Here is our final report on the Learning Circles Project to our funder, the National Literacy Secretariat, including excerpts from feedback on the project and the report of our External Evaluator, Shawn Conway.

Deliverables, feedback, evaluation. We have completed the project. The project is now generally referred to as The Learning Circles Project, because the approach to inclusive lifelong learning that we identified, described and tried to support through this work is a learning circles approach.

In our proposal, we undertook to deliver the following.

- A resource book written in clear language and aimed at facilitators in community settings on developing and implementing inclusive lifelong learning groups and identifying models for good practice.
- A report that describes the research and presents findings, including descriptions of all of the learning groups that were identified and detailed descriptions of the learning groups that were studied in depth. The report will also include recommendations for sustaining inclusive lifelong learning in Canada, incorporating feedback from across Canada. Policy implications for implementing lifelong learning models nationally and implications for literacy program and research will be discussed.

We proposed to develop these materials as texts which we would post online. As the project developed, we decided to develop a website, encouraging readers to explore our work in various ways. On this website, we have provided sixteen in-depth narratives of learning circles, short descriptions and overview descriptions of other learning circles in rural, urban and Indigenous communities, analysis of the values and practices of learning circles, a history of the project and a description of its methodology, a resource lists, excerpts from the transcript of a symposium that brought together participants from ten of the learning circles in the study, policy recommendations coming out of that symposium and *The Beginner's Guide to Learning Circles,* a Powerpoint presentation aimed at people interested in facilitating or participating in learning circles (the resource book). This website is at www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm.

In addition, as part of the website, we have provided a 60-page document, in PDF format, which can be printed and read as a report. This document includes less than one-third of the material on the website, but provides a compact, linear overview of our work.

www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm

The 60-page document and *The Beginner's Guide* are available in French. These will be posted at a separate location at NALD in January.

The English and French versions of the 60-page document were used to solicit feedback on the project. We received substantial feedback from across the country. From this feedback, we conclude that the approach to inclusive community learning that has emerged from our work, what we call "a learning circles approach," is a broadly useful. A number of the people who gave us feedback mentioned that they were involved with starting learning circles, or planning to start learning circles after reading the report. In addition, a number of people said that we should pursue this work, finding partnerships to support networking and workshops on a learning circles approach to community learning. We have begun to do this at a local level, by supporting the creation of learning circles in our communities through in-kind workshops and applications for funding for learning circles. People also encouraged us to do further research.

Here are some excerpts from the feedback we received.

One implication of this work is the need to be aware that literacy is a potential barrier. This is more of a problem for participants than for practitioners. It works two ways:

1. Participants in projects who are struggling with non-literacy issues (poverty, addiction, mental health, etc) may not have awareness of or sympathy for those who have literacy as a barrier.

2. Where I work, at a Vancouver drop in for women in the sex trade, a lot of women use the drop-in but do not come into the learning centre. Many of them struggle with literacy and are afraid if they come in they will be asked to read. They associate "learning" with "print" and are either not interested or afraid.
Betsy Alkenbrack, British Columbia

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In Manitoba, less than 1% of the 40% (IALSS results) who are at levels 1 and 2 literacy competency, actually attend literacy programs. That's a lot of Manitobans who don't have the literacy skills to cope with the challenges of the knowledge/technology based society in which we live. I have been thinking for some time that, if society and government are going to have any influence at all in helping these unreached Manitobans to embark on intentional learning, it will have to be in other ways than through literacy programs.

I have been advocating that literacy practitioners work with facilitators of any groups in the community that are already gathering for some purpose – e.g., diabetes support groups, family first groups, information dispensing groups (living wills) – so that the way the groups are facilitated will result in participants improving their skills and strategies for learning whatever it is that they

want/need to learn. Literacy development would be embedded into the activities that constituted the group's reason for being. This is a situational task-based approach to enhancing literacy skills.

As I was reading the report on the Learning Circles project, I said to myself, "Aha! Here is another way of engaging Canadians in intentional learning that will have a spin-off result of increased literacy skills and strategies."

I also remembered how important the coffee time was at literacy programs. In effect, they were tiny learning circles. The conversation around the table ran the gamut of many topics, but it was always relevant to the participants and there was a great deal of learning by individuals and collectively as a group. All the criteria of a learning group as described on page 3 existed in these gatherings around a common table. And the impacts were just as they are described on page 3. The rest of the learning in the class was what learners thought they should be learning, but the learning around the coffee table had the biggest impact on their thinking and on the way they lived their lives.

