



The Learning Circles Project: *The Circles*

The Learning Groups at the
Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre

by Guy Ewing

Parkdale. The Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre, PARC, is located in an undistinguished three-storey commercial building on Queen Street West, the main street of the Parkdale area of Toronto. Built in the 1870s, Parkdale was originally a wealthy suburb of Toronto, a “garden city” by the lake. By the time the Gardiner Expressway was built in the 1950s, separating Parkdale from the lake, the old mansions were being broken up into rooming houses, and the once fancy brick stores and meeting halls along Queen Street had lost their grandeur, and were housing the usual variety of neighbourhood stores and eating places.

Parkdale became a home for immigrants, starting with refugees from the Polish uprising of 1956. Refugees from the world’s conflicts have been coming to Parkdale ever since, often moving on to other areas of Toronto after a few years. Parkdale’s low rents and lovely old buildings have also attracted artists. Some of its old mansions have been bought and renovated for single family use.

Starting in the 1970s, a policy of “de-institutionalizing” psychiatric patients led to large numbers of patients being discharged by nearby psychiatric hospitals, the Queen Street Mental Health Centre and the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital. The Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital has since been closed. Many of these discharged patients found accommodation in Parkdale rooming houses. Some rooming houses began to cater to psychiatric outpatients, with the superintendents administering medications. Life in this kind of rooming house is vividly described in Pat Caponni’s autobiographical book, *Upstairs in the Crazy House*.

Walking down Queen Street in Parkdale, or along its tree-lined side streets, one feels a sense of place and history. Parkdale has a recognizable centre, the corner of Queen and Cowan, where there is a small plaza, with the Parkdale Library, the old Parkdale police

station, a public hall and an Anglican church around its perimeter. It has its parks and gathering places. It is rich in community buildings: churches, community centres, schools.

But Parkdale is also a place of urban alienation, of people sitting alone in all-night donut shops. Although Parkdale has inherited the appearance of a community from its “garden city” days, and although many people will tell you that the spirit of community is alive and well there, community in Parkdale often means a particular community within the larger urban neighbourhood. It means a group of women that meets at the Parkdale Community Health Centre, or the youth that meet at the Masaryk-Cowan Recreation Centre, or the congregation of a church. Parkdale may have the feel of a community, but it is many communities within a physical space. These communities have not simply evolved naturally within that space. They have been built through years of hard work. PARC is an example.

PARC. PARC was started by a group of community activists in 1980, after the local psychiatric hospitals began to de-institutionalize psychiatric patients. These activists wanted to create a storefront club, a place for psychiatric outpatients to go during the day. The club sold lifetime memberships for \$1.00. As in many Parkdale community organizations, the activists who founded PARC envisaged an organization in which the participants would be actively involved in governance, not “clients” but “members”. The activists provided initial leadership, and tried to lay the groundwork for new leadership to emerge from within the community of participants that they had initiated.

From the start, members have been active in both governance and the daily operation of the organization. Half of the seats on PARC’s Board of Directors are reserved for members. The kitchen, which provides a free hot meal at lunchtime every weekday, and some evenings, is staffed by members who volunteer. When PARC expanded to the second and third floors of its building several years ago, members were hired to do much of the renovation work .

Volunteer involvement, drawn from a pool of roughly 200 core members, has contributed to the sense of community at PARC, but was also driven by necessity. Financial support from the provincial government, though appreciated, does not cover all of PARC's needs as an organization. Fundraising events help, but take energy and time to organize.

Life at PARC revolves around a large central space on the first floor, the drop-in. The drop-in is open from 9:30 a.m. until 2 p.m. Afternoons and evenings, the space is used for learning groups, meetings and events. It is a pleasant space, taking up the entire first floor of the building, full of light and bright colours, with a hardwood floor and pine trim. The room is filled with wood tables, where members sit and talk, eat, play chess. On the left side, there is a stage-like area, for performances or talks, on the right, stairs, with members' art work hanging in the stairwell. There is a smoking room near the front door. In the back, there is an open kitchen where volunteers are usually busy preparing the next meal or cleaning up. Connected to this central space, on the first and second floors, there are meeting rooms, an art studio, offices, a computer room, showers and a laundry room for the personal use of members. On the third floor, there are ten bachelor apartments that are rented to members.

As Maynard Plane, a long-time member at PARC, explains, when the activity rooms were added to PARC, new groups and activities started to spring up. There had been a writing group and some other learning groups, but now groups really began to take off.

Some activities, like soccer, take place outside of PARC. A number of activities are totally maintained by members, who are paid for their work.

Here is a list of learning groups currently active at PARC. These groups meet once a week.

- Writing Group
- Art Group

- Drumming Group
- Drama Group
- Action Group
- Talking Circle
- Stitch and Bitch
- Guitar Group

These groups have evolved from the interests of members and the interests of staff. They make up part of the “Activities” side of the Activities-Recreation Centre. But the activities that take place in these groups are learning activities, not activities that are designed to simply pass the time away. Through these groups, a strong culture of learning has developed at PARC. Because of PARC’s mandate as a club, with members, this culture of learning has been open to all. The groups have been designed to be welcoming and accessible. There has been a conscious effort to make the groups work for members who may not be comfortable using written language.

At regular events at PARC, such as Poetry Night and Movie Night, the dynamics of group learning has begun to come into play. Also, committees at PARC involve group learning. This will be addressed in a separate section later in this narrative.

Finally, there is a Literacy Group. This group is different from the other groups in that it provides explicit instruction in basic reading and writing. Implicit literacy learning is a feature of a number of the groups. Some explicit instruction also takes place in these groups. But the Literacy Group, staffed by a nearby community literacy organization, Parkdale Project Read, makes basic reading and writing a particular focus.

PARC’s history is unique, tied to the history of Parkdale and the mandate of an urban club for psychiatric survivors. But this unique history has resulted in an approach to learning that provides a useful model for community learning everywhere.

As PARC’s program director Bob Rose points out, the principles behind this approach have never been articulated; it is an approach that has grown out of practice in a

particular community. It has never been enacted as policy. Here are the principles that I, an outside observer, believe to be in play. I will be presenting this list of principles to the PARC community for discussion and feedback.

The learning process is suited to the learning group. The group facilitators at PARC do not populate their plans with imagined learners with particular learning styles and histories of learning. The facilitators design programming around who comes to learn.

