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This is the published version of a paper published in .

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Åberg, P. (2016)

Guest Column: Study Circles Foster Friendship and Well-Being  
*Aging Horizons Bulletin*

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:esh:diva-10487>

## Guest Column: Study Circles Foster Friendship and Well-Being

*Older adults use study circles to foster friendship and enrich later life.*

*In this issue, political scientist Pelle Åberg from Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm, Sweden, leads us through the origins of Swedish study circles. He explains how they work and he discusses his research (Educational Gerontology, Jan. 14, 2016).*



Dr. Pelle Åberg

### Study circles

In Sweden, participation in study circles is widespread and receives substantial state support – the equivalent of almost C\$250 million in 2015.

Study circles have been a central part of the Swedish tradition of "folkbildning". Folkbildning is difficult to translate into English. It refers to activities commonly known as popular education.

During the early 1900s, political and societal transformations in Sweden led to popular movements becoming legitimate and strong actors in Swedish society. State support strengthened the role of these movements and their educationally-orientated organizations.

In Sweden today, we have 10 nation-wide "study associations." These organizations organize a host of voluntary learning activities, study circles being at the forefront.

In 2015, these 10 associations organized around 275,000 study circles, which attracted almost 1.7 million participants.

### Characteristics

Swedish study circles have several characteristics. For one thing, study circle activities are not about increasing one's formal competence. Instead, the activities focus on learning for personal development and for the joy of learning.

Activities are free, voluntary and inclusive.

In Swedish popular education, the activities and the learning process begin with the individual learner. Thus, the would-be teacher — called the study circle leader — is not a central figure but, rather, part of the group.

Study circles offer spaces where a broad spectrum of people engage in a wide range of learning activities. The social dimension is stressed, and learning is seen as a collective effort.

## Organization

Generally speaking, study circles come about in one of three ways.

Study circles can be organized under the umbrella of one of the 379 civil society organizations that are members of the "study associations." These include sports clubs, pensioners' groups and patients organizations, to mention a few.

For example, people who like to hunt can become a member of a study circle in hunting. Circle participants learn the steps required to become a licensed hunter and receive assistance in preparing for the test. These study circles result from collaboration between the study association Studieförbundet and the Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management (Svenska Jägareförbundet).

Study associations can also organize study circles and pitch them to the general public. Circles focused on language learning, for example, or how to play a musical instrument.

Finally, study circles can be sparked by a group of individuals coming together to pursue a common interest, say a love of literature.

By turning to a study organization and formally organizing themselves as a study circle, a group can get support for its activities. Support can include financial support to help purchase books or material support, like getting to use the premises of the study association.

A common example of the latter is a band that organizes their rehearsals as a study circle to get access to appropriate rooms.

## Benefits

In Sweden, adults 65 years and older make up more than one third of the total number of study circle participants, with many engaging in all three types of circles.

My article focused on links between feelings of well-being and participation in study circles. Specifically, I looked at why older adults participate in study circles and what they gained from the experience.

I found that many older adults emphasized the social aspects of learning.

A majority of participants reported they joined study circles to improve their knowledge and skills in an area of interest. But most often, being part of the circle fellowship — as well as the opportunity to meet new people — trumped other reasons for getting

involved. As one pensioner put it, "Apart from learning how to cook, the fellowship and working in a group meant a lot. We had fun."

When we looked at the benefits of participation, we found similar results.

Almost everyone claimed they gained new knowledge and skills through sharing their experiences. But, again, the sense of belonging to a group was paramount.

Most of the participants in my study also claimed involvement in study circles boosted their sense of well-being.

So, it seems the shared experience of learning with other people in a study circle can be one way for older adults to avoid loneliness and enhance their well-being.

As I mentioned earlier, study circles focus on personal development. So participating in study circles can be a way, not just to meet new people, but to stay mentally fit and continue growing throughout life. One pensioner summed it up this way: "You have something to look forward to. Everyday life becomes more interesting."