When I was teaching, I liked to begin every class, whether it was adult literacy or EAL, with a sharing time about what new things we had learned through the course of daily living and/or how we had applied what we had been learning in class – what we had read or written, what oral language connections we had made, how and where we had applied thinking and problem solving strategies. I can see how these were the beginnings of the learning circles described in the report. I think we need to stress more the importance of these ways of learning when we train new adult literacy practitioners.
Margaret Chambers, Manitoba

Using the learning circles approach enables a community-based adult literacy program to break down barriers and address long standing socially constructed pillars that could appear threatening and intimidating to various groups of adult learners. Such barriers have effectively silenced Aboriginal peoples and placed them on the margins of society.

With a learning circles approach many Aboriginal adult learners have an opportunity to voice their ideas and thoughts and re-establish an alternative form of knowing and learning. When the traditional barriers are removed and an environment of safety and acceptance is established then individuals will feel free to speak. They will develop their own language and become able to name and talk about the problems that they face in their day-to-day lives. They may even be able to add their voice to others and move from the margins into the socially valued.
Nida Doherty, Ontario

Learning circles support my own belief that we need to see literacy learning much more broadly than having classes. Many of the folks who could profit from classes don't see themselves in those classes. They aren't exactly beating down the doors for entry and if we are to believe the IALSS reports, many

don't believe they have a problem as we see it. The other fact the field must come to grips with is that our culture doesn't highly respect literacy learning. We don't get very excited by the idea of a learning culture either. So, less formal learning is something to look at. *Anne Marie Downie, Nova Scotia*

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        Institutions like Caledon have proven that substantial literacy gains can be had when participants are engaged in endeavor together which has value to the community e.g., building a well in rural India. They will naturally reach for the documents and other skills which support them in this endeavor. It becomes the way into literacy-related learning. I would argue that this methodology holds the key for "inclusive" strategies for groups in particular who continue to fall outside the system from any perspective. It is the place to start. The outcomes for individuals will typically lead them to reach for other learning opportunities and will assist them in starting to break the cycles of failure and poverty. In my opinion, if we are to redress the considerable exclusion that our society has created, it must involve long-term strategies which see people through fairly predictable cycles of learning and growth which will lead them to a place of dignity and self-worth however the individual chooses to define that. In many cases, it will lead them as adults to work-related choices. This would be the moment in time where they would be involved in programs/training/education which is narrower and more traditional by the demands of requiring accreditation for things like nursing or electrical work. Time enough then for very specific and targeted Essential Skills instruction if you will. Circles are an earlier point in the path . . .
        There are certain principles of PLAR in its purest philosophical sense which cause me to soldier on for its cause: asset building, focusing on learning irrespective of source, flexible means of proof, communication device to display what an individual knows and can do and who they are, recognizing someone. There are certain variants of PLAR called models which trouble me greatly as they are exclusionary and thus contradict the fundamental principle of recognition and flexibility. Circles in my mind embody the very philosophies which I find attractive about PLAR. Thus, I see Circles as a means of further exploring/defining a new PLAR – one which is inclusive, possibly oral, highly visual or audible most likely, building on assets and laying the groundwork for the expression of transferable learning which can bridge into new opportunities for individuals – again as defined by their choice. *Sandi Howell, Manitoba*

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- Participants can form the process from what they put in
- Goals can be put in place, they can also change, there is flexibility
- People get to see that there are learning environments that are safe, comfortable and accessible
- They can leave their worries about previous barriers behind

- The research includes an Indigenous perspective (i.e. drumming and sewing narratives) *Notes from an interview with Darlene King, Ontario*

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Recommends that we produce a four to five page summary of the study for wider distribution. This summary could include a glossary of terms describing different kinds of learning approaches.

Feels that we have just begun to scratch the surface on issues of class, gender and race. He found some of our ways of talking about inter-cultural understanding limited, for example, saying that learning circles promote "tolerance." They might go further, helping participants to "understand and embrace cultural differences."

Would like to see more research on how this approach works to support learning across cultural differences. He believes that funding could be found for this kind of research.

Believes that it would have been useful for the study to have presented a more explicit analysis of class, gender and race issues. More clarity about what we mean by "inclusive" would be useful.

Sees supporting a learning circles approach to community learning as important work, and encouraged us to find partners to pursue this work further. *Notes from an interview with Amanuel Melles, Ontario*

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Two of the most fundamental principles of community learning and learning about community learning I think important to the project:

1. Learning has to begin with the experience of the learner (which in many political and formal forms of learning, life experience is devalued).

