

Learning Circles: A Train-the-Trainers Approach

Overview:

The ability to engage in dialogue and create a safe and respectful context for sharing ideas, views, and experiences is vital in the work of civic engagement leaders. A Learning Circle is a format for dialogue that invites participation in a manner that may be different from the typical conversational format, as it is not based on debate. It is a valuable and effective mode of communication that, when utilized correctly, can be a foundation for deep dialogue. This format has been used for decades by organizers and has been popular with faculty and others, such as in the Invisible College founded in the mid-1980's. A Learning Circle can prompt an exchange of ideas that may support participants' deeper learning or lead to the formulation of action steps and plans that participants can take back to their own communities or organizations.

Category:

Diversity; interpersonal development; relationship building; reflection; communication

Level:

Moderate to advanced

Recommended

Bonner Sequence:

This training is most suitable for students who are in a position to participate or lead learning circles. It is a support for the junior-year developmental intention of leading reflection and inquiry. It can expand a student's repertoire of communication and facilitation skills.

expectation	explore	experience	example	expertise
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VALUES: ALL - civic engagement, community building, diversity, spiritual exploration, social justice, international perspective (any topic can be covered, depending on the focus)

Type:

Structured activity suitable for workshop (e.g. retreat or training) with the intention of training participants as trainers

Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- Participants will learn how to organize and facilitate a learning circle
- Participants will gain first-hand experience in collaborating within a learning circle
- Participants will receive tools in helping them organize, facilitate, and evaluate a learning circle on their own campus, communities, or in other organizations

Materials:

- Flip chart paper
- Markers
- Pens and pencils
- Paper (for notes)
- Handouts of *A Guide to Creating Learning Circles* for each participant (attached)

How to Prepare:

This workshop will teach participants how to organize and facilitate a learning circle by actually conducting the workshop in a learning circle. As the facilitator, your job will be to guide participants through the Learning Circle, demonstrating the actual aspects of a Learning Circle. To prepare, prepare all materials and become very familiar with the workshop.

Second, you should determine a focus or topic for the learning circle. Learning circles work well for a topic that allows participants to openly explore their own ideas, views, and experiences. Topics can include anything like: exploring one's personal values or conception of what makes a meaningful life, spiritual or religious perspective, gender, race and ethnicity, body image, social movements, etc.

Read over the article that accompanies this training to get some ideas both about topics and methods. You may want to prepare the entire article or selections from it as a handout.

How to Do/Brief Outline:

This 2- hour workshop has the following parts:

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|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1) What is a Learning Circle? | suggested time 35 minutes |
| 2) Organizing a Learning Circle | suggested time 25 minutes |
| 3) Break | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 4) Facilitating a Learning Circle | suggested time 25 minutes |
| 5) Review and Closing | suggested time 25 minutes |

Part 1) What is a Learning Circle?

Suggested time: 35 minutes

To start the workshop, introduce yourself and the topic. Then take some time to help participants arrange themselves in positions where each person can see each other, preferably in a circle.

Now have participants introduce themselves to the group. In the introductions participants should have the chance to share their names and also some other relevant aspects of who they are and why they are there (e.g., community, college, or organization they are representing; their roles in these environments, and why they choose to attend this workshop; etc.).

Next, distribute the hand out, *A Guide to Creating Learning Circles*.

Give participants 1 minute to read the first page of the hand explaining what Learning Circles are.

Using handout, briefly summarize what a Learning circle is, emphasizing its use in social change.

- Learning Circles are small gatherings of people who come together to share their ideals, goals, practices and experiences. Learning Circles are conducted in open neutral environments where participants can create dialogue and exchange ideas on any topic. The goal of Learning Circles is to help participants develop new practices or action plans they can take back to their campuses, communities, and organizations to initiate.
- For over 100 years, Learning Circles have proven to be powerfully effective tools of creating vital social change. Community organizations, unions, churches, and movements have used this technique to galvanize members into addressing social concerns through dialogue and taking action.

Once this is done, pose the first question on the handout to the participants. Label a sheet of flip chart paper with the question and begin to write down the ideas the participants generate.

After a few minutes (or when no one can think of any more ideas) move to the next question, labeling a flip chart sheet and brainstorming as before. As the facilitator, make sure that no one person is dominating and that each person suggests as least one idea.

After each question has been brainstormed, briefly review the ideas suggested for each question. Post the flip chart sheets around the room.

Part 2) Organizing a Learning Circle

Suggested time: 25 minutes

Now have the participants briefly review the rest of the handout on planing and organizing a Learning Circle. Suggested time is about 5-7 minutes.

Next, briefly explain each step in planning and organizing. Use the workshop as examples of each step.

Discuss the outline:

- 1) For the first step (**Decide how much time you have to conduct the Learning Circle**), explain that this Learning Circle will also be a 2-hour session in a somewhat comfortable setting.
- 2) For the second step (**Determine a topic**), explain that the topic of this learning circle is organizing Learning Circles (a training of trainers). Next, have the group brainstorm possible topics for learning circles in the own communities, organizations, or on their campus. Label a flip chart sheet appropriately, brainstorm for several minutes, and then post sheet somewhere in the room.
- 3) For the third step (**Invite participants**), explain that whoever has invited each person is hosting the Learning Circle and that the exchange of ideas among this group is one of the most important aspects of Learning Circles.
- 4) For the fourth step (**Develop Goals**), explain that the host (and then participants) will be responsible for developing the goals for this gathering. Following the previous brainstorming procedures, suggest one goal of the Learning Circle. Seeing your example, have participants develop 2 more goals. Post the flip chart in the room.
- 5) For the fifth step (**Choose a facilitator**), explain that the facilitator should function as you've functioned thus far in the Learning Circle, helping to keep the discussions and brainstorms going and by recording the group's ideas.
- 6) For the sixth step (**Research background information and distribute to participants**), explain that this handout functions, in this case, as background information to help the group meet the goals just developed.
- 7) For the seventh step (**Host the Learning Circle**), explain that these 3 primary things have been covered in this session. First, there is an outline for this Learning Circle and that a 10 -minute break will follow this part of the gathering. Second, all the supplies needed are present, including markers, flip chart paper, and handouts. And finally, everyone has been arranged in such a manner so each participant can see each other.
- 8) For the final step (**Wrapping up the Learning Circle**), explain that if desired by a majority of the group, email addresses will be collected and notes will be typed, organized, and distributed to each participants over email.

