



HOW TO DEVELOP ORDERING COMPETENCY?

*- experiences from two study circle
pilots*



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INTRODUCTION

Forest information and knowledge is an important basis for forest owners' decision-making - especially for new forest owners. However, much of the established channels of forest education are relatively traditional. Traditional dissemination of information and course-based training have not proven to be the best options for forest owners who are new or unexperienced. The project organized two study circle pilots to test new ways to provide training for forest owners: "Study circle on a distance" in Sweden and "Physical study circle" in Finland. The purpose of the pilots was to test and gather information of different ways to organize training and share information with different forest owners. An equally important goal was that the participants in the study circles through the courses would improve and develop their ordering competency. With increased competence to order, the security of being a forest owner is expected to increase and the forest owners would feel joy of owning a forest. Which together with the competence itself is supposed to lead to more forest related business taking place and thus more well-managed forests.

“STUDY CIRCLE ON A DISTANCE” IN SWEDEN

The purpose of the pilot was to investigate the study circle concept in relation to forest service development. In extension, if and how it can be a method for small and medium-sized enterprises to improve the amount of, and more qualified orders of forest services. Another purpose was to investigate if it is possible to contribute to increased activity among these forest owners who have traditionally been difficult to reach, by increasing the knowledge and awareness among this target group of forest owners - ie passive and new forest owners.

Specifically, the pilot wanted to investigate the possibility to:

- Strengthen the relationship between the forest owner and her or his forest and give the forest owner knowledge of the forest's different values to be able to navigate.
- Help forest owners with tools to set their own goals with the forest and to form a plan for their forest and forest ownership.
- Strengthen forest owners in their role as purchasers of forest services – their competence to order.

A digital Learning-platform was chosen as the focus for the study circle together with physical meetings and individual counselling in the field or at a distance. The start-up meetings were held at the locations: Lycksele, Vilhelmina, Umeå, Örnsköldsvik, Sundsvall and Stockholm. The participants were offered three distance courses on the Swedish Forest Agency's learning platform "itslearning". "Forest owner introduction", "Forest with variety" and "Ordering services". Physical and digital start-up-meeting and classical self-studies was interspersed with film clips, knowledge tests, discussion issues, online-meetings, and opportunities for in-depth studies via linked material at skogskunskap.se and skogsstyrelsen.se. In addition to the events that were planned from the beginning, three physical events with forest economy were arranged to meet the wishes from the participants. The study circle started up in September 2019 and ended on the learning platform in January 2020. 13 of the participants also received the offered follow-up counselling in their own forest during the summer and autumn of 2020. The group meetings that were planned to be held in the field in the spring 2020 were all cancelled due to the covid-19 pandemic situation.

84 persons signed up on the study circle but 50 % left, almost immediately. Most of them due to lack of time and some of them because of technical problems with the digital learning platform. 42 persons, of which 55 % were women, completed the entire study

circle and responded to the evaluation. The average age of the participants was 52 years. 56 % had owned forest for less than 5 years, together with those 8 % who were not yet forest owners. Based on the participants' interaction, a clear trend shows that the participants had gained better knowledge and increased security in its role and identity as a forest owner. This contributed to that they felt more secure about making decisions regarding their forest after the study circle. Drawing upon the evaluation, the participants have gained a broader and better knowledge of both the climate's impact on forestry but also about more ways of using the forest. It is also possible to see a clear positive trend with the participants' developing individual goals with their forestry. Most participants have gone from no or unclear goals to fairly clear goals. In comparison with before the study circle, more of the participants knows the economic value of their property “well” and “very well” and their knowledge about the social and the cultural values of their property also improved. A few more persons even stated that they know the content of their forest management plan “very well” after the study circle and only one person answering “don´t know it at all”. The participants experienced the content of the courses as good and well-balanced. However, the platform itself was perceived as a bit difficult to navigate and work with, but that they received good support from the study circle leaders. To compensate for the challenges of the platform, the study circle leaders also sent a lot of information by e-mail to the participants, which provided a fruitful help. The study circle felt too extensive to some of the participants who also worked full time and had a family to take care of. Overall, the participants rated the study circle as a whole with a grade of 2.7 on a scale from 1-4, where 4 is best.

According to the free-text-comments in the evaluation, some of the participants would have liked more structure in the syllabus with start-up meetings, more deadlines, and assignments along with each of the course-sections. Also mandatory discussion sections where study circle leaders and participants are involved. More meetings in general, both face-to-face and over Skype and more common discussion meetings in smaller groups were also wished. This partly due to the empowering effect of sharing thoughts and experiences with other forest owners in the same situation and with limited experiences.

To follow-up the knowledge, activities and experiences of the participants, a follow-up questionnaire was sent out by E-mail in February 2021 – about a year after the study circle ended. This corresponded to the questionnaire that also was sent to the participants in the Finnish study circle at the same time. Half of the 42 Swedish participants answered the questionnaire. Since the study circle, 62 % had bought or agreed on forestry services and 14 % expressed that they didn't have any present needs

for services. About a fourth experienced that they haven't had the time to reflect upon their service needs. The contracted services were final felling, precommercial thinning, forest management plan, silvicultural measures, and work with the forest road. 23 % were contacted by the company that offered the services and 77 % contacted the company themselves.

