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Study Circles are a type of community dialogue process that can help people explore complex issues, make some decisions and begin to take action. During study circles, community members come together to have a community dialogue on an issue. It is a community – driven process that recruits from all parts of the community. The process begins with community organising and is followed by facilitated, small group dialogue which leads to community change. Study circles don't advocate a particular solution. Instead, they welcome many points of view around a shared concern (Horizons Project).

Settling in

Arriving in Washington DC on my own, having never been to the US, was one of those 'character building' exercises we go through from time to time.

While coping with jet lag and below freezing temperatures (Minus 12 degrees C), I needed to set myself up quickly.

Purchasing a cell phone, sorting out internet and email options, learning the public transport system, finding accommodation, reporting to the Centre for International Exchange of Scholars, contacting my Hosts, organising a bank account and applying for a Social Security Number were some of the initial challenges I faced.

I quickly learnt that American hospitality is excellent, and everyone whom I've asked for assistance has been extremely generous.

Watching the first six series of West Wing as preparation also came in useful too. Yes, it's all here – White House, Capitol Hill, Washington Monument and the Smithsonian Institute to name a few.

I eventually and literally 'stumbled' upon a great basement apartment in a row house on Fourth Street, South East, on Capitol Hill.

Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program - Rockville, Maryland

On February 9, I met with John Landesman, the Director and several staff at the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Study Circles Program in Rockville, Maryland.

MCPS has 195 schools under its jurisdiction, including middle, high, career and technical schools, with over 145,000 students and 20,000 employees.

The MCPS Study Circles Program helps schools address many challenges such as race relations and barriers to student achievement by bringing hundreds of parents, teachers, and students together from different backgrounds.

Trained facilitators help participants talk, build relationships, develop a better understanding of the challenges, and plan action steps to help all students succeed.

Pre and post surveys of study circle sessions have demonstrated:

- Teachers better understand the impact of race on school success.
- Parents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds become friends and are working together for the school.
- Parents started a monthly meeting for other Spanish-speaking parents.
- Parents meet at the school to help each other and to learn how to navigate the school system.
- Staff started an after-school 'board game club' that intentionally recruited students from all backgrounds. It is now the school's most diverse club.
- The school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) worked together to recruit 65 new parents, many of whom did not speak English. Action Teams were also created and PTA officer positions were all filled
- Participants facilitated small group discussions in which parents came up with ideas for new programs and talked about the barriers that usually keep them from participating.

- The annual School Improvement Plan (SIP) usually represents the ideas of the mostly white staff and one or two active parents. After the study circle, the following year's SIP was developed from the concerns and ideas that the study circle agreed upon. Several members of the study circle are now active members of the SIP committee.



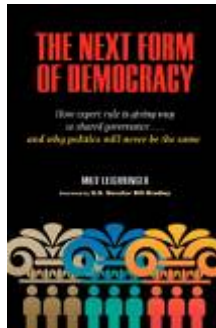
*Study circle
members
working together
to remove racial
and ethnic
barriers to
student
achievement*

John has asked me to be the note taker in his next study circle season, due to commence in a couple of weeks.

Demos Forum - New York City, New York

Having travelled up from Washington DC on the 'Chinatown bus', and arriving at a friends apartment in The Bronx, I attended the offices of Demos on Fifth Avenue on February 14.

Demos, the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium hosted a presentation by Matt Leighninger, author of *The Next Democracy: How Expert Rule is Giving Way to Shared Governance- and Why Politics Will Never Be the Same*, and he discussed the dramatic shift taking place in the relationship between citizens and government.



Matt is the Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium and a Senior Associate of the SCRC, having worked there for a considerable time before becoming the Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

Dr Martha McCoy, Executive Director of the SCRC was at the Forum to introduce Matt.

In his presentation, Matt discussed how communities are finding new ways for people and public servants to work together.

Based upon his extensive experience, Matt described how public officials are facing constant challenges, confrontation and lack of resources in the areas of education, race relations, crime prevention, land use planning, and economic development.

Along with this, a better educated and increasingly skeptical, citizenship is now able to bring decision-making processes to a halt.

However, Matt provided examples of ways in which civic experiments have overcome the difficulties facing democracy, and offered new ways forward through deliberative democracy.

As the U.S. Senator Bill Bradley states, in the Foreword of his book:

'Leighninger brings outstanding credentials to his task of documenting the rise of democratic governance. The stories he tells are rooted in his own experience - he really knows these people and has worked side-by-side with many of them. He has learned why civic engagement initiatives work - and how they sometimes fail.'



At the Demos Forum with Dr Martha McCoy, Executive Director of the Study Circles Resource Centre and Matt Leighninger

Matt now lives in Canada, however he has an office in Washington DC, and we have arranged to meet again in March.

Columbia University Teachers College, 24th Annual Teachers Conference - New York City, New York

After getting myself hopelessly lost and wandering aimlessly around in Harlem for a few hours, I finally arrived at *The 24th Annual Teachers College Winter Roundtables on Cultural Psychology and Education: Traditional and Non – Traditional Approaches to Addressing Race and Culture in Psychology and Education* held at the Columbia University Teachers College.

Rosemary Talmadge, Special Assistant to the President for Organizational Development at LaGuardia Community College, in Long Island City, New York, invited me to participate in their workshop – *Speaking of Religion: Difficult Dialogues on Religion and Public Life*.

It was an excellent workshop and included a study circle ‘taster’, where the group was broken up into small study circles and Rosemary and other LaGuardia staff facilitated the discussion.

I intend to bring this format back to Australia. Immersing participants immediately into a study circle was an extremely effective experiential exercise that clearly demonstrated the many benefits of using study circles.

At the LaGuardia Community College, Rosemary oversees the *Let Everyone Remain Free* study circle project, addressing issues of religious pluralism on campus and in the larger society.

Rosemary uses study circles as a catalyst to discuss sources of tension, opportunities for collaboration and the American traditions of religious and academic freedom.



*Dr Kyoko Toyama, Dr John Shean,
Dr Vanessa Bing, yours truly and
Rosemary Talmadge at Columbia
University.*

Rosemary has asked me to present on my previous study circle experiences and research to her staff and students in the near future.

Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program - Rockville, Maryland

On March 5, I was invited to the MCPS Study Circles Program staff meeting, where I was made very welcome and gained an understanding of the detailed organisational aspects of overseeing community wide circle programs.

At the meeting John Landesman, the Director announced the release of the *Evaluation of the 2005 – 2006 MCPS Study Circles Program: Interim Report* (Julie Wade, December 2006). The Evaluation Brief and the complete Report is available at:

http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/sharedaccountability/reports/2007/StudyCirclesEvalReport_22807.pdf

As an aside, John previously worked for the SCRC and is a current Senior Associate of SCRC.

The Report made me reflect on research that has been conducted in Australia, which has found that nearly half of Australians are unwilling to participate in further education or training due to compounding disadvantages.

Although there has been a rising level of overall participation in education and training in Australia, which has improved the outcomes for many disadvantaged groups, many indicators still show that disadvantaged groups remain behind those of the total population.