Finally, break for 10 minutes and allow participants to read over the flip chart sheets that have been posted thus far.

Part 3) "Facilitating a Learning Circle."

Suggested time: 25 minutes

When participants have reassembled, explain that the next part of the Learning Circle will focus on the facilitator of the group and the participants.

Using the handout, point out the role of facilitator(s): to help guide the discussion of the group and to keep it focused. To do this, the facilitator must always start with ground rules that each participant must adhere to. You will now conduct a brainstorm, labeling the flip chart sheet with “Learning Circle Guidelines.” Further explain that these guidelines help each participant feel comfortable inside the Learning Circle.

To start the brainstorm, suggest a first guideline, such as *Respect each view, opinion, and experience offered any participant*. Continue and allow participants to add 5 or 6 more guidelines to the list. Using clarifying questions, challenge each idea that does not support a learning environment where ideas are respected and are able to be fully discussed and considered by the group.

Further guidelines might be:

- Use “I” statements/don’t speak for others or make generalized comments.
- Each person must contribute an idea to the discussion before anyone contributes two ideas.
- Depending on the topic, what is disclosed in the circle stays in the circle.
- Any who feels it necessary may excuse themselves from the group for whatever reason.

Finally, post the sheet.

Next, help the group develop further roles of the facilitator following previous brainstorming procedures. Label the flip chart sheet, Roles of Facilitator. Suggested time is 5 minutes. Also, post these ideas.

Suggested roles of facilitator:

- Sets a friendly atmosphere through group introductions and guidelines.
- Does not allow individual participants to dominate.
- Listens carefully to what participants are saying.
- Asks hard questions and do not avoid conflict.
- Does not be afraid of silence.
- Summarizes dominant idea of the group.
- Should be free to contribute to discussion.

Now introduce the roles of participants. Explain that the goal of a Learning Circle is not to learn a lot of facts nor for each person to agree with all the ideas 100%. Rather, it is to deepen and broaden our comprehension of issues and concerns so that we may be able to empower ourselves to take action.

Next pose a question for brainstorming:

How can participants function inside of Learning Circles to meet this goal of reflection and self-empowerment?

Label a flip chart accordingly and allowing participants to brainstorm for 5-7 minutes. Also post these ideas.

Participants should:

- Listen carefully and actively
- Maintain an open mind
- Speak freely
- Talk to group, not facilitator
- Always ask for clarification if confused
- Pose questions to other participants, not facilitator
- Stay calm and don't get too aggressive
- Feel confident about their own opinions and beliefs

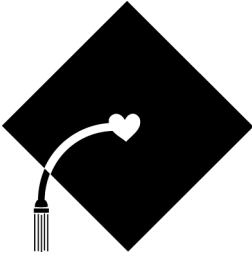
Part 4) Review and Closing

Suggested time: 25 minutes

To start wrapping up the Learning Circle, review all the posted flip chart sheets, starting at the first brainstormed and summarize the ideas for each topic covered.

Next pose the 2 final questions: What is something new you have learned in this session? How will you use this new idea to initiate change in your organization, community, or own your campus? Give the group 3-5 minutes to jot down notes for the questions and then have each person individual share their answers with the group.

Finally collect email addresses of participants and thank each person for attending the Learning Circle.



A Guide to Creating Learning Circles

For Organizers, Facilitators, and Participants

So, what are Learning Circles?

- Learning Circles are small gatherings of people who come together to share their ideals, goals, practices and experiences. Learning Circles are conducted in open neutral environments where participants can create dialogue and exchange ideas on any topic. The goal of Learning Circles is to help participants develop new practices or action plans they can take back to their campuses, communities, and organizations to initiate.
- For over 100 years, Learning Circles have proven to be powerfully effective tools of creating vital social change. Community organizations, unions, churches, and movements have used this technique to galvanize members into addressing social concerns through dialogue and taking action.

How can Learning Circles be used in your community, organization, or on your campus?
What are some advantages of using this method? Disadvantages?

How does a Learning Circle seem to differ from a discussion group?

But how do I plan and organize a Learning Circle?

1. Decide how much time you have to conduct the Learning Circle.

Learning circles can be conducted over any period of time for as long as it is appropriate. Most often, Learning Circles occur in no less than 2- hour sessions at a time during regular or special meetings. For this guide, we'll assume that you planing a 2-hour Learning Circle gathering. Once you have determined the length, choose a convenient time and location for the Learning Circle. Find a location that is as comfortable as possible (i.e. living room, lobby, someone's home, etc.) during a time when all participants can attend.

2. Determine a topic.

The most important part of the Learning Circle is the topic for the group to discuss. It could be a topic that your campus, community, or organization is particularly concerned with addressing, spreading awareness about, or just discussing in depth. Nonetheless, the topic must be one that will engage participants in meaningful dialogue.

3. Invite participants.

Just as important as the topic, are the participants of the Learning Circle. As the organizer, it is your job to invite participants that are concerned with addressing or discussing the topic and who are interested in sharing their insights and experiences with a group. And don't be afraid to invite participants that might have different views about the topic than most of your other participants. We grow and mature as thinking, socially concerned individuals only through conflict and struggle. Make the Learning Circle as diverse as possible to end up with diverse and well thought ideas.

4. Develop goals.

Goals are imperative for all involved in the Learning Circle because they serve as a kind of mission or purpose of the gathering. There should be at least 1-3 goals for the gathering. Remember that the goals should be as focused and aligned towards the ultimate product of the Learning Circle, which is something that participants can leave with to use in the own communities.