The answers show that most of them had gained a higher knowledge of forest during the study circle. 86 % of the participants answered, "quite much" or "very much" and 14 % answered "quite little" or "very little".

The raise in the participants competence to order do not directly correspond with the result of their raise in knowledge of forest. Less than half of them (48 %) answered "quite much" or "very much" and more than half (52 %) answered "quite little" or "very little". One explanation to this can be that competence to order is based on more than knowledge of forest.

"PHYSICAL STUDY CIRCLE" IN FINLAND

The physical study circle was organized in Finland in autumn 2019. The pilot tested how social interaction with other forest owners can promote learning. The study circle was held in the classroom and it was organized in collaboration through the Citizens' College of Seinäjoki. Seinäjoki Citizens' College was chosen as the location because it is well-known and accessible for everyone, not only for people interested in forestry issues. In addition, women actively use the services of Citizens' colleges and study guides are distributed free of charge widely.

There were 11 participants in the study circle, and it lasted for two months. The meetings were held once a week. No one dropped out of the study circle and only one did not respond to the feedback questionnaire. The average age of the participants was 28 years and 55 % of the participants were women. Participants had been forest owners for an average of 4,5 years. There were people among the participants who were not yet officially forest owners, but they were soon becoming forest owners through a generational change.

Based on the feedback after the study circle, participants felt that their knowledge of forest issues increased during the study circle. The participants felt that they learned about the different uses of forests and learned about the economic, cultural and recreational values of forests, although, for example, there was not much time to go through the cultural and recreational values of forests. In addition, seven participants experienced a better awareness of the effects of climate change on their forests. Based on the feedback, the participants' decision-making regarding their forest was strengthened. In addition, the participants felt that through the study circle, they became more familiar with their own forest plan. The average grade the participants gave after the study circle was 4 (on a scale from 1 to 5), which is good.

In the feedback questionnaire, the participants were asked to write what was best in the study circle and what could have been better. The participants thought it was good that the topics were discussed extensively during the study circle, and different perspectives were brought up. In addition they liked that, the lecturers were knowledgeable, and the discussions were good, based on which the participants gained "aha"-experiences. As ideas for developing the study circle, the participants listed e.g. extending the study circle time. In addition, a summary was hoped for in the end, as there was so much new to learn in every lecture. During the study circle there was a section where participants were

taught to use Metsään.fi-service, which is a service for the forest owners where they can find information of their own forest properties and plan their forest management. This learning section was described as too fast and intensive. This is a problem when there are different people involved. Others were already familiar with the Metsään.fi - service and others became acquainted with the service for the first time. The study circle developed well over time - some of the participants were initially shy and less involved, but towards the end became more active and started asking more questions.

A follow-up questionnaire was sent to the participants by e-mail on February 2021, more than a year after the end of the study circle. The questionnaire was sent to all of the 11 participants, but only four of them responded. Based on the responses, the course affected their knowledge of forests quite much or very much. Half of the respondents felt that the study circle had relatively little effect on their ability to order forest services, while half of the respondents felt that the study circle had quite large effect on their ability to order forest services. Half of the respondents had not ordered forest services because they did not need it. Half of the respondents had contracted for the service in the future. The services ordered were seedling care / thinning and forest inventory. The respondents had been in contact with the service provider themselves.

CONCLUSION

When comparing the results of different kind of study circles in Finland and Sweden, similarities can be found. In both countries the participants felt that they were more confident in making decisions regarding their forests after the study circle than before the study circle (Table 1). After both study circles, participants felt that they were in average quite confident to make decisions. Based on the results, the physical study circle improved decision-making of the participants more than study circle on the distance. But in physical study circle, also the participants felt less confident to make decisions in the beginning of the course compared to the study circle on a distance.

The results were similar when participants were asked how confident they feel when ordering the forest services. After both study circles, participants felt more confident in ordering forest services after the study circle than before the study circle. Also in this case, there was greater improvement after the physical study circle but the level of self-confidence was lower before the physical study circle compared to the study circle on a distance.

Questionnaire	Physical study circle in Finland (10 responses)		Study circle on a distance in Sweden (42 responses)	
	Before	After	Before	After
The grades before and after are average grades of the responses				
How confident are you in making decisions regarding your forests? (1=very insecure, 2=quite insecure, 3=quite confident, 4=very confident)	1,8	3	2,4	3,0
How confident do you feel when ordering forest services? (1=very insecure, 2=quite insecure, 3=quite confident, 4=very confident)	1,5	3,1	2,3	2,8

Table 1. Some results of the questionnaires that the participants of the both study circles responded before and after the study circle.

After the follow-up survey, the participants felt that both study circles contributed to their forest related knowledge quite much in average. Based on the responses, the physical study circle contributed their forest related knowledge a little bit more than a study circle in distance (Table 2). But it should be also noted that only four persons answered to the follow-up survey regarding to the physical study circle. According to the follow-up survey, the study circle on a distance contributed to the competence to order or use forest services more than the physical study circle.

