



The Learning Circles Project: *The Section*



Quotes from the Widening the Circle Symposium
compiled by Guy Ewing

Participants from the Widening the Circle Symposium answered the following questions:

1. What is important about learning circles?
2. How could you demonstrate to supporters/funders that a learning circle is working?
3. How can organizations and government support learning circles?
4. What are the impacts of learning circles on individuals and communities?†

1. What is important about learning circles?

Sharing awareness.

An increased understanding, I think, can lead to a more peaceful society.

Well, people in circles, too, they form like a family relationship. And, like, in a larger setting, you know, a lot of them would just shrink down into a corner or to the back of the room and not be visible. Whereas, in a learning circle, it's more of a family setting where everyone has equal opportunity to share what's on their mind and not feel so afraid of speaking out.

I think it also keeps you connected with the world. You're outside yourself, and even though that safe circle you're in, it gives you a little view of the world beyond that circle.

I think in the circles you can grow. Without pressure. 'Cause there's so much pressure sometimes in an ordinary school. I did it for six months, and after, I sort of decided to quit. So, because I was pressured into doing things I never have done, and I was kind of scared, too.

It's reciprocal, too. You know, each member of a group brings something to that group. They're talented in many ways. And so they bring their skills and talents to that group and someone in that group will learn from them and also, you know, reciprocate what they can bring to the group.

It won't allow isolation.

Well, everybody brings their life experiences. That's what a learning circle, from my view, is, life experiences from everybody. Everybody's a teacher and everybody's a learner.

I just wanted to follow up on the term "vulnerable". Because I think one of the things a learning circle does is allow you to be vulnerable. So you don't necessarily have to come in that vulnerable, but you know that you bring it, you can say, "I'm not really sure that I want to be doing this," and "I'm not sure I can learn this." But then the groups says, "That's o.k., that's a perfectly valid response." So it's not eliminating vulnerability, it's allowing it . . .

I think, too, just accessibility, and having, like knowing it's available and knowing that it's out there. And then, like, for us having partnerships and sharing our resources so that we can actually make something happen, so there's an action associated with what we're doing as well.

One more thing that I've noticed, outside of all these other things, is . . . I think it helps keep your mind active, and you connected and involved with . . . mental health.

2. How could you demonstrate to supporters/funders that a learning circle is working?

I think you have to be able to list the accomplishments of a circle for supporters, because supporters want to know how something works. They don't care how it's structured so much as how it works. So you

have to make sure, presenting to a supporter, to list the accomplishments of a circle . . .

The interest. And attendance.

Getting your community involved.

One tool that I like is to kind of have a questionnaire at the beginning, and then, like, maybe six months, or later, like . So you can kind of . . . It helps people to see themselves and see how they were when they came in and then later on, but it also helps to, you know, gather information to prove how a group, how successful a group has been. I've also experienced something very interesting, and I think I did share this with Tracey. There was, with one of the groups, the HATS groups, we used the self-efficacy scale at the beginning and then six months later. And what happened was the results, like later people had their self-esteem, not their self-esteem was lower, but they were more aware of themselves, of who they were, so they were aware of the fact that they could accomplish more, so it didn't change in terms of . . . You know, if you use the . . . when you analyse the questionnaires, it didn't change, it actually showed that people were at the lower level . . . than what they were when they came in. But then, we were worried . . . It was so interesting. And what happened was that people were more aware of who they were and what, where they would go, they were more self-confident, so then their goals were much higher. So you had to use another tool to prove that, you know, well the group is actually working. But it was just so interesting to take people through all these exercises. And I learned a lot from that process.

