

Learning Circles: One form of knowledge production in social action research

Cercles d'apprentissage: une forme de création du savoir au sein de la recherche en action sociale

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Article abstract

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LEARNING CIRCLES: ONE FORM OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN SOCIAL ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the use of “learning circles” as one form of knowledge production in social action research. It reports on a project that used learning circles as a setting within which to increase the engagement of people living with low income in developing strategies for the reduction and elimination of poverty in Canada. It presents the process and reflections, analysis and recommendations of 55 project participants and the authors.

CERCLES D'APPRENTISSAGE : UNE FORME DE CRÉATION DU SAVOIR AU SEIN DE LA RECHERCHE EN ACTION SOCIALE

RÉSUMÉ. L'auteur explore l'utilisation des «cercles d'apprentissage» comme vecteur de création du savoir dans le contexte de recherche en action sociale. Pour ce faire, l'auteur rapporte les résultats d'un projet ayant utilisé les cercles d'apprentissage comme moyen d'augmenter l'engagement d'individus à faibles revenus à développer des stratégies de réduction et d'élimination de la pauvreté au Canada. Cet article dresse le portrait du processus et des réflexions, des analyses et des recommandations de 55 participants au projet et des auteurs.

INTRODUCTION

New forms of knowledge that challenge dominant discourses need to be produced to support the demand for progressive social change. Dominant discourses not only provide the language within which social phenomena are understood but also how they are responded to through existing social policy and practice. Constructing, re-constructing, or shifting people's understanding of dominant discourses requires learning, whether it is formal, non-formal, informal, or incidental. Foley (1999) refers to this process as one of “unlearning” of dominant discourses and the learning of “resistant” discourses. Freire (1972) speaks of “conscientização” and Fay (1987) calls for “educative enlightenment.” In adult education literature, the importance of knowledge production for

social change is acknowledged, although often not highlighted other than by those working from a tradition of radical adult education (i.e., Fay, 1987; Foley, 1999; Freire & Horton, 1990). Historically, Dewey (1916) spoke about the role for adult education in “social reform.” Lindeman (1926) said “adult education will become an agency of progress if its short-time goal of self-improvement can be made compatible with a long-time, experimental but resolute policy of changing the social order” (p. 166). More recently, others (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow, 1985) have focused on the role of adult education as one of contributing to progressive social change. Brookfield (1987) speaks of “critical thinking” as a process that identifies and challenges assumptions, challenges the importance of context, imagines and explores alternatives, and employs reflective skepticism (constantly questioning the status quo). Mezirow’s (1985) contribution is providing insight into “perspective transformation.” However, these more recent contributions can be critiqued for not “describe(ing) how learning in perspective transformation or critical thinking might contribute in a political struggle when the battle lines are drawn and the parleying is over” (Newman, 1995, p. 47). Also, and as Foley (1999) states, “these processes ... are not straightforward; they are complex, ambiguous, contradictory” (p. 16). This article explores the limits and possibilities of learning circles as a venue for knowledge production leading to social change by reflecting on an action research project that organized learning circles with 55 low-income participants in the Canadian cities of Charlottetown, Montreal, and Victoria.

Action research, broadly defined, is conducted by researchers and members of a community as a means to improving their situation through broad participation and actions that lead to a more just or satisfactory situation (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Action research has a long history originating with the work of Kurt Lewin. Present day usage of the term covers a myriad of models including cooperative inquiry and various forms of participatory research.