This is partly due to new social and economic conditions eroding many improvements in educational and training outcomes for disadvantaged groups. The importance of lifelong learning for Australians in a global labour market is critical as it strengthens the improvement of equity outcomes in all sectors of education and training.

Education and lifelong learning are integral components to ensuring that there is an increase in the level of participation and achievement in education and training among disadvantaged groups. Technical, vocational and further education and training sectors are pivotal players in the area of lifelong learning.

The MCPS Study Circles Program predominantly works with the middle and high school sector, and with Australia's increasing number of students taking up vocational training in our secondary school sector, there are some valuable lessons to learn here that can enhance Australian efforts.

In study circles on the issue of race relations, the Report showed that:

After participating in the Study Circles Program, increased percentages of parents and staff agreed that racial and ethnic differences affect student achievement and parent involvement at their school. Over three quarters of parents (87%) and staff (93%) reported an increase in their understanding of others' attitudes and beliefs as a result of the Study Circles Program.

Furthermore, students participated in many study circles:

Both mixed (parent, staff, and student) study circles and student-only study circles developed action plans intended to provide additional opportunities for student involvement, both in academic areas and in extracurricular activities. Priority action areas aimed at supporting staff included diversity training, staff communication

with parents, and staff interaction and communication regarding students. Finally, priority action areas addressing issues that affect the whole school community included recommendations for changes to address safety concerns; improvements in communication, including Web site changes and publicity for programs; and planning school activities for the family (e.g., movie night, picnic, international night).

By including students, staff, teachers and parents (who also represent the local business sector) the opportunity to create a positive, relevant and enhanced learning experience for all is dramatically improved. If a positive educational experience can be fostered at this stage in ones life, it follows that a healthy attitude to lifelong learning in the future will result.



Gladis Martinez, Julia Novrita, Ruby Rubens, Sojeong Kim, Marta Medina, Phiri Hlupeki, yours truly, and John Landesman at the MCPS staff meeting in Rockville Maryland on March 5, 2007

John Landesman also invited me to attend Study Circle Orientation sessions at two local schools in Montgomery County.

At Harmony Hills, John gave an overview of the MCPS Study Circles Program to over 30 staff. At the end he asked for a show of hands of those who would consider that the Program would be useful for their school. I was amazed that nearly two thirds enthusiastically responded in the positive. This demonstrated to me that the staff at the school could clearly see that this was a positive step, and that they needed such a program to improve the learning experience for all their students.



John Landesman presenting at Harmony Hills

On March 7 I attended an Orientation session presented by John and Ruby Rubens at Redland Middle School for staff and parents. Of interest here is that although all parents are invited, those representing disadvantaged groups are especially targeted by follow up phone calls by MCPS Study Circle Program staff.

John and Ruby also had all participants actively participate in sample study circles. The result was that every person present signed up to be on the Program.



Orientation at Redland Middle School

Deliberative Democracy Consortium – Washington, DC

On March 9, I met with Matthew Leighninger, Executive Director of Deliberative Democracy Consortium at his office in Washington DC. As like John Landesman, Matt has previously worked for the SCRC and is also a current Senior Associate of the SCRC.

During the meeting Matt was able to provide me with valuable assistance as to how I may be able to effectively introduce community wide circle programs in Australia. The discussion also confirmed that there is a significant and a rapidly growing deliberative democracy movement in the United States and Canada. Australia may do well by being abreast of such developments.

The Deliberative Democracy Consortium site: <http://deliberative-democracy.net/>

AmericaSpeaks – Washington, DC

On March 9 I also met Joe Goldman, the Vice President of AmericaSpeaks. Although they don't conduct community wide circle programs per se, AmericaSpeaks offers a range of commercial programs that fall under the deliberative democracy umbrella including one entitled the *21st Century Town Meeting*. We spoke briefly about his upcoming visit to Melbourne in April, where through the Municipal Association of Victoria they will be working with the City of Port Phillip.

Although partnerships such as this between the US and Australia are commendable, it made me think that perhaps Australia needs to consider how to increase its own deliberative democracy expertise and capability.

Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program - Rockville, Maryland

During the week of March 12, I spent more time at the MCPS Study Circle Program where I was able to get to know the staff. They allowed me to copy many of their resources, which I am very grateful for, and I was able to meet a few study circle facilitators. They are a dedicated and diverse group and I will be spending more time with them in the following weeks.

Study Circles Resource Centre – Pomfret, Connecticut

Getting from Washington, DC to Pomfret, Connecticut required me to catch two trains, a connecting bus, flight from Washington / Baltimore airport to Providence, Rhode Island and over an hours driving on the opposite side of the road for the first time (Self talk – 'Keep right! Keep right! Keep right!').

I first became interested (and passionate, as those who know me would attest) in study circles and the work of the SCRC over 10 years ago. Over the years I

have watched, from afar the growth of this unique organisation and the development of their approach to fostering deliberative dialogue in communities throughout the United States. Since 1989, they have assisted over 400 communities across 43 States, with sometimes hundreds and even thousands of a diverse range of people from across the community, on numerous difficult and contentious public issues such as race relations, educational reform, youth issues, police and community relations, immigration, poverty, student achievement and many more.

See: <http://www.studyircles.org/en/Index.aspx>

To be given the opportunity to travel all the way to their rather remote, yet spectacular rural base in Pomfret, Connecticut (Victorians think 'Daylesford') and be included in range of staff meetings over several days with passionate, dedicated and extremely talented professionals was indeed a rewarding and memorable experience. Part of me felt I was finally home.

The hospitality and generosity of the SCRC staff was incredible. I sincerely thank them all, and the Deputy Director, Dr Patrick Scully for providing this opportunity. Here I was meeting all these people I had read about and corresponded via phone and email, finally meeting them face to face.

It is very difficult to describe how inspiring and enlightening this whole experience was to me. Imagine being immersed in an environment of overwhelming expertise of an area you have been researching and passionate about for over 10 years.



SCRC staff and Senior Associates

Staff were very generous in allowing me to collect an abundance of extremely high quality resources based on their many years of organising community wide circle programs.

Many meetings addressed a range of issues based upon the challenges the SCRC faces in the near future. Their overwhelming success now requires them

to plan for significant future growth, with both volume, and a wider range of deliberative dialogue initiatives.

Pat also gave me several case study reports on a range of community wide circle programs, demonstrating that there is a growing body of formal research that goes a long way to collectively validating the positive results of these initiatives.

I was able to have several lengthy discussions with community wide circle organisers and study circle facilitators, all with many years of experience. It was fascinating to experience the depth of knowledge these professionals have, and what an enormous asset this is for both the SCRC and the US.

I have learnt much, and as an example, I now see the importance of the organisational aspect of coordinating community wide study circle programs. Although in Australia there is some sporadic facilitator training opportunities - this is only one component. One of the essential keys to successful programs here in the US is the methodological approach to working with a community partner in organising all components of a program. Their expertise in this area is all documented, and they are able to guide a community partner through the whole process.

