

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

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This talk examines the pedagogy used in the Ruhi Study Circles and presents the results of a survey of participants in Canada, with special attention to the improved community building features and consultation skills experienced by the participants in an intensive Ruhi program.

In its Ridvan Message to the Baha'is of the Spiritual Axis region in 1996, the Universal House of Justice suggested that the transformative power of the Baha'i Faith as a pattern for future society must be shown by example, through its effects on the lives of the Baha'is and their community. As one way to achieve developmental goals, the House of Justice gave us the Institute Process—a powerful mechanism for large-scale education and capacity building. Although Baha'i communities have had study classes and deepening activities in the past, at last the Baha'i world as a whole 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 its June 1995 description of Institute Training Programs, the International Teaching Center suggested that rather than implying a short deepening course held for a fixed period, the term "Institute" refers to a range of activities for establishing and implementing a long-term program of human resource development. Because of the on-going scope of these activities, the ITC uses the term "institute process". This wording emphasizes the continually evolving nature of the system for educating the believers, a system which will be the foundation of vast future educational institutions offering life-long learning. When the administrative structure, which is already in place in many areas, is augmented by a richer devotional life and the establishment of this basic education system, we will have the key components for a truly functioning Baha'i community.

Along with devotional meetings and children's classes, the study circles of the Institute Process were specifically identified in the January 17th, 2003 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Baha'is of the world 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". This message also emphasizes that, "this outward looking orientation is one of the finest fruits of the grassroots learning taking place."

Thus, in a talk given at the World Centre 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."

An Institute begins when a core group decides to study, pray and act together in order to reach people and invite them to become Baha'is. This group operates under the Local Spiritual Assembly and gathers new believers together to go through a series of courses. The group considers the needs of the new believers and factors such as the time, place and the materials. Usually the core group takes the lessons developed by the Ruhi Institute and adapts them to local conditions.

I personally completed the seven courses currently available in English and became a facilitator, and as a veteran teacher, I found that the theoretical background and pedagogy were extremely sound. Universal House of Justice member Dr. Farzam Arbab was instrumental in developing the Ruhi Institute, and he said that, because the Institute staff wanted to overcome the traditional dichotomy between theoretical and practical knowledge,

the Ruhi curriculum consists of multi-disciplinary modules. For example a module on water would integrate the physical, chemical and biological properties of water. It would study the symbolism of water in art and literature. Students would learn how water supplies influence community development and how communities should manage their water resources.

Of course, the idea of integrated learning modules is hardly new in educational theory. However, two things are very interesting about the Institute approach. First, all participants in the learning act are called “collaborators”, whether they are students or teachers. Thus, the emphasis is on the collaborative nature of the learning process. Learning is seen as reciprocal, and the relationships among the group members are not the same as those found in traditional teacher-fronted classrooms, where an expert dispenses knowledge to the ignorant. The Institute process follows this warning given by ‘Abdu’l –Baha:

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)

Most of us are aware of the rise of collaborative learning in education. It involves group work—learners working together to solve problems, each contributing her own strengths to the learning task. Collaborative learning is linked to the work of two Russian scholars whose research has had a tremendous impact on cognition and learning theory, so I would like to consider them briefly here.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was an educational psychologist who worked with infants and very young children. His research suggested that children construct meaning collaboratively, and, therefore, social interaction is critical in establishing their organization of reality. Meaning remains mutable throughout life; it is actively and continually reconstructed through discourse. Vygotskian analysis can be applied to many types of interaction—for example, we can use it to understand Baha’i consultation.

The work of the second Russian, philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), is used in literary theory as a rebuttal of deconstructionism. Bakhtin’s basic idea was that the child internalizes the voices of those around her during her early years, and then re-externalizes those voices for the rest of her life. In other words, when we speak, we speak with the voices of our mother, our father, our teachers, our friends. True thought, Bakhtin suggests, is not found in the isolated minds of the individuals, but emerges through the discourse of multiple voices.