I have some hard bit of trouble with evaluation, maybe because for over twenty years I run a program when evaluation was a key word, you know. You evaluate things to death. And I always was very uncomfortable, and continue to be. Because I found I was part of support groups for families with people with, facing horrible circumstances. And . . . many times a person coming into a support group, and it was kind of a peer support group, and half way through it, or at the end, was more in turmoil than they had been when they

came in. Because all of a sudden, maybe the person was given permission to be, because of hearing different things you never knew. And, of course, like you said, you have to put these happy face on those things to the funders, unfortunately, because you don't want to put the programs in jeopardy, and then, I started relating to myself, I'm many times at a point in my life, because I do a lot of diaries and journalizing, and I sound . . . "Oh, you know, I'm happy, contented woman going around." And then there are the times, if people were to read those journals, just says, "Oh, God, what's wrong with her?" You, know, "She's not a happy soul, and she doesn't know what, her right from her left." And I find, many times when you face the stormy period, which I call, those are my stormy periods . . . In groups, also, if there are stormy periods, many times you grow after that. But to anyone in that, you are at the bottom of the barrel. But that doesn't mean you cannot climb again, or, you know, whatever, when you are ready for it, or the group is. So these things of evaluations, "I come in here, and then I progress today, and then I'm up there and up there." I just find these a way to . . . What we have been doing is fooling the funders. Because they make us fool them, you know? . . . But it's like we are on this vicious circle of . . . the way we evaluate things. . . . But something should change about that.

In a somewhat similar vein, I guess, in that our circle takes place in a multicultural community where there's a lot of transients. So a big part of it is always welcoming new people in, so that the circle is never the same, kind of thing. And I think, too, there might be individual successes, but the circle itself is kind of continuing on with . . . its key thing is to be accepting and bringing in. And we have probably close to fifty percent turnover in the apartments on a regular basis, maybe every year, and . . . So the challenge is there are new people, a lot of new people all the time. And I think they find it a support . . . but to know whether you could say, "Oh, success!" Other than just, anecdotally, people want to come.

I was just going to say, I think for me, I feel that I need to learn how to articulate those things to the funders. Because, well, right now, I mean, we say it, but that's how where they are at. Their agenda is, like, they want the happy faces. And they want to show that, you

know, numbers, and it's all about quantities and not quality. And I think that it would be very, very helpful if we'd have ways, kind of learning circles . . . articulate these situations. 'Cause that's my experience, too, and that's part of what I was referring to earlier on, is that. People become more aware of what's going on, and of themselves, and then, you know, it seems like their self-esteem is lower, and their self-confidence, and so on, and then articulating these things, I think, would be very . . .

If the government wants to know what we're doing and how we're doing it, why couldn't we invite them down here to see what we do and how it's done?

3. How can organizations and government support learning circles?

A big enough space. A welcoming, accessible space.

Increasingly, as you know, churches and schools often get crunched in terms of money, they're often having to charge people for the use of space, and libraries are open fewer and fewer hours, and . . . So there's something to do with, like, those public spaces being available for community groups to start up new initiatives. But I think it's really important.

I think for some groups, there is a real need for facilitation . . .

You could have something called a community adult educator who would be available to any community group.

The way I support our local groups is I just listen to them. I'm just a resource for them. They pick up the phone if they need anything, if they're having trouble finding a speaker or they're having, they don't know where to start, they can't find a place to meet, then they call me, and I'm their resource, and then it's my job to give them the tools to make that happen. So I think, you know, I support my groups. But I need support for myself.

I think learning circles coming together and sharing as well is a great support. I mean, just being here together and being able to share everything that we bring to our learning circle and all that we've learned, that it's just an amazing kind of support.

I have one more thing. I was thinking, when you're talking about money, one of the things, too, is, like, if there's seminars or workshops or something going on, a lot of time you need to send one or two people, and the group doesn't have . . . if they're not out ongoing raising funds for that kind of thing, they would need money for things like that. So that that person can become a resource as they come back.

I think it's important also to have a pool of human resources available to your groups. At times you might need expertise, and, in a certain area, and, you know, being able to develop a partnership . . .

I think there's need for start-up money for small, for learning circles, and I think there's a need for more public awareness of the concept. We've been doing our Multicultural Women's Group for years, and we've been a learning circle, and we didn't put that name on them, and we didn't . . . you know, and so it's, you come to a different level when you start to identify yourself as a learning circle, and so it's kind of a really important, I think, to have a greater awareness.