My stay was cut short due to an impending inclement weather warning - Snow, sleet, ice, etc. Staff suggested I 'get out of town'. Thinking about driving through snow, on ice, in unfamiliar surroundings and on the opposite side of the road – all the while risking an airport closure, I thought this was wise advice.

Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program - Rockville, Maryland

In the week following my first visit to the SCRC in Pomfret Connecticut, I spent more time with John Landesman and his team at the MCPS Study Circles Program.

The team were very busy organising information sessions and planning for over a dozen rounds of study circle seasons across Maryland. Many information sessions often don't end until after 9.00 pm, so the staff were working very long hours.

I attended two more information sessions during the week. One at Bethesda, Chevy Chase High School in Maryland where teachers, parents and students were invited, and another at Sherwood High School in Sandy Spring, Maryland.



Bethesda-Chevy Chase High, Maryland

Sherwood High School was of particular interest. One of the action outcomes of a previous round of study circles was to expand the program further. Students who had participated in this first round delivered an information session to recruit new participants.

Several students from diverse backgrounds had planned and promoted the information session in the days and weeks before. Their efforts were rewarded with a full room of interested students and teachers.

The information session was original and a little different to what I'd seen before. However, what was important here was that these students were able to connect to their audience, their peers. Listening to them enthusiastically discuss the merits of study circles from their own personal experiences was both inspiring and clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of the program.

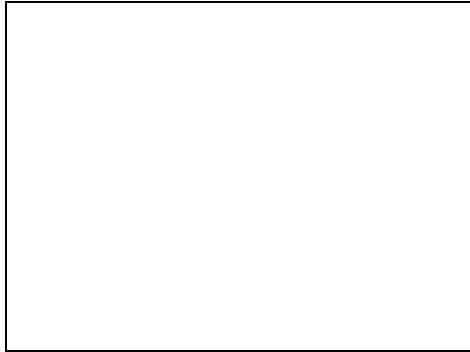


The Information Session at Sherwood High School

The status of these programs and other success stories are all documented at the MCPS Study Circles web site at <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/studycircles/>

**The City University of New York, LaGuardia Community College,
Centre for Teaching and Learning - Queens, New York City**

The following week I was back in New York City, where on March 27 I delivered a presentation to University staff entitled *International Perspectives on Study circles*. See: <http://faculty.lagcc.cuny.edu/ctl/convtteaching/default.htm>



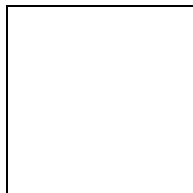
La Guardia Community College in Queens, New York

Community Colleges in the US are somewhat similar to Australian TAFE Institutions, and as La Guardia Community College is attached to The City University of New York, it starts to resemble one of Australia's dual sector institutions. The campus environment reminded me of TAFE Institutions back home and my ten years at Victoria University in Melbourne and at the TAFE Division.

I was pleased when Rosemary Talmadge, Special Assistant to the President for Organizational Development at LaGuardia Community College, invited me to attend the launch of their new study circle initiative - *Mix It-Up*.

It was quite a surprise to see the number of students and staff who attended. Sometimes, the threat of running out of chairs can be a positive sign.

I counted over 50 people in attendance and after a brief introduction, five separate sample study circles were organised. Discussion in each circle continued for well over an hour. Dialogue was so intense that it was difficult for the organisers to end the session.



Multiple sample study circles at La Guardia Community College

It was quite extraordinary experience for me as I have never seen study circles operating on such a scale, and as the environment and student cohort felt so

similar to a TAFE Institution, I started to envisage such an event being a reality at home.

Full details of this program are at <http://www.difficultdialogues.org/projects/laguardia.php>

Organising Community Wide Study Circle programs

Having seen the MCPS Study Circles Program and the work at La Guardia, it is clear that the organising and planning for these programs is extremely important. This includes many aspects such as gaining the support of key people, developing well written discussion guides and having well trained facilitators.

Fundamentally, the key to the success of community wide study circle programs here in the US is significantly bolstered by the work of the SCRC in both their written resources and more importantly, the expertise of the staff and Senior Associates.

There is an abundance of written information available through the SCRC to help organisations and communities, including the guide; *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change* (<http://www.studyircles.org/en/Resource.39.aspx>).

Although this is a comprehensive and thorough resource that is detailed and covers all contingencies, it is the staff and Senior Associates of the SCRC that have the experience, knowledge and wisdom to guide partner organisations in their study circle programs.

For example, John Landesman at MCPS worked for many years at the SCRC and remains a Senior Associate and Nancy Thomas is the SCRC Senior Associate who assisted La Guardia with their program. I believe that their expertise in organising these programs was vital, and that using the written resources on their own, is not necessarily a guarantee of success.

It is therefore the 'organisational' aspect that that is critical, and the actual study circles themselves become one component of the whole process. As this diagram below demonstrates:

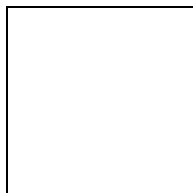


Diagram courtesy of the Study Circles Resource Centre

The above diagram is used by the SCRC to explain to interested partner organisations each stage in community wide study circle process. In this diagram it can be seen that the actual study circles fall under the 'Dialogue' stage.

Taking La Guardia as an example, the stage I was witness to, was the 'Kick Off'. Considerable planning had come before, with the help of the SCRC. For example, many staff at La Guardia had completed SCRC Facilitator Training and were present at the Kick Off to facilitate each separate study circle on the day.

At MCPS, the program is supported and financially resourced by the County. The goals, materials and facilitator training have all been previously completed. The MCPS Study Circles Program cycles between the Kick Off and Task Force stages at each school. John and his staff conduct information sessions - Kick Offs - at each school, all the while assisting, monitoring, evaluating, providing resources and using a pool of previously trained study circle facilitators who are allocated to separate schools and their individual study circle programs.

The importance of the SCRC can not be overstated. Here is a central organisation that oversees, advises and helps communities carry out effective community wide study circle programs. From past experiences, the SCRC has evolved and refined their approaches. Their extensive 'corporate knowledge', so to speak, ensures that programs are successful.

In Australia there is much study circle activity, but it is piecemeal and sporadic with varying degrees of success. I can now see that committed people in Australia who see the value of study circles are working on their own, without the experience and assistance of an organisation such as the SCRC. In Australia, lessons are not learned and we are not building a systemic capacity to make use of such a powerful program. Yet there is study circle activity in Australia, and this in itself demonstrates, and is testimony to, the need to bring together in an organised manner the experiences of the current and past study circle activity throughout Australia.

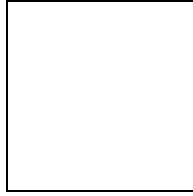
The systems, processes and expertise are extremely well developed here, and it throws up a myriad of challenges when I think of the Australian context.

To further illustrate this point, the two examples below demonstrate the extent and size of study circle activity here in the US.

- The Horizons Community Wide Circle program, on the issue of rural poverty, includes eight states across the north west of the US. 1,700 study

circle facilitators have been trained and over 10,000 study circle members are expected to participate.