Everyone is made to feel welcome. This follows from the first principle. When someone new joins a group at PARC, that person is immediately accepted. New participants do not have to fit in or learn prerequisite skills.

Reading and writing is not required. This also follows from the first principle. None of the groups requires the use of written language, nor does any of the facilitators assume that all of the participants in a group will be able to use written language comfortably. Written materials are used as back-up, not to present ideas and information.

People can relate to the group the way they want to. Sometimes, participants leave a group part way through. Sometimes, they will leave the group for a while and come back later. Sometimes, they will come but choose not to participate in the discussion. This coming and going, participation and non-participation is respected by facilitators and group participants. In return, a participant who is leaving will usually respectfully excuse himself or herself, and participants who do not participate in discussions are usually politely attentive to what the group is doing. An atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect has developed to reflect the idea behind these groups, that learning is an opportunity, an opening to possibilities, not a task that must be done in a certain way. Group participants stress that this give and take is the result of discussion and decision making about how the groups should work. It does not reflect indifference by participants toward each other. When someone leaves, the facilitator of the group will follow up to make sure that the group is working for that person, that she is not leaving out of

dissatisfaction with the group. If the person who left is dissatisfied, her ideas for improving the group are sought.

Written language is not the preferred medium for learning. Written language is not privileged at PARC. For example, visual art, improvisational drama and music have equal status.

What is learned in a group goes beyond its particular subject area. The Drumming Group is not just about Drumming; it is also about life and learning of all kinds.

Learning is seen as a way of creating meaning and exploring identity. The scope of the exploration in the groups can be breathtaking. Large questions about life are asked. Issues affecting the future of civil society are explored. Participants look into meaning and identity in their lives.

There are opportunities for literacy learning. Groups provide participants with opportunities for literacy learning by handing out written material and then presenting the same material orally, teaching the vocabulary used in written texts, helping participants with their writing. Particular attention is paid to literacy learning in the Literacy Group.

These principles, which have grown out of PARC's particular history as a place of community learning, did not seem remarkable to anyone I talked with at PARC. But, in the context of approaches to adult education in Canada, they present an alternative to formal approaches to adult learning, and to any approach that gives literacy a central role. The PARC groups are serious about not making presumptions about who will attend. This means that what is learned and how it is presented develops from session to session, rather than by means of a curriculum or predetermined outcomes. Moreover, literacy is regarded as one medium for learning, not as a prerequisite for learning. Although there is provision for literacy learning, literacy is not required or assumed. In other words, it is not privileged.

In what follows, I describe the learning groups at PARC, providing sketches of sessions that I attended. These sketches illustrate the above principles in action. I provide a particularly detailed account of the Literacy Group, to show how community literacy work fits well into the kind of community learning that takes place at PARC.

The Writing Group. PARC's Writing Group was started by Pat Caponni and Hume Cronyn in the mid 1980s. Currently, it is facilitated by Hume Cronyn, a staff person at PARC who also works at the drop in and is involved with a number of activities, including the once-a-month Poetry Night. For Hume, writing is verbal expression; he is not concerned about the participants' ability to form letters or their spelling ability. If a participant cannot write in the sense of putting words down on paper, he asks another participant to help by transcribing. If a participant wants to just listen to what is going on, she is welcome.

On the day that I attended the Writing Group, Hume had asked everyone to come with a joke. He thought of this idea when one of the participants told him a joke the week before: "What's yellow and goes through walls? A magic lemon." Hume suggested that everyone tell a joke or two, then write anything at all based on one of the jokes. Someone asked how they would remember the jokes and suggested that Hume write them down. Hume said that this would involve too much writing, so someone else suggested that he just write down titles for the jokes, to jog people's memory. Hume agreed. Another person said that she would photocopy Hume's list and hand it out.

The jokes started to come, and the group laughed and talked about them. Some participants didn't feel like telling jokes, but seemed to enjoy listening.

Then the list was photocopied and handed out and Hume announced that there would be twenty minutes of writing. Hume wrote as well. Not everybody wrote. One participant worked on an intricate pastel drawing that he had brought, almost finished, to the group.

After twenty minutes, Hume wanted more time, but other group members wanted to start the discussion, and after a few extra minutes of writing, Hume relented. Stories were read around the table. Some participants read their stories with ease, some had difficulty with reading. The stories and poems were enjoyed and discussed. Hume would usually focus on something that he particularly liked about a piece of writing, or he would ask a question. Other participants would do the same. For example, one participant wrote a story about this joke: “Why did the elephant paint his toenails red? So he could hide in a box of Smarties.” The story was about the elephant’s adventures escaping from the box. Hume said he liked the deadpan, matter-of-fact tone that the writer used to describe the ridiculous situation. Another participant said that the picture the writer had drawn was so ridiculous it made her laugh inside.

Discussion flowed from the writing to other things. A story about children peeing in a public pool led to a discussion of the adverse health effects of chlorinating public pools. One of the participants, who did not write a story, asked why fish eggs were called “caviar”, which led to a discussion about what kind of fish eggs are used to make caviar.

The jokes unleashed some powerful, imaginative stories . One participant wrote a story about the joke: “A woman needs a man the same way a fish needs a bicycle.” In his story, he rejected the premise that fish do not need bicycles, and wrote about a fish riding a bicycle to the centre of the earth.

The participants commented on the poem that Hume wrote in the same tone of respectful interest and encouragement that Hume used, obviously looking for ways in which they could be helpful. Hume explained where he was going with the poem, which was not yet finished.

Similarly, the poem that I wrote was received with respect and useful questions, which I later used to revise the poem.

At the end of the session, Hume organized a planning meeting for a book that the group is working on. This will be the group's second book; an anthology of the group's writing, *Kiss Me You Mad Fool*, was published in 1991.

The Writing Group is an inspiring place of learning. It is a place of self-expression, reflection and collaborative learning in both oral and written language.

Speaking from his long experience with writing groups and other groups at PARC, Hume emphasizes the importance of one of the previously stated principles of learning groups at PARC: "Learning is seen as a way of creating meaning and exploring identity." He says that the learning groups help the participants to focus. "Poverty and boredom is about dispersal," he says. Learning is about putting things together. It is also about making friends. A learning group is an ideal environment for making friends, better than sitting around a table in the drop-in looking for things to talk about. When Hume first came to PARC, people sat around and talked mainly about their needs. Now that people are involved with learning groups, friendship and the discussion of ideas animate the drop-in.

