

Manual for Tutors Thinking About Conducting Study Circles **Over the Phone**

Report on Teleconference Study Circles
From a Reflection Meeting, January 13, 2005

Things to Consider Before You Start

1. Universal Participation

- Know that by tutoring a study circle over the phone, you are making a **BIG** difference in the lives of those who may not otherwise be able to take part. They want to be part of the process. They are meant to be part of the process. Teleconferences meet a specific, urgent need.

2. Understand that it is a learning process for everybody

- We are pioneering teleconference use. We have to monitor, evaluate, adjust, consult, try new things. Don't worry about mistakes or problems. We can develop the skills as we learn.
- Don't ever give up! It's the only way that some people can participate in a process that is intended to involve everyone. "Bury your fears in the assurances of Bahá'u'lláh!"
- No one should look at this report and be intimidated, thinking it's too much to learn. Anyone could jump in with both feet and learn by trial and error, as we are doing. We're just ordinary folks like you!

3. The money

- It's really important at the beginning to establish how it's going to get paid for, what the costs are, and which is the best way to carry it out. This means people will have to do some research to discover the options (both participants and tutors).
- Both teleconferences and traveling by car to attend a study circle cost money. It takes a mind shift to be prepared to pay the phone bill at the end of the month when the phone bill comes in, instead of buying gas a little at a time and using the car to make additional trips.
- Costs shouldn't all fall on one person.
- Open clear consultation is needed at the outset to determine the needs and the resources available for each group.

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8. Phones

- Because you will be on the phone for an extended period of time, headsets or speakerphones work best. Headsets can be plugged into a small hole, usually on the left side of a cordless phone.
- For those in remote regions with little access to product choices, most phone companies sell or rent phones, for a small fee added to your phone bill each month. Check in the front of your phone book or at their website for more information.
- Some participants have purchased good phone systems from www.ebay.com/ or www.ebay.ca/
- If using a regular corded phone, you might find it best to do shorter study circles, more frequently, or have several pillows on your lap, to support your phone arm. Discuss your needs with your tutor.
- Phones being used successfully by participants in these study circles include: Panasonic 900 MHz cordless phone with a speakerphone on the base, Panasonic Speaker Phone KX-TSC14CB, Motorola MD671 and Vtech 2.4 GHz cordless phone with speakerphone on the base and the cordless. Phones are always changing, and information on the best systems can be found on the internet, by typing in “speaker phone reviews” at the following search engine: www.google.ca

9. Phone Plans

- Residents of Saskatchewan have excellent phone plan options with unlimited calling, 24/7. Someone with the phone plan already could be found to participate, or people could collaborate to pay for someone to get the flat rate.
- Some people are using a Wintel 25-cent-a-call plan. Their information number is 1-888-733-0346
- The Atlantic region is exploring the services of Enunciate Conferencing Services. They have found teleconferencing more successful when the calls were hosted by service providers such as Aliant -- services that only require the participants to dial in to a specific number. This eliminated the frustration of do-it-yourself chain dialing and losing people or having the chains. Do-it-yourself is definitely cheaper. However, they do take more time to arrange and hosted teleconference calls can be a much more efficient use of time. The Atlantic has found that Enunciate offers more enhanced services at a cheaper rate – well worth considering. Visit www.enunciate.com or call (416)-516-5189.
- All Saskatchewan phones have 3-way calling at 50 cents per call, with a maximum charge per month of \$6.00 or as part of a package at \$4.00 per month. In Labrador, it must be added to your line as a feature combined with another package, or approximately \$6.00/month flat rate.

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- For example: a lady in Ontario who had severe health problems and was confined to bed wanted to participate in a study circle. A tutor willing to use the teleconference method was found in Alberta. They each researched phone plans but found that neither province had an economical phone plan suited to their needs. The lady in Ontario offered to finance pre-paid phone cards for the tutor who could get 3 way calling. They decided to do the teleconference daily, for several hours during the day until they finished. When they got the 3 way service and the phone cards, they did some practice calls to familiarize themselves with the procedure. They discovered that a calling card will only engage one phone, so to do 3-way calling, they needed 2 separate calling cards. So they tried that, and it worked. Someone who was familiar with the teleconference method participated until they developed a system that worked for them, but then they proceeded on their own to accomplish their goal. If they had been unable to find a way to proceed independently, an experienced person with a suitable phone plan could have done the link-up for them. Then that person could have:
 - Left them to proceed on their own, but checked in from time to time (for example, on the half hour) to be sure that everything was OK (no accidental disconnections etc)
 - Participated
 - Monitored continually with their phone on mute, a silent partner on stand-by to help

