



The Learning Circles Project: *Values & Practices*

Inside the Learning Circle: What Makes it Work?

by Arthur Bull

What makes a learning circle work? How does it create those learning conditions that bring about positive change in the individual, and in the community? The answers to these questions lie largely within the learning circle itself. All the dynamics that go into group learning - the relationships, the setting, the atmosphere, the decision-making, the facilitation - are all ingredients in the mix that makes learning circles work. This was true in all the groups we looked at.

One element that seemed to be centrally important in all the examples we looked at was the idea that a learning circle must be a “safe place”. This means having an atmosphere where participants feel secure in speaking out, in expressing their thoughts and feelings and in talking with other group members. Freedom from fear - fear of criticism, fear of ridicule, fear of aggressive behavior - is an essential prerequisite in any learning circle. In some cases this was explicitly stated, as a defining feature of the group. This is true, for example, of the group at Nellie’s, and the groups, especially the sweats, at Ennahtig Healing Lodge and Learning Centre.

Another key element in a successful learning circle is peer learning. One of the great assets of group learning is the potential for the learners also to be teachers. This requires having a group dynamic in which the learners’ experience and knowledge are recognized and valued. Again this can happen in an explicit and intentional way, as in the PLAR portfolio group, or in a very informal way, as in the fisheries discussion group.

Learning circles also draw on the strength of group learning, sometimes known as “group intelligence”. In other words, the group is not just a collection of individuals who are all doing their individual learning in a group setting. The group is also learning *as a group*. That this kind of collective learning and thinking is a reality that is easily demonstrated by activities such as group brainstorming, where the group can answer questions and solve problems in a way that no one individual in the group could.

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As well as having these positive relationships within the group, learning circles depend on having a clear sense of how the group relates to the overall learning outcomes. We saw many examples of how the participants were able to negotiate with facilitator about where the group was going. There were different degrees of this kind of group self-direction. In some groups the participants themselves directed the outcomes as in, for example, the group at the Multicultural Women's Centre. Other groups had a back and forth discussion about what the outcomes would be. In all examples there was some kind of negotiability of the group's learning outcomes. This seems to be an important facet of learning circles.

Likewise, the group's participation in overall decision-making also seems to play a key role in defining a learning circle. This could include decisions about any aspect of the group's work - when they meet, what they do, how they work and so forth. Again, there was a range of different kinds of decision-making. At one end of the spectrum there were groups such as the Women's Institute, where there are formal "political" decision-making processes. In other groups, the self-determination was equally strong, but not as formalized.

Finally, there is a hard-to-define element that seems to be a prerequisite for any successful learning circle. This is best described by the word *conviviality*; that is, the enjoyment people take in each other's company. Again and again, when asked why they come to a group, people expressed the idea that they like spending time with the other people in the group. All of the above elements - safe place, peer learning, self-determination, group thinking - contribute to this atmosphere of enjoyment. It is also something that has a life of its own, that the group itself can create and nurture. Of course this is not something that can be made into a rule, or produced on demand. Nevertheless, it should never be far from our minds as we think about learning circles.

How are these elements of the group dynamic created? There are undoubtedly many factors, but the overriding one seems to be the role of the facilitator. Clearly this is

different from the traditional role of the teacher or instructor. It involves a number of different facets.

A Guide

Someone who is approachable and helpful in offering guidance to individual learners.

An Observer

Someone who is attentive to what is happening in the group - who is not talking, who is talking a lot, the overall mood of the group, and so forth.

A Referee

Someone who is able to help resolve differences and disagreements in a fair way.

An Administrator

Someone who knows the organizational requirements of the group, and is able to communicate them inside and outside of the group.

A Time Keeper

Someone who can keep the group on track within the time that is available .

Another feature of facilitation that we noticed in a number of the cases is that the facilitator was thoughtful about being, and acting like, an equal with the participants in the group. The leadership role of the facilitator seemed to be to all about leading the group to where they take over.

At the same time, we observed that the facilitator's role in fact shifts within the group, and sometimes even during a single session. The facilitator is almost always the person who has the responsibility for the overall life of the group. As such, he or she is always paying attention to what is happening in the group, and adjusting his or her role accordingly. This role might shift from time-keeper, to storyteller, to peacemaker to teacher, to traditional facilitator. This attention and adaptability seems to be at the heart of what makes a good facilitator in a learning circle.