



## The Learning Circles Project: *The Circles*



The Stratford Group

by Tracey Mollins

### **Building a Learning City in Stratford, Ontario a.k.a Little Sweden**

In *Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work*, Henry Milner argues that Sweden's long-standing commitment to adult education has resulted in a "virtuous circle" where a variety of measures encourages all citizens to participate in public life and discourse. A "vicious circle" results in countries where knowledge and wealth are divided unequally between an elite and the rest of the population.

In *Why do Swedes read better than Canadian?* Nayda Veeman points out that The idea of raising the educational level of the population, *folkbildning*, has been connected to adult learning in Sweden for over one hundred years "... Adult education was an inclusive concept and the term undereducated referred to adults who had not completed compulsory or high school education" while in Canada "... there has not been a comprehensive adult education policy at either a national or provincial level and literacy is a charitable cause. Public funds are used to promote literacy (ABC CANADA 2003) but without increased learning opportunities to meet resulting demand. The onus remains on individuals to improve their skills but access to programs typically goes to those most likely to succeed. The recourse for individuals who do not meet entrance requirements is the volunteer tutor system." She concludes by asking: "What would Canadian society look like if priority in access to adult education was given to those with the least education?"

In Stratford, Ontario, when government funded literacy programs would no longer work with students with developmental and intellectual disabilities, a group of concerned citizens asked themselves the very same question. They decided to step in where governments and government-funded programs were failing the people of Stratford and start a program of their own.

The program is run by the Women's Group from St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. The group gets a grant of \$250.00 a year from the church. Any other money they need they donate personally or they raise in the community.

I spoke with them about funding. The consensus of the group is that they are better off without any formal, structured or institutional funding arrangements. They have seen case after case where changes in criteria imposed by funders has disqualified people from groups and made services inaccessible. They feel that if they get too organized, they will not be able to work with the people they want to work with. They do remarkable things with the very small amount of money they have to work with. For example, they run a community kitchen once a week and manage to create meals for \$1.00 per person.

A group of developmentally and intellectually disabled adults meets in the basement of the church every Tuesday afternoon. They have a social time with the members of the Women's Group and other people from the community. They have coffee and snacks and catch up on the latest news. On the day I was there, one person had experienced a bereavement and people were signing a card to present to him. I found the atmosphere to be very welcoming and I felt like a friend within minutes.

After the socializing, they break into two groups. This happened when one of the study group members came to the facilitator with the folders for the study group. Some people, those who can complete worksheets and cope with a more directed learning environment, join Walter Mollins to do some reading and writing work. The others stay with the Women's Group members and play board games and do other learning activities. Sometimes they then head to the kitchen and prepare a meal that they eat together.

This program exemplifies the principle of from each according to his or her ability and to each according to his or her need.

Walter Mollins is my uncle. He worked as a teacher in the public school system for many years, most of the time in "special needs" programs. He has a huge amount of experience working with diverse groups of people with a wide range of abilities and needs.

Observing a facilitator with this level of experience and expertise was like watching dance. He makes negotiating learning seem so smooth and effortless that you hardly notice it is happening. But it is.

The group worked on a standard vocabulary worksheet from the Oxford Picture Dictionary series. People looked at pictures of a woman, a man, a girl and a boy. Beside each picture is list of clothing words. The activity is to read the words and circle the ones that represent clothing worn by the person in the picture.

The discussion started with questions about the weather and what clothes we wear in the winter. We then looked at the pictures and had a general discussion about the pictures and the vocabulary. The first word, which is next to the picture of the woman, is “hard hat”. Mollins asked the group if the woman is wearing a hard hat. The group members laughed and said no. He asked if women ever wore hard hats. At first they said no, but upon discussion revised that to sometimes.

The group members were very engaged with this material. When we had finished the first vocabulary list, one person laughed and said, “Now you have all your clothes on lady.” When we moved to the next picture, she said, “Let’s see if you have all your clothes on man.” This became a running joke.

This activity is simple, as is the vocabulary, but it was presented in such a way that group members were called on to use critical thinking skills (as in the hard hat discussion) and an exploratory, self-directed approach.