2. When researching learners, the researchers learn.

A second observation is how the report highlights all the gaps in formal learning such as:

- equity
- oral and written or both (and various ways of learning literacy)
- a sense of belonging (sense of community)
- a safe place and scared place
- self esteem
- policy change (or alternative forms of knowing)
- listening
- collective decision making

While the report rightfully concentrates on learning circles in the context of

learners' experience, there are some fundamental questions that arise of which may inform future projects or not?

1. The gap between citizens and the governance and economic structures that effect them in terms of fundamental human rights and democratic principles.

2. Governmental and funding support. While the symposium was very cautious in terms of how to obtain governmental support, the fear was that this kind of approach might do 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, therefore government should take responsibility for support but "through existing programs, with in existing policy frameworks." The value to the public good is obvious, yet not supported which raises some questions of gaining support without being coopted. Learning Circles will become more and more critical to basic survival of civil society and more questions need to be asked about this especially in the context of alternative or authentic ways of knowing. Why is it that learning circles are so critical to civil society yet so un-acknowledged as
legitimate knowledge? *Sherry Pictou, Nova Scotia*

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Il est certain que la langue écrite n'est pas toujours ni nécessairement le meilleure moyen d'apprentissage. Les formatrices et formateurs en alphabétisation en sont très conscients. Or leur rôle explicite est d'aider les personnes apprenantes à développer une facilité avec la langue écrite, afin qu'elles puissent participer pleinement à la société civile. Cela ne nie pas l'existence d'autres moyens d'apprentissage. Par exemple, l'apprentissage oral joue un rôle important dans le développement de l'écrit chez les personnes apprenantes adultes. Les activités d'apprentissage liées à la découverte de soi-même, de sa culture et de sa communauté prouvent régulièrement leur efficacité dans l'apprentissage dans les centres d'alphabétisation. Ici, on voit l'importance d'une complémentarité possible entre les cercles d'apprentissage et les centres d'alphabétisation. Les cercles d'apprentissage, en éliminant l'alphabétisme comme barrière à l'apprentissage, créent un environnement où l'alphabétisation peut avoir lieu. Certains cercles d'apprentissages offrent des occasions précises pour l'alphabétisation, sans pour autant la privilégier. C'est à cette jonction qu'un partenariat avec un centre d'alphabétisation pourrait intervenir efficacement. *Célinie Russell, Ontario*

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Learning in a learning circle is different from formal learning – how are the learning processes different? These differences have not been determined yet. *Notes from an interview with Maurice Taylor, Ontario*

www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm

Because the learning circles approach begins with the interests and concerns of adults, it is grounded in a context of importance to them. It demands confidence and special skills on the part of adult educators in order to act as facilitators of learning rather than "instructors." There also has to be a way to reimburse adult educators/facilitators for work that likely will not lead to credentials for circle participants. The benefits of learning in this way will have to be strategically documented. The time, effort and resources currently spent on trying to convince adults to improve their literacy skills can be reallocated to incorporating literacy into activities that already taking place in many communities . . .

This is a natural blend of community development and literacy. Literacy and learning therefore result THROUGH community development activities such as those undertaken in learning circles, as communities address their local concerns and interests rather than literacy FOR community development or other ends. Evaluating the "outcomes" in terms of community and civic engagement would help to validate community development work and strengthen communities while building confidence and capacity of the participants . . .

Formal adult education requires much greater public cost than informal learning circles. We must be careful that governments do not see this as a way to abdicate responsibility for adult education, leaving it up to individuals and their communities. As the 2006 Canadian Policy Research Network report "Too Many Left Behind" states, we must work to ensure that there are enough formal learning opportunities for those who want a second chance, something adults might realize after participating in a learning circle. *Nayda Veeman, Saskatchewan*

The biggest implication that I can see for a learning circle approach to community development work is that it is an economical model. The supports required are not expensive, a facilitator, a safe place to meet, funding to remove barriers such as childcare and transportation and money for food and other supplies. This should be a doable model for any community group in the country. The fact that learning circles are not widely known or discussed is disheartening, but that can be remedied.

Communities can provide a safe place to meet, funding so that facilitators can improve their skills, funding for things like food, childcare and transportation. In supporting a learning circle, a community will expose the many layers that are present and yet sometimes invisible or ignored. This can be an enriching experience or a threatening one. A learning circle can provide a network for community development that leads to the management of community resources, concern for families, concern for livelihoods and above all else, concern for the community itself.