5. Choose a facilitator.

When choosing someone to facilitate the Learning Circle, keep in mind that the person does not have to be an expert on the topic, but s/he must be somewhat knowledgeable about the topic. The facilitator will function to essentially keep the discussion focused and to mediate the group so that no one participant dominants the discussion and that all participants share their views and experiences. The facilitator should understand the goals and be willing to meet those goals during the gathering. And there's no reason why the organizer could not function as the facilitator as well.

6. Research background information and distribute to participants.

To set the context for group discussion, the organizer should research a small packet of readings related directly to the topic. This packet might include newspaper articles, copies from books, pamphlets, speeches, etc. Become familiar with the research you find and develop a short list of discussion questions. Then make copies of the research for all participants.

As a cover sheet, create a contact sheet that includes: 1) background info on Learning Circles, 2) the topic, 3) who's sponsoring or organizing the Learning Circle and their contact info, 4) who the facilitator will be, 5) the time and location, 6) a schedule for the session, 7) and a table of contents describing what pieces are included in the research packet. The entire packet should be mailed or given to participants several days before the learning circle.

7. Host the Learning Circle.

When finally hosting the Learning Circle, you should keep in mind 3 primary things: the schedule, supplies, and room layout. First, make sure you and the facilitator understand how the discussion will be organized. Usually, Learning Circles are simple questions posed by the facilitator and other participants about the topic while the facilitator records all responses to the questions. However, plan the period out so as many aspects of the topic will be covered. Make sure to plan at least one 10- minute break. Second, be prepared with extra paper, pens, makers, and flip chart paper to record responses. And finally, arrange the room in as comfortable manner as possible so that all participants can be able to see each other.

8. Wrapping up the Learning Circle.

At the end of the circle, make sure each participant (including the facilitator) discloses what he or she will take with him or her as a result of the discussion. Be sure to collect email addresses of all participants so that the group could be able to continue the discussion. As the organizer, it will be your job to type and organize the recorded responses and distribute them over email so participants may have a record of the group discussion.

DRAFT August 1, 2004

Notes on Learning Circles

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The tool I want to contribute to the Bonner Foundation Tool Kit is a participatory discussion strategy that I call “learning circles.” The best way I know to convey how learning circles work is to share some stories. One set of stories is mine, of how I came to learning circles, how I think about them, how I facilitate them. The other set of stories come from two students' telling about what they took from a course in which learning circles were a key component. I will bookend my stories with theirs.

The course the students are talking about is “Lives Worth Living: Questions of Self, Vocation, and Community,” given during the University of Minnesota’s 18-day short “Intersession” term, May 24-June 11, 2004. The course is unusual in that it is a residential immersion course, held at a retreat center on the prairie in southwest Minnesota. Thirteen students, four instructors, and one grandmother-in-residence lived together as a community for the full period of the course. On the last day of the course one of the instructors, Peter Shea, did videotaped interviews with seven students who volunteered to have their reflections on the course broadcast on cable television in the Twin Cities. The interviews whose transcripts appear below were first broadcast on June 20, 2004. Lynn Englund, another of the course instructors, transcribed the interviews in a realistic way that preserves pauses, false starts, and rephrasings, and thus conveys some of the everyday down-to-earthiness of learning circles themselves.

§1. Josh's Story

Josh is a junior and a philosophy major.

Peter: Why did you decide to take a course called Lives Worth Living?

Josh: I'm Josh M. and philosophy major at the U, just finished my fourth year and I'm not really sure why I took this class, ah, mainly because I had to take a full load for the summer and out of all the possible options and there's hundreds of them, ah, this one just seemed to jump out at me. I read the course description and it was interesting. The name of the class said pretty much what the class description did and I thought I'd give it a go. I like doing philosophy and it's fun to live out in the country for 3 weeks. . .[lived in Bemidji, more trees there than on the prairie]

P What's the arc of the course been like?

J Well, I figured out that I am living one, but, um, I wasn't really sure how to approach the question of just what is a life worth living, because that's a pretty vague question, but um I though I'd just jump into what we were doing because the entire purpose of the class was to just sort of experience things and think a lot and talk with everybody in the class and so I've

been doing that and it started off, ah, pretty quickly, I mean everybody gets here and we start talking and instructing, and then right away that first morning we had that first circle and that was long and drawn out and nerve-wracking because I'm really not one to a large group of people about anything personal, but um I think that through the succeeding ones, um, I learned a lot about myself just from hearing what other people had to say and from bouncing ideas around in my own head based on what they had to say, so I've been spending these weeks just living life and hanging out with people and talking with people and coming to know all of the really, really, really good people here and just learning from them.

P You discovered you already have pretty good life?

J Well, it's a pretty darned good life, or it was, but there are things that I'm going to be changing after thinking about all of the things that we talked about here. Um, I wasn't really I suppose there's a word that jumps around here, that intentionality thing, and I do pretty well at most of the stuff that I do, and I have a pretty good life, but there's a lot of things that I really didn't focus on and give thought to regarding myself, um and I can't even really say what all of them are, but we talked about one day in the circle of vocation, and ah, well, I realized that I'm not just doing philosophy for the hell of it. I mean I love the stuff but I really, I know I wanted to go to grad school and become a professor, but I didn't realize why I wanted to so much. And I've come to realize that if you if you pursue something like this and spend a lot of time with smart, smart, people who think clearly and are always interested in talking about things, um, then you can really make leaps and bounds, not just learning about yourself, which is I think what this class is mainly about, at least for me, but learning more about other people and how to live with them and live with them well. and that's something that I'm going to be taking with me and working on more because lately I'd been sort of neglecting going out and doing things with friends, or at least I did more than I should be, and go back and try to find all of those people that I care about and try to build something with them like we have here because this is the cat's meow.

P So the course made more of a connection between philosophy as something to study and the kind of relationships you want to have with people?

J Yeah.

P So you sense is a good model of way of how to live?

