



# The Learning Circles Project: *Values & Practices*



## Inclusion

by Guy Ewing

This project deepened our understanding of what is involved in inclusive lifelong learning. The learning circles that we studied did not approach inclusion as a kind of adaptation for less able learners. In these circles, inclusion was its own approach to learning. This approach to learning was different from the learning that we associate with schooling or training in that they:

- do not privilege written language
- do not privilege academic knowledge
- do not predetermine what will be “acceptable behaviour”
- do not pressure participants to learn
- do not focus on the transmission of information
- do not predetermine learning outcomes.

***Written language and inclusion.*** As literacy workers, we were particularly alert to how learning circles avoid using written language as a barrier to learning. In our society, written language is often seen as the key to learning. But, in our experience, written language can also be a barrier. Although we have spent our lives helping people to learn how to use written language, and believe that every citizen of Canada should have access to enhancing their use of written language, we also know that written language is not the key to learning, but only one medium. This is shown in the Indigenous circles, which for centuries have supported oral learning. It is also shown in non-Indigenous learning circles where other media for learning are used. For example, in the Drumming Group at the Parkdale Activities and Recreation Centre (PARC), drumming is used as a medium for learning about how the self and others can interact creatively. In the Health Action Theatre for Seniors, drama is used as a medium for exploring and articulating health issues. In other groups, written language is used, but is not required for full participation. The Action Group at PARC is an example. Here issues of program governance and advocacy for psychiatric survivors are addressed using written documents, letters, meeting notes, etc., but the facilitators are careful to present this written material orally so

that no one is excluded from participating and learning. The Fisheries Group in Digby County is actually focused on a written document, a study on the fisheries, but whatever the participants understand through reading the document is contextualized through discussion, to which everyone brings considerable knowledge of the fisheries.

So an essential aspect of inclusion is the use of various media for learning, and not privileging the preferred medium of educational institutions, written language. This is not always easy. Whether or not we were successful in school, anyone who has attended school bears its mark. In Indigenous circles, this is addressed through the rediscovery of a traditional mode of learning. In non-Indigenous circles, approaches to learning that do not privilege written language have to be developed through a process of experimentation and continual self examination. To do this, facilitators and other group participants need to be aware of written language as a potential barrier to learning, as well as a potentially useful medium, and be alert to participants who are less adept at using written language. As literacy workers, we have learned to be alert in this way. In the learning circles, we sometimes noticed participants being left out because their difficulty with written language had been forgotten. It takes time to learn not to forget, and this is one reason why self examination needs to be part of a learning circle's process.

In some cases, explicit literacy instruction is a useful complement to participation in a learning circle. This is modeled in the Literacy Group at PARC. Here, participants in learning circles at PARC receive direct literacy instruction. This instruction is based on written materials that the participants encounter in PARC learning circles, or writing that they want to do for these learning circles, or it may be based on written materials connected with the issues and ideas discussed within the Literacy Group itself. Although this group is designed for the direct instruction of word recognition, spelling, punctuation and other reading and writing practices, it does not focus on these practices in isolation from the larger learning that is happening in the learning circles, and in the Literacy Group itself. Nor is the Literacy Group used to promote the idea that written language is the key to learning. But this group does acknowledge the potential for implicit literacy

learning in learning circles, and provides an additional opportunity for learning circle participants by complementing implicit learning with direct instruction.

***Not privileging academic knowledge.*** The learning circles that we studied were inclusive in that they did not privilege academic knowledge over other kinds of knowledge. In part, this was the automatic result of not privileging written language, since knowledge of written language is embedded in academic knowledge. But academic knowledge can be presented orally, and can be given special status in oral discussion. For example, knowledge of social science could have been privileged in the discussions of the Fisheries Group. In discussions of health issues, knowledge from controlled double-blind studies could be seen to be more significant than the traditional Indigenous knowledge about what people need to be healthy. When they are truly inclusive, learning circles do not privilege academic knowledge in that way. Academic knowledge becomes one kind of knowledge, in negotiation with other kinds of knowledge, as a learning circle struggles to make sense of issues and ideas through the experience of everyone around the circle. In this kind of negotiation, participants with academic knowledge need to be constantly alert to the limitations of their own kind of knowledge, willing to contribute their knowledge, but also willing to listen and discuss outside of the confines of academic discourse.

***Negotiating acceptable behaviour.*** In the learning circles that we studied, we observed behaviour that would not be acceptable in some learning environments. For example, in the PARC learning groups, a participant may leave if s/he is feeling anxious. Or a participant may become withdrawn and unengaged with the group for a while. This is not rudeness; the participants in these groups are dealing with difficult mental health problems and the effects of medication. Nor is this behaviour the result of an “anything goes” attitude on the part of facilitators and other participants. The rules in the learning circles at PARC are negotiated and renegotiated by the participants. In these negotiations, everyone’s needs are taken into account. Acceptable behaviour is established through consensus, rather than through conventional expectations. Small adjustments in

conventional expectations can make a large difference in who can be included in a learning circle.

***Taking away the pressure.*** In academic institutions, we are under pressure to learn. Curricula are designed, timelines are established for “covering” curricula, tests and assignments are scheduled. In learning circles, this pressure is taken away. Participation is voluntary. Participants are valued for what they contribute, but not required to contribute. There is nothing that must be learned. We found that the accepting, exploratory nature of learning in learning circles is central to their success as inclusive learning environments.

***Exploring.*** Exploratory learning does more than taking away pressure. It creates opportunities. With no curriculum to follow, no predetermined outcomes, learning circles are free to follow where discussion leads them. In the Multicultural Women’s Group, discussion about preparing food for the meetings has led to discussion about cultural diversity and building trust and acceptance in multicultural communities. In the Family History Group, discussing family history has led to discussion about cultural reclamation in Indigenous communities. Exploratory learning is more than learning without institutional demands, it is a way of opening up to our potential for learning together. It is inclusive in this positive sense, in what it does as well as in what it does not do.

***Outcomes.*** It follows from all of the above that it is neither possible nor desirable to predetermine outcomes for learning circles. If a learning circle is inclusive, important learning will take place. The learning circles we studied focused on being inclusive in the ways described in this section. They were:

- welcoming
- supportive
- flexible
- non-hierarchical
- self-managed
- exploratory

By focusing on process, they became inclusive learning environments, and because they were inclusive learning environments, their successes exceeded any outcomes that could have been prescribed in advance.