



## Learning Circles

© Shelley McClure

A learning circle is a method of conversation that brings together two or more individuals for the purpose of engaging in an honest dialogue (Baldwin, 1998; Dewar, 1994; McKenzie, 2003). Learning circles have been used throughout history, originating in the aboriginal community as a practical method for learning and precipitating social change (Baldwin, 1998; Bonner Curriculum, p. 3). The principle of adult learning is the foundation for learning circles. Adults bring life experiences to their learning through practical application and collaborative learning (Dewar, 1994; Roddick, 1993).

McKenzie advocated, "The richness of honest dialogue appears to be the essence of gathering in a circle. [It is] a powerful tool in the workplace to find spirit, strengthen teams, build relationships, and re-energize respectful communication" (2003, para 4). Baldwin further explained that circles are created when a group of individuals convene, creating a safe and honored space for a specific purpose. The process is one of self empowerment in which "Leadership rotates, responsibility is shared and the group comes to rely deeply on spirit" (1998, p. 14). The circle of committed participants creates a spirit of safety, peacefulness, attentiveness, trust, respect, cooperation and creativity. There is no right or wrong in the spirit of circle, the circle is a gathering of shared energy.

In circle practice there is a shared intention and commitment to open, honest dialogue. Isaacs (1999) defined dialogue as "a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people" (p.9). Wheatley (2002) reinforced Isaacs' definition stating, "It takes courage to

start a conversation. But if we don't start talking to one another, nothing will change. Conversation is the way we discover how to transform our world, together" (p. 27). Dialogue, conversation and the practice of circle reflects the constructivist learning theory. This theory advocates that learning is an active process of creating meaning from different experiences. Individuals participating in this learning try to make sense of something on their own with a facilitator and guardian guiding their direction.

Wheatley championed (2002) that the practice of circle envelops participants, creating a sanctuary where all voices can be heard. A climate of mutual respect and understanding is fostered through the commitment to be curious of others stories and to model and demonstrate respect to fellow participants. Roddick (1993) explained that "Storytelling and listening give voice to the soul of the people by offering opportunities to express and share their wisdom" (p. 108). Four reasons for the practice of circle is "a) to build community, b) to recover our history and envision the future, c) to value our folk culture and d) to contribute to the collective research" (Roddick).

## References

- Baldwin, C. (1998). *Calling the circle: The first and future culture*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Bonner Curriculum. *Learning circles: An introduction*. Retrieved March 3, 2007 from [http://www.bonner.org/resources/modules/modules\\_pdf/BonCurFacilLearnCircles.pdf](http://www.bonner.org/resources/modules/modules_pdf/BonCurFacilLearnCircles.pdf)
- Dewar, T. (1994). *Learning circles as catalyst: exploring adult educators' training and development*. Victoria, Canada: Unpublished document.
- McKenzie, C. (2003). Learning circles. Retrieved on March 3, 2007 from <http://www.learningbyheart.com/circles.html>
- Roddick, B. (1993). *Learning circles for lifelong learning connections*. Journal of the Alberta Association for Continuing Education, Vol 21, pp. 107-120.
- Wheatley, M. (2002). *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

---

Shelley McClure is the Principal of Aspiring Leadership Inc. and a Development Consultant.