In a learning circle,

A group of people come together to examine an issue or body of knowledge in which they are interested. After some initial planning, the group sets up a series of meetings with a specific [(set of)] goal(s) that the members of the group wish to accomplish through the meetings. (Aksim, 2005)

Learning circles are a non-formal approach to adult education that is popular in Europe (Wade & Hammick, 1999), where they are a common way for people to continue their lifelong learning around topics of personal and professional interest. Informal, yet highly purposeful in nature, a learning circle is a person-centred, experiential form of learning that brings together people who share a common goal and interest and enables them to explore topics relevant to this interest. Learning circles:

allow students to focus their learning upon their own practice, and encourage their colleagues to act as critical co-investigators promoting dialogue and

collaborative enquiry. This engenders the emergence of a problem-solving approach.... and facilitates the notion of the action enquirer. Central to this is the need for “conscientisation” or “an awakening” of critical consciousness or critical reflection as described by Freire (1972). In addition, it maximizes the sharing and use of skills and experience of participants. (Wade & Hammick, 1999, p. 163)

Learning circles thus constitute a “communicative space,” a less formal construction of civil society where people explore their collective interests (VanderPlaat, 1998; VanderPlaat and Barrett, 2006). Shaw (2008) distinguishes the important difference between giving people a “place” (where social relations are structured) versus creating spaces where “people can come together to collectivize their own experience and aspirations in ways which may make managing them more difficult” (p. 32). An important component of learning circles, therefore, is the opportunity to analyze the language used in dominant discourses as a way of creating resistant or alternate discourses. Chomsky (Chomsky & Otero, 2004) reminds us that language frames the way we understand the world. Foley (1999) refers to analysis of language at two levels – the analysis of key words within a struggle and the analysis of how language is used to maintain dominant discourses. Ultimately learning circles can become the space where people become “agents who speak the discourse rather than the objectified subjects of which it speaks” (Brodkey & Fine, 1991).

The concept of learning circles in Canada is rooted in participatory learning, originating in good part from the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia. The Antigonish Movement worked from the premise of “knowledge for the people” and developed tools, under the leadership of Moses Coady, to “make complex issues understandable to ordinary listeners.” Its approach was: listen, study, discuss, and act. It linked adult education with social action through “study clubs” and other actions such as setting up cooperative organizations and credit unions. At the peak of its work, over 2,200 “self-help” study clubs were in place (Lotz, 1997).

More recently, the concept of learning circles seems to be garnering interest in the Canadian community sector. In Montreal, several organizations have developed learning circles as a way of creating space for reflection and action on shared issues. The *Institute for Management and Community Development* (Concordia University) has run several learning circles geared towards leaders in community organizations. The *Quebec Association for Adult Learning* has developed a learning circle for adult educators to increase their understanding of how adults learn. As well, the *Centre for Community Organizations* has organized learning circles on fundraising for social change and non-profit leadership. Although the approach of the three organizations varies, they all work from a process of shared learning leading to action that is grounded in a belief that the circles will contribute to progressive social change.

It should be recognized that learning circles are only one form of knowledge creation. Multiple sources of learning, or “cross-cutting” approaches (Foley, 1999; Holst, 2002; Rubenson & Beddie, 2004) are needed to address the varying learning styles and interests of adults. As the Antigonish Movement showed historically, and Walters, Borg, Mayo and Foley (2004) show more recently, multiple sources of learning are needed and most important, learnings must be linked to actions (Carroll & Coburn, 2003; DeFilippis, Fisher & Shragge, 2006; Jasper, 1997; Shragge, 2007).

THE KAIROS LEARNING CIRCLES

The project *Promoting the Mobilization of Low-Income People to Reduce and Eliminate Poverty* was implemented in 2007 by KAIROS, a coalition of eleven national church and religious organizations that educates Canadians and animates action to reduce poverty in Canada. It was funded mainly through a grant from the *Place-Based Initiatives to Reduce Poverty in Canada* initiative of the Government of Canada’s Social Development Partnership program.

Using action research methodology, the goals of the project were a) to explore the barriers to civic participation by people living in poverty; b) develop skills and capacities to increase civic participation of people living in poverty; and, c) identify government policies and community practices supportive of greater participation by people experiencing poverty. For purposes of this project, civic participation refers to a community’s capacity to influence how their collective experience is systemically understood, structured, and responded to.

