



The Learning Circles Project: *Recommendations*



How Governments Can Support Learning Circles

by Arthur Bull

Although this project was not mainly about policy change, we gained some insights from our research that may have some useful public policy implications. The following recommendations are based on what we learned by studying a diverse selection of learning circles, by listening to some learning circle participants who were brought together for the Widening the Circle Symposium and by engaging in discussions with the project's Working Group. In order to think about the project's recommendations we posed two questions about learning circles:

- Do learning circles contribute to the public good?
- How can learning circles be supported?

By answering these questions, we hope to contribute to our understanding of learning circles in Canada in a way that informs decision-making by policy makers, researchers and community groups.

But before going on to answer these questions we should revisit what we in this project meant by learning circles. This is important, in order to keep our recommendations focused on the kinds of the learning circles we wanted to address, and not some other unrelated ones. Any Google search on “learning circles” will reveal the vast array of groups and activities that people call learning circles, from management sales training to virtual networking of professionals to monthly membership meetings. As we stated above, the learning circles we looked at have some specific features that set them apart from these other groups: an emphasis on face-to-face on a regular basis, peer learning and a focus on specific actions. These are described elsewhere in this report. These characteristics also differentiate the learning circles of this project from *support groups*

www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm

which, while they are often beneficial to people in dealing with important situations and issues in their lives, are not primarily about learning.

In making recommendations relating to public policy, the first question we need to pose is: Do learning circles contribute to the public good? By listening to learning circle participants, organizers and facilitators, we got a clear sense that learning circles do serve the public good in a number of ways. These can be roughly sorted into three categories, that is, learning circles contribute to the public good:

- as effective and inclusive learning opportunities,
- as a means of increasing social capital, in ways other than adult learning opportunities,
- as a way of increasing the effectiveness of other programs by bringing in the dimension of learning into their work.

These categories should not be taken to imply that adult education does not also in itself contribute to social capital. Far from it; in fact there is an extensive literature linking social capital and adult learning (1). We are only making a distinction between those contributions to social capital that relate specifically to adult learning and those that are more general.

Effective and inclusive learning opportunities. Learning circles contribute to the public good by providing inclusive settings for adult learning opportunities, as we have seen on the section on learning and inclusion. Learning circles do this because they:

- create supportive and accessible learning settings,
- provide opportunities for adults to learn skills, such as literacy skills, in contexts that are meaningful to them,
- help participants to understand who they are, where they are going and how to get there,

- support and encourage peer learning,
- support the creation of place-based learning communities (2).

A means of increasing social capital. We also heard that learning circles contribute to the public good by increasing social capital. This concept has been defined in various ways and has been the focus of intense debate in recent years. For the purposes of this project, we need not concern ourselves with this debate or the literature it has generated. Whatever the ultimate conclusion of these debates, social capital is a useful reference point for discussing the value of learning circles in Canada. It is enough to point out that most definitions make an explicit link between group learning and social capital. For example, Maskell (2000) put it this way:

Social capital refers to the values and beliefs that citizens share in their everyday dealings and which give meaning and provide design for all sorts of rules. The word “capital” implies that we are dealing with an asset. The word “asset” tells us that it is attained through membership in the community. Social capital is accumulated within the community through processes of interaction and learning (3).

As noted above, the link between adult learning and social capital is well established. The link between non-formal learning and social capital has also been well documented (4). The question here is how in particular learning circles increase social capital, beyond what other kinds of adult education contribute.

Some of the ways that learning circles support and increase social capital are by:

- breaking down barriers within and among communities,
- synthesizing different kinds of knowledge, e.g. local ecological knowledge and scientific knowledge,
- increasing understanding and tolerance of cultural differences,

- creating networks for personal support,
- setting community goals,
- supporting community development,
- supporting cultural reclamation,
- providing opportunities for literacy learning.

A way of increasing the effectiveness of other programs by bringing the dimension of learning into their work. Learning circles contribute to the public good by enabling other non-educational community organizations to be more effective in reaching their goals by building learning into their programming. There were number of examples of this in the narratives, and this point was brought up several times in discussion at the Widening the Circle Symposium.

How to support learning circles. If we are right in concluding that learning circles have some role in contributing to the public good, what role should government take in order to support them. This is a good point to stop and pose the question: Does government need to do anything at all about learning circles? After all, these circles seem to be happening anyway, and seem to be making a difference.

When looking at the extent of non-formal adult learning as a whole the OECD came to a similar question in its study of adult learning in Canada.

The question is what to make of the extensive amount of informal learning. Perhaps we should all simply leave this issue alone, for fear that recognizing informal learning, organizing it and rewarding it will simply turn everything into a variant of formal learning- bureaucratization of everything (5).

At the other end of the spectrum there is a temptation to say that , if learning circles are really that valuable to the public good, then government should get to work on designing

and implementing policies and programs that will make them more effective and accountable. Canada has a long history of the state playing this kind of role in supporting activities beneficial to the public good. For example, the *Participation* program in the 1970's supported exercise as a means of improving population health.

Between the extremes of saying that there should be an absolute role for either the state or civil society, participants at the Widening the Circle Symposium found a middle ground. They said that, yes, there are some ways that governments could support, strengthen and increase learning circles, but it probably does not need a special policy initiative, or new grant program, or bureaucratic agency. The fear was that this kind of approach might do more to weaken learning circles than to strengthen them. The nature of learning circles is fundamentally that they are part of civil society. That is they are formed by groups of people and community organizations without a specific state incentive or direction. This may one of the reasons they are so effective and abundant.

Having said that there may be some very practical and useful things that government could do to support the development and strengthening of learning circles, as follows.

- Promote public awareness of the value of learning circles.
- Provide support for workshops on learning circles conducted by learning circle participants for interested people and organizations in their communities.
- Provide support for workshops designed for people already involved in learning circles so that expertise can be shared and developed.
- Provide support for networking by learning circle participants on a national level.
- Make public space available to learning circles.
- Make funding available to learning circles for start-up, childcare, transportation and supplies.
- Make funding available to learning circles for facilitation.
- Make funding available for support on literacy issues, such as professional development on learning without relying on written language, using accessible

written language, explicit and implicit literacy learning. In some communities, there are community literacy programs that could be funded to provide these kinds of support.

- Provide funding to existing networks that are supporting learning circles, such as the Women's Institutes.

The key point here is that are ways in which government could support learning circles. Undoubtedly, much of the support could be provided through existing programs, with in existing policy frameworks. This should not be taken as an invitation for government to do nothing. On the contrary, we believe there are important opportunities here for the federal and provincial governments to support individuals and communities.

- (1) Balatti, J., and I. Falk (2001). *Socioeconomic Contributions of Adult Learning to Community: A Social Capital Perspective*. Launceston: University of Tasmania. Available at <http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au/files/discussion/2001/D10-2001.pdf>
- (2) Faris, R. (2004). "Lifelong Learning, Social Capital and Place Management in Learning Communities and Regions: A Rubic's Cube or a Kaleidoscope?" Observatory PASCAL. Available at http://www.obs-pascal.com/resources/faris_2004.pdf
- (3) Maskell, P. (2000). "Social Capital, Innovation and Competitiveness." In Baron, S., J. Field and T. Schuller, eds. *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- (4) Faris, *op. cit.*
- (5) *OECD Thematic Review of Adult Learning*, 2002. Available at <http://www.cmec.ca/international/oecd/adult.note.pdf>