(<http://www.nwaf.org/Programs.aspx?pg=Programs/Horizons.htm>)



- The Syracuse Community wide study circle program entitled *Community Wide Dialogue to End Racism* in New York City, have been organising rounds of study circles continuously for ten years.

What began as a one-year plan to have residents talk about race and racism in Syracuse, New York, has grown to more than 10 years of moving people from dialogue to take action against racism in the community.

Ten years ago, board members of the Syracuse, New York, Community Wide Dialogue planned to spend a year talking about race and racism in their community. They soon realized, however, that one year of dialogue on such an important issue would not be nearly enough. In fact, they decided a decade wouldn't do it, either.

In 2007, as the Community Wide Dialogue to End Racism marks its 10th year, leaders report they're halfway to the goal of having 10,000 people who have talked deeply about race and racism, and who have the skills to take action against the ways racism still hurts the community.

(<http://www.studycircles.org/en/Article.517.aspx>)

Leonard Oliver – Cleveland Park, DC

Returning to Washington DC was like arriving in a new city altogether - hot days, T shirts, shorts and the Cherry Blossom Festival. It was hard to believe that a couple of weeks earlier I was shovelling snow. And where did all these people come from!

Through Patrick Scully from the SCRC, I was given the opportunity to meet with Leonard Oliver. Many of you familiar with the history of study circles will recognise his work as being a significant catalyst for introducing study circles from Sweden into the US. Len's book was a key resource for me when I was

writing my PhD thesis (http://www.voced.edu.au/td/tnc_87.556), so having the opportunity to meet him was a memorable highlight.

Study Circles: Coming Together for Personal Growth and Social Change (Seven Locks Press, Maryland, 1987) and articles such as 'Is the United States Ready for a Study Circle Movement?' in *Adult Learning* (Volume 6, Number 4, pp. 14-16, March/April, 1995) were of considerable importance, as this was an American advocating for a totally foreign program to be imported into the US.

Len Oliver had visited Sweden in 1984 and finished his book in 1987. Around the same time the philanthropist, Paul Aicher was refining his thinking and strategies in relation to grass-roots dialogue approaches to resolving contentious community issues.

A fortuitous meeting occurred between Len Oliver and Paul Aicher around this time and the result was that the SCRC was established in 1989.

Author Julie Fanselow spent a week at the SCRC in 2002, interviewing Paul Aicher, and in her book -*What Democracy Feels Like*, she eloquently takes up the story.

Aicher found himself increasingly eager to advance grass-roots dialogue as the best way to address pressing public issues. Yet he wanted to avoid shouting matches such as those he'd seen in the peace movement, where hawks and doves alternately talked past and demonized one another — or where activists within a movement simply didn't reach beyond their core supporters at all. Aicher was eager to foster a new wave of deliberative democracy, a way through which people from all walks of lives could meet and have a voice in their communities' futures. "What struck me was how little people on different sides of (an) issue spoke to each other," he says. "The seeds of what became SCRC grew out of that frustration."

Paul Aicher passed away on August 19, 2002.

Leonard Oliver's passion for study circles is only equaled by his interest in soccer. He is currently training over 40 Ethiopian soccer coaches and is a bit of a soccer legend himself.

See: http://www.soccerhall.org/famers/Len_oliver.htm

Len was extremely generous with his time and candid recollections of his many visits to Sweden, his efforts in bringing study circles to the US and his work with

trade unions. It was very exciting for me to listen to his experiences and gain a deeper understanding of study circles from the perspectives of a pioneer in this area.

Len was even able to explain to me that he had used study circles in his local community, when faced with developers wanting to build high rise apartments in the area. Not only did the building project not go ahead, but the historic integrity of the neighborhood has now been formally recognised and protected.

Meeting Len was an absolute delight and we intend to meet again in the near future.

I have now spent 12 weeks in the US and there are only 6 more weeks to go. It has been a truly inspiring experience and I know the study circle networks, and friendships that have been developed here are invaluable to both me and Australia's opportunity to build a viable community wide study circle presence.

However, if all my friends here take me up on my offer to 'put them up' when they travel to Australia, I think I'll be spending most of my time hosting their visit.

Study Circles Resource Centre – Pomfret, Connecticut

I returned to the SCRC again during the week commencing Monday April 9 for four days of meetings.

The first two days were taken up with staff meetings, as was the case with my previous visit to the SCRC in March; however during this visit I was fortunate enough to be able to attend two more days of meetings with both the staff and Senior Associates. Below is a list both the SCRC Staff and the Senior Associates, with links to brief biographies on each.

SCRC Staff

<u>Martha L. McCoy</u> Executive Director	<u>Patrick L. Scully</u> Deputy Director
<u>Francine R. Nichols</u> Director of Administration	<u>Gloria F. Mengual</u> Program Director
<u>Sarah (Sally) vL. Campbell</u> Senior Program Director	<u>Susan A. McCormack</u> Program Director
<u>Susan M. LaRose</u> Office Assistant	<u>Amy L. Malick</u> Communication Director

Jill M. Kornrumpf Office Manager	Kate G. Korner Community Assistance Associate
Carolyn M. Abdullah Program Director	Molly H. Barrett Program Liaison & Editor
Carrie A. Boron Deputy Communication Director and Operations Manager	J. Nicholas Connell Administrative Assistant

Senior Associates

Jon D. Abercrombie	John A. Fenner
Fran C. Frazier	John S. Landesman
Matthew E. Leighninger	William T. Lewis
Carol Woodward Scott	Jeff Z. Tracy
Nancy L. Thomas	Gwendolyn P. Whiting
Barbara A. Yasui	

The initial two days of staff meetings addressed topics such as how to frame issues with partner organisations, improvements to the SCRC administration infrastructure, the progress on a large scale race relations orientation initiative, generating strategies for working with partner organisations and developing post study circle action and change tools.

The following two days of meetings, with staff and the Senior Associates, covered a diverse range of topics and issues including the SCRC strategic plan, communication strategies, establishing the technical assistance required for partner organisations, issues in relation to study circle research and evaluation, systems, protocol, implications of recent grants and updates on the Horizons project.

(<http://www.nwaf.org/Programs.aspx?pg=Programs/Horizons.htm>)

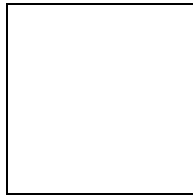
The meetings were interspersed with practical workshops on issues such as study circle facilitator best practice and structural disadvantages, including how to embody equity in all aspects of the SCRC work, both externally and internally.

I was also given the opportunity to carry out a quick briefing on what I had learnt so far here in the US and address the challenging question of how Australia could emulate the US SCRC model.

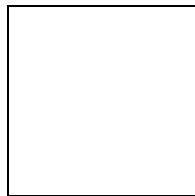
Sally Campbell, the Senior Program Director who currently directs the training function of the SCRC oversaw the Senior Associate Meetings and did an outstanding job.

It was both a privilege and a fascinating experience to be totally immersed in the work of the SCRC. Everyone was extremely welcoming and I felt completely at home.