The project was based on the following premises:

- poverty persists in Canada at unacceptably high levels;
- as a society, we spend more resources trying to manage the impacts of poverty than we do seeking to address the causes of poverty;
- poverty is a complex social problem – it has both individual and societal dimensions;
- people living in poverty have very limited voice and influence over discussions and decisions on poverty-related issues, and more generally, are excluded in various ways from the life of their communities;
- the lack of participation of people living in poverty contributes to the democratic deficit in Canada, which in turn limits support for government action to reduce poverty in Canada, hinders the development of effective policies and programs, and undermines trust and cohesion in communities;
- community organizations and policy-makers need tools and resources to better support the inclusion and participation of people experiencing poverty in their communities.

Charlottetown, Montreal, and Victoria were chosen as project sites based on interest expressed by people connected with KAIROS and working on anti-poverty issues in these three cities. A steering committee was formed consisting of KAIROS staff, local city “coordinators,” and university-based academics in each city. The steering committee designed and managed the process.

Each circle involved three stages: recruitment, learning circles, follow up/communication of learning.

Recruitment

Recruitment was a four-month process. Key local community agencies and groups such as single parent resource centres, injured worker groups, and immigrant serving agencies were contacted about the project. These organizations helped identify potential participants. Word of mouth and personal contacts seemed to be the most productive way to identify potential participants. Flyers were distributed but they were evaluated to be less useful than personal contacts.

Phone or in-person discussions were held with potential participants to explore their interest and determine final selection of participants. Criteria used to select participants included commitment to attending the sessions, interest in addressing issues of poverty but not necessarily experience in working on issues of poverty, diverse life experiences, and level of comfort working in a group in English. Participants signed a *Participation Agreement and Consent Form* and received an honorarium of \$400 in recognition of the knowledge and lived experience expertise they were bringing into the circle.

In setting up the learning circles, care was taken to ensure that participants could fully participate. *The Quality of life CHALLENGE Inclusion Policy and Procedures* from Victoria (2005) was applied. This included having participants self-identify as “low income” (not labeling), thinking of food, childcare, transportation needs, and ensuring documents were reader friendly.

The learning circles

In the learning circles time was spent on introductions, discussing hopes and expectations, establishing ground rules for working together, identifying issues of concern, inquiry into and collective analysis of issues, making recommendations for action, evaluation, and follow up/next steps.

Each circle held 4-5 sessions of 3-6 hours and applied a popular education approach using tools and exercises familiar to the local coordinators. For example, in the Montreal circles, introductions were made through the sharing of participants’ personal stories. To set the stage for the story telling (Ledwith, 2005), the first session ensured there was time spent reviewing the objectives of the project, sharing the popular education methodology, developing the ground rules for working together, and ensuring everyone was comfortable

with moving forward. In Victoria, participants drew (or wrote) their personal journey to date with the following guiding questions in mind: What are the significant events/people/ places in my life? What were the major turning points? What kind of insights did I have in these moments? One day was spent sharing the stories.

In all three cities, identification of issues of concern grew out of the introductions. Everything was documented and key issues were identified by each circle for further inquiry. There were numerous similar areas of concern expressed by all four of the learning circles - concern over jobs and working conditions, the need for better social assistance, housing, health care (including medications and dental care), affordable public transportation, and universal access to high quality child care. The concerns raised are also echoed in a recent National Council of Welfare (2007) report that calls for a poverty reduction strategy in Canada.

Inquiry and collective analysis involved lots of discussion, bringing in guest facilitators, and using exercises rooted in popular education. For example, in Charlottetown, the exercise *But Why?* was used (Hope & Timmel, 1994). This exercise helps people deepen their understanding of a topic and sets the stage for expanded discussions with the group at a later date. Using flipchart paper and magic markers, the word "poverty" was written in the centre of the paper. Participants were then asked to use a different colour of magic marker to write answers to "Who do we consider to be in poverty?" and (in a third colour) "What do we see as the major cause of poverty?" The facilitator asked "But why is that a major cause of poverty?" and "Why do we consider this group to be in poverty?" The answers were recorded in a different colour marker. After several rounds of asking "But why?" each time using a different colour magic marker, the group arrived at many of the root causes of poverty. One that was identified and elaborated on over the course of the learning circle was the right to adequate income. The group concluded "There are serious systemic problems and institutional barriers which prevent people from having their basic needs met." In subsequent meetings solutions to the problem were identified. This included making changes in the Workers' Compensation Act, Canada Pension Plan, and Canada Disability Pension as well as allowing income splitting and implementing a "Guaranteed Adequate Annual Income."

