

Learning Circles for Advanced Professional Development in Evaluation: Two Experiences



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Presentation aim

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- **Report purpose, process and outcomes of a trial implementation of an alternative learning model for advanced professional development in evaluation**

Outline

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- **Origins of this experiment**
- **Learning circles and other forms of self-directed adult learning: background**
- **Learning circle model adopted**
- **Content covered, learning achieved**
- **Outcomes: what we've learned about learning in learning circles**

Origins of this experiment

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- **Canadian evaluators dissatisfied with opportunities for advanced training**
 - Gauthier et al (2006):
 - 71% of evaluation producers would like additional training in evaluation
 - 60% cite lack of availability of training on advanced topics as a barrier
 - Preferred forms of learning:
 - Professional development workshops: 69%
 - Conferences: 47%
 - Mentoring or learning from others : 36%
 - Self-directed learning : 34%
- **Context of the competency maintenance requirement for the CE designation**
- **Suggested a need to diversify levels and forms of professional development available**

Learning Circles and other forms of self-directed adult learning

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- **Many models of self-directed learning, with two main streams:**
 - **Self-improvement: e.g.**
 - Adult education
 - Chautauquas
 - University of the Streets, Open University
 - Journal Clubs
 - Virtual learning groups
 - **Activist, change –oriented: e.g.**
 - Popular education (Freire)
 - Study circles – citizen participation
 - Quality circles - work improvement groups

Learning Circles and other forms of self-directed adult learning

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- **Definition: learning circles**
 - bring together experienced practitioners
 - in structured collaborative cycles of learning activities
 - about topics of mutual interest
 - drawing on external experts as required
- **Some best practices identified from the literature**
 - (in the midst of a lot of variations)
 - regular, anticipated meetings
 - relatively small groups (5-7 mentioned)
 - appropriate logistics (timing, duration, pace, etc.)
 - a leader for each discussion
 - summarizing findings
 - ensure common objective among members (e.g. support the learning of all members)
 - trust within the circle, diversity, cohesion

Model adopted

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- **Structure and organization of cycles**
 - Initial list of topics put together and updated informally
 - Cycle of 6 weeks
 - Revolving leadership: topic selection, identification of readings, leading discussion, leading evaluation
 - Three to six articles on topic
 - 45-minute teleconference: 12:15 – 1:00, call in at 12:00 (for lateness and chitchat)
 - Possibility of experts
 - Written post-event evaluation on expectations and experience
 - Dropbox shared access site for documents and notes

Model adopted

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- **Preparation**
 - Leader sends out study questions with readings, at least 4 weeks ahead of session
 - Each member studies the material and prepares own answers
- **Actual session**
 - Leader presents readings briefly, addresses questions
 - Discussion on questions, implications for practice, wrap-up
 - Follow-up assessment by e-mail

Model adopted

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- **Underlying principles**
 - Address a need for advanced training
 - Feasibility for busy people
 - Mutual responsibility for each others' learning
 - Enough homogeneity to share interest (e.g. evaluation culture, seniority)
 - Enough diversity to avoid group-think (e.g. career context, experience, education)
 - Mutual trust: an absolute prerequisite (e.g. competitive issues)

Content covered, learning achieved

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- **Eight cycles to date**
 - Learning circles
 - Contribution analysis
 - Bibliometrics
 - Value for money evaluation
 - Realist evaluation
 - Ethical systems in evaluation
 - Systems thinking in evaluation
 - Emergent evaluation design
- **Based on list of 23 topics**
 - Based on suggestions from LC members
 - Spreadsheet used as selection making tool (LC members scored level of interest on topics on list)
 - Most selected because at least one LC member felt a knowledge gap - could realistically expect that at least one member would learn something

Content covered, learning achieved

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- **So did we learn?**
- **Depended on where the LC member started from**
 - All admit learning at least something from each session
 - Four broad categories of learners identified

Content covered, learning achieved

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- **High learners:**

- Those who thought they did not know about the topic and who agree that they did learn
 - Now have an opinion about it,
 - Know more about what knows/doesn't know
 - Can express views about it, could manage a project involving it, etc.
 - But probably did not acquire practical skills because did not involve an actual practice

- **Comforted learners:**

- Those who thought that did not know anything and realized that they knew more than they thought through their own personal experience/knowledge.
 - Provided a sense of comfort about their state of knowledge in general, and that they could talk about the topic with a certain level of confidence.
 - Discussion is important, especially when they realize that they were not the only ones to have that feeling.

- **Refreshed-knowledge learners:**

- Those who thought they knew about something, and found the experience a good refresher.
 - Learning circle work forced the catch-up with the literature, adding confidence.
 - Discussions also added value added by providing different views on a topic.

- **Disgruntled or non-learners:**

- (Possible, but not admitted to!) Those who learned nothing or very little from a session and expressed dissatisfaction with it.

