

Innovative Language Pedagogy and Community Building Features of the Ruhi Study Circle Process

Sandra Fotos

The January 17, 2003 letter from the Universal House of Justice emphasizes that the transformative power of the Baha'i Faith as a pattern for future society must be shown by example; that is, through its effects on the lives of the Baha'is and their community. Along with devotional meetings and children's classes, the study circles of the Institute Process are specifically identified as, "a way for Baha'is to reach out to the surrounding society, share Baha'u'llah's message with friends, family, neighbors and co-workers, and expose them to the richness of His teachings." The House also emphasizes that, "this outward looking orientation is one of the finest fruits of the grassroots learning taking place."

Study circles are powerful mechanism for large-scale education and capacity building. Although Baha'i communities have had various classes and deepening programs in the past, and several Institutes have existed for many years (for example, the Ruhi Institute in Colombia), the Baha'i world as a whole now has a systematic, structured vision for addressing the three basic needs of new believers: The development of spiritual insight; the development of knowledge; and the development of skills. In a talk given at the World Center in 2001, Universal House of Justice member Farzam Arbab noted that Institutes are not only instruments for consolidation but also for expansion, suggesting that, "numerous individuals who sometimes know very little of the Faith seem to be more than willing to participate in certain institute courses, especially those dealing with spiritual subjects, and often by the end of the first course they become Baha'is."

While I was on sabbatical in Canada during 2002-2003, I completed all Ruhi courses and the facilitators' training. As a veteran teacher, I observed that the pedagogy was extremely effective in promoting favorable learning outcomes. The study circle was a great equalizer. Long term Baha'is, new Baha'is and seekers all learned together and the participants in the learning act were called "collaborators" whether they were students or teachers. The emphasis was on the collaborative nature of the learning process and the promotion of learner autonomy. Learning was reciprocal and the non-hierarchical, egalitarian relationships among the group members was very different from what is often found in traditional teacher-fronted classrooms, where an "expert" dispenses knowledge to the "ignorant." As 'Abdu'l-Baha has emphasized:

The teacher should not consider himself as learned and others ignorant. Such a thought breedeth pride, and pride is not conducive to influence.

('Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 30)

I would like to present some preliminary results from my research on study circles conducted in North America in 2003. There were three areas of inquiry: First, what was the participant's reaction to the highly structured nature and collaborative participation pattern of study circles? Second, what was the participant's perception of personal enrichment resulting from attending

study circles? Third, what was the participant's perception of community building and improved consultation skills in members who regularly attended study circles?

To investigate these areas, I developed a 23 item questionnaire with 14 of the items in a Likert scale format, where participants were asked to mark whether they agreed or disagreed with a statement along a five-point scale. The answer "strongly disagree" was scored as one point, "disagree" as two points, "no opinion" as three points, "agree" as four points, and "strongly agree" as five points, the maximum. Thus, the range was from one to five points, with higher figures indicating stronger agreement. The final three items were open-ended. Here participants wrote their reactions to the study circle format and its impact on the participants. This questionnaire was reviewed by the people in charge of study circles in British Columbia, Canada, and complied with ethical review procedures set by Canadian universities.

The participants were a convenience sample of 44 members of study circles in Western Canada and US. Most were between 36 to 65 years old and had been Baha'i for an average of 20 years. Twenty-one had facilitated courses, 23 had not. Of this group, most intended to facilitate courses in the future.

Since this is a preliminary report, I will present only a few items. One asked how the participants put into practice what they had learned after they completed a course. Here multiple responses were possible. Thirty-two participants said that they studied the Baha'i Writings and prayed more regularly. Twenty-five said that they mentioned the Faith more often; and 19 said that they started their own study circles. Seventeen said that they invited seekers to participate in a Book One course.

Now we will examine some responses to the Likert Scale items, recalling that the scores ranged from "strongly disagree," at 1 point, to "strongly agree" at 5 points. The average score of those responding to the statement that they felt comfortable studying in the highly structured Ruhi courses was 4.25. This is quite high when we consider that a middle score would be 2.5 and the maximum score would be 5. The average score of those responding to a statement asking if they liked the collaborative nature of the courses, with the facilitator guiding the class, was 4.43 points—nearly the maximum number of points. So the group learning process that promoted full participation, consultation, and learner autonomy was highly valued. The average score of those responding to a statement asking if they liked the relative lack of individual interpretation was 4, again, quite high. The average score of those reporting that they remembered what they had studied better after participating in study circle activities compared with other forms of study and deepening was also 4, a high value. The average score of a second cooperative learning item asking if the participants understood material better when they studied with other people was also very high, at 4.42 points. The average score of those responding to a statement asking if they liked the repetition of key ideas was 4.32, and the average score of those responding to an item asking if they liked the paraphrasing of key ideas was a similar high value, at 4.23. Finally, the average score of those responding to an item asking whether they agreed that the facilitator learns with the class was another high value, at 4.3.

Thus, scores for these items were 4 or over, showing the very favorable views of this convenience sample of 44 participants towards the Ruhi pedagogy.

Next, we will consider some open-ended responses on how study circles helped personal transformation and community building. One participant said that study circles were a “concrete practical realization and actualization of spiritual concepts” and were the “bridge between knowledge and action.” Several others wrote that, through the study circles, the Sacred Word became part of their daily life. Others noted improved retention of what was learned or memorized compared with traditional teacher-led deepening classes. One participant wrote the interesting comment that participants did not become “victims of their own interpretations,” and several noted positive effects from the discipline of listening to others, and being required to respect diverse views.

Many participants wrote about increased feelings of closeness with study group members, noting the positive effect of having members of the same community meet regularly to study together. Related to this were comments about improved consultation skills. One participant reported that although he had served on an assembly with another study circle member, it was not until they had taken several intensive courses together that they became very close. This new closeness resulted in improved consultation during assembly meetings. Others commented that passive members who rarely spoke became able to participate actively.

The development of knowledge was a common theme. Several participants reported increased confidence in their ability to hold children’s classes and facilitate study circles because of their improved knowledge and skills. One participant observed that study circle methods could be used to study other materials, saying that his community used the Rubi pedagogy to go through *A Century of Light*, an example of extending Rubi pedagogy. Another participant wrote that study circles were “unique and strong because they have great structure while giving the students the maximum chance to talk and be responsible for their own learning.” Several others emphasized that study circles are “focused on service and action, not just on intellectual appreciation.” One participant considered intercultural issues, suggesting, “the simplicity makes it universal—study circles can be used with all cultures and groups of people.” Another wrote that study circles “eliminate the dilemma of consolidation vs. teaching since they go hand in hand.” And several noted that they liked “the regularity of the study circle and its predictable, structured progression.”

These preliminary results suggest that the study circle’s structured interactive format is perceived as a strong plus, equalizing participation, providing predictability, and promoting the development of group ties and consultation skills. The participants clearly recognized their improved skills, especially their ability to incorporate spirituality into their daily lives, and to hold their own study classes. Many said they are ready to take the study circle pedagogy and extend it for the development of new programs.

References

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, January 17, 2003.

Universal House of Justice. *Building Momentum: A Coherent Approach to Growth*. August 16, 2003.