



The Learning Circles Project: *The Circles*

The Digby Portfolio Group

by Arthur Bull

The Digby Portfolio Program provides an interesting example of a rural learning circle for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is a well-defined learning circle, with a deliberate emphasis on peer learning, informal facilitation and lots of group interaction. Secondly, it is very rural. The group is located in the Community Learning Centre in Digby, Nova Scotia, a small town (population less than 2,500) on the Bay of Fundy, and many of the group's participants come from even smaller, sometimes remote communities. Thirdly, the program is based on an approach to adult learning that is of great interest to the study of learning circles, that is, the recognition and valuing of experiential learning.

The Digby Portfolio Program is also a good example of a learning circle that is grounded in the community it serves. It came about as the result of a partnership between number community agencies involved in community development in the area - the Digby Area Learning Centre, Western Valley Development Authority, Nova Scotia Community College and Prior Learning Assessment Centre. Its origin in this area goes back to the mid 90's, when a major furniture factory moved to the area but would not interview anyone with less than grade 12 education. Many of the people they were turning away were highly skilled woodworkers, some could even build boats and houses. This situation made some local adult educators begin to look at the whole issue of accreditation and recognition of learning and this in turn sparked an interest in the whole field of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). This led to making links with the Prior Learning Assessment Centre (PLAC) in Halifax, and from there the program was developed in 2001.

The portfolio development work in Digby can only be best understood as part of larger educational movement of PLAR. This is certainly not a new movement. It has roots that go back decades in adult education practice and theory. Neither is it exclusively a Canadian movement. For example in the UK there have been decades of work on such

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initiatives as Manchester Open College in the 1970's. However Canada has also been a leader in the field, and the work of the PLAC in particular has played a major role in this.

At the core of the PLA Centre's work is the portfolio development program. The centre's director, Doug Myers, describes the program this way. "The learning portfolio development process is comprehensive and sequential. The focus throughout is on what the individual knows and can do, no matter what or how that person learned it. The knowledge and skills embedded in significant experience - rather than the experience itself - is emphasized. To recall, reflect critically upon, articulate, organize and present one's experiential learning - as well as one's formal education and training accomplishments - is a formidable task. Furthermore, the process requires that an individual provide "evidence" and/or "demonstration" and/or third party attestation that the learning knowledge and skill claimed are real. Again, this is a challenging task for anyone, but especially for those who have not accumulated the transcripts, records and credentials associated with formal education and training." (Douglas Myers, "Building Learning Capacity: Utilizing Community Learning Assets," June, 2004.)

The centre is a joint project of five Halifax universities, the provincial community college system, and representatives from community groups, labour, business and government. The centre has had a major impact on adult education in Nova Scotia. For example, the Nova Scotia Community College has become a "portfolio" college. This has meant that, among other things, all students who attend the college system in Nova Scotia must develop a portfolio.

From the beginning PLA Centre has made the link between portfolio development program and community development. As a result, its work has had an impact beyond the Halifax area, throughout rural Nova Scotia, and especially in Digby County. A number of agencies were key players in this process.

- SMART Project, a major five-year initiative of the Western Valley Development Authority.
- Nova Scotia Community College. The portfolio program was one of the first college sponsored program offered in Digby County.
- Digby Area Learning Association (DALA).

The Portfolio Program takes place in the Community Education Centre in Digby, which is part of DALA. DALA was established in 1997, following several years of networking among local adult literacy programs. Since that time it has established

- an adult upgrading school,
- an adult high school,
- lifeskills programs,
- a career resource centre,
- the Community Learning Initiative program.

Through these programs DALA has become the main provider of adult education in English for Digby County.

The facilitator of the program is Nina Barnaby. Nina is from Westport on Brier Island, about 90 minutes drive from Digby. She first got involved in the portfolio program almost by chance. After taking the program she then took the facilitator's training program. This group was the second one that she facilitated.

In talking to the participants in this group, it is clear that Nina's approach to facilitation has a lot to do with why they kept coming back. She is able to keep things on track in an attentive and respectful way that all the participants seem to appreciate.

The portfolio program itself consists of thirty hours, in this case, ten three-hour sessions. The major aim of the program is to help each participant to produce a portfolio that documents the learning that he or she has gained from his or her life and work experience. The portfolio typically will include letters, licenses, photographs, or anything else that demonstrates past learning. Equally important, the program helps the participants to begin to reflect on their own past learning.

The course is divided into three parts:

- Reflecting on your life (3 sessions),
- Reflecting on your learning (3 sessions),
- Bringing your Life and Learning Together (4 sessions).

There is a balance of work in the group and work done at home. The learning activities in the group include a mix of:

- informal group discussions,
- writing,
- reading back written work,
- brainstorm discussions,
- working in small groups of twos or threes
- explanation by the facilitator.