"How do you live without a sense of self?" Hume asks. "Learning helps you to throw off images that have been projected on you." Knowing who you are and that you can learn are essential to the learning process.

Hume enjoys the grassroots, democratic nature of learning in the Writing Group. Everyone can join. Everyone's voice is valued. The discussions are passionate and profound, just as good as what Hume remembers from his experience teaching at university. PARC is a "more trusting" environment than university, "more humane."

The Art Group. On PARC's second floor, there is an art studio, a large room with a window onto Queen Street, filled with art supplies, painting, half-finished sculptures.

This is where Charmaine Frado, a staff person at the drop-in, brings PARC members together to do art.

PARC is full of art. The paintings of members hang throughout the building. The art studio is where some of this art is done, at the Art Group. The Art Group also discusses art.

The session that I attended was held at the drop-in space in the evening. Charmaine had brought in a large canvas of hers and fastened it to the wall at the back of the stage area, where it could be easily seen from any place in the drop-in.

As I waited for the session to begin, participants began to arrive with drawings and art supplies. They talked with each other about what they were doing. One participant showed some sketches to another.

When I talked with Charmaine before this session, about what she was planning, she told me that she wanted to start some critical discussion. She would use a painting of hers to introduce some art terms and ways of talking about art. She would do this in a way that did not assume that the participants could read books about art. She would hand out a list of terms, for those who could use it, but she would explain the terms through discussion of the painting itself.

One object of this lesson was to give the participants some art vocabulary so that they could more effectively market their art. Another object was just to get some critical discussion going, to talk about art the way artists do in order to broaden the participants' experience of art and to lay the groundwork for more learning through discussion at the Art Group.

At the session itself, Charmaine started by talking about the materials and techniques that she had used to make the painting. Words like "hue" and "hatching" were discussed.

Then she talked about the painting, a large, powerful canvas that included two dark swirling circular shapes on either side, a red background at the top, and superimposed canvas rectangles. She said that the painting was part of a series, and that selling the first painting in the series had saved her from being evicted from her apartment. She asked people what they saw in the painting, or what they had questions about, and gradually helped the participants to understand the emotions and ideas that the painting expressed. She would do this by encouraging any emotional reaction to the painting, asking how the painting provoked that reaction then elaborating on the answer, using art terms for techniques principles of composition as she elaborated on them. The result was a heightened understanding of the painting, discussion, and the learning of some words, ideas and ways of talking about art.

Like the Writing Group, the Art Group is a place where learning is both accessible and rich. Specific art skills are learned, as well as communication and group interaction skills. But the group is also a place of creative, unpredictable human growth.

The Drumming Group. The Drumming Group is facilitated by Zephaniah James, another staff person at the drop-in. I arrived at the Drumming Group late; a circle of participants, each with a large African drum, had already formed. Zephaniah was getting everybody relaxed and ready to drum.

He started with simple beats and introduced variations. Mainly, though, he taught about music, cooperation and learning, in drumming and through drumming. He began by teaching about letting go. As we worked up a simple rhythm on the drum, he showed us how essential letting go, relaxing, is to the sound and to musical expression. Then he taught about hearing each other. Drumming is about coordination, making music together, “giving each other energy.” Thinking the rhythm, hearing the rhythm, hearing each other: these are all connected. And then there is the learning process. “When I

learn, I walk with a light step.” Learning requires openness and a willingness to be swept along.

Zephaniah told us about a “show off” group that he had hired to play at PARC on the bad advice of a friend. He explained how the musicians in the group had only wanted to draw attention to themselves. They did not pay any attention to establishing a relationship with the audience. Without this relationship, music cannot happen, because music is a form of communication and learning.

Music, he said, is also about finding a perspective on life. As he talked, we drummed, and could explore what he was saying in the physical activity of producing music.

Participating in the Drumming Group is obviously a powerful learning experience. As one participant told me, “it changes you.” This participant often comes into the room where the drums are kept and practices.

For someone like myself, who, in spite of literacy work experience, often associates learning with books, groups like this are a revelation. In these groups, one realizes that physical activity can be a medium for learning ideas and values. Arguments can be made through drumming. Rhythm can teach cooperation.

When developing accessible learning groups, we need to include groups that promote learning in places that cannot be reached through words alone.

The Drama Group. The Drama Group is a place to play with stories. Eventually, these stories may become a play.

At the session I attended, participants randomly took props out of a bag and acted out stories with the props. Then they acted out stories that involved more than one person. Then they acted out stories that had a beginning, a middle and an end. For example, one

of the participants took a paint brush and began painting the room and the people in it. She called for other colours, and people came up to her, making circles with their arms, representing cans of paint. Then a new character, “the boss”, came in and said she was confused by all of the colours in the room. The painter got the boss, and everybody else, to make handprints and headprints on the walls. The boss enjoyed this, and said that she liked the room better.

The facilitator, Lesley Swarz, began the session by asking the participants, seated in a circle, to check in. One participant needed support from the other participants because of an ugly incident on the subway. Support was freely given. Several of the participants talked about the short plays that they had performed at PARC’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebration the week before. One participant brought a prop to talk about, a tropical bird inside a liquid ball that showered sparkles when shaken.

The plays at the anniversary celebration had resulted from several weeks of storytelling. They were about both the participants and PARC. In one play, the actor acted out the story of getting kicked out of his mother’s house and living on the street. Another play was about a woman given birth to a child and being surrounded afterwards by her friends at PARC, her “family,” as she called them. In another play, a couple meet at PARC and get married. The final play was about a PARC member trying to get established as a visual artist.

The Drama Group is a welcoming, playful place, which addresses important issues in peoples’ lives. When you attend a session, there does not seem to be any contradiction between pretending, playing, laughing and dealing with important issues in life. Like the other groups at PARC, the Drama Group is a place where you can go to learn without fear. There, you will not be judged for playing out stories. You can learn about yourself and self-expression without having to justify your status as a learner and without anyone telling you what to learn.

