

Learning Circles – What Are They Anyway?

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When most people think about typical training programs, they tend to imagine a classroom, a trainer standing at the front of the room and information being mostly unidirectional. Learning circles provide participants with a different way of learning. Rather than having a trainer pass on information or engage participants in various learning activities, learning circles encourage learning through self-exploration in a safe and open environment. Read on to learn more ...

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What is a learning circle?

It is a group of five to fifteen people who meet regularly for a set amount of time (i.e., 3 months) to discuss and share their knowledge, ideas and experiences about a particular topic. Meetings can last between one and three hours, and usually, one member will take the role of coordinator for a session.

What are the goals of a learning circle?

The goal of the learning circle may be to either increase learners' knowledge or skills relative to a topic that interests them. Or, the goal may be to broaden the participants' comprehension of issues and concerns in order for them to take action on an issue that needs to be solved. Either way, the learning circle must offer a non-threatening environment that is conducive to openness and participation. The setting must be one that conveys the message of safety and trust.

Where is it held?

Learning circles can be held anywhere the group feels comfortable: in a hall, a library, a park or in someone's home. Of course, to be an effective venue, it must be free from distraction and must support the group's learning.

How does it work?

Participants may choose a topic that is of value to them or the coordinator may choose one that will engage them in meaningful dialogue. Sometimes, a topic emerges from a discussion that the group will want to explore further.

Invite participants who might have different views about the topic. You want the learning circle to be as diverse as possible, to end up with different and well thought ideas. This will ensure that the discussion is interesting, vivid and instructional. The point of the learning circle is that people come away with different points of view. This is best achieved when various ideas are presented and discussed.

Determine goals for the sessions. The goals should be focused and specific, as they let the participants know the purpose of the gathering and what to achieve. The goals also direct the participants in their preparations for the meetings.

The coordinator *must not* be an expert. If you require an expert, ask one to join the group. Otherwise, the role of coordinator can change at each meeting. The coordinator's role is mainly for keeping the discussion on track and for ensuring that everyone has a chance to share their views and experiences.



How can you make a learning circle effective?

Make sure there is active participation and lively discussion among all participants. The goal is to get everyone sharing their knowledge and experience.

Participants must be prepared for the meeting before arriving. Usually, there are readings or some other form of learning about the topic that must be reviewed prior to the meeting, so that everyone is on the same page.

Establish ground rules for listening and for speaking. Make sure everyone knows that active listening is the key to truly benefitting from the experience. In the same way, state the importance of sharing and of creating a safe, open, non-threatening situation, where people feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgement.

And finally, ensure everyone can see each other. Have participants sit in a circle so that visual cues can be captured.

The benefit of learning circles is that participants get a chance to listen, learn and share their stories. Learning circles promote the opportunity for participants to hear new concepts expressed in a variety of forms, which helps them to blend the concepts with their existing framework of ideas, impart their own knowledge and help others. Good luck!

Links:

http://www.magma.ca/~raksim/learning_circle.htm