



## The Learning Circles Project: *Values & Practices*



### What Does *Circle* Mean in an Indigenous Community?

by Janice Brant

When I was asked to research learning circles in the Indigenous community, I began contacting organizations such as Native Friendship Centres, Healing Lodges, Aboriginal Literacy Programs, Band Administration Offices, Aboriginal Health Centres and libraries located on reserves and in cities across Canada. I would begin by introducing myself, describing the Identifying Inclusive Models of Lifelong Learning Project, and asking about learning circles. In many cases the response would be that there were no learning circles in their community or organization. This caused me to rethink my approach and it became clear that I need only to ask about “circles” when speaking with individuals and organizations in the Indigenous community.

#### The Circle

“Everything that an Indian does is in a circle, because the power of the world always works in a circle, and everything tries to be round. The sky is round, and the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for their religion is the same as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.”

~ Black Elk

The circle is a symbol and a concept that is expressive of Indigenous thought and world view. The circle is the primary pattern by which all creation unfolds and operates, creating circular processes of life, growth, and change. In both rural and urban Indigenous communities, the “circle” implies certain commonly held tradition-based values and beliefs that have been consistent throughout time and across many Indigenous cultures. These values and beliefs have persisted despite the many physical and material

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changes that have occurred in Indigenous cultures since the arrival of Europeans and the confederation of Canada.

The circle is viewed as having many desirable characteristics which support and enhance a harmonious state of co-existence, balance, peace, good mind, and strength. Many traditional teachings such as the Medicine Wheel use the circle to communicate complex philosophies and deep spiritual connections. Circle teachings often focus on cooperative co-existence in which individuals and communities strive towards harmonious interaction and recognition of all life as interdependent and interrelated.

The circle itself is understood to create a sacred space and within that space is an atmosphere of equality and unity that can be applied to a variety of situations from learning circles to justice circles. There is no beginning or end in a circle, and therefore no one individual is ahead or behind another. Circles foster and build community, inclusion, sharing, and listening. There is reciprocity in a circle and it is understood that giving and receiving are of equal value. Everyone is part of the circle and has something to contribute, whether it is their words, listening ears, a reassuring smile, or positive energy.

Using circles in the Indigenous community ensures that the fundamental belief in the spiritual nature of things is upheld. It supports our most basic human need to be seen and heard, to feel safe, to belong, and experience acceptance, integral to a healthy teaching and learning environment. The circle is flexible and can easily be adjusted to the number of participants. It offers each participant one or more opportunities to speak without being interrupted and with the knowledge that anything shared in the circle will remain in the circle and not be repeated. The very nature of the circle is conducive to healing (teaching and learning) and can significantly form and strengthen the identities of Indigenous people.