



# The Learning Circles Project: *Values & Practices*



## How Does Change Happen in Learning Circles?

by Tracey Mollins

These are the notes that became the framework for the Beginner's Guide.

*If nothing is going to change, why do I want to do this work?* Arthur Bull

- Things change in learning circles. Things change for individuals, things change for groups and things change for the community at large.
- There is the stuff that happens in the group and the stuff that happens around the group.
- Learning circles are transformative because they:
  - are supported by social capital
  - foster critical literacy
  - support individual and/or social change
  - are not outcomes bound →
    - they have goals, vision, missions etc. but these are set by the group not an outside agency → motivation is integrative and intrinsic + meets 6 needs to sustain motivation: exploration, manipulation, activity, stimulation, knowledge and ego enhancement (Brown, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, p. 114-117)
    - the goals, visions, missions, etc. can change as the group changes
    - the main goal is that “there will be change” – people will be different as a result of participating in a learning circle, and perhaps the community will be different, but how they will be different is not pre-determined

continuum of “formality” → outcomes bound:

state-funded ed'n → ↔ → learning circles → ↔ → chatting at coffee shop

outcomes not negotiable

outcomes negotiable

outcomes negotiable

commitment to change

commitment to change

no commitment to change

if outcomes = negotiable then → exploratory process + commitment to change =

transformative learning circle

continuum of “formality” → facilitator roles:

expert ↔ resource/admin ↔ no facilitator

learning circles can have this range

[www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm](http://www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm)

continuum of connection to community (from focus on individual change and support to focus on community change and support):

shelter from the storm  $\leftrightarrow$  freedom zone  $\leftrightarrow$  educating community  $\leftrightarrow$  social change

### **We are both individual and collective, one person and the member of a group/groups**

We are essentially social beings. We live in societies, of course; but more fundamentally perhaps, it is our participation in social communities and cultural practices that provides the very materials out of which we construct who we are, give meaning to what we do, and understand what we know.

...

Why is it then that we always think of learning in individualistic terms of acquisition of information? We associate it with lecturing teachers, with orderly classrooms, with didactic training sessions, or with lonely evenings of homework. We think of individual capabilities judged in standardized terms of intelligence. And we think of books, assuming that information exists on paper or in words, there to be acquired by individual minds?

Etienne Wenger, "Communities of practice: where learning happens",  
*Benchmark Magazine*, Fall Issue 1991

Downloaded from [www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm) on April 9, 2005

For **individuals**, participating in learning circles can:

- activate their gifts  $\rightarrow$  learning circles operate on the principle that what carries people through life is developed strengths and talents, not remediated weaknesses (Dr. Edward Hallowell, Studio 2 – April 25, 2005)
- invigorate their lives
- include healing  $\rightarrow$  people are medicine for other people (Janice Brant)
- include developing a different sense of identity as a learner or as a community member  $\rightarrow$  see storytelling as part of this (see themselves as centre of a story but also see themselves in other people's stories which creates a sense of connectedness, universality, collectivity)

For **communities**, the impact of learning circles upon them can range from very subtle to very dramatic.

*Shelter model:*

- build an inclusive, non-judgmental, open, safe and free space
- participants build strength individually and collectively  $\rightarrow$  part of this comes from knowing that they are part of this group where they will always be accepted and celebrated for who they are and the gifts they have
- can return for comfort, acceptance and rejuvenation

### *Freedom zone model:*

as above +

- model a community as the group wishes the larger community to be
- carry this model with them when they leave the group and try to spread the “freedom zone” principles when and where they can → this work is done by individuals looking for the “cracks” in the other organizations, workplaces, environments in which they participate

### *Community education model → the ripple effect:*

as above +

- are focused on bringing information to the larger community → they consciously bring the principles of the “freedom zone” (the way they work together) as well as the information to the community through explicit education programs → these education programs are designed to foster or spark change among individuals → they work on a “ripple effect” model

### *Community activist model:*

as above +

- are focused on bringing change to the larger community → they consciously research policy and advocate for change in the community at large → they meet with policy makers and/or engage in civil disobedience

## **People learn about collaborative thinking**

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise. United by this common enterprise, these people come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values—in short, practices—as a function of their joint involvement in mutual activity. Social relations form around the activities, the activities form around relationships, and particular kinds of knowledge and expertise become part of individuals’ identities and places in the community. It is not the assemblage or the purpose that defines the community of practice; rather, a community of practice is simultaneously defined by its membership and the shared practice in which that membership is engaged.

...

Institutional identities are both inevitable and reflective of the institution. An identity is not something that can be packaged or drilled. Rather, it is a trajectory of participation that reflects the actual practices of specific communities and specific forms of participation in these practices. As a trajectory, an identity is not an object that one owns once and for all: it is defined over time, it evolves, and it has a momentum of its own. It is what gives a flexible continuity to the various forms of participation one is engaged in.

Penelope Eckert and Etienne Wenger  
*From School to Work: an Apprenticeship in Institutional Identity*, April 1994  
Downloaded from [www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm) on April 9, 2005

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise. United by this common enterprise, these people come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values—in short, practices—as a function of their joint involvement in mutual activity. Social relations form around the activities, the activities form around relationships, and particular kinds of knowledge and expertise become part of individuals' identities and places in the community. It is not the assemblage or the purpose that defines the community of practice; rather, a community of practice is simultaneously defined by its membership and the shared practice in which that membership is engaged.

...

Institutional identities are both inevitable and reflective of the institution. An identity is not something that can be packaged or drilled. Rather, it is a trajectory of participation that reflects the actual practices of specific communities and specific forms of participation in these practices. As a trajectory, an identity is not an object that one owns once and for all: it is defined over time, it evolves, and it has a momentum of its own. It is what gives a flexible continuity to the various forms of participation one is engaged in.

Penelope Eckert and Etienne Wenger  
*From School to Work: an Apprenticeship in Institutional Identity*, April 1994  
Downloaded from [www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm) on April 9, 2005

### **People educate their communities**

As valuable as information is, information by itself is meaningless—as are the sounds of an unknown foreign language. Information only takes meaning in the context of the social practices of the communities that give it cultural life.

It is therefore through our membership in these communities that we come to know—and to be empowered by what we know. In fact, isolation as a principle is either illusory or paralyzing—except perhaps when it is part and parcel of the practice of communities that give it a social meaning, as in monastic seclusion or in the process of writing. Our very identity of individuality is a matter of belonging.

Etienne Wenger, “Communities of practice: where learning happens”,  
*Benchmark Magazine*, Fall Issue 1991  
Downloaded from [www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/pub/index.htm) on April 9, 2005