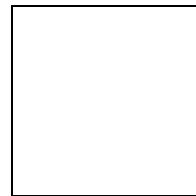
All of the meetings across the four days were conducted in a study circle format. It was astounding to see the profound personal and professional bond that can occur between the people of one organisation when they use study circles in all aspects of their planning and decision making. These four days have completely changed my perspective on the possibilities of what an organisation can become when it uses the study circle model in everything it practices.



One of the many staff and Senior Associates meetings at the SCRC



Nick Connell and John Fenner



Sally Campbell and Fran Frazier

It was a privilege to be part of these meetings with some extraordinarily skilled and knowledgeable professionals, who all totally understand the logic, principles, ideals and practice of study circles. It was this 'understanding' that I found most remarkable. Many have been working with the SCRC since its infancy. In Australia I have met few people who have the depth of understanding of study circles that was available here.

To grasp the extent of expertise at the SCRC, I urge you to look at the biographies on the staff and Senior Associates at the SCRC at <http://www.studyircles.org/en/Staff.aspx> .

The four days was also an excellent opportunity to discuss with nearly all the staff and Associates the applicability of study circles to Australia. It would be a daunting task to detail all discussions, however as an example:

- John Fenner provides training, facilitation and organising assistance to communities interested in implementing study circles around issues such as rural poverty, education, community growth, racism, and youth development.

John has worked with indigenous American Indians on the issue of poverty and we discussed a range of issues in regard to using community wide circle programs to help Australia's indigenous people.

- Nancy Thomas directs the Democracy Project for the Society for Values in Higher Education which is a non-partisan, non-profit association of American academics committed to democratic values — integrity, diversity, social justice, and civic responsibility — in university programs and governance.

Nancy and I were able to discuss ideas on how to introduce study circles into the Australian Higher Education sector and she will be a valuable contact.

Nancy was also instrumental in helping to set up the La Guardia Community College community wide study circle project that I visited in Queens, New York City.

The relevance of using community wide circle programs within Australia's vocational education and training sector is also a re-occurring theme.

For example, considering Australia's need to address skill shortages as well as increase retention and completion rates, the community wide circle program at Kuna High School in Idaho is a good illustration.

(<http://www.studyircles.org/en/Article.515.aspx>)

At this High School, Kuna residents worked together in study circles to determine what graduates should know and be able to do. As Ginny Greger, the Kuna School Board Chairwoman stated: "Part of the reason we did the study circles is because the board is updating our mission, vision and goals. It hadn't been done for five years; we wanted to see if we're on target."

Instead of top down policy, the community itself determined what was important for the High School. With this approach the staff, teachers and students 'owned' the outcomes.

Rather than being told what they should be doing, by an often disconnected and somewhat faceless bureaucracy – the community is included and allowed to partake in the decision making process. This then increases the commitment to, and the chances of, achieving success.

I remember reading once that study circles require a 'leap in faith'. Those who manage and make decisions (no matter how informed) for the rest of us need to trust in people's ability to arrive at reasonable decisions - as long as these people have a safe space and the time to engage in effective deliberative dialogue.

The synopsis of the Kuna High School community wide circle program clearly demonstrates this. It was agreed that ideally a student should:

- Be prepared so that further education is a viable option.
- Possess a well-rounded education in foundational subjects, such as math, science and literature, and also have the opportunity to explore the arts, drama, music and athletics.
- Have educational skills to sustain life-long learning.
- Possess vocational and educational skills to be employable.
- Have the ability to be adaptable and work with diverse people.
- Possess basic life skills for independent living, such as personal finance and cooking.

Furthermore, and of important relevance to the vocational education and training sector in Australia, the Kuna students' interest in vocational classes grew to the extent that now every day the school buses 100 students to a Professional-Technical Education Centre where they can take classes in everything from auto mechanics to plumbing.

These outcomes are not uncommon and the positive effectiveness of the SCRC community wide circle programs is demonstrated time and time again in the abundance of case studies listed on their web site at <http://www.studycircles.org/en/NewsArticles.aspx> .

Len Oliver - Washington, DC

Upon returning to Washington, DC, I managed to meet up with Len Oliver again on Monday April 16. I feel Len and I could talk about our common interest of

study circles for hours. I was still excited from my visit to the SCRC, so it was a great chance for me to de brief Len on my experience there.

Len and I discussed many issues including his interesting perspective on the role and function of study circle facilitators or as he terms them 'leaders'. This difference of terms derives from a subtle, yet important variation between the Swedish and US models of study circles. As mentioned in a previous report, the approach has naturally been evolving in the US over the past 17 years. It is an interesting aspect, and I think important when considering how best to use study circles in Australia.

We also discussed the issue of 'measuring' the outcomes of study circles. This is extremely difficult with study circles, as an organiser can never really determine exactly what the outcomes will be. We live in a world of milestones, benchmarks, key performance indicators, outputs and outcomes – and although these checks and balances are important (especially in relation to funding such programs); we run the risk of both overcomplicating the process and hindering the creative results that may result. There are many other problems as well, if one wants to use rigorous empirical research on study circles. For example, validity – how do we know for sure that the results of a study circle can be attributed to the study circle itself? If interested, I tackled this problem at length in my thesis.

(<http://library.vu.edu.au/search/abrophy/abrophy/1,16,36,B/l856~b1470330&FF=abrophy+mark&1,1,,1,0>)

Nonetheless, I recall three things:

- In Sweden, one of the criteria for funding study circles is that they have very loose goals and aims.
- Len Oliver told me that 'science can kill a study circle initiative'.
- Sally Campbell from the SCRC stated that study circle facilitation tends to be more of 'an art, than a science'.

Len also generously gave me an abundance of resources such as articles of his and study circle manuals he had used with the Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Union to create a more informed and active membership. He is also working hard to delicately convert me to soccer, but those of you who know my passion for our Australian game would realise that this effort is futile.

Cynthia Turner-Graham - Rockville, Maryland

On April 18, I met with Cynthia Turner-Graham, a medical doctor, psychiatrist, professional health consultant and a study circle facilitator for the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Study Circle Program.

Others at the MCPS Study Circle Program consider her to be an outstanding facilitator and it was a great chance to hear about her experiences.

Cynthia told me that when she was first introduced to the MCPS Study Circles program on race relations, she immediately saw how powerful they were and realised the huge potential they have. As she said herself, once she started facilitating she told herself “I have arrived home”.

She also spoke of how study circles tap into the “innate wisdom of everyone” and how they create a rarely experienced safe place where people are able to “document pearls of wisdom”.

Cynthia explained to me that she is now planning to include study circles into her professional practice to foster healthy family relationships.

Susan Stroud - Washington, DC

On April 19 I met with Susan Stroud who is on the Board of the Paul J Aicher Foundation. The SCRC is the primary project of the Foundation. Susan is the executive director of Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP), a non-profit organisation she founded herself in 2001. ICP works around the world to strengthen and develop policies and programs that focus on applying service as a solution to a wide range of social issues. They work with numerous universities, Non Government Organisations (NGOs), national and local governments, and multilateral organisations in over twenty countries (<http://www.icicp.org/>).