The Action Group. The Action Group is a learning and advocacy group organized by learners for learners. The group does advocacy both in PARC and in Toronto. In PARC, the group encourages members to become active in the governance of PARC. In the larger community, the group encourages members to speak out on behalf of psychiatric survivors.

Two PARC members, Heinz Klein and Terence Williams, have taken leadership in this group. Both have experience working on PARC committees, including the Board. The day I attended the Action Group, Heinz was facilitating. Another member had volunteered to co-facilitate. Heinz and Terence are actively working to help other members of the group gain experience facilitating. Facilitation is modeled as an oral skill, not requiring the use of a written plan.

The group has come up with a group of rules, as follows:

- Refrain from intimidating other members.
- Refrain from interrupting the speakers.
- Show of hands before speaking.
- Ask questions after the speaker is finished.
- Refrain from running around in circles on the same subject.
- Refrain from hogging the meeting and allow others to speak.
- Keep it confidential on certain issues, especially the personal ones.
- Think with your head and heart, not your stomach. (Don't come just for the food.)

These rules are somewhat stricter than the rules in other groups. One of these rules, the rule about showing hands, caused tension the day that I attended.

Heinz went over these rules orally. As at other groups at PARC, written material is a backup. Reading the written material is not required for a group session to proceed.

One of the accomplishments of the group has been to draft a document called “Members’ Rights and Responsibilities”. This document, currently being discussed by the Board of Directors, lists the following rights:

- the right to be informed
- the right to safety
- the right to redress
- the right to choose
- the right to a healthy environment
- the right to education
- the right to be heard.

There is also a list of responsibilities, amounting to the responsibility to be actively involved in the governance of PARC.

There was a lively discussion at the meeting I attended about whether this document would make a difference or whether it was mainly “on paper”. I felt privileged to be part of this important discussion, a discussion common in advocacy groups, about the relationship between process, driven by written documents and agreements, and action. The discussion was not resolved, but it was interesting to see questions raised about the value of written language in bringing about more member involvement in decision making at PARC.

What seems clear is that the Board of Directors has begun consulting the Action Group on important issues. Perhaps this group is evolving to become part of the governance framework at PARC. Terence Williams points out that such an evolution would follow an established pattern at PARC. For example, what was originally an informal group that discussed programming ideas has evolved into the Program Advisory Committee, a formally recognized committee of the Board of Directors. Terence points to this kind of evolution as one aspect of the dynamism of groups at PARC. Groups are created around

emerging interests among the membership. They evolve to meet changing needs for learning, action and governance. *The relationship between learning groups and committees will be discussed further in a separate section of this narrative.*

The meeting began with two check-in questions: “How do you feel?” and “What’s new?” In addition to discussion about the work of the Action Group within PARC, there was discussion of a broader community issue, how people with mental illness are treated by the police. There was a background handout on the use of deadly force. Discussion focused on how police action is often treated sympathetically by the press. When the press says that a psychiatric patient under arrest “wasn’t taking his medication,” there is the implication that the police were justified in whatever action they took.

Heinz sees this kind of discussion as practice for public speaking on behalf of psychiatric survivors. He sees the Action Group not only as a place for learning about issues but also as a place where members can develop advocacy skills.

The group also focuses on mental health. Heinz introduced an “Everyday Survival and Stress-Busting Kit”, consisting of a toothpick, a rubber band, a band aid, a pencil, an eraser, chewing gum, a candy kiss and a tea bag. The reasons for including each of these items are as follows:

- Toothpick: to remind you to pick out the good qualities in others.
- Rubber band: to remind you to be flexible.
- Band aid: to remind you to heal hurt feelings, yours or someone else’s.
- Pencil: to remind you to list your blessings every day.
- Eraser: to remind you that everyone makes mistakes, and it’s o.k.
- Chewing gum: to remind you to stick with it and you can accomplish anything.
- Candy kiss: to remind you that everyone needs a kiss or a hug every day.
- Tea bag: to remind you to relax daily and go over that list of your blessings.

One participant wondered if it was really necessary to list blessings with a pencil when you can list them in your head. An interesting point, made by a person who only learned to write after she came to PARC.

The inclusiveness of the Action Group brings people with various levels of comfort with written language together for advocacy and governance work. This can create tensions, as when one participant suggested that the Members' Rights and Responsibilities document was "just on paper." But these are creative tensions. In most organizations, written language is the uncontested language of governance. At PARC, it is one language of governance. Members of the Action Group have used this language effectively, as the Member's Rights and Responsibilities document shows. But at the Action Group meetings, spoken language is respected, and is powerful. Issues are discussed without reliance on written materials. Participants learn facilitation and speaking skills in a context where they are not at a disadvantage if they have difficulty using written language.

The meeting that I attended ended with an evaluation. Heinz asked the participants how they felt. Then he asked each participant to rate the group as Good, Bad, or in the middle. He drew a line on the flipchart, with "Good" on one side and "Bad" on the other, and put a mark for everybody on the line to reflect their rating. Reasons for the ratings were discussed.

Appropriately, the meeting ended with a kind of evaluation that included everyone in the group. A written survey was modeled, but the participants were not required to read it. Nor were they required to write. Everyone was drawn into the process by the facilitator, who used oral language as the main medium for evaluation and a diagrammatic representation of an oral discussion as its record.

The Talking Circle. This group meets for discussion and for learning about Aboriginal culture. Most of the participants are of Aboriginal ancestry.

The Stitch and Bitch Group. This group meets every week to sew together, help each other with sewing and talk.

The Guitar Group. This group, organized by a member, meets to practice and teach each other guitar.

Regular Events and Committees as Learning Groups. In addition to the learning groups, there are regular events and committees at PARC which have become learning groups. The regular events are less cohesive than the learning groups. The committees are focused on specific tasks. But it seems important not to limit our notion of a learning group to the point where we miss the whole range of group learning that goes on at PARC.

Poetry Night is an activity which attracts a group of regulars, but which brings others into the circle on any given night. On the evening of the third Friday of every month, candles are placed on the tables in the drop-in room, and a microphone is set up on the stage. There is dinner at 6:00, followed by an open mike event. Everyone who wants to go to the mike puts his/her name into a hat. There is a different MC every night. The MC pulls the first name from the hat, and the event begins. Before leaving the mike, each person reaches into the hat to discover who will be next at the mike. Once everyone has gone once, the names are put in the hat again, there is a break, and then a second round.