Follow-up	Physical study circle in Finland (4 responses) (average grade)	Study circle on a distance in Sweden (21 responses) (average grade)
How did the study circle contribute to your forest related knowledge? (1=very little, 2=quite little, 3=quite much, 4=very much)	3,25	2,9
How did the study circle contribute to your competence to order / use forest services? (1=very little, 2=quite little, 3=quite much, 4=very much)	2,5	2,9
Have you purchased forest services after the study circle?	50 % = Yes, I have 50 % = No, I have had no need for that.	62 % Yes, I have 38 % No, I have not

Table 2. Some results of the follow-up surveys that the participants responded after the study circles.

It can be concluded that individual knowledge and understanding of their forest properties and forest ownership constitute an important base for forest-related decision-making and competence to order services. However, the results of the questionnaires also highlight that this issue is a bit more complex and dependent on other variables than just knowledge. This could be variables such as the relation with the service provider, the service available/offered or external expectations and social norms related to forest ownership and decision-making.

From the free text comments submitted in the evaluation after the study circles in both countries, it can be concluded that there are both advantages and disadvantages for the organizers and the participants. Regarding to the digital study form in the study circle on

a distance, the demands on the platform's user- and pedagogical functionality are great and when it comes to communication it's hard to concur with a physical teacher. A major perceived benefit of self-study on a digital learning platform is the freedom to read the course at any time. It is a lot easier to combine with your everyday life than a physical course at a specific time. Another benefit is the time and money saved by not having to travel to the location for the course, for those who can not easily walk there. Of course, along with the savings for the environment in some cases.

Based on the experiences of the study circles, the physical study circle is easier to prepare and implement than the digital learning platform and less resources are needed. The physical study circle is also easier to modify during the study circle based on the needs of the participants. In a physical study circle, people usually also know before what to expect in terms of how much time it will take and how long it lasts. But they should be also informed, if it is needed to prepare or read things outside the time of the physical study circle.

A difficulty with the digital meeting forum can be the experience that questions and opinions that are revealed are stored digitally for posterity to read. It can be inhibiting for some people, who then refrain from participating in the discussion. In a digital discussion forum where the participants don't see each other, their expressions will not be registered by the other participants if they are not typed in and visible on the screen. As an example, nobody will notice your nodding of agreement to somebody else's comment in the discussion. Typing "I agree" is for some people a bigger step to take than to nod their head. It can be that it takes a greater effort to feel active in a digital discussion forum than a physical one.

This gives that the study circle, which is based on physical face-to-face meetings, allows easy interaction between participants, and lowers the threshold to ask questions. Based on the comments of the participants, social interaction with other forest owners promoted learning during the physical study circle. The creation of an inclusive and permissive discussion atmosphere plays an important role in successful physical study courses. Face-to-face teaching is especially suitable for learners who are more used to traditional teaching methods and appreciate personal teaching as well as customer service. There was a study trip in the woods included at the end of the Finnish physical study circle and it enabled a multi-sensory learning experience, which is not possible in a digital learning environment.

Commercializing a forest-based study circle is an excellent business idea, as many people are interested in forestry. There are not many digital learning services available as forest courses for forest owners, so there is room in the market for actors who offer impartial, high-quality and forest education that takes into account different forest owners and different forest ownership goals and values. Forest education services should be planned in a targeted way for different groups of learners and different segments of forest owners. It's therefore fruitful to reflect upon the different elements of the two types of study circles and how these relates and caters to the purpose and target group of a potential learning activity. As highlighted in the report, the different elements has different pedagogical strenghts and weaknesses that produces different types of learnings and learning enviornments. This is not a least important to reflect upon to optimise the resources allocated for the activity and ensure its goals. Forestry compete with other leisure activities, so forest learning packages could include experientialism, sense of quality, detachment from everyday life and memorable learning experiences.

Tips for the organizers of the study circles:

- The combination of digital and physical elements could be the best option because some people prefer traditional face-to-face meetings and discussions, and the technical issues can be a challenge. While others are used to the digital platforms and prefer that they can study things on their own and ask questions if needed.
- Interaction is important! There should be a possibility to discuss and ask questions even if it is a study circle on a distance. Especially the discussions are important! Reserve enough time and possibility for that.
- People need time to process what they have learned. Also, repeatiton of the learned things is important, at least in the end of the study circle.
- Communication before and during the study circle is crucial to ensure that everyone has the similar basis, information and expectations. An option can also be to provide material in advance to support individuals with a longer and a more text-based learning process.
- Try to provide the open atmosphere during the course so that everyone has time and possibility to ask and comment. Encourage everyone to participate.
- It takes time to prepare a digital learning platform so that it is compact, informative, and visual enough.
- When preparing the study circle, decide what is your target group and keep it in mind when designing the content of the study circle.
- The digital learning platform should be easy to use. It should be tested in advance, and participants needs the opportunity to ask for advice and technical help.

- During the study circle, set time limits and deadlines and stay on schedule. People need some check points, and they should know how they should progress and what the expectations are.
- Reflex on the different pedagogical elements and how they are used best in relation to different target groups, learning styles and aim of the study circle.