Susan has had an amazing career. She has been a consultant to the Ford Foundation on national and community service, served as liaison with White House policy, worked at Brown University as the founder and director of the Howard Swearer Centre for Public Service and also founded and directed Campus Compact, a consortium of 650 college and university presidents who are committed to promoting public service as an integral component of undergraduate education.

Susan and I discussed several topics including my previous experience working with unemployed youth at Victoria University, labour market policy, the visions of the late Paul J Aicher and both the challenges and successes of the SCRC.

Perhaps most important for me, Susan was able to provide me with several useful strategies for establishing a viable community wide circle presence back in Australia. Watch this space...

She also mentioned that the ICP may be interested in developing an official active partnership with someone from an interested organisation in Australia.

'A Small World' - Or...

Len Oliver, his brother James, the Study Circles Resource Centre and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs – Study Circle Bangladesh

Several weeks ago, there was an article in the SCRC Spring edition newsletter, *Focus on Study Circles* regarding my study tour here in the US.

Two weeks ago the SCRC received an email from someone in Bangladesh in relation to this article, wanting my contact details.

Last week while Len Oliver and I were talking study circles, he mentioned how his brother, James had done some study circle work in Bangladesh.

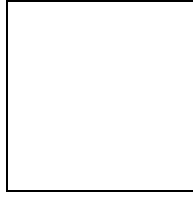
On Monday April 23 I received an email from Zahid Hassan, a Program Officer at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) – Study Circle Bangladesh. He included a link to their website and after a quick look there it was, within the details on how Study Circle Bangladesh was formed, the work of James Oliver. (http://www.studycirclebd.info/sida_sc.php)

The establishment of this viable and ongoing study circle presence and resource in Bangladesh again demonstrates the continual worldwide support and growth of this approach.

Efforts to institutionalise a community wide study circle program in Bangladesh commenced in 2001 when a meeting was arranged between the Swedish Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) (http://www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?language=en_US) , local NGOs and James Oliver, who was the NDI representative.

After this meeting SIDA agreed to provide assistance to help NDI introduce study circles to Bangladesh and sent a Swedish expert on study circles to visit Bangladesh and hold workshops and discussions on study circles. SIDA then sponsored a four member Bangladesh Mission to visit Sweden.

A plan was then developed by NDI to conduct pilot study circles with partnering NGOs. In 2003 a community wide study circle was piloted. Today NDI still works closely with local partner NGOs with the help of SIDA.



Study Circle Bangladesh logo

Reading this story on the formation of Study Circle Bangladesh, whilst considering my experiences here in the US and 17 year history of the US SCRC, makes me wonder why Australia has not yet develop a well organised and centralised community wide study circle presence.

I cannot help but feel that the world is moving forward with study circles while Australia remains static.

DC City Collegiate Public Charter School - Washington, DC

Len Oliver and I visited the City Collegiate Public Charter School near Georgetown on Wednesday April 25 to meet his friend, the Principal, Dr Phyllis Hedlund. (<http://www.citycollegiatepcs.org/home.html>)

Charter schools are independently-operated public schools that are open to all local residents, regardless of their neighborhood, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, or ethnicity. Parents and students tend to choose a particular charter school because of its unique focus, curriculum, structure, size, environment and other features that meet the needs of students.

We discussed Lens experience with running study circles and my visit here. Phyllis is interested in exploring the idea of Len and I delivering a study circle information session to students and staff at the school.

2006 Fulbright Annual Report – Canberra, Australia

My work here has been included in the 2006 Australian–American Fulbright Commission Annual Report.

See:

http://www.fulbright.com.au/events/documents/FINAL2006ARptweb_000.pdf

(Page 10).

Adult Community Education Making Connections Conference 2007 – Perth, Western Australia

I've been invited to present at The Adult and Community Education - *Making Connections Conference 2007* to be held on 15 and 16 June 2007 at Central TAFE, Perth.

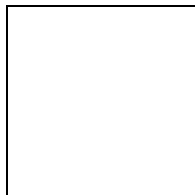
See:

<http://www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au/AccessEquity/ACE.aspx#Making%20Connections%20Conference>

Annual Fulbright Embassy Dinner, Malaysian Embassy – Washington, DC

In the US, Washington is considered first and foremost the centre of international diplomacy. For this reason, past and present Fulbright Scholars along with other distinguished guests are invited to an annual embassy event. This year the event was held at the Embassy of Malaysia on April 27, where I experienced an insight into Malaysian hospitality, cuisine and culture, as well as the opportunity to meet with many other Fulbright scholars.

I was also fortunate enough to meet Harriet Fulbright, the President of the Fulbright International Centre and a member of the JW Fulbright Foreign Scholarships Board which her late husband, Senator James Fulbright, established. She will be visiting Australia soon and we spoke of her travel plans and her particular interest in visiting the outback and seeing Uluru.



Harriet Fulbright and I at the Malaysian Embassy

Fulbright have also organised several other events that I've been able to attend including a visit to Mt Vernon, where the house and garden of George Washington is now an educational tourist attraction as well as tour of Harlem while I was in New York City

National Press Club, Taping of A Public Voice program – Washington DC

On May 2, I attended the taping of A Public Voice program at the National Press Club in Washington, DC.

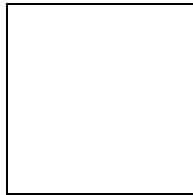
This event is an important component of the work conducted by the *National Issues Forums* (NIF) (<http://www.nifi.org/>). The NIF is a network of civic, educational, and other organisations whose common interest is to promote public deliberation in the US.

The NIF includes thousands of civic clubs, religious organisations, libraries, schools, and many other groups that meet to discuss critical public issues. Forum participants range from teenagers to retirees, prison inmates to community leaders, and literacy students to university students.

A Public Voice program is an annual event and the award winning show is distributed to Public Television stations around the country. This year the forum addressed the issue of energy use. In preparation for the event many citizen forums are conducted with the community using a NIF issue book entitled *The Energy Problem: Choices for an Uncertain Future*. See:

http://www.nifi.org/discussion_guides/detail.aspx?catID=6&itemID=7743

The panel included elected officials, policy makers and members of the media, all watching clips from the citizen forums held around the country and then discussing what they had seen and listened to.



May 2, 2007, A Public Voice taping

I was also invited to participate in a debriefing, after the taping, aimed at gathering first-hand insights into the process. The group was diverse and included professionals from a variety of deliberative democracy organisations and also three international fellows from Ghana, Poland and Russia.

After the debriefing I met Ileana Marin who is a Senior Program Associate at the Kettering Foundation. She is the coordinator of the International Fellowship Program and previously worked for US World Learning for International Development as Program Officer and then Director for Romania-based programs.

I also met Dr Harold Saunders, Director of international affairs at the Kettering Foundation, and founder, Chairman and President of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue. This Institute played a vital role in the Arab-Israeli peace

process after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Dr Saunders worked with teams headed by Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter that mediated five peace agreements.