J Yeah, it's not something you can just pack up and take with you. I mean we're out here on this farm and you're all alone for those 18 days and you get to know people really quickly, otherwise it would take years to really get to know somebody very well, so when you can just jump into living with people and experience something that's as satisfying as this was,

because it really was satisfying, um just living with people and working with them, just bouncing ideas off of each other. That's something--I'd like to take the way we do things here, for example the circle where everybody goes around in turn and there's really no interruptions, you know that's something I found particularly valuable and that's something that I might like to try to introduce into the life that I live when I go back, just paying much, much more attention to what people say, because I haven't been doing that all my life, but when you get used to doing these circles, and you listen to what people have to say about hope or changing viewpoints, or other things, I suppose that really affect how you live your life, ah, then you come to realize that, you know, you can live a much more robust life by taking into consideration, deeply, what other people have to say and how they feel and working with them can pretty much make your life a whole lot more worth living you know so, it's fun to live by yourself and just do what you want to do all the time, and study or do whatever, but living *with* people and working with them and building a community like one that we've had here, that's something I'd like to take with me, and it's yah, it is a model and it's a damn good one too, this has been, it's been probably the best 18 days of my life, I suppose, in a row consecutively.

P I'm so pleased to hear that, having had a little to do with the planning and execution of this, it's very gratifying, ah, philosophy has traditionally been sort of a loner's activity. The tradition is all about these grand, usually men, who worked alone, largely, lived alone, largely, and took full credit for whatever it is they produced. Ah, interesting to think about an alternative about that.

J Yah, if you get a bunch of people who are all just smart as a whip together, and you sit down and talk about something for a long time and you work it out together, you can do more than you just could by yourself, I mean, That's something that I actually discovered here, because I'd never really enjoyed working with people on, I suppose philosophy or things like that before. All my jobs had been, in the past they've just been just things that I do by myself, or I'm responsible for by myself, but I've found that it's really rewarding, I suppose, to work with people and to count on each other if you know that you can count on each other, to make something better than you could just by yourself.

§2. John's Story

I have been teaching community-based learning courses in the philosophy department at the University of Minnesota, and leading workshops with faculty and staff doing community-based education for the last 15 years. I have found that things go best in this work when I can spark the

creation of spaces for learning that foster a community of inquiry. The spaces need to have the following characteristics:

people feel safe to say what they believe and what they feel, to speak from the head and from the heart

there is a spirit of peaceful and alive attentiveness; deep listening is easy and natural

there is a spirit of equality, of mutual trust and respect; an assumption that each person has valuable experiences and ideas to contribute informs the space

there is a spirit of cooperation, not competition

there is a spirit of creativity, not compliance; people are often surprised at what they say and what they hear others say, no one is following a script or reciting pre-established positions

there is a sense that the participants are creating together, here and now, on the spot in real time, the safe and humane space; everyone contributes to making the space, so everyone owns it and takes responsibility for it

It is a kind of grace when all of these characteristics come together in a group of people. There is no mechanical procedure, no fool-proof recipe, for making sure that it will happen. When a group does experience a visitation of this grace, it will be impossible to point to any one factor that caused it. If asked to explain it, there are likely to be many factors in addition to the discussion strategy used that one points to as helping to make it happen—the quality of the meeting space, the beauty and accessibility of the surrounding environment, the richness of the topic under exploration, the depth of motivation of the participants, the rhythm of engagement and relaxation that the space affords, and the interweaving of verbal and non-verbal modes of expression and communication. All I claim for the learning circle strategy is that it provides a way of inviting visitations of the grace that happens in a group when all the characteristics I have listed above come together.

How do learning circles work? They can vary in size from 4 or 5 to 20 or so, and shouldn't be much more than 20. The group sits in a circle so that everyone can easily see everyone else. The discussion process proceeds in three stages. First, the facilitator poses a question. Then, going in a regular way without interruption around the circle each participant has an opportunity to express his or her thoughts in response to the question. Third, after everyone has either responded or chosen to pass, the space is opened up for cross-talk—questions, comments, and further thoughts that have been called to mind by what has been heard in the circle go-around. In all of this the facilitator is both facilitator and full-fledged participant in the process—she sits with everyone else in the circle; she takes a turn responding to the question; and enters into the cross-talk as the spirit moves her.

Let me comment a bit further on each of these stages.

What does one need to think about in coming up with the question to launch a learning circle? The basic thing is to trust that the question that launches the circle go-around matters—the wording of the question, the way it is set up, the tone with which it is presented, all these things can help call into the space the grace we seek. Good questions are likely to have in them some surprising twist or evocative image that starts participants' thoughts on fresh paths. Good questions will be focused enough so that the different responses will provide different takes on some one "same" theme, and at the same time broad enough so that everyone in the group will have ideas and

experiences to contribute. When I am thinking up questions to use in a circle I will be facilitating, I make it a qualifying test for the question that I am eager to hear what I will have to say in response to it—there is something in it that creates a possibility that I will surprise myself—and also eager to hear what each participant will say. I try to find a question that will be "good for them" to answer, and the main ground of my trust that it will be good for them is that I know it will be good for me. Perhaps it goes without saying that classical "teacher's questions," to which the facilitator knows or thinks she knows the answer and suspects that others don't, are completely out of place for launching a learning circle.

Posing the question to launch a learning circle may be a matter of simply stating a plain one sentence question, or it may be more elaborate, involving use of a story or a short text, or a photograph, or a sort chunk of video to "set up" the question, followed by the direct statement of the question. After the question has been stated, it is often a good idea to have a short period, say from one to five minutes, of silence to collect their thoughts and possibly make some notes. Then the facilitator asks for responses to begin. This might be done by simply turning to right, or left, and asking the person next to you to begin, and then having the responses continue around to the next person, the next person, and so on. Or the initiating request might for a volunteer to start. Once the first response has been given, that person gets to choose whether the responses will proceed around to the left or to the right. In making remarks to start the circle it is important to make clear what the process will be, that people are to be allowed to speak without interruption, and that it is fine to pass.

Picture everyone already seated in the circle. Here is the sort of thing I say to introduce participants to the idea and norms of a learning circle.