When a community understands that the right to participate in the work force is an integral part of the learning process, will it open doors to allow young

people, persons with physical challenges and different ways of knowing to enrich their community? Will it become a more vibrant community because it values all its members? I would hope so . . .

I like that the original group formed a working group to keep exploring the issues surrounding inclusive lifelong learning. The statement that you eventually saw yourselves as "a learning circle, a place of discussion and discovery" is an indicator of the growth process you went through. The researchers becoming an inner circle within the working group is also interesting, you replicated the model you were studying which, I believe added an extra dimension to your research. You added layers to your work at every opportunity, from working group and researchers becoming learning circles and then hosting a symposium that was also a learning circle. In labour circles, we call this the learning spiral, an action-reflection model that leads to change and growth; it is present in your report. *Linda Wentzel, Nova Scotia*

- I would like to do a community portfolio based on the culture, drawing out the rich history of the community
- Demonstrates reverence for all people in the community and validates people as members of the community
- Learning circles fit the prior learning assessment context perfectly, they are like hand and glove
- The circle concept is very powerful and is designed to protect the integrity of all individuals   *Notes from an interview with Paul Zakos, Ontario*

In addition to the general feedback, briefly excerpted above, we received feedback on specific points in the report, and have made revisions in the PDF reports and in the material on the website.

The project has been evaluated by an External Evaluator, Shawn Conway. His report follows.

An Evaluation of "The Learning Circles Project"

By Shawn Conway
shawnco@ralphthornton.org

Background

Many months before the Learning Circle Project was approved and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat (N.L.S.), a group of literacy practitioners began meeting in response to the Movement for Canadian Literacy's National Action Plan for Literacy. The group was concerned about the proposal for a national adult education system and what they felt was the potential for a focus on academic learning in academic environments. The group called for "inclusive lifelong learning" to be one of the plan's goals and considered piloting inclusive community learning centres. But after several meetings the group realized they did not have enough information about the variety of community learning situations that currently exist. They decided that a more valuable project would be one that explores and sheds light on inclusive community learning in its various forms. It was in this context of open-ended exploration that the "Lifelong Learning Working Group," as the group called itself, was formed and the Learning Circle project was conceived.

The Working Group consisted of highly skilled and seasoned literacy practitioners who had observed the trends and fashions of literacy policy for well over two decades. They defined themselves as a learning circle, which meant, among other things, that they were committed to an emergent, open-ended process of observation, analysis and reflection. This exploratory group process mirrored what they believed to be the kind of process that occurs in many other learning circles and is, in fact, a defining characteristic of inclusive learning circles. It was in this context that I was chosen as the Outside Evaluator for the Learning Circles project.

Evaluation Process

Designing the Evaluation Framework

The initial project proposal submitted to the N.L.S. in late 2003 stated that the objectives of the project were:

1. To describe models of informal learning that have managed to include participants who have difficulty using written language, or who might not want to use written language to support their learning;
2. To explore some of these models in depth;
3. To identify best practices from the models;
4. To identify benefits to participants;
5. To identify benefits to communities;
6. To identify ways in which knowledge about informal, inclusive learning can be shared;
7. To explore possible links between this kind of learning and adult literacy programs;
8. To propose ways in which inclusive lifelong learning can be strengthened across Canada;
9. To propose new approaches to lifelong learning.

As I prepared for my first meeting with the Working Group in the fall of 2004, I considered these objectives and I wondered what the group might define as the indicators of success and outcomes for each of the objectives. For many years, in human services work and education, nationally and internationally, the accepted wisdom has been that a project is legitimate and meaningful to the degree that it has well-defined and pre-defined indicators, benchmarks and outcome statements. For example, in a project of this kind, we might create a list of indicators that equate success with participants mastering job application forms or reporting that they have more confidence in using written language for their day-to-day tasks.

Soon into my first meeting with the Working Group it became quite clear that the Group members had no intention of creating lists of pre-defined indicators of success and tailoring their research in order to look for certain details and experiences and not others. In fact, the Group was ambivalent about the whole concept of "evaluation" laden as it is, especially in the literacy field, with histories of testing, benchmarks, employment preparedness, etc. much of which has been counterproductive and sometimes destructive. At the same time the Group was very committed to deep engagement with and analysis of learning circles, how they work and how they are effective for their members and communities.