Content covered, learning achieved

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	1: Learning circles	2: Contribution analysis	3: Bibliometrics	4: Value for money	5: Realist evaluation	6: Ethical systems	7: Systems thinking	8: Emergent design
Participant A	High	Comforted	High	Comforted	Comforted	High	Comforted	Refreshed
Participant B	High	Comforted	Refreshed	High	Comforted	High	Comforted	Refreshed
Participant C	High	Comforted	High	Refreshed	High	Comforted	Refreshed	Refreshed
Participant D	High	High	High	Refreshed	High	Comforted	Comforted	Refreshed

- **Balancing learning results among all members is important.**

Outcomes

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- **Was this experiment successful for advanced professional development? YES**
 - Advantages over other forms
 - Easy/accessible, low-cost, flexible
 - Shared responsibility
 - Greater time investment than just reading:
 - Each spent 2-4 hours preparing for each cycle, plus more time for leader
 - A luxury rarely self-afforded
 - More interactive than a webinar or seminar
 - Access to a wealth of examples from others' experiences
 - Professionally stimulating, over and above new content

Outcomes

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- **Making the “someday” pile the “today” pile**
 - With a busy evaluation practice, tend to only read what is necessary, when it is necessary
 - With the learning circle, have a systematic process for working through professional literature (before it is “necessary”)
- **Impacts on evaluation practice**
 - e.g., recognition that we should be paying more attention to cost questions
- **Immediate relief of guilt plus sense of satisfaction from reducing the “someday” list**
- **Increased confidence in evaluation practice**
 - Additional models or techniques to incorporate into practice
 - But also, validation that our practices are not as vulnerable as we may have thought because we hadn't kept up with our reading
 - Plus, readings take us up to a point of knowing enough about particular topics to be able to identify where we might want or need to learn more

Outcomes

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- **Disadvantages and caveats**
 - Our group has long history of successful collaboration: would it work as well among people who don't know each other as well?
 - Homogeneity is a potential concern; it facilitates the process but perhaps limits the discussion
 - 2-3-4 articles is not exhaustive: choice is important
 - Small group could lead to issues if schedules are difficult and people cancel
 - Hasn't been an issue for our circle though (in fact, might be a motivating factor)

Where to next?

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- **We intend to continue**
 - Documenting our process so we continue to learn about it
 - Practice note for CJPE
- **Acceptability of learning model for CE credits?**
- **Expansion to other "cells" (other evaluator learning circles), other domains (other content areas such as health, environment, federal government, etc.)?**
- **Sharing of reading lists to facilitate broader professional development**
 - Development of a Web site

A second experience: background

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- **Kathryn Radford**
 - Graduate Certificate in Program Evaluation, University of Ottawa, August 2012
 - Audit and Evaluation, Industry Canada
- **Learning Circles**
 - CES Annual Conference 2012 Halifax, group dinner
 - Unable to attend session, asked for PPT
 - Made a commitment to Benoit and Shelley to try to put together a group

A second experience: putting it together

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- 3 colleagues from Graduate Certificate Program
- Had worked together before
 - Had won the 2010 CES Student Case Competition
- Sent them Learning Circle PowerPoint
- Almost instant buy-in
- First meeting a couple of weeks later

A second experience: how we work

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- **Preparation**

- Leader sends out readings about 2 weeks in advance
- All members read and prepare a short reflection that could include:
 - questions/comments that arise
 - our own experience with topic or anecdotes heard from others
- Quotations from the readings that could generate discussion
- Send reflections to all members, by morning of session, earlier if possible

- **Actual Session**

- Short round table
- 45 minute discussion, using reflections to feed discussion
- Close discussion with synopsis of learning outcomes
- Confirm next topic, leader and date for session

A second experience: results

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	Session 1: Theory-Based Evaluation / Contribution Analysis	Session 2: Performance Measurement	Session 3: Cost- Efficiency
Participant A	High	Refreshed	Comforted
Participant B	High	Refreshed	Comforted
Participant C	Refreshed	Refreshed	Comforted
Participant D	High	Refreshed	Comforted

A second experience: impressions

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- **Members are very positive**
 - **Member 1**
 - Immediately appealing idea.
 - Felt frustrated by not being able to keep abreast.
 - Lack of time at work and of motivation at home.
 - **Member 2**
 - Learned new things and refreshed.
 - Newly published documents and literature.
 - Sharing ideas with colleagues.
 - Writing task very useful.
 - **Member 3**
 - Time investment not onerous.
 - Included as part of my formal annual learning plan.

A second experience: points to ponder

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- **Challenges**
 - Some articles not easily available
 - Need access to teleconference services
 - Scheduling
- **Improvements?**
 - Satisfied with current process but interested in hearing about other groups

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