We want to create a space where it is safe for us to speak from the head and from the heart. We will take turns speaking, and each speaker will be allowed to speak without interruption. Someone will volunteer to start, and we will go around the circle either to the right or to the left—the first speaker gets to choose which—with each person having a turn before any cross-talk occurs. This is "no interruption" norm for discussion is one that we are not used to—and it is not easy to follow! As people speak around the circle, you are going to hear ideas and experiences that you want to respond to immediately—to affirm, to question, to tell about a similar experience of your own, to ask for more details, ... countless impulses to respond that we are used to following up on quickly in conversations with friends. But in these circles I ask you to hold onto these impulses, and to file what you felt like saying to be used later. After everyone has had a chance to be heard, we will open up the space for cross-talk. When it is your turn to speak, if for whatever reason you don't wish to speak at that time, that is fine and you are free to pass. When we have gone all around the circle, we will go back to those who have passed and give them another opportunity to speak. You contribute as much to the discussion by your listening as by your speaking. One of the main things that interferes with listening is that we tend to think of speaking as a performance on which we will be judged. Here we are creating a space in which we don't need to think of speaking in this way, but rather as a quiet and patient sharing of thoughts among friends. Freedom to listen is enhanced by realizing another rule of learning circles: silence in a learning circle is OK. If, as you are speaking, you find that you need to pause to arrange what you want to say next, that is fine. What we are doing here is not a performance, but sharing of thoughts in a spirit of friendship. If, when it comes your turn to speak, you wish to take a few seconds to silently collect your thoughts, that is fine. Please don't feel that the movement from speaker to speaker to speaker has to be a split-second handoff as in a relay race.

Once everyone has had a chance to speak—and those who passed the first time around have had a second chance—then the facilitator invites cross-talk. The facilitator may do this by asking an open-ended question, such as, “What common threads did you hear?” “What points of dissonance or tension did you hear?” Or the facilitator may simply open the space for comments, observations, or questions, either general ones or ones addressed to particular people. Of course a key issue in any discussion is time. It is often a good idea for the facilitator in launching the circle to say something about this. “We have two hours for our whole discussion this morning—the circle go-around and cross-talk afterwards. We have fifteen people in the circle so if each of us will be mindful that that we should speak for roughly six minutes, that will leave a half hour for cross-talk at the end.” In opening the space up for cross-talk, the facilitator may want to remind people again of time: “we have about 25 minutes now for cross-talk; let’s be mindful of trying to get as many of people’s further thoughts expressed as possible.”

It is evident that the design and selection of initiating questions is a key element in leading learning circles. It may be helpful to give some examples of questions I have used.

Sample question one: powerful learning experiences. In many groups it can be valuable to have a sharing of views of what makes for powerful learning experiences. Such a sharing of views may be valuable because the members of the group are teachers or educators reflecting on their work, or are professionals in other fields where they design and provide learning experiences for others. Or it may be valuable because the group wants to strengthen its own understanding of itself as a community of inquiry. One could pose a question about powerful learning experiences flat out and head-on: “what do you think makes for powerful learning experiences?” In my experience flat-out and head-on questions elicit generalities that are neither illuminating nor energizing for the group. A question that works much better is to ask: “dig back in your experience and find a story about a time when you had a powerful learning experience—what is the story?”

In most circumstances I draw out the way I pose this request for a story, to give people time to think about it while I am talking, and so I can watch their facial expressions and their body language to get a sense while I am posing the question how it is going over. What I say might go as follows:

Think back to a time when you had a powerful learning experience, what might be called a “peak” learning experience. This experience might have happened in a formal educational setting—in a class or seminar—or not—it might have occurred on a camping trip, or in a community theater or music project, or in a conversation with a friend, or in any of a million settings of ordinary life outside of school. The experience may have been so powerful that it is still vivid in your memory; you may remember the other people who were present; you may remember even physical details of the setting, the time of day, the furniture and how it was arranged and where people were sitting. Maybe the experience showed you new possibilities for what you might do with your life, and set you off with fresh energy on a fresh path. Collect this memory of a powerful learning experience into a story that conveys the experience. What is the story?

Sample question two: important friendships. I have come to appreciate that the concept of friendship is a core concept in community work. When you reflect on the kind of relationship you have, and the kind you would like to have, with the people you are working with in the community, becoming a friend—with the child you are helping with homework, with the adult you are helping to learn English, with the nursing home resident you are reading with or playing games with—is an ideal worth considering. When you reflect on what a just and decent society would be like, the dream of a society in which anyone can be friends with anyone else is worth

exploring. How to open up the topic of friendship in a group? As with powerful learning experiences, my experience with the topic of friendship is that the direct and general question—"What is friendship?" "What does friendship mean to you?"—is not the best way to invite people to communicate what friendship means to them. Asking for a story is much more powerful. So I might pose the question this way:

Dig back in your experience and find a story about a friendship that has been important to you, and perhaps still is important to you. You may want to include in your story something about how the friendship began, something about its ups and downs, and something about why it has been important to you. What is the story?

Sometimes I expand this way of posing the question by introducing into the space a poem that provokes reflection on friendship. I might add something like this:

To stir up your thoughts about friendship, as you are searching for your story, I would like to read out a poem by Robert Frost that gets at some aspects of friendship.

The Telephone

"When I was just as far as I could walk
From here today,
There was an hour
All still
When leaning with my head against a flower
I heard you talk.
Don't say I didn't, for I heard you say---
You spoke from that flower on the windowsill---
Do you remember what you said?"

"First tell me what it was you thought you heard."

"Having found the flower and driven a bee away,
I leaned my head,
And holding by the stalk,
I listened and I thought I caught the word---
What was it? Did you call me by my name?
Or did you say---
Someone said 'Come'---I heard it as I bowed."

"I may have thought as much, but not aloud."

"Well, so I came."