One of the exercises used in Montreal was *Three Explanations for Poverty* (Social Action Commission, 1987). The exercise involved sharing stories of three ideological explanations for poverty (inherited, insular, or structural) and discussing which explanation reflected the experience of each participant. In sharing why they saw poverty as a structural problem, one small group said "Work hard and you'll make it - it takes more than that!" They shared examples from their experiences showing how poverty is not insular, as it does not get eliminated with the production of wealth and goods in society.

In Victoria, through drawing and drama exercises (Arnold & Burke, 1983), participants spoke about how trauma, isolation, stigma, and racism were themes for many living in poverty. Poverty, they felt, leads to powerlessness and that got the group asking, "Living in poverty feels like always being the follower, so how do we become leaders?" Strategies for moving forward were then explored. One of the strategies identified was "working together." Another was "talking to people in power in ways that they can hear us," something the group was able to do because of a follow-up forum in Ottawa.

Analysis led to the identification of learnings which were shared, in varying degrees, across the learning circles. These included the recognition of the link between poverty and traumatic experience, the impact of poverty on well-being, the isolation produced by poverty, the stigma and discrimination associated with living in poverty, the lack of adequate support, and the identification of the root causes of poverty as structural.

Participants from all three cities felt strongly that it was important for people living in poverty to have greater opportunities to participate in learning circles such as those implemented in this project. Learning circles were seen to increase people's knowledge of their rights, which helps them to stand up for themselves. They also strengthen collective action and advocacy, which participants believe to be very important in addressing poverty.

Participants reaffirmed the need to create shared community spaces such as learning circles. A range of physical spaces are important: gathering places (e.g., internet cafés), artistic places or "cultural sanctuaries," recreation places (including lower priced recreation centres, access to local schools in summer, and bike lanes), green space and community gardens, and places for children (e.g., play days).

Participants developed five major recommendations, which called for more opportunities for people living in poverty to come together, more front-line support, more advocacy and participation opportunities from government and community organizations, more government policies to reduce poverty, and more societal support for people living with poverty.

Follow up and communication of learnings

A report was produced on the learning circle experience and recommendations (KAİROS, 2007). More important, in building on the action research model, a forum was organized. Several participants from each city came together with people active in other areas in KAİROS in the Fall of 2007. Learning circle participants had an opportunity to share and reflect on their city's learning circle's conclusions together. The activities and learnings from the learning circles were presented and discussed with others at the forum. Other organizations (ADT Fourth World, ACORN, Workers' Action Centre) then shared their work with forum participants. Participants also had the opportunity to

attend a *Make Poverty History – Feeding Change* dinner and discussion about eradicating poverty in Canada, hosted by the *National Anti Poverty Organization* (now *Canada Without Poverty*) and others. There they met with anti-poverty activists and federal (and some provincial) politicians and bureaucrats.

Learning circle participants took the recommendations from the learning circles to federal politicians and senior bureaucrats via meetings on Parliament Hill. A short training session on how to work with politicians preceded these meetings. For most participants, this was an empowering personal experience and some small connections with politicians have continued.

Other follow-up actions, at a city level, included circulating a petition, becoming active in a provincial-wide anti-poverty campaign, starting a new learning circle, etc. As project funding drew to a close, the collective actions became more diffused. Some activism has continued on an individual level or within the organizations in which participants were previously involved. However, this appears to be quite limited and several participants have expressed frustration and disappointment that the learning circles work has come to an end when much work is still left to do.

