

Learning circle process guidelines – pulled together by Lynn Englund and John Wallace in February 2011

1. We want to create a **safe space**—one where we feel free to speak from the head and the heart (to express thought and emotion).
2. The facilitator will **pose a question** of the nature “Dig back in your experience and tell a story of a time when...”
3. After a short time to reflect on the question and to let a story come into our minds or to choose just one story from many, someone will **volunteer to start**.
4. That person will **choose the direction** to go around the circle either to the right or to the left.
5. We will take turns telling our stories **without interruption**. This “no interruption” norm for discussion is one that we are not used to—and it is not easy to follow! As people speak around the circle, you are going to hear ideas and experiences that you want to respond to immediately—to affirm, to question, to tell about a similar experience of your own, to ask for more details, ... countless impulses to respond that we are used to following up on quickly in conversations with friends. But in these circles I ask you to hold onto these impulses, and to file what you felt like saying to be used later.
6. When it is your turn to speak, if for whatever reason you don’t wish to speak at that time, that is fine and you are **free to pass**. When we have gone all around the circle, we will go back to those who have passed and give them another opportunity to speak. It is fine if for any reason someone still chooses to pass.
7. You contribute as much to the discussion by your **listening** as by your speaking. One of the main things that interfere with listening is that we tend to think of speaking as a performance on which we will be judged. Here we are creating a space in which we don't need to think of speaking in this way, but rather as a quiet and patient sharing of thoughts among friends.
8. Freedom to listen is enhanced by realizing another rule of learning circles: **silence** in a learning circle is OK. If, as you are speaking, you find that you need to pause to arrange what you want to say next, that is fine. If, when it comes your turn to speak, you wish to take a few seconds to silently collect your thoughts, that is fine. Please don’t feel that the movement from speaker to speaker has to be a split-second handoff as in a relay race.
9. Once everyone has had a chance to speak—and those who passed the first time around have had a second chance—then, if there is time, the facilitator will invite **cross-talk**. The facilitator may do this by asking an open-ended

question, such as, “What common threads did you hear?” “What points of dissonance or tension did you hear?” Or the facilitator may simply open the space for comments, observations, or questions, either general ones or ones addressed to particular people.

10. It is often a good idea for the facilitator in launching the circle to say something about the **time available**. “We have two hours for our whole discussion this morning—the circle go-around and cross-talk afterwards. We have fifteen people in the circle so if each of us will be mindful that that we should speak for roughly six minutes, that will leave a half hour for cross-talk at the end.” In opening the space up for cross-talk, the facilitator may want to remind people again of time: “we have about 25 minutes now for cross-talk; let’s be mindful of trying to get as many of people’s further thoughts expressed as possible.”