Sample question three: what students take from things they read. The courses I teach revolve around questions like "What is a good society?" "What is a good life?" "What is good education?" The students read works from the philosophical tradition and also works of biography and autobiography. For a particular class period students might read a chunk of Plato's *Republic*, say the chunk in Book II where the conversation explores how and why people organize themselves into political communities, or they might read chapters from Dorothy Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*. Whatever the reading, my standard question to launch the learning circle at the beginning of the class goes like this:

Thinking over the whole chunk of reading for today, what was the one idea, or argument, or image that was most alive and powerful for you--and what made it so?

This question reliably elicits a rich array of responses, some of which reinforce each other, some of which are in tension with each other, that provides an abundance of points of reference for lively and illuminating cross-talk.

Another part of my experience with learning circles is that after people have experienced them, and found them valuable, they start thinking about using them in their own work. They have questions about what makes learning circles tick. Here are some examples of questions I have encountered, and the sorts of answers I give.

Q: How do you suggest that I handle recording/synthesizing what is said in a classroom learning circle? I cannot facilitate, listen, and record at the same time. (I always sympathized with Gerald Ford when folks accused him of not being able to walk and chew gum at the same time.) If I ask a student to play the role of recorder, how will s/he participate as a speaker?

A: On recording. The basic "technology" for doing this is the flip chart--a big sheet of paper on which key words or short phrases can be written as each person in the circle speaks. When there are two facilitators--and this is in many ways the ideal situation--one can write while the other engages with the circle. But in the classroom: one teacher. The way I have addressed this is to have students take turns flip-charting the circle. After a student has had her turn to speak, she goes up and records on the flip chart for the next person, and so around the circle. This makes for a certain amount of to-ing and fro-ing and shuffling around, and sometimes I don't want that, but often it loosens up the atmosphere and slows things down a bit in a good way--and it gives a record of what people said that everyone can then see and reflect on.

The matter of synthesizing what is said is another matter and raises lots of interesting questions. First, in recording on the flip chart it is important for the recorder to write down words the speaker used. The recorder inevitably does some selection and shortening—we can't write as fast as we speak—but if the recorder resists the temptation to substitute her own words and ways of putting things for the speakers, then the speaker sees his own words up on the flip chart, and this reinforces the sense that everyone is listening to the *speaker*. Once the circle go-around is completed, and you have the flip chart record where everyone can see it, you can get at one kind of synthesis by asking, "Do you see common threads that tie together several things that people said?" "Do you see tensions or disparities between things that people said?" (there is a whole range of questions that can be asked in this spirit). Then harvest what people's responses to this in the circle again, either by a regular circle go-around, or by "popcorn," that is, allowing people to speak when they are moved to do so.

Now the truth is, once people are accustomed to the circle process and are in the habit of really listening, you can use follow-up questions of this sort after a go-around, even without having flip-charted it, and get good observations and insights. People in the circle are alert to hear what is alive to them, and they will hear it and remember it and make connections even without the flip-chart. It depends what is the best thing to do; there is no one way that is always right.

There is another kind of synthesis that it is important to be aware of and, I think, to avoid. This is what might be called "teacher synthesis," where after the circle go-around and the follow-up cross-talk I am tempted to say what the essence is of what we as a group have thought or learned in the whole conversation. For me, this is not a good idea. I try always to resist the temptation. There

are too many and too diverse fresh and alive meanings in participants' heads for this to be a useful exercise. To give in to the temptation undermines that sense of equality that is part of the grace I am trying to call forth with learning circles. What I do instead is just to enter as an "equal" into the circle go-around and into the cross-talk, always speaking for myself and not assuming to speak for the whole group.

Q: Another idea I had was not to record while people are speaking but to have everyone take a few minutes to write down their thoughts after each round. This might capture some of what each person has gained from listening and help us focus, reflect, and articulate our ideas before the next round or "popcorn." What do you think of the writing activity that I'm proposing here? Would the writing itself be shared? I could prepare a handout for the next class meeting based on what everyone has written.

A: I think the idea of people having time to write down their thoughts right after the go-around is excellent. After they do this, there are some alternatives for "what next?" any one of which might be "the right one," depending. They could speak what they had written in the large group, either in a go-around or popcorn (after people catch catch the spirit of the regular go-arounds, they become very civil, thoughtful, and respectful in these less structured follow-ups), or they could get in small groups to share what they had written, letting what they have written be the jumping off place for a more in-depth conversation where each person has more air time.

I think it could be very useful for you to prepare a handout for the next class in the way you describe.

One other thing I have done in this general area, as people are getting used to the intense listening dimension of the circle go-arounds, is to ask them, just as a circle go-around is about to begin, to "listen to yourself listening," pay attention to the thoughts that are sparked in you as each person speaks and how these thoughts shift and build as the go-around proceeds, and how this whole experience of continually-moving-thought feels, and then at the end of the circle, ask them to report back about this. Immediately after the last person has spoken in the go-around, I ask them to write down their perceptions of "listening to themselves listen," and then have another regular go-around to share what they noticed.

Q: Where does the name "learning circle" come from?

My use of this name comes from a sentence Myles Horton used to describe workshops at the Highlander Folk School: "I think of an educational workshop as a circle of learners." (Myles Horton, *The Long Haul*, p. 150.) The name resonates for me also with Paulo Freire's insistence that human beings are makes of culture, and his idea that one place where this culture-making capacity manifests itself is in small discussion groups that he calls "circles of culture." The name also marks recognition that many cultural groups over many thousands of years have used discussion in a circle as a way to build community understanding and to reach community decisions.

Q: You mentioned that context and purpose contribute to the grace of a safe and humane learning space. Can you say more about the context and purpose that led you to start using learning circles in your teaching?

- When I first started teaching service learning courses, in 1988, I was casting about for an overarching noble purpose to guide me. At that point I came across the following quotation in Irving Howe's anthology of socialist writings:

A cultural community, a value system are always put in jeopardy when their values fail to be applied to the main social problems of the hour. The discrepancy between the accepted moral norms and actual human behavior, always present in any society, becomes unbearable in such crises; values which have lost their relevance in real life come to be regarded by the masses as mere upper class hypocrisy, and thus lose their binding force.