In Montreal there was an attempt to involve community-based organizations that participants were already involved in with follow-up actions. This proved to be somewhat difficult. A learning circle for people living with poverty was subsequently conducted within a local community organization as one way of housing the work more specifically. This circle was co-facilitated by a participant from a previous circle. This learning circle has left a legacy of activism in the organization. For example, the organization recently organized an information evening on the provincial governments “consultation” on poverty. Petitions were signed and people joined a province-wide protest of the consultation.

DISCUSSION

This project mobilized 55 people living with low-income in creating an alternative discourse on anti-poverty policy development. It stimulated a rich discussion of poverty and the barriers to the full participation of people living in poverty. It demonstrated that those living with poverty have the abilities and skill to be partners in identifying solutions for the elimination of poverty. It led to specific actions within the broader work for the elimination of poverty in Canada. It illustrated how learning circles can be one form of knowledge production in social action research.

The project highlighted the struggles with power and control that are inherent when a radical adult education methodology (Foley, 1999) is desired but the work is embedded in government funded projects. While learning circle participants developed an alternative discourse on poverty and implemented specific actions to support the elimination of poverty, the parameters of the

project limited the potential for longer term impacts on social change. This is an inherent contradiction with much state-funded work that desires fundamental social change yet does not engage fully in the political struggle. It suggests that these types of projects can contribute to influencing the discourse on social issues such as poverty but that work is needed beyond learning circles for this type of knowledge to contribute to actual social change.

Specifically, this project showed the challenges of funding and having sustainable outcomes with the use of learning circles. Flicker, Savan, McGrath, Kolenda, and Mindenberger (2007) identify these areas as two of the five themes that researchers would change in their action research work if they could. The other themes were time, understanding/clarifying the roles and expectations, and involvement. Funding dictated time lines and, most importantly, locked the project into a one-year cycle. Yet, having funding was important both for the extensive work the local coordinators did in recruitment, facilitating the circles, supporting the follow-up work, and providing the honorarium the participants received. The nature, sources, and methods of funding have been recognized as key shapers of work connected to social action (Brock & Banting, 2003; Ng, 1996; Phillips, 2003). In the evaluation, participants in all four learning circles spoke about “needing more time, more days” to more fully implement the action part of the learning circles. This in turn affected the sustainable outcomes of the learning circles. The ongoing actions of the subsequent learning circle, housed in one organization, suggests that conducting learning circles within an organization may allow for more depth of follow-up over time. Having an impact in progressive social change is a long term process. Learning circles are but one component.

There was animated discussion in at least two of the learning circles about the social constructions produced through language. For example, the use of the term “living with low income” or the term “living with poverty” (distinguishing between forms of wealth/poverty other than monetary, such as family, social, community, and spiritual) was explored. Likewise, there was frequent discussion about whether the discourse was about “poverty-reduction” or the “elimination of poverty.”

This project highlights the importance of links between this form of knowledge production and other work being done on the elimination of poverty. The design of the circles very consciously involved inviting guest facilitators, providing opportunities for interaction with anti-poverty organizations, and informing participants about other anti-poverty work (i.e., a provincial coalition working on a post card campaign). Linking to broader social movements also gives individuals involved in learning circles the ability to work on the issue in ways more sustainable and far-reaching than a single learning circle experience. It shifts the relationship of power and control away from funded programs and towards citizen control. For example, linking up with a provincial

anti-poverty coalition or becoming active with a Canadian-wide anti poverty lobby group ensures that the local actions are grounded in the larger movement of action for social change.

"While important lessons can be learned from other struggles, there are no formulas ... each struggle has its unique dynamic" (Foley, 1999, p. 26). This KAIROS project has contributed to lessons that can be learned about knowledge production in social movements, while recognizing the limits imposed when knowledge production is conducted within a state-funded project. Moreover, it illustrates how a unique situation creates a unique dynamic.

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