

Learning Circles

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Learning Circles assume that all members bring valuable knowledge and perspectives to the learning setting and that learning is collaborative, transformative, and implies social action. The facilitators seek to create and hold safe space that frees participants to share their stories. The circle unfolds from initial questions framed by the facilitators based on the topic of concern to the circle. The questions usually address this main concern by exploring where participants are now, what participants are seeking, and what they would consider to be the ideal situation with regard to the concern and its resolution. This exploration is a process of hearing from every member of the group, scribing their responses, and noting threads of commonality and diversity. The initial questioning process generates the subsequent questions, concerns, and issues that the group addresses.

There are different kinds of learning circles. One kind is designed to lead to action. As the group goes through layers of questions, discussion spirals through the ideal vision or situation to the reality, to the barriers and responses to get from the reality to the idea, and finally to the course of action this discussion implies. Another kind of learning circle focuses on people sharing their stories. Participants put their stories side by side. Each person comes away with an enhanced sense of how his or her life is connected to the larger community.

The best size for a learning circle is 12-20 people. As the name implies, the physical shape of the conversation is everyone sitting in a circle. This arrangement not only symbolizes the participants' basic equality as the learners and teachers but also helps make it physically real. In the circle, everyone can see everyone else when they are speaking or listening. Everyone is down on the playing field participating in the process of inquiring and learning; no one is a spectator observing from the stands. Sometimes the big circle will break out into small groups of three or four people, for discussion in which each participant can have more air time than in the big circle. After these "break out" discussions, everyone comes back into the big circle so that each small group can share with everyone the ideas, insights, or questions from its discussion. In this way the whole group in the big circle remains the "home space" and the base community of learners.

Learning circles rest on assumptions about community and the need to create community in order to voice all group members and to voice many facets of each member. Community is built through ongoing face to face sharing of information, concerns, and resources. For this reason, learning circles work best in an extended setting in which members share group meals, cultural activities, service projects, household or group chores and a common space.

Learning circles as a tool for learning and social action grew out of a great tradition of people's education, democratic education, and community development. Some of the well-known leaders in this tradition are Myles Horton, Septima Clark, and Paulo Freire. The basic practices of relating as whole persons in respectful conversation about matters of deep concern, however, are rooted in the wisdom and caring of countless community leaders whose names we do not know.