


The Learning Circles Project

A Look at Inclusive Learning: Report to the Field
by Guy Ewing

Sometimes, people like to read a hardcopy version of a report about a study. Here is a short (60-page) hardcopy version of what is on this website.

We used this version of the report, which we made available in English and in French, to get feedback from around the country. You can read some of this feedback in our final report to the National Literacy Secretariat.

This feedback has convinced us that there is interest from across Canada in a learning circles approach to community learning, both as a way of expanding the scope of adult literacy work and as a way of making community development work more inclusive.

The Learning Circles Project:
A Look at Inclusive Learning

This is an overview of a two-year study of learning circles in Anglophone communities in Canada funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. The researchers, Janice Brant, Arthur Bull, Guy Ewing and Tracey Mollins, worked collaboratively with the Lifelong Learning Group, which is itself a learning circle. The members of the Working Group were Ningwakwe, Tannis Atkinson, Janice Brant, Arthur Bull, Nancy Cooper, Colleen D'Souza, Guy Ewing, Katrina Grieve, Jenny Horsman, Nancy Jackson, Joy Lehmann, Tracey Mollins, Sarah Thompson, Judi Snively, Sheila Stewart and Tracey Westell. This was a Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) project supported by a partnership among MTML, the Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre and the National Indigenous Literacy Association (NILA). For additional material, please see our website: http://www.nald.ca/learningcircles/workgrp.htm. For further information, or to provide feedback, please contact Guy Ewing at guye@ca.inter.net.

Overview

Learning is essential to who we are. It is a human need.

Most of our learning takes place in daily life. But we also create places to focus learning. Some of these places are academic institutions of learning: schools, colleges, universities. But there are also community places of learning which are quite different from academic institutions. This report brings into focus a kind of

learning group in communities that is not widely recognized, but which provides an exciting alternative to academic learning. In these groups, which we call "learning circles," adults with various levels of formal education and quite different histories of learning come together to share and create new knowledge. Learning circles are inclusive. They do not presuppose academic skills. They do require facility with written language or with any other specific mode of learning. They trace their origins to Indigenous circles, learning groups in which, for hundreds of years, the Indigenous people of Canada have sat in circles where everyone's knowledge is respected and learned together.

The report was developed through a two-year study of learning circles in Canada funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. The study was a project of Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) supported by a partnership among MTML, The Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre and the National Indigenous Literacy Association. Researchers from each of these organizations worked in collaboration with The Lifelong Learning Working Group, which includes representatives from the partner organizations, literacy workers and researchers in the adult literacy field, and which is, itself, a learning circle.

In this study we:

- identified learning circles in three kinds of communities, urban, rural and Indigenous;
- documented the values and practices of learning circles;
- documented the impacts of learning circles on individuals and on communities;
- identified ways in which learning circles can be supported by communities and by government;
- developed a manual, *The Beginner's Guide to Learning Circles*, for individuals and organizations that might be interested in creating learning circles.
- compiled a list of background resources, both theoretical and practical, about learning and learning circles.

Our methodology was based on narratives about the learning circles.

In our initial scan, we discovered that learning circles are created for many purposes, and are organized in a great variety of community settings. In Digby, Nova Scotia, The Fisheries Group was organized in cooperation with The Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre to learn about fisheries policy. In Toronto, The Multicultural Women's Group was organized at Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services, a community organization in North York, to provide a place where women who have recently immigrated to Canada can explore cultural and social issues. In Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, near Belleville, Ontario, The Family History Group was organized to learn about the tapestry of family histories in the community.

These groups are not always recognized as learning groups. For example, The Fisheries Group is sometimes seen as a community action group. The Multicultural Women's Group is sometimes seen as a support group. The Family History Group is sometimes seen as a hobby group. But we discovered that learning was at the core of what these groups do. Most fundamentally, this learning is about personal and social meaning. More concretely, members of The Fisheries Group have learned to read complex research documents, participants in the Multicultural Women's Group have learned skills for everyday living in their new country and participants in The Family History Group have learned about the roots of contemporary Mohawk culture.

Learning circles enact a way of looking at knowledge. In this view, knowledge is not monolithic, not owned, not imparted; it is various, shared, learned.

In a learning circle, everyone's knowledge is respected around the circle. No one receives knowledge; everyone around the circle contributes the knowledge that he or she brings: experiential knowledge, abstract knowledge, spiritual knowledge. As different kinds of knowledge are articulated and discussed around the circle, new knowledge is negotiated, a synthesis of the various kinds of knowledge around the table. So, to use the example of The Fisheries Group introduced in the previous section, a university graduate brings knowledge of the fisheries studies gained through studying statistical models of the regeneration of fish stock. Fishermen bring various kinds of knowledge of the fisheries gained through observing the ways of fish and their ecosystems. Through negotiation, the university graduate and the fisherman can create new knowledge about the fisheries. Various kinds of understanding about the ways of fish and their ecosystems can be combined and used to correct oversimplifications in the statistical model. At the same time, understanding how statistical models work can enhance the group's understanding of the ways of fish and their ecosystems.

In this view of knowledge, the word "circle" is important. No one sits at the head of a circle. Learning moves around the circle, not from a teacher to an audience of students. The shape of a circle illustrates a learning process.

This process creates access to learning for people who would be excluded if academic requirements were imposed. But it is more than a "second chance" for adults, a way of compensating for a lack of formal education. It is a different kind of learning, one that creates a different set of possibilities than formal learning. More than "compensatory learning," it is a powerful kind of learning in its own right.

We have written a number of pieces about the values and practices that characterize learning circles, and documented them in the narratives. Participants in learning circles elaborated on these values and practices at a symposium called Widening the Circle Symposium that we organized. But to summarize, learning circles are:

- welcoming
- supportive
- flexible
- non-hierarchical
- self-managed
- exploratory

In contrast to academic learning environments, they:

- do not privilege written language
- do not privilege academic knowledge
- do not predetermine what will be "acceptable behaviour"
- do not pressure participants to learn
- do not focus on the transmission of information
- do not predetermine learning outcomes

We have written a piece about the impacts of learning circles on individuals and communities, and documented these impacts in the narratives. Participants in learning circles described some of these impacts at the Widening the Circle Symposium. In general terms, we found that learning circles:

- break down isolation and barriers
- synthesize different kinds of knowledge
- provide opportunities for adults to learn skills, such as literacy skills, in contexts that are meaningful to them
- increase understanding of and tolerance for cultural, social and personal differences
- help participants to understand who they are, where they are going and how to get there
- create networks for personal support, community development and cultural reclamation

To use a term that is current in policy development circles, learning circles create "social capital."

We have outlined ways in which learning groups could be supported, based on what participants in learning groups said they need. Communities and governments could coordinate resources to:

- promote public awareness of the value of learning circles
- provide support for workshops on learning circles conducted by learning circle participants for interested people and organizations in their communities

- provide support for workshops designed for people already involved in learning circles so that expertise can be shared and developed
- provide support for networking by learning circle participants on a national level
- make public space available to learning circles
- make funding available to learning circles for start-up, childcare, transportation and supplies
- make funding available to learning circles for facilitation.
- Make funding available for support on literacy issues, such as professional development on learning without relying on written language, using accessible written language, explicit and implicit literacy learning. In some communities, there are community literacy programs that could be funded to provide these kinds of support.
- Provide funding to existing networks that are supporting learning circles, such as the Women's Institutes.

We believe that the creative use of government funding could play a useful role in providing this support. We would see this as a national investment in a valuable community resource and in a vision of inclusive lifelong learning in Canada.

1 How We Learned

History of the Project

This research project began with a meeting at the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML), a network of literacy programs in Toronto and York Region, in the spring of 2002. The Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL), a national literacy coalition, had just released its National Action Plan for Literacy for feedback, and MTML called a meeting to discuss the plan and elicit a response from Toronto area literacy workers.

The meeting attracted a group of literacy workers with a wide range of experience in literacy work, in Toronto and in other parts of Canada. Our experience included various kinds of program work, research-in-practice, academic research,

program administration, advocacy, planning and policy development. The group shared a social justice perspective on literacy work, the view that literacy work should be focused on personal development and social equity more than on meeting the ever-changing needs of the Canadian labour force.

A central element of the National Action Plan was the goal of developing a national adult education system. The group that gathered that day at MTML felt that this was a positive goal, but was concerned that such a system might become focused on academic learning in academic environments. For many adults in Canada, access to learning means more than access to academic learning. It means access to learning of all kinds, learning that is meaningful to adults in their particular contexts, and that helps them to move forward in their lives. Academic learning leads to academic credentials, and this can be important to adults who lack these credentials. But for many adults, the impetus to learn does not come from the need for academic credentials. Many essential kinds of learning are not even suited to an academic learning environment. Learning about our cultures, our communities, ourselves; these kinds of learning often beg for environments that are quite different from what we experienced in high school. And as literacy workers, we were well aware that written language, the staple of academic learning, is not the only medium for learning, and not always the best medium. It can be a barrier to learning, not only because it makes learning inaccessible to Canadians who have difficulty using written language, but also because it may not be the right medium for a particular kind of learning. By privileging written language, academic learning environments exclude people from learning, and they also exclude important kinds of learning.

At the same time, as literacy workers, we had observed over the years that literacy learning is often most effective when it is embedded in other learning. Often, it is through engagement with learning about culture, community, self that the detailed scribblings of written language begin to make sense, that marks on a page begin to take on meaning. So it seemed to us that opportunities to learn outside of academic learning environments were also opportunities to acquire basic literacy. Non-academic learning environments let people in by not privileging literacy. They eliminate literacy as a barrier to learning. Paradoxically, by doing this, they create ideal environments for literacy learning to occur.

So we responded to MCL's National Action plan by calling for "inclusive lifelong learning" as a goal. Adults with less formal education should have access to informal learning opportunities that respects their knowledge and learning needs and does not require the use of written language as a prerequisite to learning.

We decided to continue to meet. We named ourselves "The Lifelong Learning Working Group." After several energizing discussions, we decided that we should start "doing something" about our ideas. With the help of developmental funding from the National Literacy Secretary, we began to develop a proposal for a project. We researched the literature on inclusive community learning. Against

the background of Nayda Veeman's studies of adult education in Sweden ["Adult Learning in Canada and Sweden: A Comparative Study of Four Sites." Ph.D dissertation, Department of Education Administration, University of Saskatchewan, 2004, available at http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/sweden/cover.htm], we discussed the Swedish learning circles, which provide, with government support, education for adults through informal learning focused on the interests of the participants. We explored the idea of piloting inclusive community learning centres; this would certainly be "doing something," and appealed to us as community activists. But, as we talked, piecing together what we knew and were learning about community learning, remembering experiences in different parts of Canada, we began to realize that we should perhaps become less focused on doing and more focused on looking and listening. We were getting glimpses and flashbacks of the inclusive community learning that we already have in Canada. This inclusive community learning, we began to understand, is often not seen, because it is not understood as learning. One of us remembered a tenants' group which a learner in a literacy program had organized. Another remembered attending talking groups in Nunavut. We had started with the idea of developing a project that created inclusive community learning opportunities, but humbled by what little we knew about existing kinds of inclusive community learning, we decided to develop a project to make more visible and to better understand this kind of learning as it currently exists in Canada. In our project proposal, we described this kind of learning as an "unacknowledged resource."

To carry out this project, we developed a partnership among three organizations, MTML, The Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre in Digby, Nova Scotia, an organization that supports learning and research in the rural, natural-resource-based communities in the Bay of Fundy area, and the National Indigenous Literacy Association (NILA), an organization that supports literacy learning in Indigenous communities throughout Canada. This partnership allowed us to explore inclusive community learning in a range of Canadian communities: urban, rural and Indigenous. It was important to us to include Indigenous communities in our research because of their long tradition of oral learning.

Researchers were hired from each of the partner organizations, and became members of the Working Group on Lifelong Learning. MTML hired Guy Ewing and Tracey Mollins to research urban learning circles in Toronto and Southern Ontario. The Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre hired Arthur Bull to research learning circles in Digby County, Nova Scotia, a rural area with a resource-based economy. The National Indigenous Literacy Association hired Janice Brant to research learning circles in Indigenous communities. MTML hired Guy Ewing to facilitate the Working Group, to coordinate the work of the researchers, and to coordinate with MTML in providing project management. The Working Group continued to provide intellectual direction to the project. More than an advisory group, it was a learning circle, a place of discussion and discovery. The researchers became an inner circle within the Working Group, meeting frequently in person or by phone to develop the project, to write and to discuss.

As the project comes to a close, the Working Group is discussing its future role. We believe that the issues and ideas that brought this group together will continue to sustain discussion, networking, and possibly future projects by this group. As long as we are a learning circle where we can continue to learn and grow, we will continue.

The Members of the Working Group are: Tannis Atkinson, Janice Brant, Arthur Bull, Nancy Cooper, Colleen D'Souza, Guy Ewing, Katrina Grieve, Jenny Horsman, Nancy Jackson, Joy Lehmann, Tracey Mollins, Ningwakwe (Pricilla George) Sarah Thompson, Judi Snively, Sheila Stewart and Tracy Westell.

Research Process

In this project, we took an ethnographic approach to research. That is, we became engaged with learning circles, familiarized ourselves with how they work, listened to the participants talking about them, became part of their world as much as we could, and wrote about them out of this experience of engagement and listening.

Our writing took place in several stages. First, we wrote narratives about the learning circles. Then we wrote analysis pieces, focused on aspects of learning circles that seemed particularly important to us. You will find these analysis pieces in the section of this report called Values and Practices of Learning Circles.

This writing became the basis for discussion among the Researchers and the Lifelong Learning Working Group. The discussion was long and complex, continuing as the Researchers continued to meet with learning circles and learn about them. This discussion deepened the analysis and led to new ways of understanding the learning circles as we met with them. This, in turn, led to new questions to explore with the learning circles and among the Researchers. We Researchers began to see ourselves as a learning circle in our own right. And we were also part of a larger learning circle, the Lifelong Learning Working Group, which had begun the discussion about inclusive lifelong learning, and which continued to help us to understand the significance of what we were seeing in the research.