The people who come to the mike feel comfortable reading or reciting their own poetry, or other peoples' poetry, singing, playing the guitar, playing the harmonica, drumming, doing monologues about books they've read. At this event, unlike many poetry readings in Toronto, there is a feeling of comfort with poetry, art, self expression. Songs are created as they are performed. Once, someone recited a poem that she had written in her head on the way to Poetry Night. One night, a participant liked someone else's poetry in the first set so much that when her turn came in the second set, she asked to read that person's poems.

There are people who come to this event every month. These people begin to offer comments, suggestions, encouragement. Other people come to see what it's like. Gradually they get drawn into the core group.

People in the community who are not members of PARC, like myself, are welcome. Some of them, like myself, have become regulars. I keep coming back for the learning, the creative energy, and the useful, generous feedback on my poetry.

The learning that goes on at this event is inspiring. This is entirely unscripted learning. Poetry Night is facilitated only in the sense that Hume Cronyn and the core group of participants have created an environment where creativity and learning are supported by passion, caring, openness to creativity. This is group learning worth noting. It brings the environment of the Writing Group into a more public space.

Any regular event at PARC can lead to informal learning with regular participants. Hume tells of a Movie Night where there were follow-up discussions. As with the Poetry Night, a core group of participants turned the event into a place for group learning.

Committee work at PARC also involves group learning, as members learn to work together within PARC's governance structure to maintain the organization and effect change. A number of PARC members have told me that committees become places where people get together not only to get things done, but also to learn how to get things done.

As discussed in the section on the Action Group, learning groups sometimes evolve into committees. Committees which evolved in this way, for example, the Program Advisory Committee, have learning built into their process from the start.

So group learning at PARC goes beyond participation in learning groups. Once a culture of learning has but developed within a community, it can take various forms. At PARC,

the establishment of learning groups seems to have been at the forefront in the development of this culture of learning. As both Maynard Plane and Hume Cronyn have noted, once rooms for learning groups were opened up, and learning groups began to meet in these rooms, a culture of learning developed that spread into the drop-in, events, committees and other activities at PARC.

The Literacy Group. This is the group that I first attended at PARC. I will describe this group in detail: its history, how it is facilitated, how it is integrated into the community learning environment at PARC. A detailed account is called for, because there is much to be learned from how this group supports explicit instruction in basic reading and writing within the broader community learning environment at PARC. If we want to understand how inclusive learning groups in the community and community literacy work can be connected, the Literacy Group at PARC is an excellent place to start.

Creating a Literacy Group at PARC. Literacy learning is part of the rich, inclusive learning environment at PARC, particularly in the Writing Group and the Action Group. In each of these groups, participants have numerous opportunities to develop their use of written language. A participant in the Writing Group can get help from other members and from Hume editing what she has written. A participant in the Action Group can learn how governance documents are written and improve his reading by means of handouts that derive from oral discussion.

At the same time, at least one member at PARC, Maynard Plane, felt the need to add a more explicit focus on literacy learning. In addition to a Writing Group, he says, he wanted to have someone at PARC to “teach us to write,” by which he means teaching basic reading and writing.

Maynard had identified a group of people at PARC who had difficulty with basic reading and writing. He urged them to speak out about the need for reading and writing instruction. He suggested that PARC try to get a group facilitated by a staff person at

Parkdale Project Read, a nearby community literacy program that he had become involved with. People were shy to speak out, however. “Some people were sort of scared to say anything about it, because they didn’t know what kind of answer they were going to get.” Maynard was discovering that it is often difficult for people to advocate for themselves, even in a community like PARC which is responsive to member advocacy.

At first the situation made Maynard angry. “At first, I was pretty well on the edge. I was saying, ‘Well, why the hell. Tell me. ‘Cause I’m a member of PARC, too.’” But he began to realize that anger was not helping, and that to get a literacy group at PARC, he would need to become a persistent lobbyist, both at PARC and at Parkdale Project Read.

Lobbying either group is not an easy task. Staff at both organizations are often stretched thin, and it can be hard to get new programming started.

Mary Brehaut, a staff person at Parkdale Project Read and the original facilitator of the Literacy Group at PARC, describes Maynard’s tactics. “I mean, he’s got a way of organizing things. Like, he would physically go to Diana Capponi [at PARC] and get in her face and say, ‘I thought you were going to Project Read. When are you going to do that?’ And then he’d come in here and, sort of, come into the office and say, ‘So, I talked to Diana and she’s waiting to hear from you.’ So, and you know that he’s going to be at you tomorrow, right? So you’ve got to make that call . . .”

Maynard’s lobbying came at a good time for Parkdale Project Read. A new staff person had been hired on project funding, and there was time and energy for the discussion of new initiatives. Staff began to make time for reflection and staff discussion a priority. Paperwork, including the paperwork required for accountability to funders, was streamlined. Mary says: “When we . . . got more reflection time, this changed everything, changed everything . . . When you’re sort of nose to the grindstone, you can’t reflect, you don’t have time, you don’t have staff . . . So that enabled us to think about:

‘Well, what do you want for this program? What kinds of partnerships do we want to have in the community? We’ve always been thinking about this; let’s do it.’”

Staff at Parkdale Project Read had, in fact, been interested in staffing a literacy group at PARC since the 1980s. At one point, in the 1990s, a small literacy group was actually started at PARC by a Parkdale Project Read staff person. This group ended when the staff person left Parkdale Project Read. Now, with time and energy for new initiatives, with Maynard’s leadership, and with Parkdale Project Read’s new location just several blocks away from PARC, words could be turned into action.

Once the two organizations decided to go ahead with a Literacy Group, there were still perceived difficulties to be overcome. At PARC, Maynard needed to convince members that the Literacy Group was not going to be like school. He told them that it wouldn’t be like a regular class, that participants could come and go as they pleased, that there would be no fixed curriculum. At Parkdale Project Read, Mary met with Hume Cronyn, the facilitator of the Writing Group, to learn about facilitating a group of psychiatric survivors. PARC needed to be assured that the Literacy Group would not be an alienating experience for members, and Mary wanted to learn how to adjust her facilitation style to accommodate the culture of learning at PARC.

