Starting a Study Circle

Notes (almost word for word) from a talk by Councillor Baatar delivered at the Regional Conference in London 3rd of January 2009
Study Circles

What is a study circle? We know that is a small group of friends who come together regularly. They study profoundly the Writings, gain insights; they reflect, learn and serve together. Study circle is a setting; it’s a space where conversation takes place among these friends. In the context of the Study circle, each individual acquires a vision about twofold purpose in life. Everybody gains an understanding that we have twofold purpose in life. On one hand we are to grow spiritually, to draw closer to God. On the other hand we are to serve humanity, make our contribution to the advancement of civilization, and we learn that these two purposes are interrelated, they are complementary. The more we grow spiritually, the more we are able to serve, the more we serve, the more we grow spiritually.

A study circle is not just an activity to deepen our knowledge, to enjoy each other’s company and to get inspired. More importantly it is a place where we learn to act, where we learn to serve. In fact action and service is an integral part of the institute process. The concepts that are emphasized over and over again, is that of “being and doing”, that these two are complementary. The basic concept that underlines all the units of the Ruhi Institute, irrespective of the particular emphasis of each, is that of walking a path of service. Each participant, each person chooses a path of service.

About Tutoring

A lot depends on the qualities, attitudes and skills of the person who act as a tutor in a Study circle. We know the importance of having a humble posture of learning, of being and doing, to act as a tutor implies to accompany the participants of the study circle to build their capacity for service. At the same time by helping others the tutor builds his own capacity to serve. You create the atmosphere, serious and uplifting environment for the friends to engage in the process of study, action and reflection.

In order to visualize for ourselves of what it means to be a tutor, to act as a tutor, let’s assume that I have decided to become a tutor, so what happens, what do I do? I have completed the sequence of courses and I want to initiate my own study circles and I want to conduct my study circle in a way that this study circle acts like an engine of growth. So each person who decides to have a study circle, should think of their Study circle as an engine and make sure this engine is running.

What do I do in the beginning after finishing book 7?

Preparation

1. I begin by praying so I become the pure channel through which people can come in contact with the Word of God and experience the edifying experience of the Institute.

2. I assess my circumstances in life, my time, my opportunities and decide that since I am extremely busy, I should focus my efforts on a certain neighborhood, so that the results can be sustained and from my efforts a community life can emerge in that particular area. So I decide to focus on my own surrounding neighborhood, decide to teach my neighbors.
3. I decide how much time I want to dedicate to my Study circle, and I see as I plan that I should forgo certain things, sacrifice certain things in order to free up a predominating share of my time to serve the Plan.

4. Because I have limited time, I decided I want to become a tutor and I want to focus on this particular path of service. 'Abdu’l-Bahá says that if we put a flat mirror to the sun, the rays of the sun will be dissipated, we will not feel the warmth, the heat. But if we put a convex mirror to the sun, one point will be heated and that point will really burn. So I want to really focus on my Study circle on this path of service so that it really can set ablaze that particular neighborhood.

Finding participants - Teaching

5. So I need to have participants for my Study circle so what do I do? I begin by teaching but how do I teach?

   a. First I realize that teaching should become the foremost thought in my mind, I constantly think about teaching. When I start thinking about teaching all the time, when it becomes my passion, when it becomes my desire, the reality around me starts to change, just because I changed my thoughts. I feel the love for all the people that cross my path, my colleagues, my relatives, my acquaintances, my neighbors.

   b. People feel my love and friendliness and in mysterious ways I get to know different people in my neighborhood and start having meaningful conversations with them on spiritual subjects. With some people I discuss the life of the soul and the meaning of prayer, with some I discuss about the education of children, about the importance of humanitarian, material and spiritual education, with some I discuss about the powers of junior youths, with some I discuss about the unity of mankind, equality of men and women, basically using the skills I learnt by studying the books of the Institute Courses.

   c. In the process of these conversations, I learn to recognize the thirst for the vivifying waters of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

6. I begin to perceive receptivity of people and start offering the Message to them directly; using the example I got from book 6.

   a. One thing I do want to when presenting the Faith is to mention about service to humanity, and about the different ways one can serve such as conducting children classes, devotional meetings. So even though the person is hearing about the Faith for the first time, he already knows that the Bahá’ís are there to serve humanity. That there are many different ways, many different paths of service one can choose.