In the last year of the project, we brought more people into the process of analysis-through-discussion at a symposium. The symposium brought together sixteen participants representing three rural learning circles, three Indigenous learning circles and four urban learning circles. This group also included members of the Working Group, the Researchers, a staff person from the Federation of Women's Institutes of Ontario and faculty and researchers from the Centre for Aboriginal and Indigenous Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

Just as we had begun to see the Researchers and the Lifelong Learning Working Group as learning circles, we saw the symposium as a learning circle, one that widened the process of analysis-through-discussion. We called the symposium Widening the Circle.

We decide to facilitate the symposium using the approach to learning and knowledge creation that we had observed in the learning circles. We did not tell the participants that we were going to do this, but they soon recognized what was happening, leading to this exchange between Maria Matias, a learning circle facilitator, and Arthur Bull, as he facilitated one of the sessions.

> **Maria:** Do you know what I felt yesterday and today? This has been a very positive experience for me, because I found that when we came together, it was . . . The group is kind of, was set up, you know, whoever organizes things, on ones such as simplicity, acceptance, take it as it is. Because there wasn't these expectations, you know, you know how sometimes you go into a group or a situation and there is these expectations of this professionalism, of this or that or the other, and then you feel, oh, am I going to be able to meet that level, so I'm not going to do anything at all and be vulnerable. Because in here it was based on just be as, come as you are and be as you are and all of that, then all of us, all right, would just be as we are, but then grow a little more from the experience.
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> **Arthur:** I think you've found us out, because this is . . . We thought, "How do you find out about learning circles? You do it with a learning circle."

At the symposium, all of the participants in the circle brought knowledge about learning circles. Members of learning circles brought knowledge from the experience of participation in the various circles. The Researchers and members of the Working Group brought knowledge from their involvement in the project, against the background of their discussions. At the symposium, these kinds of knowledge were negotiated. The result is the overview in this report, which the Researchers developed, with feedback from the participants, from the transcripts of the symposium and the posters on learning circles which the participants made.

In this project, our beliefs about research have been clarified. We know that an ethnographic approach to research can be used effectively by adult educators, in this case literacy workers, who are not trained as researchers. We know that analysis can be developed collaboratively, through discussion. We also know that this discussion can be extended beyond the research group to the participants in the study, by applying the inclusive practices that we observed in the learning circles.

2 The Narratives

As has been explained, the research began with narratives of learning circles. Sixteen narratives were written altogether, some of them describing several learning circles in a single community organization. This section contains the narratives for a learning circle in Toronto, The Multicultural Women's Group, a learning circle in a smaller city in Southern Ontario, The Stratford Group, a rural learning circle, The Fisheries Discussion Group in Digby Nova Scotia, the Women's Institute in New Tusket, Nova Scotia, a Learning Circle in an Indigenous community, The Family History Group at Tyendinaga, and an Indigenous Circle in an off-reserve Indigenous community organization, The Barrie Native Friendship Centre.

The Multicultural Women's Group
by Guy Ewing

Building Community in Jane-Wilson. The Jane-Wilson neighbourhood of Toronto, where the Multicultural Women's Group meets, is anything but "colourful." What you notice here first is traffic filling the multi-lane streets. There is the Sheridan Mall, with its enormous parking lots. There is chain store advertising everywhere.

But there is another neighbourhood under this bland exterior. In the strip malls, in between the variety stores and the wholesale outlets, there are stores where you can buy the raw ingredients for Middle Eastern and African cooking. And then you notice the variety of international phone cards sold at the variety stores. A group of women, in long, hand-printed dresses from the Horn of Africa, are making their way along the narrow strip of grass that separates the strip mall parking lot from Jane Street.

The place where the Multicultural Women's Group meets, the community centre at a place called Chalkfarm, exemplifies the neighbourhood's exterior blandness and interior life. The community centre is a small one-storey square brick building maintained by the City of Toronto. It is adjacent to two large, undistinguished highrise apartment buildings. These buildings are privately operated, but provide low-rent housing. Driving past Chalkfarm on Jane Street, one might not even notice these highrises, tucked behind the Sheridan Mall.

But the community centre at Chalkfarm is a rich community place. People come here to learn, celebrate, support each other, find solutions to individual and community problems. The Chalkfarm housing complex is the home to people from the Middle East, the Horn of African, West Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, the former Yugoslavia. People come to the cultural centre to share their cultures, learn about Canada and support each other. This community place has been created over a number of years because of the leadership of Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services. The philosophy of this organization is to provide community support at people's "doorsteps." Like all community programs in the former City of North York, now amalgamated into Toronto, it serves a geographical area that is larger than Parkdale, but it does this through three centres, each associated with an identifiable neighbourhood.

As was stated earlier, it is characteristic of Toronto neighbourhoods that they become communities through the infrastructure provided by municipal and community organizations. This is certainly true at Chalkfarm. For example, it is hard to imagine how the Multicultural Women's Group would have started without a place where people felt that they would be welcome, both a building and people. And where are the places you can go when you are new in this city, from another culture, perhaps mourning your homeland, living in close proximity to thousands of people, but all of them strangers? Places like this must be created. They are not a natural part of the urban environment, but the result of commitment to the idea of actualizing community in this environment.

But how are communities made? What makes community building work?

Community Building as Learning. Lorna Weigand, the Executive Director of Doorsteps Neighbourhood Services, has worked for many years helping to build community. Sitting in her small crowded office in the Falstaff public housing complex, one of the three neighbourhoods that Doorsteps serves, she reflects on what organizations like hers can actually do. She dismisses the idea that Doorsteps is simply a place where you can get discrete bits of information or support. Rather, it is a place of learning. Many kinds of learning are supported through Doorsteps. At the preschool play groups and parenting programs, parents and children learn together. In these programs, parents and children may learn particular skills, but parents and children are also learning, more holistically, how to learn within family units, and together with other parents and children, in the community. At the Healthy Lunch Program, seniors from different cultures learn together about nutrition, and also learn how to bridge cultural divides. The after-school programs provide help with homework, physical activity, and also a time for reflection and discussion about Canadian schools and their role in the community. There are formal learning opportunities at Doorsteps, an adult literacy class offered in partnerships with the Toronto Catholic District School Board and adult English as a Second Language classes offered in partnership with the Toronto District School Board. Doorsteps also provides practical help: a toy-lending library, help with getting services, help with finding and getting a job. But this practical help is offered not only as a

service, but also as a way of learning how to be a community in which mutual support is valued and freely given.

Lorna sees Doorsteps as an organization whose mandate is to support learning as a means to community building. Doorsteps is, then, a natural site for an inclusive learning group like the Multicultural Women's Group to take root and grow.

Friendship, Support, Learning: the Development of the Multicultural Women's Group. The group began as a breakfast club for women at Chalkfarm. Lorna initiated this group in response to women in the neighbourhood telling her that they did not know anybody, that they would like to meet with other women. Lorna stresses that the group was not an idea that originated with her, but an idea that emerged from discussions with women in the neighbourhood. She sees this as an example of her role as a community "connector." A volunteer at Doorsteps who lived at Chalkfarm, Farida Haq, was enthusiastic about the idea of a breakfast club, and encouraged people she knew at Chalkfarm to come. Farida's role in making the group known was crucial when the group was starting up. Her leadership in planning activities with the group and ensuring follow-up continues to be important today. As in other learning groups in Toronto that I became involved with, leadership from the community, not just the community organization, was crucial in the creation and continuing success of the learning group.

After a while, the group rescheduled for lunch-time; the community centre needed the big activity room where the group meets for a children's program.

Adjacent to the activity room, there is a kitchen. Preparing lunch became a part of the group's routine. Members of the group taught each other the cooking of their homelands: Ethiopia, Iraq, Pakistan, Trinidad, Sri Lanka, Costa Rica. Also, members taught each other about how to use foods available in Canada, like canned beans and frozen fruits.

Sometimes, they brought people in to help them learn Canadian ways with foods. One time, someone came in to teach them how to make freezer jam. This helped them to satisfy the demands of their children, growing up Canadian, for jam sandwiches.

This pattern of learning together and sometimes bringing in other people to learn from has been extended into areas other than food. A public health nurse will be brought in to discuss health issues. Someone will come in to talk about how the Canadian school system works.

Also, the discussion about food leads to other important discussions, about culture and religion. Lorna and Gladis Camacho, a Community Worker at Doorsteps, organize discussions about the cultures that the members come from. This leads to discussion about religious holidays, and about religions. Other

religions, not represented in the group, are discussed. Ultimately, the discussion turns to living in a multicultural society, where many religions coexist.

The group has been able to help people in many practical ways. When people become aware of each other's needs, they can often help, ensuring that people get the necessities of life, as well as access to services. Also, as Farida put it, "Sometimes people need to learn how to complain" when they are not getting the services they need. The group provides a place where people can learn how to complain, in person or in writing. In doing this, they are also learning how the services work.

Members of the group know that they have access to the resources of Doorsteps. Doorsteps staff and volunteers can pursue a personal or collective issue raised in the group, and help members of the group find the services and information that they need. This includes help with education and job training. Gladis tells the story of one women who did not speak English when she came to the group. At the group, she began to learn English. Then Doorsteps helped her to find suitable ESL classes and an office skills training course. Now, she is working in the office at Doorsteps and doing an internship to become a childcare assistant.

Written Language Learning in the Group. Language is another dimension of learning in the group. Several of the current group members learned how to speak English by coming to the group; they spoke rudimentary English when they first came, but can now converse comfortably in English. They were not attracted to the more formal environment of the English as a Second Language classes offered at Doorsteps and elsewhere in the neighbourhood. They preferred to learn to speak English in the informal learning environment of the Multicultural Women's Group.

Written language is learned as well as spoken language, and writing may be used as an adjunct to discussion. For example, at a session that I attended, the group was planning a community dinner to celebrate Eid, the feast at the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. As a way of structuring the planning, Lorna had brought a form used at Doorsteps for planning events, a table called "Event Planning Outline." It was a simple table, with a column labelled "Task" and another column labelled "Responsibility of." The table was handed out. Lorna led a discussion in which tasks were identified. Lorna, Gladis and some of the women in the group would write down the tasks. Other women just had the table in front of them as a visual representation of how the discussion was being structured. Then responsibilities were divided. Again, some of the participants wrote these down. Others committed the plan to memory, without writing it down.

The women in the group have a range of knowledge about written language. Lorna is very conscious of never forcing anyone in the group into a situation where she will have to reveal her ability or inability to use written language. At

the same time, she creates opportunities for the women in the group to learn written English.

From my perspective as an observer with a background in adult literacy work, as well as adult English as a Second Language teaching, I noticed numerous opportunities in the Eid discussion for learning either about written language in general or written English in particular. Words were getting written onto the Event Planning Outline as issues were being discussed. Writing words down in situations where these words are being used and are contextually important is a classic way of helping people learn sight vocabulary, in both basic literacy methodology and ESL methodology. Watching Lorna write "set up" and "clean up" into the Event Planning Outline was an opportunity to learn these written words.

Lorna says that, from time to time, the women with a better understanding of English will re-present something that Lorna or Gladis has presented to women in their first language. This informal teaching arises spontaneously within the relationships that develop in the group.

An Environment for Learning. The Multicultural Women's Group was not established to teach language skills, or any other skills. It does not have a curriculum. It does not have performance objectives. It simply provides a rich environment for learning, and welcomes every woman into that learning environment, whatever her level of education, previous experience of learning, or language abilities.

Consider the range of what is learned in this group, about Canada, community, social and cultural issues, religion, collaborative decision-making. Particular skills are learned as well, from how to make freezer jam to sight vocabulary. Because of where and how they are learned, these particular skills are full of meaning and value for the participants.

The history of the group shows how learning naturally develops in a group of people that value each other's experience. From learning to cook each other's foods, the members of the group moved on to learning about each other's cultures and religions, and then to discussion about living together in a multicultural society. In planning a community celebration together, they improved their knowledge of spoken and written English.

In this group, no relative value is placed on any one kind of learning. Learning written English does not count more than learning to cook new foods. In an environment without pinpointed training objectives, learning is continuous, interrelated, mutually supported.

Toward Community Education. From Lorna's perspective, the Multicultural Women's Group is an important step toward community education, but it is not the final step. Although Lorna and Gladis facilitate this group, they

cannot devote the time that could be used on follow up. There is no paid facilitation time for the group; Lorna and Gladis must take time out from their paid work at Doorsteps. Lorna feels that paid facilitation and follow-up would add an important dimension. For example, a paid facilitator could provide follow-up instruction for participants in the group that are working to improve their reading and writing.

Lorna has long dreamed of hiring what she calls a Community Educator at Doorsteps. The Community Educator would support a number of learning groups, as well as the learning of individuals in these groups. Doorsteps provides an environment in which many kinds of learning can grow naturally; the Community Educator could ensure that all of these kinds of learning are woven together and fully supported. She believes that a Community Educator would greatly strengthen community building in Jane-Wilson.

What Makes the Multicultural Women's Group Work? Each inclusive learning group is unique, but there are some features that the Multicultural Women's Group shares with the other learning groups in Toronto that I became involved with.

- A community centre. In Toronto, communities are not inherited; they are continually being created. A community centre, a place where there are staff and volunteers to support the community building process, can play an important role in supporting the creation of an inclusive learning group.
- A focus on learning rather than on skills training. Doorsteps is an organization where learning is appreciated and fostered. By taking a broad approach to learning, these organizations create an environment in which learning can be natural, multi-dimensional and meaningful. These organizations make the important link between learning and community building.
- Attention to fundamental needs. The Multicultural Women's Group provides a place where people can find meals, practical help and mutual support. Doorsteps also makes a childcare worker available for the time that the group meets.
- The leadership of key community members. Farida has played a crucial role in ensuring that the group is not owned by sponsoring organizations, but by its participants.
- Facilitation that respects participants with different levels of education and different language abilities. Lorna and Gladis both have many years of experience working with people who do not use written language, and of involvement with literacy issues. This shows in their non-reliance on written materials in the group, along with their sensitive use of written language for those who use it or learn how to use it.

Supports that Would Strengthen the Group. I have already mentioned Lorna's dream of a Community Educator position at Doorsteps. This position

would build on the strong learning environment which the group has created by providing additional facilitation and individual support for learning.