From Richard Lowenthal, "Notes on Fascism," in Irving Howe, ed., *Essential Works of Socialism*, Third Edition (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986), p. 306.

As soon as I read this a large number of things that students had said to me over several years jumped into perspective. I had tons of evidence that I had never quite pulled together that students are aware of, and distressed by, the gap between the professed ideals and the actual performance of American society—the gap between the equal rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness proclaimed in the founding documents, and the poverty, racism, and other kinds of discrimination that we see all around us. Some students respond to their awareness of the gap by cynicism, some by fearful grasping for material success, some by engaging in political activity or community service. Lowenthal's statement helped me see the issue and its importance, and to see also that the combination of philosophy and service-learning had potential for helping students reflect on and discuss the gap and their diverse perceptions of it and responses to it. It seemed to me clear that the students needed to formulate and discuss back and forth their own views of the gap, that simply reading or being told what other people have said about the gap would not be enough, and if fact might only add to the students' despair. I began to experiment with various approaches to discussion. When I went to a five day workshop at the Highlander Research and Education Center in 1990 I experienced learning circles for the first time and realized immediately: "this is the approach to discussion I am looking for."

Q: You said that in your use of learning circles you try always to ask questions to which you don't know the answer. In what sense, then, can what you are doing be called "teaching?"

A: It is not teaching in the sense of transmitting a pre-determined package of information or skill, from the teacher who has the information or skill to the students who don't, in a pre-determined span of time. I would be quite happy if people concluded that what I do is not "teaching" at all. There is a great tradition of self-proclaimed non-teachers, from Socrates to Carl Rogers and beyond, that I would be happy to count myself part of. That is, I would be happy at this conclusion, provided that people remember that there is a big difference between learning something and being taught something, and recognize that some learning, and some of the most powerful learning, is teacher-free and not a result of being taught. In particular settings, from the observation "no one is teaching" one cannot infer "no one is learning." It is useful to remind oneself of the process by which children learn their native language. Every healthy child learns it; no sane adult tries to teach it. Where their first language is concerned, children are, as George Miller says, "spontaneous apprentices." The child is welcomed into environments in which older humans are going about their daily rounds of tasks and talk, games and laughter. The child naturally, as she is ready, reaches out to participate, and the older humans naturally respond to her creative and spontaneous gestures of reaching out to include her more fully in the ongoing web of communication and action. What exactly the child will learn on a given day in a given environment is unpredictable—certainly it is not controlled by adults with a learning plan. I hope that the learning circles I do are like this. They create a safe area of play where participants are free to explore, in ways that are alive and meaningful to them, large questions around what they want to do with their lives. Now of course this is the kind of space for growth that we expect for young children learning their first language; we expect them to do this learning in a spirit of freedom and creativity. Learning circles extend this kind of learning to people of any age, including college students and other adults.

Q: You said that participants in learning circle discussions should be encouraged to speak in an improvisational non-scripted way; but you also said that the facilitator should give a lot of thought in advance about the questions to be posed, and should prepare the questions in advance. How are these two pieces of advice compatible?

A: There is a big difference between being scripted with a certain package of information that that you want to impart during a class period, and being scripted with a couple of open-ended questions designed to elicit answers that draw creatively on experiences and interests that participants bring, on a topic that you know is alive for them.

I spend time in advance of a course or workshop I am going to be leading thinking through what the overall shape and sequence of discussions is going to be, what questions and what texts or videos to set up questions I will use, and I draft the wording or at least important parts of the wording of the questions. I use the image of “making in imagination a film” of the course or workshop, an image I borrow from Myles Horton, to guide my attention in this advance thinking. Horton uses the image to describe how he planned the first citizenship school class:

I made up a movie in my mind of what would happen during those three months, and when I'd see certain things going wrong in my mind's eye I'd re-edit the film or erase the movie and start over again. Then I replayed the film until I finally got most of the bugs out of it. After that I wondered how it would look if I ran the movie backward, and when I tried it I found some things I hadn't caught in running it forward. I'd sit by the hour and imagine all these things until I got it simple enough that I could throw away the excess baggage and all the things I'd done wrong.

Myles Horton, *The Long Haul*, pp. 101-2.

I can't speak for Horton, but in my experience the mind-set that results from this kind of planning feels the opposite of being scripted. The reason for this is that the pile of film on the cutting room floor is not really lost. Having gone through the film-making process, I go into the first day of the class or workshop with a full plan, overall purpose and shape and the sequence of stages and steps to achieve it. And I do launch the first learning circle with the question I have prepared. Then surprises start happening. In the first learning circle someone uses an image that I can use to get a more apt and alive wording for the question I had prepared for the next day—plus I get the bonus in terms of the trust and grace I am hoping will visit the group, of giving credit to the person who gave me the image. In the first and second learning circles, I see from the energy and insight in the conversations that the question I have prepared for the third circle is too timid, it does not challenge the group enough, and that some ideas I had snipped to the cutting room floor, combined with the fourth of my prepared in advance questions, make a much better question for the third circle than the one I had prepared. So, in goes the new third question, out go the pre-prepared questions three and four, and we are off to the races. Every next question from this point on very likely will be different from what I had prepared. To me, it feels like improvisation, improvisation that I can enter into freely and with confidence because I have so much material on the cutting room floor that I can take another look at and use in fresh ways.

Q: Is it possible to use learning circles for only some of the class meetings in a course, and to use lectures or other discussion strategies the rest of the time?

A: Yes, certainly. It depends on what the goals of the course are. I myself use a few mini-lectures, when I feel that I need to simply put out into the space some information that gives context and

background. I use a lot of small group discussions, in which each participant has more air time than in the large circle, and issues that were opened in the large circle can be explored in greater depth. If a goal of a course is to invite the “grace” of a learning space that is safe and creative for all participants, then one has to be careful that the mix strategies that one uses don’t diminish the invitation. Many mixtures are possible, and I have no convictions of the form “Just these mixtures, and no others, are alive and generative.” Traditional learning activities like reading books and listening to lectures, that can be and too often are passive and uncreative, can become active and creative if interwoven with discussions that have the characteristics of a good learning circle.