7. So some of these friends enroll in the Faith, some do not. But still I perceive their receptivity and eagerness to investigate. To both categories, I introduce in the simplest way the institute program and invite them to join book 1. Eventually I have about ten people to start my study circle.
Tutoring my Study circle

8. So what do I do in my first session?
   
   a. I give them the vision of the whole sequence of courses and introduce to them the concept of walking the path of service, and about two fold purpose in life.
   
   b. We plan our time, decide to complete book 1 within one month, even though everybody is busy. But with careful planning of our time and prioritization, creating in them the desire to study book 1, I am able to illicit their commitment to finish book 1 in one month. In fact, the experience show that if one is really searching, is on fire about the Faith, it is difficult to tell somebody, let’s go slowly, only once a week for a couple of hour or to do it in a relaxed manner. It is very hard to control their desire, their motivation. So we decide to do it as intensively as possible. And really experience show that the way one did book 1, really has implication for the way he would do book 2, book 3, and the way he would be conducting his own study circles, the way he would be teaching the Faith, so this is very crucial.

Accompaniment

9. I am constantly aware that accompanying them along book 1 is challenging but joyful process and I should derive joy from the actual process of learning together with these friends. My enthusiasm becomes contagious and this feeds their motivation.

10. From the first session we begin our actions, some of these actions are to do with changing our thoughts, our mindsets.

   a. Very crucial part of the study circle is the practice component. I decide not to delay the practice component to the end of the course but to weave it in the actual study process.

   i. So in the process of going through unit two, I help my friends to prepare a presentation about the concept of prayer and help them develop their skill of sharing prayers with others,

   ii. after role-play and rehearsal in the study circle first,

   iii. we divide into teams and we decide to visit some Bahá’ís who needs to be visited,

   iv. and then after that, after they have gained some confidence, we go and visit their contacts, relatives and neighbors.

   v. After each visit, we reflect on what we did.

11. In the process of studying book 1, to some of the friends who had not yet enrolled in the Faith, I decide to make a presentation of the Faith during the study circle session. So those who enrolled before going into book 1, book 1 helps to flame their spark of Faith and embark on a meaningful life of service.

12. Because of the eagerness of the friends, I become so inspired myself, and become very passionate about accompanying others.
13. The last session of book 1 is very critical, in fact if you saw book 1, it’s like an extension of teaching. Teaching does not end when one comes to book 1, it continues. Some people would have declared already, some would enrolled in the Faith in the process of book 1, but when you come to the end of book 1 the last session is very critical,

a. when participants are asked to reflect on their service, on their allegiance to the Faith, each person is asked to think about a particular path of service he or she would like to pursuit. Three of our participants decide to open regular devotional meetings, three decides to become tutors of study circles like me, and I am very happy about that because that will ensure that the process is sustained. Two decide to become children class teachers, and two as junior youth animators,

b. so based on this plan, we plan the study of the next book in the sequence.

Continuing the sequence

14. Right during the session, we begin the study of the first session in book 2, in this way, the transition from book 1 and book 2 becomes seamless and meaningful and ensures continuity.

15. So in this manner I continue accompanying my friends until they become firmly established in their lines of service and even begin to accompany others. Not until they become firmly established in their service and start accompanying other people, I will not leave them.

Result of my Study circle

16. As a result of my study circle which acted as an engine of growth, within the matter of a few months, the numbers of core activities in that neighborhood multiply and numbers of people attending these activities expand. So a whole new community is created.