do Learning Circle Differ from Discussion Groups
The distinction between a learning circle and a discussion group is not great, but there are three common differences.

• A learning circle is often more focused than a discussion group. In a learning circle, it is mandatory that every participant must present his/her views on issues the circle is exploring, but it is not the case with discussion group.
• A learning circle is based on common resources which may not be the case with a discussion group.
• A learning circle is intended to have targeted learning objectives, which may not be the case with a discussion group.

Implications for Counsellors
The main responsibilities of a student counsellor in study circle are to train and provide opportunities for the participants to practise basic study circle skills before the commencement of the real study circle. Though, the acquisitions of the study circle skills form part of the training of a professional guidance counsellor, it is onus on the part of a counsellor to be knowledgeable and conversant with these skills. This is in line with an adage that says “you cannot give what you do not have” The counsellor who is not sure of his or her ability in training students, can use a fellow counsellor or a psychologist to facilitate the training and practice workshop sessions while she or he serves as an observer.

It is incumbent on the part of the counsellor to organise and coordinate the circle training workshops before the commencement of the students organised study circle. He or she makes sure the students keep to democratic set grounding rules. Students keeping to the ground rules will on the part of the counsellor, demands constant monitoring and coordination of study circle sessions.

The counsellor should also make sure each study circle group produces a precise and concise report covering all the courses discussed in their circle meetings and ensure each member has a copy before their semester examinations. This is predicated on the fact that, students studying the report before their examination may help to improve their learning and performances in the examinations.

Conclusion
To achieve quality learning in students using study circle strategy, every ODL institution must through guidance counsellors plan, organise and coordinate training workshops for students prior to the commencement of the study circle. Such training workshops should be therefore tailored towards building capacity skills of active listening, facilitation interpersonal relationship, observation, report writing skills and setting ground rules required for planning, organising, coordinating and executing study circles in the participants.

Other areas of significance during the training include: adherence to democratic principles of equal participation, reciprocity, harnessing of collective wisdom and ground rules governing the operation of the study circle. Every participant is a vital part of the group effort and accepts a degree of responsibility for the overall success of the study circle.
References