10. Technical Issues

- A hands-free head-set, or good quality speaker-phone is really helpful.
- A conference-call speaker phone is even better if it is going to be used on an on-going basis (such as at a Bahá'í Centre). Joe Tretina in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, NL is very knowledgeable about this. He can be contacted at 709-896-8791 for help.
- Speaker phones vary in quality. Do trial runs until you are familiar with the phone. Get feedback from other participants to find out what helps and what hinders with the phones you are using. It only takes a few minutes, but it's well worth it.
- If you are purchasing a new phone with speaker phones built in, and people listening to you complain of the way you sound, return it and try another model, until you are satisfied that it has a pleasing sound quality for both ends of the conversation.
- With some speaker phones, you need to speak directly into the speaker and be close to the phone in order to be heard clearly. You need to sit still and be quiet when not speaking.
- When using 3 way calling, link the 3 localities before picking up an extension phone. Two phones in the same house act as 2 localities if the

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main connections haven't been made first. Once the localities are connected, extension phones can be used.

- Many localities in Canada are now using digital phone lines. If your area is still using analog, you may be more susceptible to having the phone line cut you off, for no apparent reason.
- If using a cordless phone, make sure the battery is fully charged or that there is enough talk time left on the phone to cover the length of the call

11. Noise

- On cordless speaker phones, the voice signal has to go through many more stages of electronic transformation and at each stage there is room for noise to creep in and the signal to be degraded
- Noise and movement around a speaker phone causes the transmission to break up. A lot of noise is eliminated if people use the "mute" button when they are not speaking. It's worth getting a phone that has one, if possible. If you don't have a mute button, you must take care not to breathe into the phone or rustle papers when others are talking. This problem is especially acute if using a headset.
- More than 3 localities can sometimes affect the transmission quality. Regions vary. Do test runs ahead of time, to find out what works best in your locality. It's better to split into smaller groups than to proceed with poor sound quality caused by too many locations linked together.
- Make sure each locality has a clear line. If there is static or echo's or "phantom voices" on the line, hang up and re-dial. You may have to do it more than once but you can usually get a clear line.
- You might want to give your participants permission to let you know if the sound quality changes, or check in with them from time to time. You may be unable to hear it on your line. It could start out OK and change part way through the session.
- If the line has any kind of crackle or static, change the phone to determine if it's the phone or the line
- Be careful of wall plug adapters that allow you to plug in more than one device: sometimes they cause noise especially the ones that have a little light on them that tell you when someone else is on the line
- A bad modem on a computer connected to the phone line, or answering machine or fax can also cause problems. Temporarily unplug them when troubleshooting noisy lines. If the phone or adapter or modem is causing the problem, replace them. If not, call the telephone company to fix the line.
- Sometimes it's the cord that's bad, (especially the handset cord). You can usually tell because you get the noise when wiggling the cord. Avoid hand set cords that have a swivel on them – they are notoriously bad for noise once they get a little dirty
- Things that decrease sound quality

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1. Phones differ, lines vary, atmospheric conditions change, static comes and goes.
2. Noise and movement around the speaker phone, including window or indoor fans, air conditioners, room filters or humidifiers
3. Not being close enough to the speaker phone or speaking towards it
4. Linking too many localities with satellite or analog phones
5. Noise in one locality disrupts speaker phone transmission in another, and breaks up transmission
6. Cordless phone battery alarms beeping

12. Managing the Phone Line

- Make a plan at the outset how to monitor for accidental disconnection of a party, and have a system to reconnect. Choose one person to do the dial-up, otherwise people can be redialing at the same time and getting a busy signal.
- If you think you've been cut off, hang up immediately, otherwise the designated connector will get a busy signal and be unable to re-connect.
- If one of the participants has a cell phone, give the number to the designated caller, so this phone can be used as a back up for passing information along.
- The tutor needs to have frequent participation from each person to ensure no one has lost the connection. (Someone may accidentally hit the off button, instead of the mute button, or someone's cat may hit it for them!)

13. Managing Time Zones

- Double check starting times. This is crucial when crossing time zones. Make sure the time suits everyone and that they know the exact start time in their time zone.
- Some provinces don't change to daylight savings time, so make sure you are clear about the change in time, when this happens.

14. Making a 3 Way Call

- Dial the first person on your list. Once the connection has been made, press the "link", "switch-hook" or "flash" button on your phone. If you don't have any of these buttons, press *71.
- After you hear 3 short beeps, dial the second number on your list, including 1 and the area code if it's a long distance call.
- Once the call has gone through, and you hear it ringing at the other end, you can press the "link", "switch-hook", "flash" buttons or *71 again. When the person answers, all three of you should be linked.