Group participants identified a number of other supports that would strengthen the group.

- Money for transportation. Not all of the participants live at Chalkfarm. Transportation money would allow the group to include more women from the wider neighbourhood.
- Money for food. Food is currently donated by Doorsteps or by members of the group.
- More childcare. Although Doorsteps provides one childcare worker, there are sometimes too many children for one worker, and group participants must leave the group to help.
- Money to help people in urgent need of necessities. As it stands, Farida can usually link people with the help that they need through Doorsteps. Doorsteps can either link people to services, or, if this requires too much red tape, the organization will often provide assistance out of its own budget. Having more money available for this purpose would be helpful to the women in the group and to Doorsteps.
- Money for crafts. Women in the group are interested in teaching each other crafts, and Doorsteps can sometimes find some money for supplies, but money for equipment and supplies would be useful, particularly money to buy sewing machines. Access to sewing machines would be of practical assistance to the women in the group, and would provide a good opportunities for language learning, sharing cultural knowledge and learning a marketable skill.

The Stratford Group: Building a Learning City in Stratford Ontario a.k.a Little Sweden

by Tracey Mollins

In *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* [Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002], Henry Milner argues that Sweden's long-standing commitment to adult education has resulted in a "virtuous circle" where a variety of measures encourages all citizens to participate in public life and discourse. A "vicious circle" results in countries where knowledge and wealth are divided unequally between an elite and the rest of the population.

In *Why Do Swedes Read Better than Canadians?* [Paper presented at Ninth National Congress on Rural Education, Saskatoon, 2004] Veeman, Ward and Walker point out that
the idea of raising the educational level of the population, *folkbildning*, has been connected to adult learning in Sweden for over one hundred years "... Adult

education was an inclusive concept and the term undereducated referred to adults who had not completed compulsory or high school education" while in Canada "... there has not been a comprehensive adult education policy at either a national or provincial level and literacy is a charitable cause. Public funds are used to promote literacy, but without increased learning opportunities to meet resulting demand. The onus remains on individuals to improve their skills but access to programs typically goes to those most likely to succeed. The recourse for individuals who do not meet entrance requirements is the volunteer tutor system." She concludes by asking: "What would Canadian society look like if priority in access to adult education was given to those with the least education?"

In Stratford, Ontario, when government funded literacy programs would no longer work with students with developmental and intellectual disabilities, a group of concerned citizens asked themselves the very same question. They decided to step in where governments and government-funded programs were failing the people of Stratford and start a program of their own.

The program is run by the Women's Group from St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. [http://www.cyg.net/%7Estandrews/] The group gets a grant of $250.00 a year from the church. Any other money they need they donate personally or they raise in the community.

I spoke with them about funding. The consensus of the group is that they are better off without any formal, structured or institutional funding arrangements. They have seen case after case where changes in criteria imposed by funders has disqualified people from groups and made services inaccessible. They feel that if they get too organized, they will not be able to work with the people they want to work with. They do remarkable things with the very small amount of money they have to work with. For example, they run a community kitchen once a week and manage to create meals for $1.00 per person.

A group of developmentally and intellectually disabled adults meets in the basement of the church every Tuesday afternoon. They have a social time with the members of the Women's Group and other people from the community. They have coffee and snacks and catch up on the latest news. On the day I was there, one person had experienced a bereavement and people were signing a card to present to him. I found the atmosphere to be very welcoming and I felt like a friend within minutes.

After the socializing, they break into two groups. This happened when one of the study group members came to the facilitator with the folders for the study group. Some people, those who can complete worksheets and cope with a more directed learning environment, join Walter Mollins to do some reading and writing work. The others stay with the Women's Group members and play board games and do other learning activities. Sometimes they then head to the kitchen and prepare a meal that they eat together.

This program exemplifies the principle of from each according to his or her ability and to each according to his or her need.

Walter Mollins is my uncle. He worked as a teacher in the public school system for many years, most of the time in "special needs" programs. He has a huge amount of experience working with diverse groups of people with a wide range of abilities and needs.

Observing a facilitator with this level of experience and expertise was like watching dance. He makes negotiating learning seem so smooth and effortless that you hardly notice it is happening. But it is.

The group worked on a standard vocabulary worksheet from the Oxford Picture Dictionary series. People looked at pictures of a woman, a man, a girl and a boy. Beside each picture is list of clothing words. The activity is to read the words and circle the ones that represent clothing worn by the person in the picture.

The discussion started with questions about the weather and what clothes we wear in the winter. We then looked at the pictures and had a general discussion about the pictures and the vocabulary. The first word, which is next to the picture of the woman, is "hard hat." Mollins asked the group if the woman is wearing a hard hat. The group members laughed and said no. He asked if women ever wore hard hats. At first they said no, but upon discussion revised that to sometimes.

The group members were very engaged with this material. When we had finished the first vocabulary list, one person laughed and said, "Now you have all your clothes on lady." When we moved to the next picture, she said, "Let's see if you have all your clothes on man." This became a running joke.

This activity is simple, as is the vocabulary, but it was presented in such a way that group members were called on to use critical thinking skills (as in the hard hat discussion) and an exploratory, self-directed approach.

For example, when we came to the word sneakers, nobody in the group knew what sneakers were. Mollins asked them some questions about the word but did not reveal the answer. The person in that picture was not wearing sneakers, so we moved on. Later, when we saw the word in a context where the person in the picture was wearing sneakers, the group members were able to deduce what sneakers were. There was quite a bit of excitement about this discovery.

I found this to be a very powerful moment and a very powerful example of what can happen when the facilitator/teacher has this level of experience and expertise. I had wondered why he did not just tell them what a sneaker is. That is probably what I would have done and these students would have missed this exciting moment and the feeling of pride that results from solving a problem using one's own skills.

Mollins is working from a belief that everyone has a right to learn and be a learner. He believes that everybody has a right to learn for learning's sake, for the sense of pride, accomplishment and connection that brings, not for any other goal. As he says, everyone has a right to develop a sense of conscious growth.

He works from a very respectful place. His approach is to respect and honour people for what they can do. He does not assess based on what they cannot do and try to fill in the gaps. He assesses what they can do and tries to strengthen that and build on it.

When I asked him how they decide what to work on, he said that he chooses material that they will use in their daily lives. He said, "I am not trying to change their lives, I am trying to invigorate their lives."

When they had finished the worksheet, Mollins asked the students if they had done enough for today. They said that they had. They put stickers on the completed work, put their work into their folders and we went back to join the others.

Later Mollins told me that sometimes they work together for longer but that when he notices that they have had enough, he checks in. I asked him what he had noticed - I had noticed nothing - and he said that he can tell by their body language. He says that once people have had enough there is no point in continuing because they cannot learn any more. He uses observation, his knowledge of the people he is working with, and his experience in the field to tell him how long a class should be. He spoke of some frustration he felt as a public school teacher because the length of classes is determined by a schedule, not the students' capacity for learning. He said that some administrators were more understanding about this than others.

In my observation, the members of this group were very conscious of their identity as learners, not just because of the clear separation of the social activities from the learning activities, but because they are expected to be learners, not just in this group but everywhere they go.

Each person in this group is connected to a network of opportunities and learning experiences. Some people live independently, some with family, and some in group homes. Some people work in restaurants and other workplaces and some work at a workshop. Some go to church, some go to the library, and some participate in programs at L'Arche (www.larchecanada.org) or the Canadian Association for Community Living (www.cacl.ca).

Talking to people about what they do during the week brought to mind a huge Venn diagram; person A participates in 123, person B in 234, person C in 134, etc. Again, the principle of from each according to his or her ability and to each

according to his or her need is exemplified and the right to learn and experience conscious growth is paramount.

The group at the church sees itself as part of this network and defines a role for itself within that network.

Mollins works with some people individually at the library. He works with one person individually because this student finds working in groups difficult: he gets very nervous and cannot concentrate. The other person is working on a more advanced upgrading program; he is working towards qualifying for training. He was disqualified from the upgrading program because he was unable to pass a test within the required time limit.

When I met the first of these people, he was very happy because he had just found out that the restaurant where he works was soon to re-open. It had closed for repairs after a fire. New owners were reopening it and had agreed to keep all the old staff. This man does have some accommodations so that he can work but there is no sense that these accommodations are burdensome. It seemed to me that this community takes the right to participate in the work force very seriously, not just as an economic right, but as a democratic right. It also occurred to me that in this case and from what I had heard from other people from this group, that labour market participation is viewed not as a goal of training, but as an integral part of learning for some people. People in this group seem to get some of the sense of themselves as learners from paid work.

As Veeman, Ward and Walker say in "Learning for Work or Learning through Work?" [The Changing Face of Work and Learning Conference, University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2003]:

> ...work related learning experiences can provide the confidence to take on other learning challenges. This can happen through the building of technical or trade related skills or when employers provide tangible support for learning outside the workplace provided that it meets the goals and interests of workers."

After his learning session at the library, this man went home to work on a shed-building project with "his worker"... another circle in this person's connection to community.

Fisheries Discussion Group – The Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre

by Arthur Bull

Of all the rural learning groups we looked at, the one about the fisheries, sponsored by The Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre (MRC), certainly has the

widest range of education levels among its participants. Some have Ph.Ds, some have some post-secondary education, some have a few years of high school and some have no high school education. There is a similar range in terms of their backgrounds: about half the group is fishermen, and the rest are a mix of academics and community development workers. What they share is their interest in fisheries, and specifically fisheries policy. They originally came together as a group for a very specific reason: to discuss a recent study about the privatization of the groundfish fishery in Southwest Nova Scotia. When the book first came out, a copy was circulated around the MRC, resulting in some animated discussions about both its perspectives and its findings. It describes a process that has had a major effect on the local fisheries and communities, and some people, who had been amongst those affected by these changes, disputed the version of events given in the book. Others pointed out that only certain people had been interviewed for the book, and others had been left out. At some point someone said, "What we need to do is sit down with a group of fishermen, university people and community members to talk about his book." From there the MRC made a few phone calls, and started convening the group, which has met roughly on a monthly basis since then.

Since its inception, the group has gone through a series of rapid changes. Initially each person would read a chapter of the book and summarize it to the group and discussion would follow. These discussions were often animated, since they involved strongly held opinions about the Federal Government's management and privatization of the fishery. After a couple of these meetings, the discussion broadened out to include the larger topic of social science, and how it relates to the fisheries. This centred on the question of who is telling the story of what happened to the people of the region, and how so many voices can be excluded from that story. This led to the next phase where the participants decided to invite some of the people who were part of the process of privatization of the groundfish in the early 90's, to come and talk to the group. The first guest was Dr. John Kearney from the Saint Francis-Xavier University Centre for Community-Based Management to join the group for one session, so that they could "interview" him. John had been a representative of the Maritime Fishermen's Union in the early 90's, and was "at the table" during the negotiation of quota systems. At this meeting, one of the fishermen brought along a piece about privatization that he had written, and there was discussion of this as well. This led to the suggestion that the group become a "writing group," where people could bring some writing for discussion. This seemed to be part of the larger process of "telling our side of the story." Thus, in a period of less than a year, the group has made a number of quick transitions, based on participants' interests and objectives.

This group poses a number of interesting questions relating to learning circles. How can groups function with an extremely wide range of educational levels? Can a learning group be entirely self-directed, without a formal learning program? What is the relationship between a high motivation for meeting and learning, as demonstrated by this group, and a high motivation to make social or

political change? What happens, from an adult education perspective, when we make research itself the subject of research, when we turn the tables, and have the people who are being researched suddenly become the researchers?

Before getting to these questions, though, there are some essential pieces of background context that should be filled in. These take the form of three stories about what has happened in the fisheries in Southwest Nova Scotia. The first is about the federal government policy of privatizing the fisheries. The second is about community-based management. The third is about community capacity-building, and the emergence of the MRC.

Digby and Annapolis Counties are located on the Nova Scotia side of the Bay of Fundy. It is a very rural area - the biggest town, Digby has fewer than 2,000 people. The rest of the population is mostly scattered around small coastal fishing villages (except for the Annapolis Valley, which is Nova Scotia prime farming area). These communities are almost entirely dependent on the fisheries for their existence. This has changed somewhat over the last few years with the downturn in the groundfishery and the increase of service jobs in big box stores, as well as new jobs in a major call centre. But fisheries are still a big industry here. This has always been a multispecies fishing area - lobster, groundfish (cod, haddock, pollock), scallop and herring. These fisheries are divided into a number of sectors:

- Groundfish fixed gear - A fleet of about 150 under 45-foot boats that fish mostly using hook and line, or in some cases gillnet. These boats are owned and operated by inshore fishermen and generally have 1-3 crew aboard.
- Groundfish mobile - About 25 fish draggers, with about three crew each, entirely owned by fish processing companies.
- Scallop - the famous Digby scallop fleet made up of about 30 - 40 scallop draggers, now mostly owned by companies.
- Herring - a fleet of herring seiners, owned by companies, mostly in the Clare region.
- Lobster - about 200 under 45-foot lobster boats that fish with lobster trap during fixed season. This fishery is owned and operated by individual fishermen and is the most successful fishery in the region.

The main difference in the way these fisheries are managed has to do with quota, which determine the fishery's access to the resource. The lobster and the fixed gear groundfish fishery are fished by under 45-foot boats that are mostly owner operated small enterprises, that is the fishermen work on the boat and own the enterprise. The lobster fishery has no quota, but is managed through "effort control": tightly regulated trap limits, seasons and fishing areas. Groundfish fixed gear is managed according to community quota. The mobile groundfish, scallop and herring fleets are quota based. They use a system of Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs), in which quotas are attached to licenses and can be

bought and leased. These fleets are all company owned, by a handful of companies in the area.

This system of privatizing the quota is really the key background issue for this learning circle. Many fishermen and community members believe that Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) has deliberately set out to put the fisheries in a few corporate hands, to the detriment of inshore fishermen and the coastal communities they support. There is good evidence for this, starting with the Kirby Report that called for this approach in 1984, right through the 80's and 90's. This resulted in the introduction of privatized quotas in the herring, scallop and mobile groundfish fisheries. In each case it has resulted in the concentration of ownership in a few corporate hands. In 1995 it looked as though this system would be brought into the inshore fishery as well. This would have had a devastating effect on the local inshore handline and longline boats. As a result there was a massive protest throughout Southwest Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. By the time it was done, most federal fisheries offices had been occupied for more than a month. The communities also rallied in support of the fishermen in many local protests and the biggest protest march in the history of Halifax. The outcome of all of this was a mediation process, which resulted in community quotas. Each county, or region was allocated a community quota shared by the fishermen.