While the Group welcomed the idea of developing a process to keep them focussed on their larger goals, they were opposed to a process that restricted or predetermined opportunities for learning circles and their participants to present or speak for themselves. As one Group member put it, they wanted to "build indicators without anticipating the end." They wanted to keep their broad destination in mind but not "filter" people's experience through predetermined criteria.

The Group also wanted to avoid coming up with a new formula for lifelong learning that could become a new fetish for policy makers. That is, the Group did

not want their work to support a new policy directive whereby learning circles are defined in a particular way and are promoted as a solution to "literacy problems."

If, as the original proposal stated, they wanted to "provide a view of the possibilities for inclusive lifelong learning" that learning circle models represent, then they would need an evaluation process peculiar to their open-ended, exploratory research process. The evaluation process would need to allow for, rather than circumscribe, the organic, dynamic process of the Working Group as well as the open-ended emergent lessons and recommendations that follow from the engagement with the learning circles.

So, instead of a set of indicators and narrow outcomes we designed an analytical framework that focussed on the three levels or areas of outcomes in the original proposal, namely, the resource book, the research process, and policy recommendations. The Group agreed to address the following questions on a continuing basis:

- Are we doing / have we done what we said we would do?
- What would we have done differently?
- What are we learning?
- So what? That is, what has changed / will change / should change because of what we have learned?
- Now what? (What is left to do?)
- What are the core factors that contribute to the learning of the Working Group?

Although these guiding questions were uncomplicated, they were in keeping with the Group's adherence to rigorous and honest reflection at each step in the research. Thus, while the evaluation framework seemed deceptively simple, it provided a useful guide to a group as strong and committed as the Working Group.

Interim Evaluation Meeting

The next stage in the evaluation process occurred after six months of further research. During this period the four researchers had been working with their respective learning circles and had been meeting or communicating via the telephone or email regarding their work.

In May of 2005, the whole Working Group and the Outside Evaluator met to discuss progress to date. In a note from the Project Facilitator prior to the meeting, it was stated that the meeting would be an opportunity to "look at how far the narratives and analysis have moved us toward a resource book and recommendations. Do we have what we need to develop the resource book and recommendations? What additional pieces do we need? At this point, what kinds of recommendations do we see coming out of this project?"

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By this time considerable work had been done by the researchers. The Working Group members were very satisfied with the sixteen draft narratives and the six draft analyses that had been written by the researchers. From my vantage point as Outside Evaluator, I saw that the researchers had already begun to articulate important lessons and suggestions regarding the overarching themes of how learning circles work and what makes them successful for their members and communities. There were already specific and rich drafts of writing with titles such as "How Do Things change Because of Learning Circles?", "Inside the Learning Circle: What Makes It Work?", and "Literacy and Inclusion."

It was also clear that the evaluation framework was providing the Working Group, and the researchers more particularly, with what they needed to stay focussed and to assess progress towards the project's goals.

My role at this meeting was to help facilitate the Group's reflection on how far along the work was, what was being learned and what else needed to be done. In general, the Group members responded well to the draft narratives and analyses and considered other questions and issues that the research had spurred. For example, an interesting process occurred whereby each level of learning circles provided opportunities for reflection. In its work with the sixteen learning circles, the researchers relied on each other and became a kind of learning circle themselves. In turn, the larger Working Group was a learning circle that reflected on and provided feedback about what the researchers were learning. This multi-layered process of reflection was named "analysis-by-discussion" by the Group and it encouraged a broad and exciting fabric of reflection, a sort of proof that learning circles are good vehicles for lifelong learning.

By the time of this meeting the researchers had also begun work on a website and had started to summarize what they had learned about learning circles. The lively and provocative "Beginners Guide to Learning Circles" eventually became the "resource book" envisioned in the original proposal.

The Widening the Circle Symposium

The Group's recognition of the significance of continual reflection and discussion led the Group to question the completeness of its observations. They agreed that if they were to continue to emphasize an open-ended reflection process, the project, and all those it touched, could benefit from a symposium involving some of the larger group of learning circle participants. In September, 2005 the "Widening the Circle" symposium was held and seemingly represented a shift in direction. The Group felt they needed to check their draft conclusions, to reflect and to explore experiences and concepts with a broader circle of people and specifically current learning circle participants. (See report for more details.) In this sense, the symposium was less a shift in direction and more a creative event directly in line with the principles and questions guiding the Working Group.