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- If the 3rd person doesn't answer or isn't available, press the "link", "switch-hook" or "flash" button or *71 buttons again, to disconnect the call from the 3rd person
- To add a 4th caller, repeat the process

Guidelines for Tutors

1. Preparation of Room

- Something that might be tempting for tutors to skip on, is the process of beautifying the room so participants can feel they're in a beautiful space. If the room is cluttered or disordered, it distracts from being able to focus on the Word of God. What we are doing is a sacred thing, and the surroundings should be befitting. Don't skip on this. Assist participants to make this preparation also in their surroundings.
- It's necessary to eliminate background noise as part of preparing and making sacred, the space where you will be participating. This includes interruptions from other members of the household.

2. Prayers and Memorization

- The tutor may feel pressured for time, due to costs. Don't skip on prayers. You really need the power of prayer to carry you through, especially since you can't see what is going on.
- Use music as part of the devotions. Do a test-run to check that the volume works for all participants. You may need to play it louder than usual, in order to be heard over the phone. Ask people ahead of time to choose the music to share and rotate the responsibility, so everyone has a chance.
- Singing together over the phone is fun, but the voices tend to cancel each other out, so you won't be able to feel part of a group. Experiment and have fun!
- Don't skip on memory work. Include it as part of the devotions.

3. Exercises

- There are various ways to do this: together in person or assign it as homework. Tutors need to be flexible, as participants have different learning styles.
- Exercises involving skits: don't skip on this just because you are using a phone. They can be done over the phone, and the distance adds an extra dimension of fun! People can get fun and creative with this, and it adds a playful dimension to the study circle.
- In Book 3, when participants are "practice teaching", the others can play the role of children, and everyone has fun.
- Each book has a practice component, which is necessary to complete before a person can be said to have truly completed the book. Make

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participants accountable for them. The tutor needs to build time into the program for each person to report on their experience. It's enriching to hear and consider the experience collectively.

4. Housekeeping

- Have a "housekeeping" session somewhere. It could be at the start so it doesn't get forgotten when people are tired. It could be at the end when you might want to include something that happened during the session: ie. assign someone to research something that came up, for reporting back at the next session. It may include schedule changes, or whatever. Be flexible. Keep trying different things till you find something that works for your particular situation.

5. Courtesy and Respect!

- It's really important to start exactly on time (and end on time too!). Let the tutor know ahead of time if you can't participate, and don't be careless about this. It takes a lot of work to set things up and a lot more to make a change at the last minute.
- Give people a voice to explain their needs, at the outset, and ongoing during breaks or in their turn, and maybe at special reflection meetings. It's no use following a procedure that doesn't work for someone. Consult and modify, but **don't ever give up!** Even if it isn't perfect, it may be the only way an isolated, estranged or infirm individual can participate in the goals of the plan.
- It's important to have breaks. If you need a break part way through (i.e. bathroom, someone at the door etc), make sure you let the tutor know you have left the call temporarily.
- Give people permission to quit earlier if they get weary for example. Talking on the phone requires more energy than face to face study circles, because people are having to listen for cues that they can't see. They need permission to let the tutor know if something is not working, even if it means having to interrupt the tutor's plans for the session.

6. Managing The Study Circle

- It's harder to interrupt someone on the phone, so tutors have to be more disciplined.
- On the phone there is no eye contact or body language, so it may help to assign an order for prayers, reading and answering questions. It runs smoother and takes less time if you establish an order and routine.
- Alternatively, tutors can name the person each time, so people will have permission to speak.
- Phones in the Arctic relay to a satellite so there is a delay before the voice reaches you. During those seconds, you can't tell that another person is

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speaking, so suddenly all the voices are heard at once. It's harder to be successfully spontaneous so it's particularly helpful to take turns. Try different things and use what works best.

- Humor is a divine quality and can ease awkward situations and tensions, when used wisely.
- With teleconferences, participants don't already have an existing social context with each other (i.e. participation at various events where there is a chance to get to know each other in other settings). This makes it harder to establish a rhythm and constancy, which is vital to the success of the circle. If sessions are interrupted, for example due to holidays or sickness, it's important to get back into the rhythm quickly.