The work done at home consists of:

- reflection,
- finding documentation,
- writing.

The focus throughout is on recognizing, documenting and presenting what you have learned in your life and work and putting it together in a portfolio.

There are twelve participants in the group, six men and seven women. Their ages range from early twenties to mid fifties and they come from various communities in the area. Most of the participants are also attending the upgrading programs that are offered at the Community Education Centre.

Typically, a session consists of a mix of activities. It usually starts out with a high-energy icebreaker or brainstorm activity to get things moving. This is followed by some explanation of the session by the facilitator and an outline of what the group wants to accomplish. The small group discussions focus on writing, with report back to the larger group. The session usually ends with each person talking about the “evidence “ or documentation of some aspect of their past learning.

How does learning happen in the group? Clearly, a lot of the learning happens as each individual goes through the steps in reflecting, remembering, documenting and presenting what he or she has learned. At first glance you might think that, since the program is so much about the individual learning portfolio it could be done by an individual entirely through self-study. However, it turns out that the individual work is only part of the picture; in fact, much of the important learning happens in the group setting. In the group's discussions, reporting back, reading written pieces, smaller groups of twos and threes, and brainstorming, the interaction between the group members seems to be of critical importance to the learning that takes place. There seems to be an important interaction between the individual learning activities and the group activities. In every session there are some activities in which everyone gets a chance to speak. And there is lots of back and forth in the discussions.

A key condition for this kind of group learning is a feeling of trust within the group. Speaking to groups, even small groups, is not for everyone; for some, it is extremely difficult. And generally speaking, it is even harder when you are talking about yourself. This is not to imply that there is any pressure for participants to talk, or write, about their lives at a level that is so personal that it goes beyond their own comfort level. Quite on the contrary, the facilitator is constantly reminding the participants that they should be focused on their learning, but only to the extent to which they are comfortable. But by its very nature, the portfolio program is about reflecting on your past experience and what you have learned, and this is not something we are generally used to doing in groups. There must a "safe" atmosphere in which participants can speak without fear. There seem to be two factors at play here.

First, the facilitators must be able to maintain a respectful atmosphere, setting and overall tone of respectful listening, and allowing one person to speak, uninterrupted.

When asked about this Nina Barnaby said:

I wasn't up there, with them at a lower level. I think to be an effective facilitator you have to identify your common ground with them . . .

You had to share your experiences. I mean I was one of the students. I was sitting in their classroom. I know what it felt like, because I had also taken the portfolio as a participant, and I'd seen the flipside of it. Being aware of some of their concerns, being aware that there were things that had happened and why - they were very wary- that made it better for me because I could see where they were coming from.

Secondly, the group itself seems to have a tacit agreement that people will be respectful. Because these two conditions were met in the group, there seems to be openness about speaking, even though clearly some participant were a lot more comfortable than others in speaking to the group.

You're more relaxed, you're more comfortable, you feel more open. We all know each other and we felt free to open up and share parts of our lives. We made a few rules on the first day. One of them was confidentiality, and I think that everyone respected that, and that made it a lot easier.

It is important to note that this mutual respect was the result of some "ground rules" that were set by the participants themselves in the first session. As one participant put it:

We made rules the first day. We all just drew up a list of rules that we thought should govern the group. What we would go by and what we ...
The only rule she had was that if you miss two sessions in a row, you couldn't complete the program.

The link between the group's self-governance and the positive learning atmosphere is important to note when we are thinking about learning circles.

Peer learning also happens in small groups of two or three. Participants help each other by giving feedback on writing. They also bounce ideas back and forth and share experiences. "Peer learning" in this case is not limited to learning between people who have a lot in common. In fact, in this group it was quite the opposite. As Nina Barnaby puts it:

...we had people in their 50's and people in their early 20's. I think if they had just come in and met for the first time there might have been an age barrier, but here there wasn't. It was amazing for me to watch a 20 year old hanging on every word that the 50 year old woman was saying. They were great. There was a mutual respect between them, and I'm not sure if this was due only to the fact that they knew each other a bit, or if they were just an amazing group of people. There was one individual who was very fidgety, and when we sat down to go over his portfolio he said, "To be honest, I'm only doing this for you. I don't plan to show it to anyone else." He was one who started with a kind of an attitude and ended with listening to the 50 year old talking, and having this rapport with her, seeing things from her level and asking questions. That was amazing.

Often this meant working with, and learning from, people who you had not previously met. One learner said:

I liked when she asked people to go into small groups, she'd say, "Pick somebody you don't know well," and you'd get to know the other ones. I thought that was really neat.

There is also a kind of peer learning that seems to be about "thinking" as a group, especially in the group brainstorming experiences. In these discussions, the facilitator is rapidly writing a list on the board, as the group members call out their ideas.