In the Bay of Fundy region this resulted in the creation of the Fundy Fixed Gear Council (FFGC), which was the management board for the Nova Scotia side of the Bay of Fundy. The FFGC set up a system of democratic self-governance that included managing the quota as a common community quota, as well as compliance, harvesting and science. Increasingly, it became clear that there was also a need to answer social science questions about fleet profiles, economics, and fisheries policy. The FFGC was also involved in training and education providing a number of workshops and learning opportunities to its members.

It was to support community-based management that the Marine Resource Centre was formed. It was created by an alliance of the local economic development authority and the FFGC to provide support to local organizations that were involved with community-based management. Their mandate included capacity building, organizational development, education, information and referral services, and research and conflict resolution. In some ways the Marine Resource Centre is like a switchboard for local fishermen groups. They can plug into it and access a wide range of support fundraising, technical expertise, such as Geographical Information Systems map making and board development. The MRC also plays a role in the community as "a safe place," where groups can get together and resolve differences. This had a major role, for example, after the Supreme Court's Marshall Decision, when there was great potential for conflict between First Nations and non-native fishing communities in the region. The education role has also been central to the Marine Resource Centre's work. It has hosted a wide range of conferences and workshops on topics such as participatory research, heath and safety, and other marine-related topics. It was natural,

therefore, for the Marine Resource Centre to bring together the Fisheries Discussion Group.

Although this background is an oversimplification of a complex and long-term series of events and issues, it does provide the essential context for the group. This context is essential to understanding what makes this group tick. The participants have a shared interest and involvement in fisheries issues that inform all the learning, including the reading and writing that happens in the group. The question of privatization of the fisheries, and the development of community-based management as an alternative, is of intense interest to every person around this table. In addition to this there is a shared interest in "telling our own story" and "setting the record straight" about what has happened in the fisheries in the area.

These shared interests and commitments cut across the group's diverse make-up. One of the most interesting features is the mix of different backgrounds and education levels: some are active inshore lobster and groundfish fishermen, some are community development workers, one is a retired fishermen, one is a retired DFO scientist and one is a provincial employee. As mentioned, their education levels cover a wide range. It is important to note that this is not a volunteer tutoring situation, where those with more education are teaching those with less. This kind of learning dynamic has never emerged in the group. Rather all of the participants, from their different perspectives, come to the group with an interest in learning. This is not to say they all come to the group to learn the same things, but rather that they share an interest in taking a critical look at texts relating to the impact policies.

The learning objectives of the individuals and group as a whole have also been dynamic and changing since the group's inception. Every session has included a discussion that starts with the question "what are we doing here anyway?" Each of these discussions has led to new ideas for group activities. To date it seems to have gone through three phases:

(1) *Meeting to discuss the book in question.* This included a conversation about how to proceed. This led to a decision to each read one chapter and bring back a summary for discussion (one session). Spoken summaries of the chapter were followed by discussions (two sessions).

(2) *The invitation of a "guest speaker,", someone who was involved in the processes discussed in the book.* The purpose of this was to conduct a group "interview" to get his side of what happened. The MRC transcribed the interview, which led to another discussion. This interview was of great interest to the group, because it presented a very different version of the process of meetings and negotiations that led to the introduction of ITQs in the groundfish fishery. Far from being a fair and open process, as described in the book, the testimony showed that it was in fact fraught with manipulation, deceit and intimidation. There was even a detailed description of a death threat that was made during one

of the meetings. Much of the discussion centred around how to have a voice in these kinds of studies. As one participant put it, "We need to tell our own stories."

(3) *After the discussion of the transcription of the interview, one fisherman in the group brought some writing of his own.* The first piece of writing was by one of the fishermen. It described the effect of ITQs from a handliner's perspective:

> [with the] the threat of ITQs, many things would change as we once knew in terms of liberties and freedoms, rights, privileges, laws and a whole whack of items of betrayal involving top down government and corporations. All the secrets of top down government aim to protect corporate and foreign investment through ... the use of licensing that was meant to wipe out our attachment involving the fisheries, which continue. Fish continue to decline not because boats are racing to get the biggest catch - if that were the case we would have had access or would have draggers or gillnetters better known as ghost nets. Say anything DFO will say gear conflict we have a bunch of madmen on our hands.

He goes on to describe the negative effect of this conflict on a personal and community level.

> It's not a good experience dealing with the foes of our communities nor the higher powers of government and the United Nations and of bureaucracies. But why do I sometime feel like a puppet on a string. I don't think anyone could possibly know what it is like to walk in my shoes ... My life will never be the same again, to live the rest of my life doing what I've been trying to do for the community ... I know that the wise and prudent have used our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities of greed, the opportunities to sell ourselves out, envy, strife and all categories of division ...

He goes on to connect what has happened in this region to the global scene:

> More and more this world is losing its compassion for the less fortunate and the poor who give so much. As our resource declines, I can only think of what's to come for the younger ones behind us - to live healthy lives, where resources are accessible without the dictatorship of global control. Knowing how global control works and to witness it, I fear for their futures and wonder if they will have the same courage that hard times have taught us to survive ...

This piece of writing has led to further writing by the group's participants to express their opinions and describe their experience of fisheries policy. Inspired by this example, the group made another transition, this time to being a writing group.

Thus the group moved from discussion to inquiry to expression in a relatively brief period. The key point here is that the group is self-defining: none of the initiative, support, planning or motivation came from outside the group.

This self-motivated and self-directed nature is one of the features that sets this group apart from the other rural learning circles that are looked at in this study. In talking to the participants about this however, they point out that there have been a couple of factors without which the group would never have happened. The first is the experience of eight years of community-based management in the local inshore fisheries. This work has often required fishermen to get involved in science, ranging from biological science about fish stocks, to social science about markets and local ecological knowledge. Without this experience it seems unlikely that a group of fishermen would have initiated a group like this. The other factor is the Marine Resource Centre. By offering support in the form of coordination and a meeting room, the MRC provided the minimal support needed to help the group start up and keep going. The key point here is that these institutions themselves - the FFGC and the MRC - are locally run locally directed civil institutions, which were created for and by the community to do this kind of support work.

The group's facilitation has been informal. By consensus at the first meeting it was agreed MRC staff would share the facilitation tasks. In most ways these duties have been very much like chairing a meeting. For example, the "facilitator" is usually sitting at the table, not standing at a flipchart. The facilitation has mostly involved helping to generate an agenda for each meeting, setting goals, and ensuring that everyone gets a chance to speak and gets a fair hearing.

This meeting-like structure raises the question: How is this group different from any committee that meets on a regular basis to discuss issues? The key difference seems to be that this group was started in order to answer some specific questions. "How can we set the record straight?" "How can we tell our one story of how these policies hurt our communities?" These questions soon led to broader questions: "What is social science?" "What is the purpose of a book like this?" These questions all began with the first person plural, that is, they were group questions. This defined the group as a learning group from the beginning. Once the group was together there was great interest in peer learning. "Who can tell us this?" "Who else should we invite?" Finally the group was defined as a learning group by the process by which it operated. Just by reading and summarizing the text, interviewing, and writing new texts, the group moved beyond sitting in a meeting to a learning environment.

Again, it would be wrong to assume that the peer learning that happens in this group is about the people with lower education levels learning from people with higher education levels. In fact there has been no element of tutoring or teaching at all. The peer learning has gone in a number of directions and for different

reasons. Everyone seems to be learning from everyone else. Different people bring different expertise, and learn from each other's area of experience and leaning. In this way the group recognizes the authority of different kinds of knowledge: what fishermen know about what happened in the fisheries, what fishermen's representatives know about what happened at meetings, what researchers know about how social research is done, and so forth. There has been a great deal of learning taking place in this group according to everyone in the group. There seems to have been a kind of complementarity at play around the table, between some very different kinds of knowledge and learning.

Why do people come? Clearly it is self-motivation that makes people come back to these sessions. There is no external pressure or demand for this group to keep going. There was no grant or project given to the MRC that required it to keep the group going. The group goes on solely because of the interest and commitment of the participants. Why is this happening? The answer seems to lie in the overall context of this learning circle; that is, they already are engaged in the policy change issues that are being discussed. The learning that is happening here is part of a larger struggle that each participant has been intensely involved in. The group's purpose is part of a larger purpose: to ensure that the coastal communities of this area retain some access to the natural resources (fish) that they depend on for their well being. But it is also more than this. If this had simply been a working group on privatization of the fisheries, it may well not have kept going with this many participants.

However, this group is about more than just addressing one issue; it is about getting together to look at a text that describes this issue. It is about the written word, the research and the discourse that describes the reality of what actually happened to people. One of the recurring topics has been the growing realization that what goes into books, and who gets to tell the stories, has a lot to do with what happens to people's lives and livelihoods in rural communities. The participants do not come out of a sense of need of self-improvement or career betterment; they come out of a concern for their families, their livelihoods and their communities.

What kind of literacy learning? The learning that takes place in this group relates to the printed word in three different but related ways:

- Reading the texts, and summarizing them for the group. For some participants this involved reading at a much higher level than they would be used to in every day life. This kind of "leaping levels," where people read above their reading levels when there is a meaningful context and they know the subject area, is well known to literacy workers. This happened naturally as part of this group's work.
- Interviewing, as for example when John Kearney visited.
- Writing, mostly short pieces, or letters to the editor, relating to fisheries policy.

These language activities have not been about learning language or literacy skills per se, but rather about creating awareness of language, and its power to define reality. At the same time, a key aspect of this kind of literacy is demystifying the power of the written word. In this sense this group is an example of a learning circle that is focused on critical literacy.

This learning circle raised some interesting questions about learning circles in general.

- How can learning circles function without curriculum, educational structure or professional facilitation?
- What is the relationship between learning circles and social capital, e.g. the MRC and the FFGC, in the community that can support them?
- What is the relationship between commitment to social/political change and commitment to learning?
- What is the role of critical literacy in learning circles, especially as it relates to social science research? In the words of the handline fishermen: "This is where I think we need the opportunity to tell our story in good detail from beginning to end - how being very well organized won't stop us from being robbed or invaded or abused."

The New Tusket Women's Institute
by Arthur Bull

New Tusket is a very small place. It's about a fifteen minute drive inland from Weymouth in Digby County, and has a population of less than 500 people. Like many inland Nova Scotia communities, New Tusket's economy is largely divided between small farming and forestry. The largest employer, however, is mink farming, which provides almost half the local jobs. The community is relatively stable over the last ten years, although, as in many rural areas, there is an aging population.

The New Tusket Women's Institute meets in the New Tusket Baptist Church Hall once a month. On the day I visited they got together earlier, to make quilts for the IWK Children's Hospital in Halifax. These quilts are given to children who have long stays in the hospital. A couple of groups of three or four are working together at wooden frames, adding tufts to the quilts, while a two others are sewing at machines. The atmosphere is quiet and relaxed. As it gets near suppertime, there is a brief discussion about when to hold their meeting, before or after the potluck supper. Since the steady snow is starting to lay down out on the road, they opt for an earlier meeting, so they can get going before the roads get too bad. Their business meeting follows a standard 'Roberts rules' format and a number of decisions about future activities - teas, fundraisers, community projects and other activities - are made after brief but inclusive discussions. As

soon as the meeting is adjourned, the potluck supper appears, the work of many hands, a spread followed by a selection of several pies.

At first glance, this group may seem to have little to do with learning circles. Like many organizations, Women's Institute is a civil society organization that meets to accomplish shared goals that are in the public good. But The Women's Institute in fact has some valuable lessons its history can deepen our understanding about the nature of learning circles in rural Canada.

First, this history shows that there is a long tradition of group learning in rural Canada. Second, it illustrates how this tradition largely involves women. Third, The Women's Institute demonstrates that group learning can be one of several activities that a group does, embedded in a wider context of varied activities. Finally, The Women's Institute has some important lessons about the relationship between group learning and civil society organizations. It shows how adult learning can closely relate process of democratic decision-making, of affiliating with a larger democratic organization and of addressing questions of the public good. These are questions that might also have some part to play in rural learning circles.

This narrative will draw out some of the themes relating The Women Institutes to our understanding of rural learning circles, by looking at both the history and activities of The Women's Institute in Nova Scotia, as well the work of the New Tusket Branch.

The Women's Institute is a Canadian initiative that has affected rural women around the world. In the words of their official history, on the Women's Institute of Canada Website:

> Founded in 1897 in Stoney Creek, Canada, The Women's Institute (WI) has become a fundamental part of many women's lives throughout the world. Originally set up to provide training and education to women and address the wrongs in predominantly rural society in the late 19th century, the WI now offers women a mutual support structure, as well as an important lobbying voice on issues close to its members' hearts.
>
> Today The Women's Institute links some 80 million women over 60 countries.
>
> Women's Institutes came together as a national body in 1919, when representatives of the provincial groups met in Winnipeg to found the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.
>
> Today Women's Institutes are active across rural Canada, with 1,257 chapters in 10 provinces, and a membership of more than 18,000.

The objectives are:

- To provide a united national voice for Women's Institutes of Canada.
- To initiate national programs and to provide resource material.
- To provide a medium of inter-communication among the units of the Federation.
- To provide leadership in the promotion of Canadian agriculture and other aspects of community living.
- To develop responsible citizens through the study of issues of national and international importance.

The Women's Institute of Nova Scotia (WINS) was founded in 1913. Their Mission is stated as follows:

> The Women's Institutes of Nova Scotia continue to provide opportunities to enhance the quality of life, through education and personal development, allowing us to meet the changing needs of our local and global communities.

Their motto is: "Learning, sharing and improving the quality of life for all."