7. Get to Know Each Other

- It's very important at the outset to get acquainted with each other. Have each person introduce themselves and include a little about their personal life, locality and community. This is interesting, educational and often helps bond people. It brings individual needs to your attention. It provides an opportunity to understand another culture, exchange addresses so you can keep in contact. If you don't want to take time to do this during the study circle, set up a special phone time, or do it via email.
- Cultural dynamics vary and affect the teleconference. For example, it may be customary to have a period of silent reflection before answering, or a younger person may need to let an elder answer first.
- It is vital to find out what an apparent lack of response mean. You could set up a system for them to advise you. They may need a break if they are exhausted and have trouble staying awake. They may have to leave to answer the door. They may just be shy and need encouragement or some special consideration. A non-Bahá'í visitor may have come in and joined the circle, and even be participating. Ask that the participants let you know of any changes, so you can accommodate them, and so that you can welcome and include the guest.

8. Selecting Group Members

- It's been noticed that having husband and wife in the same group may cause limitations because of the dynamics between a couple. Often in a marriage one partner dominates, so it prevents equal participation. One person may try to invalidate the other's views.
- There can be similar issues with family groups.
- If a tutor has difficulty with not being able to pick up on visual cues over the phone, they may find it easier to tutor individuals, one-on-one instead.
- If there is only one other participant in a study circle, the tutor could enrich the consultation by sharing ideas noted from participants in other study circles.

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9. Cultural Challenges

- There may be cultural challenges, such as slower response times, deferring to an elder etc. It can be hard to read a situation.
- Some cultures aren't so talkative, and others don't ever ask questions, so if your questions are met with silence, you may have to ask your participants to help you understand why.

10. Advice to the Institute Boards

- Teleconference study circles are meeting a real need, allowing people to participate who could not do so otherwise. Help tutors continue the process and not quit when they are having difficulties.
- A system should be put in place so that if a tutor feels unable to carry out the study circle, another tutor should be brought in to finish it. An isolated participant shouldn't be dropped and left alone. Everyone needs to be able to participate.
- If you have the option, use tutors that are not already busy people living in large centers. Draw on untapped resources. An isolated pioneer may be able to facilitate or participate, but the financing may need to come from somewhere else.
- When feasible, link diverse areas so that people learn about different regions, become familiar with pioneer areas and support isolated people. Even rural vs. urban can be a learning experience. People learn to consider and care for others who are marginalized by circumstance.
- Tutor training should address teleconference study circles as a specific method.
- A file of trained tutors, willing to use teleconferences should be set up with a coordinator, listed in Bahá'í Canada, so isolated people have a means to access Ruhí Institute Training. Some people have been trying for several years to find a way to participate. Others just think it's impossible.
- An ongoing system needs to be set up as a means for teleconference tutors to exchange information, ideas and experiences and to offer help and encouragement to each other.
- Clear guidelines need to be put in place to record inter-regional study circles, so that records and statistics accurately reflect what is going on. (i.e. to whom should a study circle be reported, if a tutor is in Labrador, and participants are in Nunavut and Ontario?)
- This report should be made available to all institute boards and Bahá'í Canada, and uploaded to www.ruhiresources.org

Testimonials

- "I like it! I love it! I get a great deal out of it. I too am suffering from isolation. It's extremely helpful to talk to others. Some groups are more challenging. The

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- technology is OK. I just miss the body language. I find teleconferencing very fruitful.”
- “As isolated believers we often feel very disconnected from the rest of the Bahá’í world. Participation in such classes reconnects us in very vital ways.”
 - “Even though we can't meet face to face the teleconference method is a wonderful method of connecting with believers in isolated areas where opportunities to participate in such Bahá’í events as Ruhí classes is impossible”
 - “I prayed for a long time when I first came (to my pioneer post) about what I could do. It kept niggling at me to do this. I can only say “Thank you, God!””
 - “I would certainly recommend the teleconference method as a wonderful way to reach out to isolated believers whether isolated by distance or housebound. It redirects ones life to service to the Cause and ones community. It's not that we forget what our purpose is but sometimes we need that regular personal connection to make us forget the day to day struggle and focus on what our role is as Bahá’ís living in isolated areas.”
 - “I was really saddened to hear that some people were giving up doing study circles and devotional meetings by teleconference. Tell them not to stop! Tell them that they are providing an unbelievable service to those who are isolated, for whatever reason! How else are people in isolated areas, with health limitations etc. going to be able to participate in the goals of the plan? If you don't do it, who will?”

Conclusion

Remember: This is a sacred and divine process. We are not just tutoring a course. Don't ever give up! Keep going! There are no mistakes!

As Counselor Smith is fond of saying: “Just do it!”

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