6. STUDY CIRCLE

Basic format: Small-group discussion among peers, often facilitated.

Purpose: Explore a critical public issue in a democratic way, analyze a problem and develop strategies and actions, and look at issues from multiple viewpoints.

Uses: Problem solving, idea generation, policy development, planning, value and interest clarification, and community sustainability.

Duration: Circles meet regularly over a period of weeks or months.

Participants: 8 to 12.

Key elements: Basic premise of democracy is of people governing themselves. Study circles rely on the voices and active participation of citizens.

A study circle sets its own ground rules for respectful, productive process.

May be established within an organization, across a community or among a number of organizations.

Discussions may lead to areas of agreement and common concern, but generally there is no intention to reach consensus.

Community-wide programs are developed, with a number of study circles on the same issue at the same time. This can result in the development of new connections among community members.

Study circles allow participants to discover a connection between personal experiences and public policies. Participants gain a deeper understanding of their own perspectives, as well as the perspectives of others.
The Study Circle Resource Centre (http://www.studycircles.org/) provides help to those wanting to establish a study circle, and tracks the progress of circles already underway.