What is happening is people are sparking off each other, new ideas emerging very quickly one after the other. As a result the group as a whole generates a very comprehensive list that might have taken hours to aggregate for the work of each individual. Nina Barnaby described this process:

If at some point you could take that group of people, if you could somehow visually show all the connections on a grid - each comment, every bit growth ... When I think about that brainstorming I was just writing the comment down, but the group would be putting them in order and saying things like, "Oh, that one goes with that one over there," making connections. So there was all this interconnecting going on. You see that a lot in the portfolio classes. Because the brainstorming starts every sessions.

What Kind of Learning is Happening? If we think of learning in terms of knowledge, skills or awareness, it is clear that the learning in this group is all about awareness. In spite of the structured nature of the program itself, it presents very little new knowledge to be absorbed. Neither does it focus on teaching specific new skills.

Of course, it is always hard to separate these ways of learning. There are certainly many kinds of skills and knowledge that a person could take away from the program.

There are not many questions about “Does anyone know...” where there is a correct factual answer. Neither are there a lot of questions that begin, “Today we are going to learn how to ...” Of course there is much knowledge and many skills gained through the program, but the essence of the learning in this group is about the awareness. It is not about learning about something but rather about recognizing learning that has already happened in your life.

The printed word plays a large part in the program. The exercises and activities that lead up to the portfolio are given out as handouts through out the program. Each participant keeps them in a binder that is quite thick by the end of the ten weeks. There is also a great deal of writing, with written assignment between each session. All of these reading and writing activities are aimed toward helping each participant to put together the portfolio.

In recognition of this, the CEC provided considerable support to participants in the portfolio program, including class time for preparation, help with typing and individual support on writing assignments. Because the participants have varying literacy skills, considerable attention is given to providing extra help on the written assignments, to those who need it. There is also quite a bit of leeway as to the length of the written pieces. Nevertheless, it is an interesting question to speculate whether the program could be offered to learners with considerably fewer literacy skills. This is something the PLA Centre is currently looking at.

On the broader question of accessibility to the group, one of the biggest barriers that were removed was removal of the cost of the program. If it were paid for, as a community

college course or business training program, the portfolio program would have cost more than two thousand dollars. This was possible because there was a commitment to funding the program from the Smart Community program. In other words, it was not funded through one of the usual adult education funders, but through a community economic development initiative, the Smart Communities, as part of a collaboration that cut across various lines, the community college, the PLA Centre, the local adult education networks. As a result more than 800 people in Digby County were able to access this program.

As a result this program has had a demonstrable effect on the community. For example, when a call centre moved into the area, most of the people they interviewed were graduates of the portfolio program. But there are also many other examples which are not about the local labour market - examples of people going back to school or university, or choosing a new occupation, or even for personal uses making a portfolio as a way of passing a biography to the next generation as part of family history.

The portfolio program also relates to the larger community because of its link to local community development work. It is part of the larger effort to recognize and activate the gifts that exist in the community. In a sense, there is an analogy between portfolio development and community asset mapping, one of the primary tools of community development. On a personal level, making your own learning portfolio is analogous to community asset mapping. This is something the group is looking at.

Clearly the whole field of PLAR has a lot to offer to the understanding of learning circles. PLAR is based on the recognition that learning does not happen exclusively in the domain of formal learning programs, that in fact the opposite is true; most of our learning happens in the course of our everyday lives. Most importantly, recognition of prior experiential learning can change the adult learner's understanding of learning itself and its potential in his or her life.

In rural settings there is a different relationship between public and private, which has a major effect on group learning situations. In rural communities "everyone knows what

everyone else is doing.” As one person put it, “When you go to an upgrading program, people might say you are going to the “welfare school”.

Emphasis on informal learning seems to fit particularly well in rural settings. Many of the group’s discussions centred on topics that were shared. Likewise in the small group, there was often discussion of topics that are rural in nature, such as hunting, fishing, etc.

As Doug Myers puts it, “... a fundamental step towards *taking charge* of rural ‘education’ is to broaden the definition of ‘learning = schooling’ and recapture and enhance an older definition that would be *experiential* and *formal* learning as complementary and empowering. This ought to be easier in rural settings where ‘multi-tasking’ and ‘cooperation’ remain more obviously essential than in urban settings.”

If there is a single factor that made the Digby portfolio group work, it would have to be conviviality, that is, the enjoyment that people take in being with each other in the group.

As Nina Barnaby puts it:

...there was a rapport - a lot of laughter, and the comfort level was amazing. I think that my being aware that there were some people who already guarded about this made my job a little easier because I could put them front row and centre. It occurred to me just sit back and watch how the dynamic went at first, until THEY felt comfortable - then the comfort level came into it and you could get him to open up. I had one gentleman in particular come up to me and he shook my hand and said he enjoyed it - and I said to myself, “That’s just great.”