WINS Objectives are:

- To help rural and urban women acquire knowledge and skills needed to meet the demands of life in the 21st century, including food and nutrition, education, consumer awareness, environmental issues, balancing family and working life;
- To encourage and assist women to become aware of issues affecting them;
- To discover, develop and train potential leaders;
- To encourage good citizenship through informative and stimulating programs and projects;
- To preserve traditional arts and crafts and to encourage the learning of new skills;
- To foster a feeling of concern and cooperation among women for the betterment of home and country and the world-wide community.

In the decades since their founding, WINS' activities and programs have constantly changed and adapted to the changing challenges faced by rural Nova Scotia.

In World War I, this meant raising money to support the Red Cross. In the nineteen-twenties, there were social programs, like the school lunch program, as well as learning programs on crafts such as rug making. During the Depression, WINS focused more than ever on helping those hardest hit by the hard times through programs like the Saskatchewan Relief Program. They also initiated a leadership training program called Leadership Training Schools. During World War, there were two WINS-supported home front efforts relating to conserving

food. In the postwar years, WINS has continued to develop a wide range of programs, including a Scholarship Program and "Into the North," a program for new Canadians settling in rural areas.

Throughout its history WINS has always maintained education as a cornerstone of its work. This has included:

- Short Courses - weaving, crafts, knitting glove making, home nursing, first aid
- Production of learning material on various aspects of rural life, such as nutrition and conservation
- Scholarship Fund
- Guest Speakers at local chapters
- Public education on rural issues
- Working with rural schools
- Folk Schools - Two-week residential courses on various aspects of rural life.

In addition to these specific learning activities, there has clearly always been a learning dimension involved in most of the WINS' work. While doing their work its members have learned:

- Organizational development skills
- Leadership skills
- Crafts and other skills
- Communications skills.

Today WINS continues to be an important part of rural life on Nova Scotia. The Women's Institutes are involved in the following current projects and programs:

- Adopt-A-Highway Program
- Farm Safety Day Camp Program
- Electric Breast Pump Rental Program
- Reach for the Stars membership Challenge Program
- IWK Health Centre Project
- A Quilted Wall hanging for IWK Health Centre
- WINS Water Quality Project, to improve the water quality in rural Nova Scotia
- Handicrafts Competitions
- Colour me Healthy Poster Challenge 2002
- "Stories to Go"- teaching children about agriculture literacy

The New Tusket Women's Institute was founded 31 years ago. The founder, Hilda Mullen, still chairs the group. Its membership has varied over the years, from as high as 65 to the average size of about 30. There are currently 14 active members, who come not just from the new Tusket area, but also from Digby County as a whole, from Weymouth to the town of Digby.

The group meets monthly. Their meetings follow a regular pattern: reading of the minutes, reading aloud of correspondence, discussion of issues arising and new business, committee reports.

Their activities over the years have covered a wide range of activities and purposes.
Charitable projects include quilting, crafts, teas and supper for fundraising for various charitable causes, hospital quilts, food banks. The group has also undertaken major community improvement projects, such as rural beautification and the adopt-a-highway program.

Some of their activities have simply been about networking and getting together with people, such as linking to other branches, and hosting carol sings at Christmas.

The New Tusket branch shows that Women's Institutes still play an important role in the life of rural Nova Scotia. From a learning circles perspective, it also shows that there is a deeply rooted tradition of group learning in rural Canada. Looking at their long history of providing learning opportunities in group setting clearly demonstrates that learning in circles is not something new for rural communities.

It is also clear that there is a vibrant tradition of women's learning circles in rural Canada. WINS programs are developed and delivered by and for women, often relating to rural issues from a specifically women's perspective. This is not to say that the issues they have addressed have been solely "women's issues." Issues such as drinking water, the environment, and health relate to everyone in a community. However, many of the learning opportunities have been specifically for Canadian rural women.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Women's Institute is its staying power. Many other worthwhile adult educational initiatives have gone by the boards in the last hundred years, but Women's Institutes are still going strong. One of the reasons for WINS's remarkable longevity may be its strong, well-tuned democratic structure - in today's language, the resilience of its civil society organization. This is true at all levels, local, provincial, national, and even international. Throughout the organization there is a well-defined and transparent organizational structure that enables members to participate in decision making processes.

For those of us who are thinking about the role of learning circles as part of the future of adult education, The Women's Institute has some essential lessons. First of all, bearing in mind that this idea of learning circles is far from new to rural Canada, we should build on the existing traditions where they exist. Secondly, the context of learning circles doesn't necessarily require educational

institutions, in fact, democratic, self- organizing groups seem to be more stable than many top-down government initiatives.

The Family History Circle, Kanhiote - Tyendinaga Territory Public Library

by Janice Brant

Kanhiote Library opened in 1990 and established a philosophy "to provide a well-balanced collection of materials, to focus on maintaining a Native resource/reference collection with emphasis on Mohawk/Iroquois people, and to function as an information centre on aspects of cultural heritage." "Kanhiote" means "rainbow" and was chosen to symbolize a bridge. This bridge would serve to link the knowledge in the material with the community, as well as other cultures and Kanien'kehaka culture, traditions and beliefs.

Kanhiote offers a wide range of books, magazines, videos, vertical file material, local history items, and genealogy research. A children's corner offers a cozy area for children to read and explore a variety of brightly coloured books. There are six computer stations for the public with free access to the internet. Community members are welcome to set up an email account and come in to check their messages, do a resume, make invitations to a party, or create a newsletter to share with friends. Kanhiote is also a gathering place for families, children's reading circles, the Mohawk language circle, and hobby groups.
One such group that gathers at the library is the Family History Circle. The circle has been actively meeting at the library on the third Thursday of every month from 6 to 8 p.m. to learn more about their family history and about the history of Tyendinaga.

The Family History Circle was founded by community member Joy Brant and Kanhiote's librarian, Karen Lewis. Joy had been visiting the library for several years researching her family history and genealogy. She had found some old photographs in the attic of her uncle's homestead and was looking for people in the community that could help her identify the people in the photographs. Joy was also interested in learning about and researching the 20 original families that settled the community and thought that others might share her interest.

Joy shared her idea for a Family History Circle with the librarian. The librarian liked the idea and offered to support the development of the group by posting an invitation in Kanhiote's monthly newsletter. Joy and the librarian, Karen Lewis called upon the researchers in the Lands department to help them brainstorm some topics to assist them in getting the group started. Lisa Maracle and Trish Rae from the Lands Department offered to visit the circle acting as resource persons from time to time to assist the circle members with their research and to offer their support and expertise.

Today the Family History Circle has 15 participants who gather to share their research findings, tell stories and share photographs. Recently the group visited the Napanee Historical Society to participate in a research presentation for a book new book called *Dancing in the Sky* by Bill Hunt. This book will focus on the history of Camp Mohawk and Camp Rathbun. It was an exciting event for the circle as some of the elderly participants had childhood memories of family members employed at Camp Mohawk, while others lived in close proximity to the military training camp.

The Family History Circle welcomes both residents and non-residents of Tyendinaga to participate and share in their learning circle. It is a diverse group ranging in age from 28 to 75. Some have university degrees while others only attended school for a brief period early in their life. Each participant in the circle works at their own pace and shares their research as they wish within a flexible framework.

Topics and themes are loosely determined by the group at the end of each meeting, although there are more structured events such as the planning and coordination of visits outside of the library such as cemetery walks.

The circle explores a variety of topics from how to research family history and access records, to reading cemetery maps. They discuss veterans, family photographs, family Bibles, larger than life characters, nicknames, special places, and school records. The circle has also explored band council minutes from the 1800s and census records.
In researching and sharing family histories and the history of Tyendinaga, the Family History Circle hopes to build pride in community members about who they are and where they have come from. They want to help community members to develop greater sensitivity and understanding of one another by communicating the struggles of their ancestors. They would also like to demonstrate to the young people that they are all tied together, to promote belonging and acceptance. The circle has plans to develop displays for public viewing at community events about the various families and clans in the community. They also try to record some of their sharing on audio tape for reference at the library.

The librarian, with the help of lands researcher Trish Rae, has developed a pamphlet to assist the Family History Circle that outlines some best practices for starting your own family history. It can be accessed at Kanhiote Library and includes special considerations for researching First Nations family history. Some of the considerations include keeping in mind that documents reflect the times in which they were produced and there was a time when legitimate children of Status Indian women and a non-native man were considered to be “white.”

The circle is grateful for the support of the library in providing them with a place to meet, access to computers, reference materials, the photocopier and when needed the expertise of the librarian.

When asked what would make the circle stronger, participants simply said more people to share their family history and stories. One participant commented that it could be like a living museum and that our greatest strength is the people knowing who they are.

The Barrie Native Friendship Centre

by Janice Brant

The Barrie Native Friendship Centre (BNFC) was established in 1987. The goal was to provide a meeting place and offer services to Aboriginal people (regardless of legal definition) living in Barrie and the surrounding area. According to Stats Canada Census (1991), 1,555 Native people have settled in and around the Barrie area. There is also a local Métis population of indeterminate number. Today the BNFC has over 200 families registered on their membership list.

Since its inception, the Centre has grown to serve specific community needs through programs and services ranging from recreational, educational, social, and cultural activities. Revenue for the centre is generated from various sources such as governments when they are available, foundations, and private grants. Fund raising is an important part of BNFC activities and is done through bingos, raffles, donations, and auctions that are supported by staff, memberships, and community circles hosted by the BNFC.

The BNFC has hosted numerous social gatherings and fundraising activities. These activities assist in gathering support for the Centre, as well as raising the consciousness of the whole community by bringing people together.

A key factor in the vision of the BNFC is to promote and reaffirm a strong sense of identity and self-worth through cultural awareness and education. They are dedicated to promoting a holistic approach in their programs and services to First Nation, Métis, and non-native visitors. Community participation and the concept of lifelong learning are central to their activities.

The BNFC welcomes visitors with brightly painted murals on the exterior walls of their building. The stones in the garden along the walkway are painted with the teachings of the Seven Grandfathers (Trust, Respect, Love, Humility, Bravery, Wisdom, and Honesty) reaffirming traditional cultural beliefs and values.

The BNFC hosts several learning circles that foster community building, peer learning, self-awareness, cultural teachings, and holistic healing. One such learning circle is the Hand Drum Circle which consists of approximately eight members. The circle has been consistent for over a year and is growing. The Hand Drum Circle came to be as a result of collaboration between the Aboriginal Health Outreach Worker and the Healing and Wellness Worker.

The Aboriginal Health Outreach Worker provides crisis intervention for Aboriginal individuals and families in need of health information and/or referrals to both Native and non-native health care providers. They promote healthy lifestyle awareness and prevention education, as well as advocate for better health services for Aboriginal clients.

The Healing and Wellness Worker provides cultural-based counselling services to Aboriginal individuals and families and/or makes referrals to treatment centers and escorts clients. They provide cultural teachings and language programming to assist Aboriginal people in their healing, as well as support the participation of their clients in ceremonies.

All members of the Hand Drum Circle have visited the Aboriginal Health Outreach Worker or Healing and Wellness Worker at one time or another looking for a healthier lifestyle. What they would come to learn is that a healthier lifestyle involves a balance of spirit, heart, mind, and body. They sought healing and comfort and wanted to know who they are and where they come from. In response to the needs of the people the Aboriginal Health Outreach Workers organized drum teachings.

The Hand Drum Circle began with the story of how the drum came to be. Many Elders, cultural teachers, and traditional healers use the drum for healing and prayer. Making music, drumming, singing, and dancing are integral to Aboriginal culture and promote physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well being.

A drum making workshop was organized by the BNFC and each member had the opportunity to make their own drum. It was followed by a feast ceremony for the drums and the Hand Drum Circle began meeting on Thursday evenings from 6:30 to 8:30. They started by listening to recorded drum songs and invited cultural teachers and Elders to share songs and stories about the drum. Before long they were drumming and singing.

The Hand Drum Circle learned to drum and sing by seeing, hearing, feeling, and supporting one another. They listened to stories and observed their teachers drumming and singing. All of their communication is oral and no print materials are used, making the Hand Drum Circle accessible to a broad range of participants, young and old. Anyone interested in drumming and singing is welcome to attend and participate or just observe.

The Sewing Circle is another example of a learning circle hosted by the BNFC. The Sewing Circle has 12 members that meet weekly and evolved as a result of the Hand Drum Circle. They needed hand drum bags to protect the drums from the weather or from being damaged. The Hand Drum Circle participants volunteered to make a drum bag for the large social drum belonging to the BNFC and decided

they should care for their drums in the same respectful manner. Circle participants began donating fabric and seeking out other donations.

The Sewing Circle started with a few donations and some willing teachers. Later they were able to acquire some funding to purchase materials and fabric to make traditional clothing. Like the Hand Drum Circle, the Sewing Circle opens with an offering of thanksgiving, circle, and smudge in honour of the people gathered and to create a safe space for learning and sharing.

The Sewing Circle is not simply about learning to sew, it is about learning their culture and traditional practices, beliefs, and values. Together they explored and learned about their clans, inviting Elders and cultural teachers to share the clan teachings with them. They invited traditional dancers to model their clothing and talk about how it was made. Elders shared teachings about the colours and what they represent. They learned about the different styles and types of traditional clothing, as well as who wore them and what purposes they served.

Since their initial aim to make hand drum bags, the Sewing Circle has evolved into making various pieces of traditional and ceremonial dress, as well as blankets to raise funds for the BNFC. They share food and friendship at the Sewing Circle and have developed a social support network.

The method of teaching and learning is predominately oral, although some literacy and numeracy skills are needed for reading patterns and instruction. The Sewing Circle participants work collaboratively on their projects, helping one another and therefore participants with lower literacy are supported by other participants. This ensures that the circle is inclusive of all people wishing to participate in the Sewing Circle.

The Hand Drum Circle and Sewing Circle hosted by the BNFC operate and collect materials primarily through donations and fundraising, although their host has at times been able to access small allocations of funding to support their activities. The funds are often used to support Elders and traditional teachers as they travel to visit the centre and the circles. These funds have in the past usually stemmed from federal initiatives such as the Healing and Wellness Strategy. Greater access to funding for these circles could not only support the continued learning of individual participants, but essentially contribute to building healthier and stronger Aboriginal families and communities.