The other thing about money, too, is, for young women, I think you always have to make sure there's childcare money, because you prevent people from being able to participate if that's not taken care of.

I would add to that, especially for the rural programs, you know, transportation money. I know in our group . . . a number of people said, "We just wouldn't be here . . ."

There is a lot of misconceptions still about what's a circle . . . My friend this morning called me, and she said, "Oh, could you talk to me," and I said, "I have to go, I'm . . ." and I told her a little bit about this circle. And she said, "Oh, not you again. Are you guys holding

hands? . . ." She's quite, you know, she's a normal woman, you know? . . . She sees these things, she doesn't see the learning part. She sees the support. When she said that, I think what she meant is that she sees the support part that a learning circle provides, but she doesn't see the learning, the growth, the other part. And I was thinking, she's not unique. I'm sure she's not unique. She's very much what other people also think about learning circles, that there is . . . this one. So I think somehow it has to come to the public that a learning circle is this and that and much more, because I don't think everybody understands the concept.

I was just going to say that, like, often, like groups, regardless, groups are perceived as support groups, like adult support groups. Like you go, if you have a problem, you can go. Like, it's for problems, like, for people with whatever problem, and they go by that theme. Versus the, all the dynamics. So I think it needs to be more . . . Like the dynamics need to be promoted, and people need to understand more. And if Paul Martin was to come here, the only thing that I think I would say was, well, maybe offer him a seat and say, "Well, just join the circle." Because I think that's what we need, is not to explain anything to that particular person but be able to kind of, you know, have the opportunity that I had today, and that we all had, and I think that's the best way to learn is to be involved in part of it.

5. What are the impacts of learning circles on individuals and communities?

I have attended a lot of healing circles, where people share many abuse issues that they may carry. And the way that it's helped me personally and the way I've seen it impact on community members is you gain a lot of self-confidence. It's a circle where people share, and that circle is respected, where nothing leaves that circle. So it also helps build trust for those who may find it hard to trust. And I think from a, also from a personal level, it helps you to grow and have more confidence to be able to move further in whichever life path you choose to move on.

The main thing I find out of the whole thing is that beside me learning myself I'm also teaching other people . . . I find more respect for myself that I can get to the people in the circle. And they can replace that back to me . . .

I learned that they don't pressure you, so I started to realize that one of my goals was to get into groups. So I . . . I'm one of those people that had to learn that.

Even though there might be seven different languages being spoken in the group, the communication increases and people help each other to understand and there's a feeling of commonality that kind of grows, that the human condition is bigger than, you know . . . Somebody's from Afghanistan, somebody else is from Jamaica and somebody else is from Bangladesh, or whatever, but when people start to talk about their families or their wishes or their concerns, it's very much a common feeling. It's a good feeling about humans.

We had . . . someone who was approximately around 19 years old and then we had people who were in their fifties, and how the listening . . . to watch the 18 year old be so intent on what the 56 year old was saying, and then reverse, you know, that factor was amazing, the respect there but also the interest . . .

It breaks down some barriers, and maybe, in our situation, helps alleviate some racism, because people start to know each other on a personal level.

I think it also helps create a bigger support network for the participants and the community, as well as for yourself, if you may need it.

Many times we just become so, through life, so self-involved, you know, our worries, our illness, our family members, whatever. So your world becomes, at times, smaller. So it's true, when we reach out and go out there, then you say, "O.K., my problems matter . . ." but sometimes you put things in perspective, if nothing else.

