



The Learning Circles Project: *Impacts*

The Impact of Learning Circles on the Community and on the Participants

by Janice Brant

The “Widening the Circle Symposium” brought together representatives from several learning circles identified in the study, and included representation from rural, urban, and Indigenous communities. This gathering presented the research team with an opportunity to hear directly from participants and facilitators about the impact of learning circles on individuals and communities

In order to synthesize the impact of learning circles on individuals and communities I have organized the discussion under five distinct headings: holistic, spiritual (see), emotional (feel), intellectual (think), and physical (act). These headings arise from the data and offer a means of managing the collective responses expressed by the group.

First and foremost a number of responses were “holistic” or characterized by wholeness; that is spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects are present and extend outward to the total environment. “The total environment” is the recognition of self in relationship to family, community, Nation, and creation. One participant at the symposium described this as recognizing that we are “part of a larger picture.” Being part of a larger picture is recognizing a shared human condition in which each person plays a crucial role in the world and has something valuable to contribute. This includes people taking ownership of and for what is happening in their community and circle, building support networks, and assuming responsibility for one another without ignoring the inherent autonomy of individuals.

The symposium participants also spoke to the healing potential of teaching and learning that occur in the circle and impact on participants. The incidents they described were relationship-based and stemmed from the development of friendships, partnerships with community organizations, the inclusion of people with diverse heritage and experiences, as well as intergenerational relationships in which young and old people teach, support,

and learn from one another. Learning circles are about people and bringing people together to widen the circle for the purpose of sharing and learning.

A number of the responses from the symposium participants expressed spiritual connections and understandings that give strength to the individual spirit. These reflections included the power and strength of learning about one's own culture, history, and identity; developing trust in one's self and therefore others; reciprocating love, support, and encouragement to others; reconnecting and communicating the joy of nurturing relationships. Symposium participants shared both their observations and personal journeys of exploring creativity, discovering personal resiliency, and uncovering a belief in their own potential to learn. The gathering also established that these spiritual connections have the potential to create a ripple effect that extends beyond the learning circle and into the community. As learning circle participants build confidence and explore their inner strength they are better prepared and equipped to pursue other challenges or have new courage to make positive change in their lives and communities.

A number of participants from the symposium spoke to the emotional quality and experience of learning circles. Learning circles supported individuals in getting to know themselves on an emotional level and challenged them to explore their own feelings of grief, sadness, joy, and love. Some learning circles in the Indigenous community, although focused on sewing or drumming create a space for dealing with anger, unresolved grief, sadness, shame, and loneliness in the safety and security of the circle environment. Emotional unburdening is considered a natural and necessary component of personal growth and life long learning in the Indigenous community. In other circles, participants experienced feelings of commonality despite differences in age, gender, and cultural heritage. Generally, participants identified feelings of respect for one's self and others; respect for space and diversity; as well as mutual support and encouragement.

Participants talked about "being the only one" and how learning circles fostered a space where participants could see and feel that they were not alone or "the only one." The learning circle itself became a space of common ground, where the circle participants

could collectively give voice to the challenges, injustices, or problems that are part of the human condition. Participants felt a great sense of comfort in knowing that they were embraced and valued by their learning circle.

Learning circles are intellectually stimulating and challenge participants to explore new thought processes, problem solving, and decision making techniques. Learning circles offer participants the opportunity to share and explore their ideas on various topics or issues addressed by their circle. This includes the opportunity to look at common problems and issues together from various and diverse perspectives. Many felt that the sharing of personal stories and lived experiences provided a mechanism for breaking down barriers around racism and stereotypes, and encouraged participants to develop greater appreciation for others by becoming aware of their commonalities and respecting difference. Learning circles also create other types of awareness, for example it may introduce participants to programs and services that are available to assist them. Learning circles empower individuals and communities to explore learning on their own terms and within an environment that is appropriate and comfortable for them.

Finally, learning circles impact individuals and communities on a physical level in that they show us how to be in a group, break down isolation by bringing people together in a circle, create a space for action, encourage sharing and self expression in a safe space, as well as reveal our individual and collective skills and abilities. Learning circles can help participants to realize their gifts and discover amazing things about themselves through theatre, music, sewing, cooking, telling stories, organizing events, and more. The physical manifestation of our gifts and the release of emotions through the body in the form of tears and laughter can have a revitalizing effect and increase the esteem and confidence of participants. Equally important are learning circles that share and prepare food together as a means of providing fellowship. Sharing food to nourish the body is symbolic of the nourishment that we receive through participation in learning circles.