3 Values and Practices of Learning Circles: Initial Analysis

After the narratives were written, the researchers wrote pieces analysing the values and practices of learning circles, as input for further discussion. Here are sample pieces.

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 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.

How Does Learning Happen in an Indigenous Circle?

by Janice Brant

"All learning moves through a cycle." Diane Hill

The protocol and procedures involved in conducting a circle in the Indigenous community prepares the participant's heart, mind, body, and spirit to receive and work with the teachings of the day. Many of the learning circles identified in the Indigenous community open the circle with a smudge, thanksgiving prayer or greetings to all of creation, followed by greeting one another. Participants in learning circles are encouraged and counselled by the facilitator or Elder to immerse themselves in the experience by opening their hearts and minds. In being receptive to the circle experience and the information being shared or demonstrated by each participant or the facilitator, individuals have learned collectively through participation (seeing, feeling, thinking, and acting).

In a learning circle learning happens by way of four fundamental stages; seeing, feeling, thinking, and acting. Each stage in this cycle plays an essential role in the learning process and the development of the individual as a "whole" person. The cycle of learning begins with awareness or the ability to *see* what is needed to increase and further develop our understandings of self and the world around us. In the Indigenous community this is understood as our insight, intuition, and

dreams that activate the learning process and challenge the way we feel/relate, think, and act.

As the learning cycle unfolds one must explore how they *feel or relate* to their new awareness, self, and others. Indigenous cultural teachings emphasize the importance of relationships, and this stage involves expressing and articulating one's feelings about self and how we relate to the total environment. This would include our relationship to the learning circle. Do I feel welcome, am I being heard, how do I relate to other participants in the circle?

The learning process can evoke a wide range of feelings from joy to sorrow as participants in learning circles work to make changes, adjust to the challenges of learning something new, or are engaged in examining their lived experience. In this stage we find insight in sharing and exploring our experiences with the learning circle.

The third stage in the learning cycle brings forward what we have come to know and understand about ourselves and the world through information and facts. It is what we *think* about and how our thinking manifests change in our lives. It is also the integration of new patterns that are the result of positive life experiences, for instance joining a learning circle. This stage in the cycle exemplifies our skill and ability to solve problems and make informed decisions about our lives and future.

The final stage in the learning cycle is the actualization of one's learning. This is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (beliefs and feelings) that are internalized and used to maintain positive patterns. It is what we do and how we *act* (or react) to the challenges we are presented with in our day to day lives. In this stage a learning circle participant may find the confidence to introduce a topic that they have wanted to explore or perhaps they have learned the skills needed to become an advocate for social injustices.

The cycle of learning presented by scholar Diane Hill is grounded in Indigenous philosophies of teaching and learning and is also evident in learning circles in the Indigenous community. Characterized by observation, experience, relationships, and spiritual connections the learning cycle can be observed in learning circles at both the individual and collective level. Simply stated, on one level, awareness was emerging for individual participants in the circle, while on another level it was happening collectively as the learning circle defined their scope and purpose. This cycle was continuous, multidimensional, individual and collective, deliberate and unintentional.

In learning circles identified in the Indigenous community participants engaged with others and in the cycle learning by sharing and exploring their insight, feelings, relationships, thoughts, and experiences. All aspects of their sharing and experience were significant and one's thoughts did not take precedence over

one's feelings. This demonstrates the openness and inclusive reality of how learning happens in circles in the Indigenous community.

Storytelling

by Janice Brant

"All oral traditions are composed and performed in three dynamic dimensions using the body and hands, face and voice: we sing and dance, tell stories and riddles and quote proverbs, we sculpt out of timber and stone, marble and ivory, we shape and mould clay, and craft grass into baskets and beads and cloth into tableaus and dolls." Joan Conolly

Oral tradition and storytelling have been used by many cultures world wide to pass down knowledge of themselves and their learning to future generations. Stories are used to teach origins, beliefs, values, practices, and social customs. They demonstrate lessons of survival, describe the landscape, and convey deep spiritual connections. Trickster stories challenge our creative thinking and cause us to laugh at our shortcomings. Storytelling is vital to linking the past, present and future as has been demonstrated by many of the learning circles identified in the Indigenous community.

A common observation made by the research team in both rural and urban centres, and including the Indigenous community, was the opportunity for participants to tell their stories and recount life experiences as a principal method of learning about identity and addressing barriers that they had experienced in their lives. In sharing their stories and lived experience, learning circle participants are validated for who they are and where they have come from. In this way, storytelling adds a dimension of healing to the learning circle.

In the Indigenous community the storyteller would ask or counsel the listeners to use their own minds to see what the stories mean to them. Traditional teachers generally accept that each listener is at a different stage of life, and only able to grasp and learn certain elements of a story at certain moments in their lives and learning cycles.

This understanding seemed to come about naturally as part of the learning circles and participants engaged readily in the opportunity to find themselves in the stories of others and develop compassion for the struggles and challenges that others have faced or celebrate their insight and achievements. Participants benefit from drawing upon the lessons and learning of the storyteller to enhance or broaden their own learning. It also has a way of leveling the playing field and dismantling previous barriers such as racism and sexism.

The stories told in learning circles are not simply for entertainment or pleasure. Stories are powerful teachers as they emerge from social struggles and injustices. They reflect the most intimate perceptions of people and unearth longstanding beliefs and attitudes. They explore the growth, development, and synchronicity of human relationships and cause individuals to reflect upon their own relationships to self, family, community, nation, and creation. As a result, one's identity is continually being challenged and reconstructed in the adoption of changing understandings and diverse perspectives.

Storytelling plays an important role in learning circles. It offers healing (teaching and learning) in the expression and validation of one's lived experience. It fosters group cohesion and social development. Finally, it provides opportunities for cultural and linguistic continuity.

Storytelling in its many forms is evident in learning circles and valued in the Indigenous community. Communities of people from around the world have listened to and shared stories to warn their children of danger, gain new insight, resolve conflict, celebrate change, and make spiritual connections. These stories come from all our relations and ancestors to support continual and lifelong learning.

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 Ennaahtig 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*. This kind of collective learning and thinking is a reality that is easily demonstrated by activities such a group brainstorming, where the group can answer questions and solve problems in a way that no one individual in the group could.

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.

Principles of the Learning Circle Approach at the Parkdale Activities and Recreation Centre (PARC)

by Guy Ewing

This analysis is part of a narrative about the learning circles at PARC.

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.

4 The Widening the Circle Symposium

In the second year of the project, learning circle participants came to Toronto for the Widening the Circle Symposium. The purpose of the symposium was to expand discussion of the narratives and analysis beyond the researchers' group and the larger Working Group. Sixteen participants in learning circles attended, representing three rural learning circles, three Indigenous learning circles and four urban learning circles. In addition, there were participants from the Federation of Women's Institutes of Ontario and the Centre for Aboriginal and Indigenous Studies at OISE/UT as well as the Researchers and several members of our Working Group. At this symposium, we discussed the emerging themes in our research. This fed into further writing and analysis, which, in turn, fed into the overview of this report and its recommendations. The following quotes from the transcripts of the Symposium were chosen to capture the nature of the discussion and important points of agreement.

Question: What is important about learning circles?

Sharing awareness.

An increased understanding, I think, can lead to a more peaceful society.

Well, people in circles, too, they form like a family relationship. And, like, in a larger setting, you know, a lot of them would just shrink down into a corner or to the back of the room and not be visible. Whereas, in a learning circle, it's more of a family setting where everyone has equal opportunity to share what's on their mind and not feel so afraid of speaking out.

I think it also keeps you connected with the world. You're outside yourself, and even though that safe circle you're in, it gives you a little view of the world beyond that circle.

I think in the circles you can grow. Without pressure. 'Cause there's so much pressure sometimes in an ordinary school. I did it for six months, and after, I sort of decided to quit. So, because I was pressured into doing things I never have done, and I was kind of scared, too.

It's reciprocal, too. You know, each member of a group brings something to that group. They're talented in many ways. And so they bring their skills and talents to that group and someone in that group will learn from them and also, you know, reciprocate what they can bring to the group.

It won't allow isolation.

Well, everybody brings their life experiences. That's what a learning circle, from my view, is, life experiences from everybody. Everybody's a teacher and everybody's a learner.

I just wanted to follow up on the term "vulnerable." Because I think one of the things a learning circle does is allow you to be vulnerable. So you don't necessarily have to come in that vulnerable, but you know that you bring it, you can say, "I'm not really sure that I want to be doing this," and "I'm not sure I can learn this." But then the groups says, "That's o.k., that's a perfectly valid response." So it's not eliminating vulnerability, it's allowing it . . .

I think, too, just accessibility, and having, like knowing it's available and knowing that it's out there. And then, like, for us having partnerships and sharing our resources so that we can actually make something happen, so there's an action associated with what we're doing as well.

One more thing that I've noticed, outside of all these other things, is . . . I think it helps keep your mind active, and you connected and involved with . . . mental health.

Question: How could you demonstrate to supporters/funders that a learning circle is working?

I think you have to be able to list the accomplishments of a circle for supporters, because supporters want to know how something works. They don't care how it's structured so much as how it works. So you have to make sure, presenting to a supporter, to list the accomplishments of a circle . . .

The interest. And attendance.

Getting your community involved.

One tool that I like is to kind of have a questionnaire at the beginning, and then, like, maybe six months, or later, like . So you can kind of . . . It helps people to see themselves and see how they were when they came in and then later on, but it also helps to, you know, gather information to prove how a group, how successful a group has been. I've also experienced something very interesting, and I think I did share this with Tracey. There was, with one of the groups, the HATS groups, we used the self-efficacy scale at the beginning and then six months later. And what happened was the results, like later people had their self-esteem, not their self-esteem was lower, but they were more aware of themselves, of who they were, so they were aware of the fact that they could accomplish more, so it didn't change in terms of . . . You know, if you use the . . . when you analyse the questionnaires, it didn't change, it actually showed that people were at the lower level . . . than what they were when they came in. But then, we were worried . . . It was so interesting. And what happened was that people were more aware of who they were and what, where they would go, they were more self-confident, so then their goals were much higher. So you had to use another tool to prove that, you know, well the group is actually working. But it was just so interesting to take people through all these exercises. And I learned a lot from that process.

I have some hard bit of trouble with evaluation, maybe because for over twenty years I run a program when evaluation was a key word, you know. You evaluate things to death. And I always was very uncomfortable, and continue to be. Because I found I was part of support groups for families with people with, facing horrible circumstances. And . . . many times a person coming into a support group, and it was kind of a peer support group, and half way through it, or at the end, was more in turmoil than they had been when they came in. Because all of a sudden, maybe the person was given permission to be, because of hearing different things you never knew. And, of course, like you said, you have to put these happy face on those things to the funders, unfortunately, because you don't want to put the programs in jeopardy, and then, I started relating to myself, I'm many times at a point in my life, because I do a lot of diaries and journalizing, and I sound . . . "Oh, you know, I'm happy, contented woman going around." And then there are the times, if people were to read those journals, just says, "Oh, God, what's wrong with her?" You, know, "She's not a happy soul, and she doesn't know what, her right from her left." And I find, many times when you face the stormy period, which I call, those are my stormy periods . . . In groups, also, if there are stormy periods, many times you grow after that. But to anyone

in that, you are at the bottom of the barrel. But that doesn't mean you cannot climb again, or, you know, whatever, when you are ready for it, or the group is. So these things of evaluations, "I come in here, and then I progress today, and then I'm up there and up there." I just find these a way to . . . What we have been doing is fooling the funders. Because they make us fool them, you know? . . . But it's like we are on this vicious circle of . . . the way we evaluate things. . . . But something should change about that.

In a somewhat similar vein, I guess, in that our circle takes place in a multicultural community where there's a lot of transients. So a big part of it is always welcoming new people in, so that the circle is never the same, kind of thing. And I think, too, there might be individual successes, but the circle itself is kind of continuing on with . . . its key thing is to be accepting and bringing in. And we have probably close to fifty percent turnover in the apartments on a regular basis, maybe every year, and . . . So the challenge is there are new people, a lot of new people all the time. And I think they find it a support . . . but to know whether you could say, "Oh, success!" Other than just, anecdotally, people want to come.

I was just going to say, I think for me, I feel that I need to learn how to articulate those things to the funders. Because, well, right now, I mean, we say it, but that's how where they are at. Their agenda is, like, they want the happy faces. And they want to show that, you know, numbers, and it's all about quantities and not quality. And I think that it would be very, very helpful if we'd have ways, kind of learning circles . . . articulate these situations. 'Cause that's my experience, too, and that's part of what I was referring to earlier on, is that. People become more aware of what's going on, and of themselves, and then, you know, it seems like their self-esteem is lower, and their self-confidence, and so on, and then articulating these things, I think, would be very . . .

If the government wants to know what we're doing and how we're doing it, why couldn't we invite them down here to see what we do and how it's done?

Question: How can organizations and government support learning circles?

A big enough space. A welcoming, accessible space.

Increasingly, as you know, churches and schools often get crunched in terms of money, they're often having to charge people for the use of space, and libraries are open fewer and fewer hours, and . . . So there's something to do with, like, those public spaces being available for community groups to start up new initiatives. But I think it's really important.

I think for some groups, there is a real need for facilitation . . .

You could have something called a community adult educator who would be available to any community group.

The way I support our local groups is I just listen to them. I'm just a resource for them. They pick up the phone if they need anything, if they're having trouble finding a speaker or they're having, they don't know where to start, they can't find a place to meet, then they call me, and I'm their resource, and then it's my job to give them the tools to make that happen. So I think, you know, I support my groups. But I need support for myself.

I think learning circles coming together and sharing as well is a great support. I mean, just being here together and being able to share everything that we bring to our learning circle and all that we've learned, that it's just an amazing kind of support.

I have one more thing. I was thinking, when you're talking about money, one of the things, too, is, like, if there's seminars or workshops or something going on, a lot of time you need to send one or two people, and the group doesn't have . . . if they're not out ongoing raising funds for that kind of thing, they would need money for things like that. So that that person can become a resource as they come back.

I think it's important also to have a pool of human resources available to your groups. At times you might need expertise, and, in a certain area, and, you know, being able to develop a partnership . . .