He is also the author of *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999) and *Politics Is about Relationship: a Blueprint for the Citizens' Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Dr Saunders and I managed to have a brief conversation, and as a result he sent me a copy of his latest book. In this book he discusses how a new political paradigm needs to be developed in order to resolve the many challenges the world faces. This new paradigm encompasses many fundamental aspects of the study circle principles including deliberative dialogue that engages all members of the community: "... institutions alone will not solve the problems of humanity; only if human beings whose lives are at stake become involved is there a chance of resolving them" (*Politics Is about Relationship*, 2005: 7)

Sheet Metal Workers' International Association – Washington, DC

On May 9 I met with Len Oliver and Bill Butler, a consultant for the Sheet Metal Workers International Association (SMWIA).

The SMWIA is an Association that represents 150,000 skilled tradespeople in the unionised sheet metal industry throughout the US, Canada and Puerto Rico.

Bill described how the Association had used a variation of the study circles approach with Association members.

In a one day format, several study circles were established and different circles addressed separate issues. Running through a process of identifying barriers and obstacles to the issues each group developed a list of possible solutions and action outcomes. After ranking these possible solutions - recommendations, along with consequences, advantages and disadvantages of each recommendation were documented. The outcomes were then presented to the Associations Board members.

Aside from the many other contexts such as Higher Education, VET sector, secondary schools, local government and adult education, this meeting provided me with an insight into how to utilise study circles in a union context.

Study Circles Resource Centre, Racism Orientation, University of Arkansas, Clinton School of Public Service - Little Rock, Arkansas

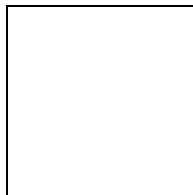
The SCRC recently launched a three year initiative to create a national network of diverse community coalitions to link dialogue to change on issues of racism and racial inequities.

The SCRC recognises that communities are becoming more ethnically diverse and issues of equity are becoming more pressing. The initiative is designed to help non-profit leaders, community activists and public officials who are searching for more effective ways to include people from the community of all backgrounds.

In the initial stages, the SCRC delivered Orientation Sessions addressing racism in Atlanta, Los Angeles and Little Rock, Arkansas. See:

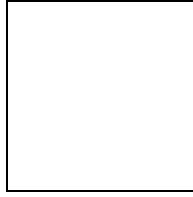
<http://www.studycircles.org/en/Page.Events.aspx>

I was able to attend the Little Rock Race Orientation on May 11, where Sally Campbell, Fran Frazier and Amy Malick from the SCRC facilitated a day long orientation with over 50 people from all areas of the community including local government, faith groups, the education and training sector, non-profit organisations and industry.



*Amy Malick, Sally Campbell and Fran Frazier
from SCRC preparing for the Race Orientation*

Participants were given a basic overview of how study circles operate, experienced sample study circles on the issue of race relations, worked together to develop strategies in their communities and were provided with information in regard to the range of resources and opportunities available through the SCRC.



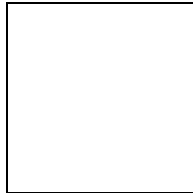
Participants of Race Orientation engaged in a study circle ice breaker

I was given the opportunity to facilitate one of the eight separate study sample study circles myself during the day. I was a little anxious, but I found that not only was this a valuable facilitator experience but I was privy to some very intense and honest discussion in relation to race relation and multicultural issues in the US.

An experienced study circle facilitator, Ann Marshall from the Arkansas School Boards Association, was a member of my circle and provided me with a positive critique of my facilitation skills upon completion. Although I have not been a teacher or trainer for a few years, it seems I still have these skills.

Arkansas Study Circles Project - Little Rock, Arkansas

While in Little Rock, I was also able to meet Heather Gage Detherow, Project Director and Diane Vibhakar, Coordinator of the Arkansas Study Circle Project. (http://www.arsba.org/ascp_about.html)



*Heather Gage Detherow, Study Circles Project
Director and Diane Vibhakar, Study Circles
Coordinator of the Arkansas Study Circle Project*

The Arkansas Study Circle Project is yet another example, similar to the MCPS Study Circles Program, of how institutions have recognised the value of the study circle approach and have embedded the program within part of their ongoing practice.

I met Dan Farley who is the executive director of the Arkansas School Boards Association. This Board agreed to launch the Arkansas Study Circle Project in 1998, and the project is credited with helping the district transform community relations that were once tense.

On the Centre for Public Education site, Dan explains how he was attending too many meetings where people were at polar opposites, and continued to shut others out. He recognised that study circles could address this pattern and the resulting positive results confirmed this:

These conversations were the first step in turning things around in that district. The action plan that emerged called for five specific changes, such as televising board meetings on cable TV which happened right away and enhancing school-to-home communication.

Dan is also fond of saying that "people support what they help to create," and he routinely promotes study circles as a framework for community engagement. (http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/site/c.kjJXJ5MPIwE/b.1524775/k.444A/Study_circles_make_the_difference_in_Arkansas.htm)

The Centre for Voter Deliberation – Alexandria, Virginia

On May 14 I met with the founders of The Center for Voter Deliberation; Bill Corbett, the Executive Director and Beth Offenbacher, a Scholar in Residence. (<http://www.centerforvoterdeliberation.org/>)

The Centre works to educate the public on the importance of participation in political life and aims to help communities build social capital. All projects and research are non-partisan and volunteer-run.

As an example of their work, they provided me with a recently completed a report on a 'Deliberation Day' they conducted in March 2007 at Falls Church City in Virginia. This was a full day of deliberative dialogue with 135 local residents.

During the course of the day participants were able to be part of small and large group discussions with an equal chance to have their questions answered and their opinions registered.

There were several issues addressed, including affordable housing, traffic and parking plans, and improving communication between citizens and government.

By the end of the day action suggestions were established, and these are now the topic of a future online community survey

Bill and Beth are both dedicated and experienced professionals in the deliberative democracy field here in the US, or as Bill terms it; "The Deliberative Industry Network". We shared our thoughts and opinions on the ever evolving nature of this work and again, as I so often come across here, found myself

immediately connecting with those who are passionate and dedicated to this fascinating and challenging work.

International Union of bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers – Washington DC

On May 21, Len Oliver and I met with Constance Lambert, the Director of Education, International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers (BAC) in Washington DC. (<http://www.bacweb.org/>)

Founded in 1865 the goal of the BAC is to improve Union members' quality of life — on and off the job — through access to good paying jobs, quality benefits, safe working conditions and solidarity among members.

The BAC represent over 100, 000 craft workers across the United States and Canada including bricklayers, stone and marble masons, cement masons, plasterers, tile setters, terrazzo and mosaic workers, and pointers/cleaners/caulkers. The BAC is the oldest continuous union in North America.

The BAC was an early pioneer in using study circles in the US, and I had previously described their experience in my PhD thesis in 2002. An extract from my Thesis is here:

The Union, historically, did not have effective member educational programs. The Union President, Joyce was aware that the study circle format had been successfully used in Sweden for many years and decided to attempt to introduce study circles into the Union. Twenty-seven experimental pilot study circles were conducted in North America during 1986, attracting two hundred

and seventy local union members across fourteen US states and two Canadian provinces.