For example, when we came to the word sneakers, nobody in the group knew what sneakers were. Mollins asked them some questions about the word but did not reveal the answer. The person in that picture was not wearing sneakers, so we moved on. Later, when we saw the word in a context where the person in the picture was wearing sneakers, the group members were able to deduce what sneakers were. There was quite a bit of excitement about this discovery.

I found this to be a very powerful moment and a very powerful example of what can happen when the facilitator/teacher has this level of experience and expertise. I had wondered why he did not just tell them what a sneaker is. That is probably what I would have done and these students would have missed this exciting moment and the feeling of pride that results from solving a problem using one's own skills.

Mollins is working from a belief that everyone has a right to learn and be a learner. He believes that everybody has a right to learn for learning's sake, for the sense of pride, accomplishment and connection that brings, not for any other goal. As he says, everyone has a right to develop a sense of conscious growth.

He works from a very respectful place. His approach is to respect and honour people for what they can do. He does not assess based on what they cannot do and try to fill in the gaps. He assesses what they can do and tries to strengthen that and build on it.

When I asked him how they decide what to work on, he said that he chooses material that they will use in their daily lives. He said, "I am not trying to change their lives, I am trying to invigorate their lives."

When they had finished the worksheet, Mollins asked the students if they had done enough for today. They said that they had. They put stickers on the completed work, put their work into their folders and we went back to join the others.

Later Mollins told me that sometimes they work together for longer but that when he notices that they have had enough, he checks in. I asked him what he had noticed - I had noticed nothing - and he said that he can tell by their body language. He says that once people have had enough that there is no point in continuing because they cannot learn any more. He uses observation, his knowledge of the people he is working with, and his experience in the field to tell him how long a class should be. He spoke of some frustration he felt as a public school teacher because the length of classes is determined

by a schedule, not the students' capacity for learning. He said that some administrators were more understanding about this than others.

In my observation, the members of this group were very conscious of their identity as learners, not just because of the clear separation of the social activities from the learning activities, but because they are expected to be learners, not just in this group but everywhere they go.

Each person in this group is connected to a network of opportunities and learning experiences. Some people live independently, some with family, and some in group homes. Some people work in restaurants and other workplaces and some work at a workshop. Some go to church, some go to the library, and some participate in programs at L'Arche ([www.larchecanada.org](http://www.larchecanada.org)) or the Canadian Association for Community Living ([www.cacl.ca](http://www.cacl.ca)).

Talking to people about what they do during the week brought to mind a huge Venn diagram; person A participates in 123, person B in 234, person C in 134, etc. Again, the principle of from each according to his or her ability and to each according to his or her need is exemplified and the right to learn and experience conscious growth is paramount.

The group at the church sees itself as part of this network and defines a role for itself within that network.

Mollins works with some people individually at the library. He works with one person individually because this student finds working in groups difficult: he gets very nervous and cannot concentrate. The other person is working on a more advanced upgrading program; he is working towards qualifying for training. He was disqualified from the upgrading program because he was unable to pass a test within the required time limit.

When I met the first of these people, he was very happy because he had just found out that the restaurant where he works was soon to re-open. It had closed for repairs after a fire. New owners were reopening it and had agreed to keep all the old staff. This man

does have some accommodations so that he can work but there is no sense that these accommodations are burdensome. It seemed to me that this community takes the right to participate in the work force very seriously, not just as an economic right, but as a democratic right. It also occurred to me that in this case and from what I had heard from other people from this group, that labour market participation is viewed not as a goal of training, but as an integral part of learning for some people. People in this group seem to get some of the sense of themselves as learners from paid work.

As Veeman, Ward and Walker say in “Learning for Work or Learning through Work?”

...work related learning experiences can provide the confidence to take on other learning challenges. This can happen through the building of technical or trade related skills or when employers provide tangible support for learning outside the workplace provided that it meets the goals and interests of workers.”

After his learning session at the library, this man went home to work on a shed-building project with “his worker”...another circle in this person’s connection to community.

#### Resources

Veeman, N., Ward, A., & Walker, K. (2004). “Why do Swedes read better than Canadians?” Paper presented at Ninth National Congress on Rural Education, Saskatoon.

Veeman, N., Ward, A., & Walker, K. (2003). “Learning for Work or Learning through Work?” The Changing Face of Work and Learning Conference, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Milner, H. (2002). *Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

St Andrew's Presbyterian Church (<http://www.cyg.net/%7Estandrews/>)