I think there's need for start-up money for small, for learning circles, and I think there's a need for more public awareness of the concept. We've been doing our Multicultural Women's Group for years, and we've been a learning circle, and we didn't put that name on them, and we didn't . . . you know, and so it's, you come to a different level when you start to identify yourself as a learning circle, and so it's kind of a really important, I think, to have a greater awareness.

The other thing about money, too, is, for young women, I think you always have to make sure there's childcare money, because you prevent people from being able to participate if that's not taken care of.

I would add to that, especially for the rural programs, you know, transportation money. I know in our group . . . a number of people said, "We just wouldn't be here . . ."

There is a lot of misconceptions still about what's a circle . . . My friend this morning called me, and she said, "Oh, could you talk to me," and I said, "I have to go, I'm . . ." and I told her a little bit about this circle. And she said, "Oh, not you again. Are you guys holding hands? . . ." She's quite, you know, she's a normal woman, you know? . . . She sees these things, she doesn't see the learning part. She sees the support. When she said that, I think what she meant is that she sees

the support part that a learning circle provides, but she doesn't see the learning, the growth, the other part. And I was thinking, she's not unique. I'm sure she's not unique. She's very much what other people also think about learning circles, that there is . . . this one. So I think somehow it has to come to the public that a learning circle is this and that and much more, because I don't think everybody understands the concept.

I was just going to say that, like, often, like groups, regardless, groups are perceived as support groups, like adult support groups. Like you go, if you have a problem, you can go. Like, it's for problems, like, for people with whatever problem, and they go by that theme. Versus the, all the dynamics. So I think it needs to be more . . . Like the dynamics need to be promoted, and people need to understand more. And if Paul Martin was to come here, the only thing that I think I would say was, well, maybe offer him a seat and say, "Well, just join the circle." Because I think that's what we need, is not to explain anything to that particular person but be able to kind of, you know, have the opportunity that I had today, and that we all had, and I think that's the best way to learn is to be involved in part of it.

Question: What are the impacts of learning circles on individuals and communities?

I have attended a lot of healing circles, where people share many abuse issues that they may carry. And the way that it's helped me personally and the way I've seen it impact on community members is you gain a lot of self-confidence. It's a circle where people share, and that circle is respected, where nothing leaves that circle. So it also helps build trust for those who may find it hard to trust. And I think from a, also from a personal level, it helps you to grow and have more confidence to be able to move further in whichever life path you choose to move on.

The main thing I find out of the whole thing is that beside me learning myself I'm also teaching other people . . . I find more respect for myself that I can get to the people in the circle. And they can replace that back to me . . .

I learned that they don't pressure you, so I started to realize that one of my goals was to get into groups. So I . . . I'm one of those people that had to learn that.

Even though there might be seven different languages being spoken in the group, the communication increases and people help each other to understand and there's a feeling of commonality that kind of grows, that the human condition is bigger than, you know . . . Somebody's from Afghanistan, somebody else is from Jamaica and somebody else is from Bangladesh, or whatever, but when people start to talk about their families or their wishes or their concerns, it's very much a common feeling. It's a good feeling about humans.

We had . . . someone who was approximately around 19 years old and then we had people who were in their fifties, and how the listening . . . to watch the 18 year old be so intent on what the 56 year old was saying, and then reverse, you know, that factor was amazing, the respect there but also the interest . . .

It breaks down some barriers, and maybe, in our situation, helps alleviate some racism, because people start to know each other on a personal level.

I think it also helps create a bigger support network for the participants and the community, as well as for yourself, if you may need it.

Many times we just become so, through life, so self-involved, you know, our worries, our illness, our family members, whatever. So your world becomes, at times, smaller. So it's true, when we reach out and go out there, then you say, "O.K., my problems matter . . ." but sometimes you put things in perspective, if nothing else.

We came together through a common thing, which was elderly abuse. A group of people just started to find that other seniors in the community were dealing with very difficult situations, and then they wanted to do something about it, but they didn't know what at that time, what they could do. So I think they did a most amazing thing, was that they decided to come together as a group, and they started looking at different ways of addressing some of those issues. And then they kind of developed a safe zone, where people could talk about themselves and talk about their experiences. And from there, they moved into action, into thinking what can we do. And most of the people that were part of that group . . . some of them had never . . . like, had no formal education. Never went to school. And they thought that, you know, that there was very little that they could do at that time. But by coming together, by working together, they realized that they could actually do a lot of things. And one of the things that they identified was theatre, through the use of theatre. And then, because language was still a barrier for communication, they thought that, well then we can just use body language. So they started preparing these little, short, these short plays, about the problems that they were seeing in the community, and then they would go to places and they would engage people in discussing those issues and coming up with possible solutions to the problems, so all of a sudden they became popular educators. And it was an amazing experience, because people in the group, they became aware of a lot of things that they had that they didn't know. And they also became more self-confident, and then their self-esteem went up, and then they start going to all kinds of places, including at colleges and universities, and we have a quote, Tracey used that, from one of the participants that says, "I never sat in a school bench, and today I was teaching a university class." And it is true. Like, I mean they brought in their experiences, which are unique, and there's no way, as you know, me as a worker, anybody, could share that type of experience with a class. So it was really interesting. So that's my experiences, one of my experiences, with learning circles, is people coming together, we can discover amazing things about ourselves.

I become, as a member of the circle I work with, become more and more aware of how you have to read body language and understand body language, and how important it is to communicate in that way.

Where I work, there is a, most of the ladies, they don't speak English. And we all does body language. We explain to body language. And now become they can speak, because they've been coming eight, nine months in the program. And now they speak little bit – little bit English, and they are not isolated at home, and we're proving that . . . they come to the sitting room and they share their problem, and everybody . . . when you are at home, you don't feel like everybody have same problem. And when you come to the circle and in this community centre, then you talking . . . and everybody have the same problem.

The people within those groups take ownership of what is going on in their community. And, like if there was a need we had within the Native Centre, they're all right in there to get their hands dirty, to work together, so that the common goal is worked at, and they continue those things, and they all come in with their creativity and all their talents and their life skills and . . . They're the ones that drive what goes on in those programs. And learn with each other, from each other, and joke with each other, and they become such a tight-knit group of people. Like, they can tell each other a lot of . . . You know, there's a lot of humour in groups, and there's a lot of, you know, someone's having a difficult time; they rally to work with that individual, or within that family. So I find that we are able to take care of each other in our community. We get lost in the system sometimes, because of the mainstream being so large and . . . So they know that, coming to the Centre, there's that support there.

It builds strength within yourself as an active participant, in terms of being able to make better choices, healthier choices in your own life, and getting rid of that anger that may be inside you or the sadness, where you have a safe place where you can do that . . . And the communication improves . . .

There's like a reclaiming and a reconnecting with the history of our people, of our families, of our community . . . Through the awareness that's being created, you know, by exploring family history is not only are you impacting community by identifying and naming and recognizing who your family is, but it seems to go much deeper than that where it's like waking our people up. It's like shaking them awake . . . Reconnecting who we are as families within a small community . . .

I'm seeing a bigger picture.

There were a lot of stereotypes about intergenerational communication, and so on, like lack of respect and all these things. And people realized that, often, the cause is the fact that people don't know about each other, right? So coming together, they were able to share . . . one of the scenarios that came out of it was

just this simple scene in the TTC . . . inside a bus where the youth comes in and, you know, the seniors kind of stay behind in the back and not having a seat and no one giving them a seat, that type of . . . We've all seen it for sure. So they worked around . . . overcoming that, and one of the things that the youth said was that, well, "Never thought about it. You know, we're so engaged into our thinking, we're just talking to each other, that . . . often we don't even see it." So they became more aware. And that . . . I mean that was, I think, a great impact, that, by coming together, by talking to each other, we know about each other and we kind of make those changes, and then those things become just natural and organic. Like, it's not a big deal any more . . .

I was amazed at the things that people, the learning circles have been able to bring together and solve. And I think there seems to be no limit on what, when people are focused on one thing together, what they can accomplish together as a small group. Just amazing. I think we could take care of all the world if they would just leave us alone.

5 Analysis following the Widening the Circle Symposium

The following pieces were written after the Widening the Circle Symposium, incorporating what had been learned at the Symposium with what had been learned from the narratives and earlier discussion by the researchers' group and the larger Lifelong Learning Working Group. These pieces, in turn, were used in writing the overview at the beginning of this report.

Inclusion

by Guy Ewing

This project deepened our understanding of what is involved in inclusive lifelong learning. The learning circles that we studied did not approach inclusion as a kind of adaptation for less able learners. In these circles, inclusion was its own approach to learning. This approach to learning was different from the learning that we associate with schooling or training in that they:

- do not privilege written language
- do not privilege academic knowledge
- do not predetermine what will be "acceptable behaviour"

- do not pressure participants to learn
- do not focus on the transmission of information
- do not predetermine learning outcomes.

Written language and inclusion. As literacy workers, we were particularly alert to how learning circles avoid using written language as a barrier to learning. In our society, written language is often seen as the key to learning. But, in our experience, written language can also be a barrier. Although we have spent our lives helping people to learn how to use written language, and believe that every citizen of Canada should have access to enhancing their use of written language, we also know that written language is not the key to learning, but only one medium. This is shown in the Indigenous circles, which for centuries have supported oral learning. It is also shown in non-Indigenous learning circles where other media for learning are used. For example, in the Drumming Group at the Parkdale Activities and Recreation Centre (PARC), drumming is used as a medium for learning about how the self and others can interact creatively. In the Health Action Theatre for Seniors, drama is used by the participants as a medium for exploring and articulating health issues encountered by seniors. In other groups, written language is used, but is not required for full participation. The Action Group at PARC is an example. Here issues of program governance and advocacy for psychiatric survivors are addressed using written documents, letters, meeting notes, etc., but the facilitators are careful to present this written material orally so that no one is excluded from participating and learning. The Fisheries Discussion Group in Digby County, Nova Scotia is actually focused on a written document, a study on the fisheries, but whatever the participants understand through reading the document is contextualized through discussion, to which everyone brings considerable knowledge of the fisheries.

So an essential aspect of inclusion is the use of various media for learning, and not privileging the preferred medium of educational institutions, written language. This is not always easy. Whether or not we were successful in school, anyone who has attended school bears its mark. In Indigenous circles, this is addressed through the rediscovery of a traditional mode of learning. In non-Indigenous circles, approaches to learning that do not privilege written language have to be developed through a process of experimentation and continual self examination. To do this, facilitators and other group participants need to be aware of written language as a potential barrier to learning, as well as a potentially useful medium, and be alert to participants who are less adept at using written language. As literacy workers, we have learned to be alert in this way. In the learning circles, we sometimes noticed participants being left out because their difficulty with written language had been forgotten. It takes time to learn not to forget, and this is one reason why self examination needs to be part of a learning circle's process.

In some cases, explicit literacy instruction is a useful complement to participation in a learning circle. This is modeled in the Literacy Group at PARC. Here, participants in learning circles at PARC receive direct literacy instruction. This

instruction is based on written materials that the participants encounter in PARC learning circles, or writing that they want to do for these learning circles, or it may be based on written materials connected with the issues and ideas discussed within the Literacy Group itself. Although this group is designed for the direct instruction of word recognition, spelling, punctuation and other reading and writing practices, it does not focus on these practices in isolation from the larger learning that is happening in the learning circles, and in the Literacy Group itself. Nor is the Literacy Group used to promote the idea that written language is the key to learning. But this group does acknowledge the potential for implicit literacy learning in learning circles, and provides an additional opportunity for learning circle participants by complementing implicit learning with direct instruction.

Not privileging academic knowledge. The learning circles that we studied were inclusive in that they did not privilege academic knowledge over other kinds of knowledge. In part, this was the automatic result of not privileging written language, since knowledge of written language is embedded in academic knowledge. But academic knowledge can be presented orally, and can be given special status in oral discussion. For example, knowledge of social science could have been privileged in the discussions of the Fisheries Group. In discussions of health issues, knowledge from controlled double-blind studies could be seen to be more significant than the traditional Indigenous knowledge about what people need to be healthy. When they are truly inclusive, learning circles do not privilege academic knowledge in that way. Academic knowledge becomes one kind of knowledge, in negotiation with other kinds of knowledge, as a learning circle struggles to make sense of issues and ideas through the experience of everyone around the circle. In this kind of negotiation, participants with academic knowledge need to be constantly alert to the limitations of their own kind of knowledge, willing to contribute their knowledge, but also willing to listen and discuss outside of the confines of academic discourse.

Negotiating acceptable behaviour. In the learning circles that we studied, we observed behaviour that would not be acceptable in some learning environments. For example, in the PARC learning groups, a participant may leave if s/he is feeling anxious. Or a participant may become withdrawn and unengaged with the group for a while. This is not rudeness; the participants in these groups are dealing with difficult mental health problems and the effects of medication. Nor is this behaviour the result of an "anything goes" attitude on the part of facilitators and other participants. The rules in the learning circles at PARC are negotiated and renegotiated by the participants. In these negotiations, everyone's needs are taken into account. Acceptable behaviour is established through consensus, rather than through conventional expectations. Small adjustments in conventional expectations can make a large difference in who can be included in a learning circle.

Taking away the pressure. In academic institutions, we are under pressure to learn. Curricula are designed, timelines are established for "covering"

curricula, tests and assignments are scheduled. In learning circles, this pressure is taken away. Participation is voluntary. Participants are valued for what they contribute, but not required to contribute. There is nothing that must be learned. We found that the accepting, exploratory nature of learning in learning circles is central to their success as inclusive learning environments.

Exploring. Exploratory learning does more than taking away pressure. It creates opportunities. With no curriculum to follow, no predetermined outcomes, learning circles are free to follow where discussion leads them. In the Multicultural Women's Group, discussion about preparing food for the meetings has led to discussion about cultural diversity and building trust and acceptance in multicultural communities. In the Family History Group, discussing family history has led to discussion about cultural reclamation in Indigenous communities. Exploratory learning is more than learning without institutional demands, it is a way of opening up to our potential for learning together. It is inclusive in this positive sense, in what it does as well as in what it does not do.

