



## The Learning Circles Project: *Values & Practices*

### How Does Learning Happen in an Indigenous Circle?

by Janice Brant



“All learning moves through a cycle.”

~ Diane Hill

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

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

As the learning cycle unfolds one must explore how they *feel or relate* to their new awareness, self, and others. Indigenous cultural teachings emphasize the importance of relationships, and this stage involves expressing and articulating one's feelings about self and how we relate to the total environment. This would include our relationship to the

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learning circle. Do I feel welcome, am I being heard, how do I relate to other participants in the circle?

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

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

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

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

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