Topics included the current problems faced by the Union and alternatives for the future. Careful planning of topics and sessions were arranged, leaders were trained, newsletters published and trials conducted. As part of the leader training, it was stressed ‘... that the study circle was to be a dialogue ... [and] that no majority votes or consensus would be sought’.

Eventually after three months, the number of circles grew from twenty-seven to thirty-five, and all were conducted in areas of high unemployment. These circles ran between May and August 1986, after which time, circle leaders met to report back on the twenty-seven pilot study circles.

Early reports demonstrated good attendance, no recruitment problems and serious and substantive discussion. Some of the responses given by circle leaders throughout the USA included:

- *‘There was so much to discuss ... we forgot the time - I couldn’t turn them off.’*

- *'Our group met for over two hours ... I had to call it a night to get them to break up'.*
- *'Some of our guys came with simplistic views, but after our discussion, realised how complex the problems are'.*

The resultant evaluation of these pilots pointed to several important issues:

- *Materials (both video and print) were crucial to success of the study circles, and leaders needed to follow plans.*
- *Study circles were not a normal meeting, and all members needed to be aware to stay neutral and let discussion flow.*

A summary qualitative and quantitative questionnaire was distributed to circle members after completing the study circle season. The results demonstrated that eighty-three per cent of members believed that a study circle was an opportunity for everyone to present their views.

When asked how effective as a means of education study circles were, eighty-nine per cent of members considered them as useful while fifty-six per cent felt better informed and twelve per cent had not changed their opinions.

Some qualitative responses were also requested in the questionnaire and included:

- *'I learned something and got to express my views - views that might not come out at a regular meeting'.*
- *'Some new ideas came out and most of the members were able to voice their frustrations and have their concerns addressed'.*
- *'Friendly and informed - the atmosphere provided for a free expression of ideas'.*
- *'Even though some problems were not resolved, I believe everyone left with a much better understanding of the issues'.*
- *'It's the way to go, to make the member ... know that his ideas and voice do mean something'.*
- *'We need more of them - it makes us feel involved'.*

- *'Listen to what was said. We are important to'.*
- *'Thank you for asking my opinion on the issues'.*

The twenty-seven pilot study circles were extremely successful. Joyce concluded that union members appreciated having their views shared, and that union leaders found members' views valuable.

Joyce termed study circles as 'miniature democracies, highly participatory, [and] neutral and unconstraining'.

Furthermore: 'We are the first Union in North America to attempt to adopt the study circle format. Democracy requires an ongoing dialogue between leaders and the people they serve ... This is what the study circles are about'.

Connie, Len and I were able to discuss the progress made during this time. It is a credit to those who were brave enough to try this completely new idea in the US

over 20 years ago – these early efforts paved the way for what would become the Study Circles Resource Centre of today.

James Oliver – National Democratic Institute for International Affairs

On May 27, I met Jim Oliver, Len Oliver's brother. Jim is a Country Director for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

The NDI is a nonprofit organisation working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with a variety of people in every region of the world to build political and civic organisations, safeguard elections, and to promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

Jim explained to me how he first started to use study circles. Len Oliver had given his brother Jim, a copy of his book, *Study Circles: Coming Together for Personal Growth and Social Change* and for a time Jim had not got around to reading it. However, one night when he couldn't sleep, due to the many frustrations he was having with bureaucracies and officialdom in trying to carry out his work for NDI, Jim decided to start reading his brothers book.

He quickly saw how the study circle could be a viable solution to the concerns he was having and eventually, as explained earlier in this report, through working with local NGOs and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency the Study Circle Bangladesh organisation was created.

Jim also gave me a promotional film that study Circle Bangladesh had produced. It is an excellent short documentary that shows all the stages of establishing a community wide study circle program and the action outcomes that have resulted. The process explained is almost an exact replica of that of the Study Circles Resource Centre here in the US.

Jim's current work involves repeating his efforts in Bangladesh, and he is helping to set up a study circle presence in Sri Lanka.

Adult Community Education – Making Connections Conference 2007

The Program for this conference, to be held at Central TAFE in Perth, Western Australia, has now been released and is available at <http://www.vetinfonet.det.wa.edu.au/home/>.

My *Study Circle Orientation and Workshop* is scheduled for the afternoon of Friday the 15th (See Page 6, Workshop 12).

Currently I'm planning to duplicate the Orientation Sessions I have seen here in the US. A bit of a hybrid between what I've seen at La Guardia Community College, MCPS Study Circle Program and the Arkansas presentation.

I believe that this may well be the first time such a presentation is given in Australia, and it is therefore somewhat of an experiment. To be honest I'm a bit apprehensive and I hope I am able to give justice to the fantastic presentations I've seen here.

I know that if the presentation can generate the same excitement, interest, possibilities, hope, faith and commitment I've seen here, then Australia can start catching up to the rest of the world's with study circles.

Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program - Rockville, Maryland

On May 29 I had my final visit to the MCPS Study Circle program to say goodbye to John and his dedicated team. It was an opportunity to sit with John and go through my presentation plans for Perth.

Conclusion

On a personal note, I have found this visit to the US to be the most fascinating and rewarding experience I have ever had. It has been a life changing journey. To borrow the words from another Fulbrighter:

The excitement, displacement, adjustment, otherness, bonding, cultural sensitivity, confusion, and adventure that comprise the daily experience of living in a foreign country, is a kind of personal experience that cannot be substituted.

Working, living and being immersed into this country has been an absorbing and challenging adventure that has broadened both my knowledge and understanding of this culture and the ever expanding deliberative democracy movement. I am extremely fortunate, and thankful to the Australian – American Fulbright Commission and the Australian Federal Department of Education, Science and Training, for the opportunity to spend four months investigating a program that has been a passionate interest to me for over ten years.

Much has been gained here, not only for myself, but all Australians interested in developing 'grassroots' democratic initiatives through the utilisation of study circles. For example:

- I now have an abundance of resources, many that I've already mailed back to myself in Australia, and a significant amount of materials stored on my laptop. These resources include manuals, study circle discussion guides, reports, templates, training guides, evaluations, DVDs, photos, video I have taken of study circles, etc.
- I have also been fortunate enough to have seen and / or been an active participant in many study circles on issues such as race relations, student achievement and religious diversity.
- I have delivered a presentation at La Guardia Community College to staff on my research, facilitated a study circle in Little Rock Arkansas for the Study Circles Resource Centre and participated in meetings at the MCPS Study Circle Program and the Study Circles Resource Centre.

But the most important asset that I will bring back, from an Australian perspective, is the extensive range of valuable relationships, with highly skilled professionals who have been practicing and developing community wide study circles for many years.

These relationships now need to be fostered and built upon in order for Australia to develop its own capability in creating community wide study circle initiatives. I can't do this alone – I need partners committed to building upon the momentum and opportunities that exist now.

Finally, I can't thank enough, everyone I've come into contact with here in the US. Your generosity, hospitality and smiles were all sincerely appreciated. I hope that someday I can try to repay the favour.

There are too many people to mention individually, but I should especially thank Pat Scully, John Landesman and Len Oliver for all the time and effort they put into providing the opportunities for me to expand my experiences and knowledge as much as possible.

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May 30, 2007