Thus, from the Bakhtinian perspective, the collaborative learning style used in the Ruhi Institute not only encourages the construction of meaning through interaction, but—through study and memorization of the Writings—also supplies the new believer with the Voice of God.

The second interesting point about the Institute process is that the material is very highly structured. In fact, we could say that it is virtually “teacher proof.” To understand this better, let’s consider the lesson plan for the first part of Book One: “Understanding the Baha’i Writings.” It consists of 20 short quotations from the Writings which are studied in groups and memorized. Then the participants answer questions about the Writings. Three levels of comprehension are targeted: comprehension of the meaning of the words and sentences, applying the concepts to daily life, and applying the concepts to more general situations.

Now, let’s go through a lesson as it’s presented in Japan. First the learners read the target passage. This activates their background knowledge, helping them process the new content and link it to previously developed knowledge. Next is clarification of the meaning of the words used in the passage. This facilitates integration with previously learned material, and creates new schemata, or mental organizations in the mind. Many new believers will be studying ideas that they have never thought of before, so this development of mental

structures for handling the new material is very important.

In the third step the students manipulate the passage by forming questions using its words. Take the quotation: "The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds." In this step, the learner might ask, "How can the betterment of the world be accomplished?" The other learners would answer, "Through pure and goodly deeds." This might seem very simple, but actually, such repetition is a very important learning strategy. Furthermore, by changing the grammar, the learners are able to access the deep structure of the passage—its underlying meaning according to principles of Universal Grammar.

After asking and answering these questions, the learners move to the fourth step, in which they discuss the quotation, analyzing its application to different situations in their lives. At this point, the collaborative nature of the discussion leads to the creation of meaning for all participants. Through discussion, the new believers think deeply about the passage and develop spiritual understanding. This is a very different process from quickly reading new material and then very superficially paraphrasing its general meaning. The collaborative nature of the study process enables a more detailed exploration of the many meanings contained within the Holy Word.

The final step is the memorization of the passage: in the Bakhtinian sense, empowering the learner with the Voice of God.

After the passages have been studied, the learners answer review questions which test the three levels of understanding. When they answer these questions, the learners reinforce their knowledge of the Writings and the spiritual principles they embody. Through collaborative discussion, they come to understand how the Writings have direct application to their own lives and the operation of their community. In this way, they move down the path of spiritual development.

If we compare this process to traditional, teacher-led deepenings or study classes, where the participants tend to forget what they've studied as soon as they leave the room, we can understand how effective the Institute Process can be. All of participants I've spoken to believe that the Institute Process fits in very well with the dominant Asian-Pacific culture of consultation and group decision making as well as with the Asian tradition of life-long study.

While I was on sabbatical in Canada during 2002-2003 I observed that the Ruhi 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. 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 we have mentioned before.

I therefore decided to do some research on this pedagogy while I was in North America. I would like to present some preliminary results from that research today. My study had 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 of responses was from one to five points, with higher figures indicating stronger agreement. The final three items were open-ended. For these items, participants wrote their reactions to the study circle format

and the impact it had on them. 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 the U.S. Most were between 36 to 65 years old and had been Baha'is 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. 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; 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 response 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 response would be 2.5 and the maximum would be 5. The average response to a question 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. Thus, the group learning process that promoted full participation, consultation, and learner autonomy was highly valued.

The average response to a question asking if they liked the relative lack of individual interpretation was 4—again, quite high. The average response to a statement about remembering 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 response to 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 response to a statement asking if they liked the repetition of key ideas was 4.32, while the average response to an item asking if they liked the paraphrasing of key ideas was a similar high value, 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, 4.3.

Thus, average responses for all of 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 had become 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 of the community who rarely spoke became able to participate actively.

The development of knowledge and skills 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 Ruhi pedagogy to go through *A Century of Light*, an example of extending Ruhi 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 other participants 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.” Moreover, 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 to the development of new programs.

References

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