Q: Can you say more about how you think about the role of the facilitator of a learning circle?

D. W. Winnicott, the British psychiatrist, uses the image of “holding the space” for what the analyst does to create atmosphere where the patient can connect with the true self and the health that is in him and to grow authentically from there. I think that the most important thing that the facilitator does, or the joint facilitators do, is analogous to this. They hold the space of the circle; they take the first step and keep standing for and exemplifying the grace-inviting qualities that the circle needs to have to be a creative and safe space for everyone.

§ 3. Beth's Story

Beth is a senior and a history major.

Peter What brought you to this course, Beth?

Beth Well, I've taken um two other classes from professor John Wallace and I've really enjoyed them and feel that I've grown emotionally. I took one on social justice and one on the philosophy of education and I found them both really informative and really interesting and I wanted to take something that would take a lot of time so I could really get into it and really spend some time here and really put myself into the course. It was always hard to learn all these things and um in his classes and these new ways of living and these new ways of looking at the world and then having to go home to the same old patterns and the same old routines and then only getting that class once a week. And this class provided 3 weeks of living um these values and living these ideas that we would talk about and I think that that was the biggest draw. The next draw was that it gave me practice from being away from my family which, although it was difficult, was definitely something that I needed and something that ended up being really positive.

P So, living values, how did that work out?... What kinds of things counted?

B Well I think that here, something that was really brought to light was community, and how important it is to live in a community and to see the people that you live with as part of your community and the things that are important in that community and I feel like it's good, it's easy to talk about these things in a class that isn't a May session, or, yah, that isn't a May session that just meets once a week, but in this course, we talked about community, and we

talked about what it meant to be a good listener and we talked about what it meant to be a good friend, we talked about the things that were important to us as people within the course and then you got to know people on this such a real true level, you got to know their hearts so well that you couldn't help but treat them well you couldn't help but treat them like they were important and you couldn't help but see everything that made them up, because you get to know people backwards here. You know in the normal world, you meet someone and you figure out what they do, you know, they work out or they don't work out, or they take science classes, or they're a history major and these are the things that we learn first, and then maybe after years of friendship you find out that this specific event was extremely difficult for them and that's why they are the way they are, or you, um, that value, religion, is really important to them and that's why they treat people the way they do. Here, you learn that first. You learn people's hearts first, and that sets you up to treat people so much better and with so much more respect, because you learn to love people so quickly and you learn to care about them so quickly and I think that you can't help but live those community values, you can't help but care what's happening to other people in your group and see how your actions affect other people, because you get to know them so well and you care so deeply about them.

P yeah. The University as a whole doesn't strike me as particularly friendly to this project of learning to like people.

B Yeah, I've felt pretty loved. I like CLA quite a bit, the College of Liberal Arts, I always feel they're always looking out for my best interests...., but there is no other place where you can learn this way. I have never taken another class at the U that is run the way that John runs his classes. And I can also say that I have never learned as much in any other class as I learned in his classes. I've taken classes in almost every subject and I've gotten the most, I've become a better person by taking his classes and I think he really forces you to do that.

P And what's most important about this kind of teaching?

B I think in other courses, the professors they might help you find your own answer, but they don't help you find answers that will stick, answers that mean something to you. They help you find your own answers to a math equation or something, and that's really important and extremely helpful, but I think that here, the instructors ask you questions, and they're soul based questions, and they, they force you to kind of look at yourself and look at the way that you're living and look at the things that are important to you, and I think that, in that way, you learn on a level that you can't learn in those classes where they're only wanting to impart information about a certain subject. I think that these classes set you up to do better

in every single other subject because it's important to do quality work, it's important to work hard, it's important to do these things because it builds up who you are. And that's the basis of this class, is to focus on you being, living a good life, and I think it translates to every other area. Those other classes don't do that, they don't fill those needs, they fill an informative need and they teach you about a subject, but they don't make you want to learn about it, they don't make it as though you're life will be better if you know this information, and I feel like when I take these courses, then I look and I say well of course I'm going to go to law school and of course I'm going to do the very best that I can because any less wouldn't be a life worth living. Any less would decrease my value as a person, to not give your 100% best effort, but I learned that here, I learned that through these kinds of classes.

P From the very beginning of the course I had sense of you knowing your values, and being sure about all sorts of things. You couldn't say enough good things about your family. You quickly laid down grid of what you cared about. I wasn't expecting to see you undergo big changes during the course. So I am wondering, has anything shifted for you?

B Well, I think the idea of being able to build a community outside of my family shifted. That's probably the thing that shifted the most. Um, I had a really hard time believing that I could actually build a home or build a community without my mom and my dad and my brother and my sister being involved. It just didn't [P You have an awesome family] Yah, I mean I just adore my family. I mean I used to tell my mom when I was little that we would all sleep in a huge giant bed when I got older. I wanted a huge bed with my mom and my dad and my husband and all my brother and sister , I mean just all sleeping together, and she said that I probably wouldn't want that when I grew up, but I remember thinking that she was just crazy, of course I would always want to live with her forever. And I still kinda feel like that, I mean, I still kinda think there is no better family than my family and there's not four people that I'd rather be around and I still feel that way, but I'm much more confident that I can be happy in another community, that I can make kind of extended family members. I've met people here, the instructors I've felt kind of like a parent-kid relationship, in some ways, just somebody just kinda looking out for you and I have faith that I'm gonna be able to have my own family and my own home and that I'm going to be able to join other communities and feel that I have kind of a family away from my real family. And I think that that was a relief for me, because I was worried that I would just go my whole life being unhappy that I couldn't be at home, or that I would be at home and finally be happy about it, so it was, it was *great* to not feel that huge sense of homesickness, to just feel like I was kind of home while I was here was amazing, and I've never felt that way away from my family before.