We came together through a common thing, which was elderly abuse. A group of people just started to find that other seniors in the community were dealing with very difficult situations, and then they wanted to do something about it, but they didn't know what at that time, what they could do. So I think they did a most amazing thing, was that they decided to come together as a group, and they started looking at different ways of addressing some of those issues. And then they kind of developed a safe zone, where people could talk about themselves and talk about their experiences. And from there, they moved into action, into thinking what can we do. And most of the people that were part of that group . . . some of them had never . . . like, had no formal education. Never went to school. And they thought that, you know, that there was very little that they could do at that time. But by coming together, by working together, they realized that they could actually do a lot of things. And one of the things that they identified was theatre, through the use of theatre. And then, because language was still a barrier for communication, they thought that, well then we can just use body language. So they started preparing these little, short, these short plays, about the problems that they were seeing in the community, and then they would go to places and they would engage people in discussing those issues and coming up with possible solutions to the problems, so all of a sudden they became popular educators. And it was an amazing experience, because people in the group, they became aware of a lot of things that they had that they didn't know. And they also became more self-confident, and then their self-esteem went up, and then they start going to all kinds of places, including at colleges and universities, and we have a quote, Tracey used that, from one of the participants that says, "I never sat in a school bench, and today I was teaching a university class." And it is true. Like, I mean they brought in their experiences, which are unique, and there's no way, as you know, me as a worker, anybody, could share that type of experience with a class. So it was really interesting. So that's my experiences, one of my experiences, with learning circles, is people coming together, we can discover amazing things about ourselves.

I become, as a member of the circle I work with, become more and more aware of how you have to read body language and understand body language, and how important it is to communicate in that way.

Where I work, there is a, most of the ladies, they don't speak English. And we all does body language. We explain to body language. And now become they can speak, because they've been coming eight, nine months in the program. And now they speak little bit – little bit English, and they are not isolated at home, and we're proving that . . . they come to the sitting room and they share their problem, and everybody . . . when you are at home, you don't feel like everybody have same problem. And when you come to the circle and in this community centre, then you talking . . . and everybody have the same problem.

The people within those groups take ownership of what is going on in their community. And, like if there was a need we had within the Native Centre, they're all right in there to get their hands dirty, to work together, so that the common goal is worked at, and they continue those things, and they all come in with their creativity and all their talents and their life skills and . . . They're the ones that drive what goes on in those programs. And learn with each other, from each other, and joke with each other, and they become such a tight-knit group of people. Like, they can tell each other a lot of . . . You know, there's a lot of humour in groups, and there's a lot of, you know, someone's having a difficult time; they rally to work with that individual, or within that family. So I find that we are able to take care of each other in our community. We get lost in the system sometimes, because of the mainstream being so large and . . . So they know that, coming to the Centre, there's that support there.

It builds strength within yourself as an active participant, in terms of being able to make better choices, healthier choices in your own life, and getting rid of that anger that may be inside you or the sadness, where you have a safe place where you can do that . . . And the communication improves . . .

There's like a reclaiming and a reconnecting with the history of our people, of our families, of our community . . . Through the awareness that's being created, you know, by exploring family history is not only are you impacting community by identifying and naming and recognizing who your family is, but it seems to go much deeper than that where it's like waking our people up. It's like shaking them awake . . . Reconnecting who we are as families within a small community . . .

I'm seeing a bigger picture.

There were a lot of stereotypes about intergenerational communication, and so on, like lack of respect and all these things. And people realized that, often, the cause is the fact that people don't know about each other, right? So coming together, they were able to share . . . one of the scenarios that came out of it was just this simple scene in the TTC . . . inside a bus where the youth comes in and, you know, the seniors kind of stay behind in the back and not having a seat and no one giving them a seat, that type of . . . We've all seen it for sure. So they worked around . . . overcoming that, and one of the things that the youth said was that, well, "Never thought about it. You know, we're so engaged into our thinking, we're just talking to each other, that . . . often we don't even see it." So they became more aware. And that . . . I mean that was, I think, a great impact, that, by coming together, by talking to each other, we know about each other and we kind of make those changes, and then those things become just natural and organic. Like, it's not a big deal any more . . .

I was amazed at the things that people, the learning circles have been able to bring together and solve. And I think there seems to be no limit on what, when people are focused on one thing together, what they can accomplish together as a small group. Just amazing. I think we could take care of all the world if they would just leave us alone.