In fact, these difficulties turned out to be more perceived than real. The learning environment at PARC is similar to the learning environment at Parkdale Project Read in many ways. In both places, the learning environment is informal, respectful, flexible. Learners at PARC are used to coming and going during a group session, but this is also true at Parkdale Project Read. Respectful listening is encouraged in both places. For the first few months of the Literacy Group, Hume co-facilitated with Mary. This support was appreciated by Mary, and helped her to see that the facilitation style that she had developed at Parkdale Project Read could be easily adapted to PARC.

How the Literacy Group works. Literacy learning is a process in which the focus of learning continually shifts back and forth between language as communication and the creation of meaning and written language as representational practice. Literacy learners have not mastered the representational practices that one needs to use written language to its full capacity. They are limited in what they can read and write by what they can recognize and produce, using the conventional practices of a writing system.

These conventional practices are largely learned by exposure and experience. For example, most young children who read English language story books with adults start school with sophisticated knowledge about the possible letter sequences of English. They will recognize “bluck” as a possible sequence and “zdrk” as peculiar. (Adams, 1991). It is commonly recognized that both children and adults learn the spelling patterns of English largely through exposure and practice.

As can be seen from the descriptions of the PARC learning groups, there are many opportunities in these groups for this kind of implicit learning. This is because these groups put oral discussion in the foreground while providing written texts as background. What is in the written texts mirrors the oral discussion, and can be learned, at least in part, from the oral discussion.

Explicit instruction is also possible in these groups. For example, in the session of the Writing Group that I attended, participants asked each other how to spell words as they were writing their pieces.

In the Literacy Group, much of the learning is also implicit. Like the other groups at PARC, learning is seen as a way of exploring meaning and identity. The participants engage in discussion about their lives and write about their interests. Group discussion is planned on issues of concern to the participants: ecology, the war in Iraq, the rights of psychiatric survivors. Written material is provided by the facilitator to support the oral discussion of these topics.

But in this group, the facilitator consciously creates opportunities for explicit learning. Here are two examples of how this works.

In one session, the participants began by working on writing in their journals. The facilitator, Jo Petite, helped the learners with spelling, listened to their stories, got me talking with one of the learners about the pieces he had written about his family.

Then, by way of further exploring issues of perspective in writing, she did a presentation on Dadaism. She explained the history of Dadaism, and described some of the visual artists and poets who were involved in this movement. She introduced the idea of perspective, walking around a lectern that was in the room and looking at it from different angles and remarking on how its appearance changed. Then she presented the group with a list of written instructions of making a Dadaist poem, a poem that would disrupt ordinary language and make us see it differently. Here are the instructions.

- Take a newspaper.
- Take some scissors.
- Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem.
- Cut out the article.
- Next, carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag.
- Shake gently.
- Next, take out each cutting, one after the other.
- Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.
- The poem will resemble you.

Jo read through these instructions with the group. Jo had chosen an exercise that she hoped would feed the group's exploration of meaning and identity when they write in their journals. But she also used the instructions as a way of giving the participants practice with reading and the opportunity to learn new sight words. For example, "conscientiously" was explicitly identified as a difficult word to recognize. Jo discussed its similarity in appearance to "conscious", the word that one learner had mistaken it for. Meaning relationships between the two words were explored.

Reading a newspaper story before cutting it up also became an opportunity for explicit reading and writing instruction. Because time was running out, the newspaper story was cut into lines instead of into words. Reading the lines out of context became another opportunity for explicit instruction. Recognizing words without meaningful context forced the participants to rely on print cues more than meaning cues, providing useful practice. Then there was the writing of the reordered lines of words on a flip chart, a way of seeing words written out letter- by-letter. Finally, there was the oral reading of the resulting poem, which also forced the participants to rely on print cues more than usual.

The focus of the session was on oral discussion of perspective, upsetting expectations, combining words in new ways. But because of the focus on basic reading and writing in the Literacy Group, Jo had used an activity that created opportunities for explicit instruction through practice, observation and discussion.

In another session, Jo led a discussion about forests. The discussion began with an appreciation of High Park, a park at the edge of Parkdale that contains one of Toronto's urban forests. Participants reminisced about sleeping in High Park. The legality of sleeping in public parks was discussed. One participant remembered encountering a coyote in High Park.

Jo had brought in a reading about the ecology of rainforests. The passage had been chosen to fuel discussion and learning. But, because of the literacy focus of the group, the passage had also been chosen to introduce sight words to the participants. That is, the passage contained some words that Jo knew the participants would have difficulty with: "temperate", "nutrients", "vegetation". The better readers in the group took turns reading the passage aloud. The participants helped each other with the unfamiliar words, with Jo jumping in if nobody could recognize or sound out the word.

This explicit learning of sight words took place in the context of a discussion of rainforest ecology. The discussion took the group's exploration of ecological issues a step forward. It also provided a forum for two members of the group with Aboriginal ancestry to speak about traditional Aboriginal knowledge about the environment, and how this knowledge was reflected in the modern science of ecology. But, in addition to a discussion about ecology, this session involved the explicit learning of sight words.

These opportunities for explicit learning are valued by the participants. As one of the participants, Alice Rogers, puts it.

I don't know how to explain literacy. It's, um . . . To me, it's a challenge on it's own. Because when I first came to Toronto, I couldn't read. I could read, but not the big words. And now I feel like I have improved with my big words. Like, when we have our Literacy Group, it's like we practice. Like, she gives me these articles to read, and that helps me. 'Cause I know I can't skip this word, because then I won't know what the next word is, so . . .

This was what Maynard Plane had lobbied so hard to achieve. Although opportunities for the implicit learning of basic reading and writing already existed at PARC, Maynard wanted to create opportunities for explicit learning as well. Maynard wanted PARC to have a group where someone would "teach us to write." This is what the Literacy Group provides.

But this is not to say that the Literacy Group is narrowly focused on reading and writing practices. As can be seen from the above descriptions, basic reading and writing is learned in the context of the kind of broad-ranging, exploratory discussion that characterizes all of the learning groups at PARC.

As one participant, George Allen, said when asked what he learned in the Literacy Group:

Oh, boy, I really don't know where to start because . . . more or less, reality in general. That's anywhere from a human being down to a termite . . . it's not just a literacy group, it's more than a literacy group, because many times people go there to listen to what the Literacy Group are teaching, what they're talking about.