Outcomes. It follows from all of the above that it is neither possible nor desirable to predetermine outcomes for learning circles. If a learning circle is inclusive, important learning will take place. The learning circles we studied focused on being inclusive in the ways described in this section. They were:

- welcoming
- supportive
- flexible
- non-hierarchical
- self-managed
- exploratory

By focusing on process, they became inclusive learning environments, and because they were inclusive learning environments, their successes exceeded any outcomes that could have been prescribed in advance.

The Impact of Learning Circles on the Community and Participants

by Janice Brant

The Widening the Circle Symposium brought together representatives from several learning circles identified in the study, and included representation from rural, urban, and Indigenous communities. This gathering presented the research team with an opportunity to hear directly from participants and facilitators about the impact of learning circles on individuals and communities

In order to synthesize the impact of learning circles on individuals and communities I have organized the discussion under five distinct headings:

holistic, spiritual (see), emotional (feel), intellectual (think), and physical (act). These headings arise from the data and offer a means of managing the collective responses expressed by the group.

First and foremost a number of responses were "holistic" or characterized by wholeness; that is spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical aspects are present and extend outward to the total environment. "The total environment" is the recognition of self in relationship to family, community, Nation, and creation. One participant at the symposium described this as recognizing that we are "part of a larger picture." Being part of a larger picture is recognizing a shared human condition in which each person plays a crucial role in the world and has something valuable to contribute. This includes people taking ownership of and for what is happening in their community and circle, building support networks, and assuming responsibility for one another without ignoring the inherent autonomy of individuals.

The symposium participants also spoke to the healing potential of teaching and learning that occur in the circle and impact on participants. The incidents they described were relationship-based and stemmed from the development of friendships, partnerships with community organizations, the inclusion of people with diverse heritage and experiences, as well as intergenerational relationships in which young and old people teach, support, and learn from one another. Learning circles are about people and bringing people together to widen the circle for the purpose of sharing and learning.

A number of the responses from the symposium participants expressed spiritual connections and understandings that give strength to the individual spirit. These reflections included the power and strength of learning about one's own culture, history, and identity; developing trust in one's self and therefore others; reciprocating love, support, and encouragement to others; reconnecting and communicating the joy of nurturing relationships. Symposium participants shared both their observations and personal journeys of exploring creativity, discovering personal resiliency, and uncovering a belief in their own potential to learn. The gathering also established that these spiritual connections have the potential to create a ripple effect that extends beyond the learning circle and into the community. As learning circle participants build confidence and explore their inner strength they are better prepared and equipped to pursue other challenges or have new courage to make positive change in their lives and communities.

A number of participants from the symposium spoke to the emotional quality and experience of learning circles. Learning circles supported individuals in getting to know themselves on an emotional level and challenged them to explore their own feelings of grief, sadness, joy, and love. Some learning circles in the Indigenous community, although focused on sewing or drumming create a space for dealing with anger, unresolved grief, sadness, shame, and loneliness in the safety and security of the circle environment. Emotional unburdening is considered a natural and necessary component of personal growth and life long

learning in the Indigenous community. In other circles, participants experienced feelings of commonality despite differences in age, gender, and cultural heritage. Generally, participants identified feelings of respect for one's self and others; respect for space and diversity; as well as mutual support and encouragement.

Participants talked about "being the only one" and how learning circles fostered a space where participants could see and feel that they were not alone or "the only one." The learning circle itself became a space of common ground, where the circle participants could collectively give voice to the challenges, injustices, or problems that are part of the human condition. Participants felt a great sense of comfort in knowing that they were embraced and valued by their learning circle.

Learning circles are intellectually stimulating and challenge participants to explore new thought processes, problem solving, and decision making techniques. Learning circles offer participants the opportunity to share and explore their ideas on various topics or issues addressed by their circle. This includes the opportunity to look at common problems and issues together from various and diverse perspectives. Many felt that the sharing of personal stories and lived experiences provided a mechanism for breaking down barriers around racism and stereotypes, and encouraged participants to develop greater appreciation for others by becoming aware of their commonalities and respecting difference. Learning circles also create other types of awareness, for example it may introduce participants to programs and services that are available to assist them. Learning circles empower individuals and communities to explore learning on their own terms and within an environment that is appropriate and comfortable for them.

Finally, learning circles impact individuals and communities on a physical level in that they show us how to be in a group, break down isolation by bringing people together in a circle, create a space for action, encourage sharing and self expression in a safe space, as well as reveal our individual and collective skills and abilities. Learning circles can help participants to realize their gifts and discover amazing things about themselves through theatre, music, sewing, cooking, telling stories, organizing events, and more. The physical manifestation of our gifts and the release of emotions through the body in the form of tears and laughter can have a revitalizing effect and increase the esteem and confidence of participants. Equally important are learning circles that share and prepare food together as a means of providing fellowship. Sharing food to nourish the body is symbolic of the nourishment that we receive through participation in learning circles.

6 Recommendations

This recommendations piece was written after the Widening the Circle Symposium. In incorporates ideas from the narratives with ideas that emerged during the Symposium. The recommendations were discussed and finalized by the researchers and by the Working Group.

Although this project was not mainly about policy change, we gained some insights from our research that may have some useful public policy implications. The following recommendations are based on what we learned by studying a diverse selection of learning circles, by listening to some learning circle participants who were brought together for the Widening the Circle Symposium and by engaging in discussions with the project's Working Group. In order to think about the project's recommendations we posed two questions about learning circles:

- Do learning circles contribute to the public good?
- How can learning circles be supported?

By answering these questions, we hope to contribute to our understanding of learning circles in Canada in a way that informs decision-making by policy makers, researchers and community groups.

But before going on to answer these questions we should revisit what we in this project meant by learning circles. This is important, in order to keep our recommendations focused on the kinds of the learning circles we wanted to address, and not some other unrelated ones. Any Google search on "learning circles" will reveal the vast array of groups and activities that people call learning circles, from management sales training to virtual networking of professionals to monthly membership meetings. As we stated above, the learning circles we looked at have some specific features that set then apart from these other groups: an emphasis on face-to-face on a regular basis, peer learning and a focus on specific actions. These are described elsewhere in this report. These characteristics also differentiate the learning circles of this project from *support groups* which, while they are often beneficial to people in dealing with important situations and issues in their lives, are not primarily about learning.

In making recommendations relating to public policy, the first question we need to pose is: Do learning circles contribute to the public good? By listening to learning circle participants, organizers and facilitators, we got a clear sense that learning circles do serve the public good in a number of ways. These can be roughly sorted into three categories, that is, learning circles contribute to the public good:

- as effective and inclusive learning opportunities,

- as a means of increasing social capital, in ways other than adult learning opportunities,
- as a way of increasing the effectiveness of other programs by bringing in the dimension of learning into their work.

These categories should not be taken to imply that adult education does not also in itself contribute to social capital. Far from it; in fact there is an extensive literature linking social capital and adult learning [Balatti, J., and I. Falk (2001). "Socioeconomic Contributions of Adult Learning to Community: A Social Capital Perspective." Launceston: University of Tasmania. Available at http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au/files/discussion/2001/D10-2001.pdf.] We are only making a distinction between those contributions to social capital that relate specifically to adult learning and those that are more general.

Effective and inclusive learning opportunities. Learning circles contribute to the public good by providing inclusive settings for adult learning opportunities, as we have seen on the section on learning and inclusion. Learning circles do this because they:

- create supportive and accessible learning settings,
- provide opportunities for adults to learn skills, such as literacy skills, in contexts that are meaningful to them,
- help participants to understand who they are, where they are going and how to get there,
- support and encourage peer learning,
- support the creation of place-based learning communities [Faris, R. (2004). "Lifelong Learning, Social Capital and Place Management in Learning Communities and Regions: A Rubic's Cube or a Kaleidoscope?" Observatory PASCAL. Available at http://www.obs-pascal.com/resources/faris_2004.pdf.]

A means of increasing social capital. We also heard that learning circles contribute to the public good by increasing social capital. This concept has been defined in various ways and has been the focus of intense debate in recent years. For the purposes of this project, we need not concern ourselves with this debate or the literature it has generated. Whatever the ultimate conclusion of these debates, social capital is a useful reference point for discussing the value of learning circles in Canada. It is enough to point out that most definitions make an explicit link between group learning and social capital. For example, Maskell (2000) put it this way:

Social capital refers to the values and beliefs that citizens share In their everyday dealings and which give meaning and provide design for all sorts of rules. The word "capital" implies that we are dealing an asset. The word "asset" tells us that it is attained through membership in the community. Social capital is accumulated within the community through processes of interaction and learning (Maskell, P. [2000]. "Social Capital, Innovation and Competitiveness." In Baron,

S., J. Field and T. Schuller, eds. *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives*. New York, Oxford University Press.)

As noted above, the link between adult learning and social capital is well established. The link between non-formal learning and social capital has also been well-documented [Faris, R. (2004). "Lifelong Learning, Social Capital and Place Management in Learning Communities and Regions: A Rubic's Cube or a Kaleidoscope?" Observatory PASCAL. Available at http://www.obs-pascal.com/resources/faris_2004.pdf.] The question here is how in particular learning circles increase social capital, above and beyond what other kinds of adult education contribute.

Some of the ways that learning circles support and increase social capital are by:

- breaking down barriers within and among communities,
- synthesizing different kinds of knowledge, e.g. local ecological knowledge and scientific knowledge,
- increasing understanding and tolerance of cultural differences,
- creating networks for personal support,
- setting community goals,
- supporting community development,
- supporting cultural reclamation,
- providing opportunities for literacy learning.

A way of increasing the effectiveness of other programs by bringing the dimension of learning into their work. Learning circles contribute to the public good by enabling other non-educational community organizations to be more effective in reaching their goals by building learning into their programming. There were number of examples of this in the narratives, and this point was brought up several times in discussion at the Widening the Circle Symposium.

How to support learning circles. If we are right in concluding that learning circles have some role in contributing to the public good, what role should government take in order to support them. This is a good point to stop and pose the question: Does government need to do anything at all about learning circles? After all, these circles seem to be happening anyway, and seem to be making a difference.

When looking at the extent of non-formal adult learning as a whole the OECD came to a similar question in its study of adult learning in Canada.

The question is what to make of the extensive amount of informal learning. Perhaps we should all simply leave this issue alone, for fear that recognizing informal learning, organizing it and rewarding it will simply turn everything into a variant of formal learning- bureaucratization of everything [Balatti, J., and I. Falk (2001). Socioeconomic Contributions of Adult Learning to Community: A

Social Capital Perspective. Launceston: University of Tasmania. Available at http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au/files/discussion/2001/D10-2001.pdf.]

At the other end of the spectrum there is a temptation to say that, if learning circles are really that valuable to the public good, then government should get to work on designing and implementing policies and programs that will make them more effective and accountable. Canada has a long history of the state playing this kind of role in supporting activities beneficial to the public good. For example, the *Participaction* program in the 1970's supported exercise as a means of improving population health.

Between the extremes of saying that there should be an absolute role for either the state or civil society, participants at the Widening the Circle Symposium found a middle ground. They said that, yes, there are some ways that governments could support, strengthen and increase learning circles, but it probably does not need a special policy initiative, or new grant program, or bureaucratic agency. The fear was that this kind of approach might do more to weaken learning circles than to strengthen them. The nature of learning circles is fundamentally that they are part of civil society. That is they are formed by groups of people and community organizations without a specific state incentive or direction. This may one of the reasons they are so effective and abundant.

Having said that there may be some very practical and useful things that government could do to support the development and strengthening of learning circles, as follows.

- Promote public awareness of the value of learning circles.
- Provide support for workshops on learning circles conducted by learning circle participants for interested people and organizations in their communities.
- Provide support for workshops designed for people already involved in learning circles so that expertise can be shared and developed.
- Provide support for networking by learning circle participants on a national level.
- Make public space available to learning circles.
- Make funding available to learning circles for start-up, childcare, transportation and supplies.
- Make funding available to learning circles for facilitation.
- Make funding available for support on literacy issues, such as professional development on learning without relying on written language, using accessible written language, explicit and implicit literacy learning. In some communities, there are community literacy programs that could be funded to provide these kinds of support.
- Provide funding to existing networks that are supporting learning circles, such as the Women's Institutes.

The key point here is that are ways in which government could support learning circles. Undoubtedly, much of the support could be provided through existing programs, within existing policy frameworks. This should not be taken as an invitation for government to do nothing. On the contrary we believe there are important opportunities here for the federal and provincial governments to support individuals and communities.

7 Resources

Learning in Indigenous Communities

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Study Circles

http://www.nald.ca/CLR/study/scbiblio.htm A good bibliography of study circles articles and studies.

http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC33/Andrews.htm More on general study circles (in more plain language.)

http://www.studycircles.org This website promotes study circles as community practice in democracy.

http://www.kumc.edu/uwwy/studycircles.html Kansas Study Circles, building stronger connections between parents, communities and schools.

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Social Capital

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Social Change

Connon Unda, Jean (2005). "What's Involved in Bringing About Change?" *Literacies*, Fall, 2005. Available at http://www.literacyjournal.ca/literacies/6-2005/readers_f05.htm

Freire, Paulo (1987). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum

Gloubermann, Sholom, and Brenda Zimmerman (2002). "Complicated and Complex Systems: What Would Successful Reform of Medicare Look Like?" http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/pdf/romanow/pdfs/Glouberman_E.pdf

Milner, H. (2002). *Civic Liberty: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
http://www.paulofreireinstitute.org/ Paulo Freire Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles

Formal and Informal Learning

Colley, Helen, Phil Hodkinson and Janice Malcolm (2002). "Non-Formal Learning: Mapping the Conceptual Terrain. A Consultation Report for the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA)". Available at http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/colley_informal_learning.htm

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Livingstone, David (2002). "Mapping the Iceberg". Working Paper Number 54 of the Research Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL). Available at
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/54DavidLivingstone.pdf

Taylor, Maurice C., Glenn Pound and Brenda Wright (2004). *Informal Learning Practices and Media Perceptions of Adults with Low Literacy Skills* (a series of reports). Ottawa: Partnerships in Learning. Available http://library.nald.ca/research/browse/series/?name=Informal+Learning+Practices+and+Media+Perceptions+of+Adults+with+Low+Literacy+Skills