To the Working Group's credit, the symposium was a highly successful addition to the whole project. Discussion at the symposium enriched the draft ideas and conclusions of the researchers and Working Group and provided further material to build into the overall analysis and, in turn, the Guide, the final report and recommendations. As an outside evaluator, I found the decision to hold a symposium an important testimony not only to the integrity of the Working Group's process but also to the validity of the emergent, open-ended process of learning circles themselves. The symposium also showed that the evaluation framework was working well: the Group was continuing to ask open-ended questions and to gather diverse and abundant material about learning circles.

Feedback from Organizations

The last stage in the project's evaluation was the solicitation of feedback from literacy practitioners across the country. The Working Group asked interested people and groups the following questions:

1. What are the implications of a learning circles approach to community learning for adult literacy work?
2. What are the implications of this approach for community development work?
3. What are the implications for a community that you are involved with?
4. Do you have any thoughts about what kind of follow-up would be useful?
5. Plus any other thoughts that occur to you.

Here again the questions are broad and open-ended and indicate the researchers' thoughtfulness in seeking to hear about others' experiences and knowledge without circumscribing people's responses.

Project Outcomes

My final meeting with the Working Group in November, 2006 was dedicated to considering the feedback from the organizations and what was achieved overall in the project. This was also the time for a final reflection on the evaluative framework as a departure from the standard form of evaluation.

At this meeting the Working Group debated about some of the feedback particularly whether the intent of the project had been made clear and whether readers could see that the audience for the writing was wide open. Some felt the project writings needed to be a little more explicit regarding these points while others felt that it was important for the project outcomes to throw up more questions and to spur further reflection. The various documents are not intended to "represent" all learning circles or to offer a strict formula for them. Instead,

the outcomes (the Guide, the report, the narratives and analyses, and the recommendations) are meant to represent a thoughtful exploration.

Perhaps more significant was the discussion by the Group about the absence of Francophone voices in the project. While the Group did deliver what it promised, namely the French translation of the final report, the Group members recognized that it would have been useful for Francophone voices to have been involved at various stages of the project. It was noted that the Working Group had made efforts to involve some Francophone groups but that insufficient resources had been available to do more especially with respect to translation and feedback.

Regarding the key desired outcomes of the project – how learning circles work, of what value are they, and what can we learn from them as vehicles for lifelong learning – the Learning Circles Project has clearly delivered what it promised. In particular, the project has provided the following:

- A plain-language Beginner's Guide to Learning Circles that can be used as a conceptual introduction to learning circles. As some symposium participants stated, the Guide also recognizes and provides legitimacy for learning circles as an important model for learning;
- A rich collection of narratives that shows the range and variety of learning circles in Aboriginal, rural, and urban settings;
- A collection of highly insightful and unique analyses cum reflections regarding the learning circles model. Taken together, the Guide, the narratives and analytical writings make up an ample view of how learning circles can work as models of informal learning, and some of their benefits to participants and communities;
- An example, in the form of the symposium, of how an open-ended exploratory process can lead to a unique forum that engages learners in a sort of meta-analysis (analysis-by-discussion) of a learning process in which they are intimately involved;
- An evaluation framework that resists pre-determined ends but that serves as a rigorous guide in helping a group reach a project's destination;
- A set of recommendations that tentatively suggest how learning circles can contribute to the public good and how they might be supported;
- A strong case for learning circles as effective and inclusive opportunities for lifelong learning and for contributions to building social capital.

The Learning Circles Project has provided an abundance of ideas and material and exceeded in some ways what it set out to do (symposium, website, etc.) Although its conclusions and recommendations are especially relevant to the literacy field they are arguably as relevant to many other areas of civil society.   In particular, the concepts of open-ended reflection, emergent knowledge and continual exploration of what is meaningful for the individual and the community would be welcome additions in areas as diverse as environmental justice, community health and community development.

In the field of health, for instance, "learning" rather than behaviour modification could be tied more closely to determinants of health and could itself become a determinant of health. So too in the fields of community development and community economic development "learning" and learning circles could take an important place beside the standard language of "development," "growth," and "progress," terms which flow from the dominant values of the marketplace rather than core community values.

Though beyond the scope of this project, how learning circles models could be used elsewhere would constitute very valuable social research. In the meantime, the many lessons and conclusions of the Learning Circles Project will, it is to be hoped, encourage further work and action towards placing lifelong learning, in all its varieties, closer to the centre of how we live.