Referring back to the principles underlying the approach to community learning at PARC, what is learned in the Literacy Group "goes beyond its particular subject area." Here is how Alice Rogers characterizes what she has learned.

I've learned different things. Like, I've learned to communicate with other people. I've learned that there are things I can learn with other people. Like I said, I like to work on my own. I do better working on my own, but now I'm trying to work in groups . . . I like helping people, though. If I have the knowledge, I will help people. Like I said, I learned to communicate with other people now, so it makes it much easier for me to learn.

I love science. We do a lot in this group on animals. I'm an animal activist, so . . . Well, I feel I am. And I learned a lot more about, like, writing letters. Like, we wrote a letter to the gas company that was going to put an oil rig through. And I've learned to put lessons together. I'm putting a Native lesson together . . .

I'm a writer. I like writing different things, and the Literacy Group gives me that chance. I really do like the literacy groups better than I like the ordinary schools, because they're more creative. More, like, you don't have to be pressured to do this and that. You could disagree. People respect you more. I've had a few fall-outs, but . . . they solved themselves. I'm computer wise. I can't say I'm smart at it, but I'm wise to it. I have my own, actually.

My husband encourages me to write a lot of the time. But through the Literacy I've learned that I can do it . . . It's like you can learn and not be afraid to learn. It's like, at one point, I figured I couldn't do nothing. Nothing at all. I was very into myself there for a while. I just said, "I can't do this." And then I started to pick up these books. Like, buy them. I pretty well finished one of the books, but I got a lot of research to do, but . . . I know that the work . . . I know I can do it, it's just that . . . My husband encourages me to do it, too . . . Jo comes up to me and says, "How would you like to do a Native class?" I just looked her and said . . . At that time I didn't have the books, right? And I said, "There's a load of information on Natives, so how am I going to do this?" And then I got my

books. And, um, it's all about . . . I told you that the books were North American Native, First Nations . . . and I figured, if I work in the book, then, you know, people will understand, right? 'Cause there's a lot of stories how the white . . . they said "white men" . . . came, and Columbus, how he thought he was in India and all that, right? It's kind of history related to one book. So I said to myself, "Sure, I'll do it." And I'm going to put some lessons together. Now, I feel important . . .

Basic reading and writing ability is, in itself, important. George Allen, who not only attends the Literacy Group but also has a tutor at Parkdale Project Read, attributes his involvement with community organizations partly to his improved reading ability and how it has helped him to get around the city.

Now, here, if it wasn't for PARC, if it wasn't for Project Read, I wouldn't have this opportunity. So I'm involved with the Board at PARC, I'm involved with the Board at Hong Fook Mental Health Association, that's the Chinese one, and I'm also involved with the ODSP Coalition, and I'm also involved with Toronto Disaster Relief, that's the homeless, and I'm also involved with the Recovery Campaign, with the consumer survivors, and I'm also involved with the Action Group at PARC, and I'm also involved with the Board development at Hong Fook, and I'm also involved with the Task Force at Hong Fook. See, and without Project Read, without me coming to Project Read, I wouldn't have a chance in the world to get involved with things like this . . . Before I come to Project Read, I'd pretty well almost be afraid to go anywhere, because I can ask a person, "Hey, I want to go to Yonge Street." But if I don't even know how to read "Yonge Street", I get there, I don't even know where I'm at. So I'm missing that out. So it's panic, kind of afraid of going anywhere you can't read, you see? Because you're asking directions, you know what I mean? It's hard.

But he also attributes his involvement to the self confidence his has learned through involvement with the Literacy Group, participating in its discussions, learning how to communicate.

I can get somewhere, instead of sit there, sit tight and don't know what to say . . . we have to have good communication no matter where we go. And when first we develop the communication, after that, from the communication, we develop knowledge, information. So, I think that all of these three things go together.

Jo Petite describes how the Literacy Group provides ongoing support for participants who want to become more involved in governance at PARC by helping them read through written material.

. . . so many of the members of the PARC group will bring minutes, for example, to the Literacy Group. So maybe coming to the Literacy Group is a strategy for leadership for them. Like, maybe they've chosen to come to the Literacy Group because they see it as a way to be a more effective leader in other capacities.

So the Literacy Group **“goes beyond its specific subject area.”** It also follows the other principles of group learning at PARC. **“The learning process is suited to the group.”** As in the other groups, the Literacy Group is organized around the interests and abilities of its participants. Jo began her time with the group by discussing what it was they wanted to learn about, and she continuously follows the group's lead in planning presentations to the group. **“Everyone is made to feel welcome.”** The first time I attended the group, there was a go-around, with each of the participants telling me about the group and why they participated in the group. This was a remarkable session for me, because I have never participated in a learning group in which the participants listened to each other so respectfully. Some of the participants spoke for quite a long time. Some seemed to be getting off topic. The other participants did not become impatient. Clearly, every person in the group knew how to respect every other person's voice. After the session, Jo told me that she had spent some time with the group working on respect for voice, which she sees as the basis of both active participation in the group. Later, Mary talked with me about the “soft” approach to facilitation used by the staff at Parkdale Project Read. This approach has been strengthened by the program's long-time association with Jenny Horsman, whose work on the effects of violence on learning has been incorporated into the development of Parkdale Project Read as a safe learning environment for victims of violence.

“Reading and writing is not required.” One of the participants in the Literacy Group comes mainly to listen. She simply enjoys being in this learning environment.

Perhaps she experiences what George Allen identifies as an important aspect of the group.

And the same time they learn something, the same time they got a peace of mind. And more or less, what I mean “a peace of mind,” what we talk about there, what the Literacy Group talk about, what they do in there, it kind of gives them a chance to focus on what we’re doing instead of their mind focusing on their own problems.

“People can relate to the group the way they want to.” As in the other groups at PARC, participants come and go. Involvement with the group is based on interest, not on expectations about attendance and performance. As one participant, Tsering Gyari, put it, “I come for myself. I enjoy. Forcing and coming by yourself is totally different.” For Alice Rogers, also, this is an important aspect of the group.

I feel like you’re not pressured in this group. In the [adult] school, I felt pressured because I had to do things at a certain time. And I think it’s the timing that . . . and sometimes I think I learn better in this group, that I don’t have to be there every day . . .

“Written language is not the preferred medium for learning.” Most of the participants in the Literacy Group also attend other groups, and bring discussions and ideas from these groups to the Literacy Group. A story that started out as an improvisational skit in the Drama Group might end up as a written story in the Literacy Group. A discussion about the rights of psychiatric survivors that began at the Action Group might inspire a letter to the editor written with Jo’s help. A painting produced in the Art Group gets discussed in the Literacy Group and included in a collection of writing by members of the group. The Literacy Group does not operate in an atmosphere which values written language over other media for learning and expression.

As has already been seen, **“learning is seen as a way of creating meaning and exploring identity”** in the Literacy Group. And, of course, **“there are opportunities for literacy learning.”** As has been seen, what differentiates the Literacy Group from the other Learning Groups at PARC is the number of opportunities for explicit literacy learning in the Literacy Group.

Including the explicit learning of basic reading and writing in community learning: the PARC model. The addition of a Literacy Group to PARC’s inclusive learning groups provides a model for how community organizations supporting inclusive learning and community literacy organizations can work together. Inclusive learning groups provide learning opportunities for people regardless of their reading and writing abilities or their level of formal education. They do not impose formal rules and learning structures on participants. They are welcoming, flexible, supportive.

The main value of these groups is that they provide these kinds of learning opportunities. But these groups also have a secondary value; they provide opportunities for implicit literacy learning, and for some explicit literacy learning as well. By adding explicit literacy learning to the picture, these groups can add to the learning opportunities that they provide. In the PARC model, this explicit literacy learning is added by means of a Literacy Group staffed by a community literacy organization.

From the PARC experience, it appears that, for such a model to work, the literacy organization will need to acknowledge the importance of inclusive learning as an end in itself, not as a means to literacy learning. The staff at Parkdale Project Read acknowledge and value all of the kinds of learning that take place at PARC. They do not try to privilege literacy as a medium for learning. They provide explicit literacy instruction within a learning culture in which creating meaning and exploring identity are paramount.

The Parkdale Project Read staff are comfortable with all aspects of the learning culture at PARC, and mirror it in how they teach basic reading and writing. The inclusive principles in PARC's approach were not hard for the facilitators from Parkdale Project Read to adopt, because they are similar to principles followed in that organization.

Learning to read and write as an adult can be a powerful experience, as the participants in the Literacy Group reminded me, but it felt more powerful in a multi-faceted, inclusive learning environment provided by PARC than it has ever felt to me, in twenty years of literacy work experience. The participants move freely between groups, between media, as part of a single learning experience.

From her perspective as a staff person at Parkdale Project Read, as well as the facilitator of the Literacy Group at PARC, Jo Petite stresses the importance of what she calls the "portal" that the Literacy Group has created between PARC and Parkdale Project Read. This portal has helped participants in the Literacy Group at PARC to become involved with Parkdale Project Read, participating in the learning groups there, becoming involved with tutors, and contributing to Parkdale Project Read's anti-oppression work.

When I first came [to Parkdale Project Read], it seemed like psychiatric survivor issues were quite invisible. There were psychiatric survivors here, and the staff knew, but it wasn't something that was . . . they didn't identify themselves as a group within Project Read, as an active group within Project Read, and I think that's happening more and more, especially with this initiative where they want to put together a tutor training initiative [a workshop for volunteer tutors on tutoring psychiatric survivors.]

At the same time, adult literacy learners at Parkdale Project Read have gone through the portal to become involved with PARC. And some of the people who participate in both programs are now talking about getting the Literacy Group at PARC to meet twice a week.

Jo believes that, without a portal between PARC and Parkdale Project Read, it is unlikely that the PARC members who are currently involved at Parkdale Project Read would have become involved. Their involvement with a literacy learning group at PARC and, through their involvement in this group, their personal connection with Parkdale Project Read staff made involvement with Parkdale Project Read seem possible. Here is Jo discussing how one PARC member became involved with Parkdale Project Read.

But I think what it required was for her to have the connection with me. She and I worked quite hard on the connection. Like, the first year, I think, of working together, it was . . . we worked quite hard on it. And so I think it was about her being comfortable with me and me telling her about what the groups were like. Like, there was a lot of showing on the calendar, you know . . . and also the fact that she didn't need to go through an intake process. I think this is actually big. To come to the PARC group, there's no intake process. You can just wander into the group, right? If you come to Project Read, you can't come to a group until you've gone through an interview, intake-type process with one of the staff, so that you're officially a learner. And the PARC group waived that requirement, so that you could come and get comfortable with the style, with the facilitator, with the material, with the fact that you can suggest material and you're going to get some of that material that you asked for, that you have some control around the learning. And then, I found that it wasn't so difficult to get them to come to an intake. And it was actually a good thing . . . 'cause it would mean, like, "I'm going to be here."

Elaborating on the importance of not having a formal initial intake process, Jo says:

When they first started coming, it wouldn't have been a situation where I could say, "O.K., you can't come to this group until you meet me at this time. We go through this interview. We talk about your experiences at school. We talk about where you live." You know, like those kinds of issues are not necessarily so easy to answer. And, you know, it's way easier to come and sit and listen, and you don't have to read, you don't have to write, you just take it in.

It is clear that the portal between PARC and Parkdale Project Read has made both organizations more inclusive. Parkdale Project Read now includes learners who would not have felt comfortable becoming involved before this portal was created. Its work as a literacy organization has been strengthened by the participation of psychiatric survivors

whose involvement at PARC has helped them to develop an awareness of psychiatric survivor issues, and a willingness to advocate on those issues. At the same time, psychiatric survivors who are participants at Parkdale Project Read have been drawn to become involved or more involved at PARC. And, as has been discussed previously, the involvement of PARC members in the Literacy Group at PARC has helped them to more fully participate in governance at PARC through increased reading ability and self-confidence in situations where written language is used, as well as ongoing help with reading minutes and other written material from the meetings that they attend at PARC.

We can be encouraged by this model of embedding the explicit learning of basic reading, writing and numeracy in community learning through partnership between a community organization committed to inclusive learning and a community literacy organization. This model is a compelling example of how an inclusive approach to learning can flow within and between organizations to multiply opportunities for lifelong learning.