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~~ Learning as if People mattered ~~

**Spreading CRAFT in word and deed:
Action Learning Circles an innovation in
Adult Learning and Action Research**

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Table of Contents

[A] Introduction.....	3
[B] Background considerations	3
ALC's cp. AG's & COP's (Affinity Groups and Communities Of Practice)	3
Craft and its ALC legacy in Australia.....	4
From 'c'raft to CRAFT to.....	4
[C] About action learning	4
[D] About learning circles.....	5
What is a learning circle?	5
Organising a learning circle	6
Facilitating learning circles.....	6
Participating in a learning circle.....	7
Scheduling your learning circle topics and meetings.....	8
Conducting learning circle meetings.....	8
[E] Bringing the two together	8
Expressing the outcomes from your action learning circle.....	9
[F] Establish your own Disability Accessibility Learning Circle (DALC).....	9
[G] References.....	10

[A] Introduction

Action Learning is not new.

Learning Circles are not new.

What is new, I submit, is the innovation of putting the two together and applying them in the CRAFT sense of Practical Hope.

What is new however, is that, like with all innovations, here they are put together and synergised in this article and have been extensively field trailed. I argue that we have here an innovation in both Adult Learning (andragogy) and empowerment (emancipatory action learning) well worth the reader's attention and I suggest field application in the context of Disability Accessibility.

So in this sense Action Learning Circles as developed, configured below and applied by myself over the past decade are, if not new, at least, I argue, an innovation in the dual fields of Andragogy (Adult Learning) and Action Learning and offer substantial potential for application in Adult Learning in general.

Key resources in this regard are listed at the end of this exhibit and include: Dick (2009), Kolb (1984), Freire (1972), Wade and Hammick (1999), Wildman (2011, 2013, 2014) and Wildman and Schwencke (2003) and webwise <http://studycircles.net.au/>¹, <http://kalgrove.com/adultlearning/> and www.crafters-circle.com.

This exhibit outlines the three fold process of (1) Action Learning, (2) Learning Circles and (3) Bringing them together in order to gain insight and action in relation to Disability Accessibility.

[B] Background considerations

My dilemma as a practitioner of Action Learning and Andragogy (my doctoral studies were in both areas) [Wildman (1997)], was that action learning was appropriate to Adult Learning (Andragogy), and quite separately Learning Circles where less known however were hugely relevant in terms of historical relevance to Adult Learning (Andragogy). So it occurred to me to link the two to develop a pedagogical process that offered a self-organising system of Adult Learning. This innovation was designed for field application for Adult Education rather than in its application for students in Universities.

ALC's cp. AG's & COP's (Affinity Groups and Communities Of Practice)

For me I note that ALC's are quite distinct from, yet overlap with, AG's (Affinity Groups – primarily for activists), COP's (Communities of Practice – primarily for same skill set professional in service development). Members of an ALC potentially come from all aspects of the content area i.e. not all are nurses, teachers or students for instance.

¹ For me the term 'Learning' is more appropriate than 'Study' or 'Training' as it connotes a potential for Adult involvement and lends itself to amalgamation with terms such as Action Learning. Prior to being called 'Study Circles Australia' this NGO was called 'Learning Circles Australia' and I advocated against the name change. Again I see this as a loss of nuance and continuation of decline in the role of Andragogy in the sense I use it here. Whereas 'Training' is uniquely top down, often behaviourist and to a centrally predetermined curricula which has little bearing to the students lived life.

As the most recent application of Learning Circles I developed and conducted a Biochar ALC over a three month period in Northern NSW with folks of both genders across a broad age range and complete range of educational achievements (primary school to degree) in an intergenerational age range who wanted to learn about (a) making Biochar, (b) using Biochar, (c) making a retort to make Biochar etc. In this way I hope that ALC's can achieve in some small way part Freire's legacy that may allow them to be seen as 'emancipatory' in what the Europeans call 'associationalism' that is empowered citizens and indeed civic society at its apogee reduces the need for the state.

Craft and its ALC legacy in Australia: This is the legacy of the Schools of Arts and Mechanics Institutes and Workers Education Associations that once dotted our cultural and geographic landscape and now are derelict remanent we see as we scoot by in our air-conditioned cars and coaches passing through country towns as quickly as possible. Even worse the remanents that still exist have been captured completely by the Vocational Education for jobs agenda of the nation state and Paulo Freire's liberation and conscientisation approach all but forgotten indeed rubbed out in conventional academia and associated Government Departments. Clearly here we use the term 'craft' to include 'arts and crafts' it covers both genders and crosses ethnic and generational divides.

From 'c'raft to CRAFT to www.crafters-circle.com

This exhibit argues that as developed ALC's offer a unique tool for spreading the word and world of CRAFT. In this eZine we use CRAFT in 'capitals' to illustrate that it applies to the context for 'craft' that is the big picture into which we argue 'c'raft locates. Furthermore we call our eZine 'crafters-circle' (www.crafters-circle.com) in recognition of the role that craft and the actions needed to undertake a craft activity in a circle of crafters who naturally choose this format and therein share stories and thus help one another to learn, can play in a global renaissance and re-emergence of an empowered actively learning citizenry.

[C] About action learning

Action learning draws from theories on adult learning and seeks to build on a person's experience of the world through concrete actions, reflecting on the effect of the actions, then understanding and planning for ongoing action, in particular see Dick (2009). In Kolb's (1984) terms 'adult's learning interests are embedded in their personal histories, in their visions of who they are in the world and in what they can do and want to do'. In turn, this process is based on the view that learning (and knowledge and wisdom) can be gained through a cycle of concrete actions in the real world, observation of, and reflection on, those actions and the formulation of abstract concept or generalisations. In turn, these generalisations can lay the groundwork for further action based on the initial concrete action.

The application of Action Learning is particularly relevant for fuzzy problems, systemic issues and complex situations. This is especially the case if no one knows the solution or way out of a situation. In such situations the challenge is not whether to, but rather where and how to, start organising development action. In this sense Action Learning can assist the community to take one small action to improve operational opportunities, then reflect on it and plan the next step to improve the situation even further.

Action Learning, as applied in this context, is about communities entering a cycle of taking actions to improve their effectiveness and then reflecting on the effectiveness of this action with a view to learning from the past and seeking to improve it in the future. This cycle then has four moments or quadrants as if one is moving around a circle, namely:

→ **Act** [doing] => **Observe** (inc. recording) => **Reflect** [thinking] => **Generalise** (theorise).
=> **Plan** (intend and plan to act again) → Continue into another cycle → **Act**.....

From this it is clear that acting, observing and reflecting, generalising and planning are linked in the one cycle, with no specific starting point, and are not separate from each other, as in most conventional learning methods.

Action Learning is iterative, that is, it relies on continuously repeating the learning cycle. Understanding, and addressing DA is dependent on many small steps and actions (that is, smaller action learning cycles) being undertaken by your Learning Circle and throughout the community, building improvements from the base up. It is also part of your action learning circles that we look at the Big DA Picture – a global view or Global Problematic.

People generally exhibit a preference for a particular starting point in an ‘action learning circle cycle’, that is, they have a preferred ‘learning style’. Some people want to get in and do, others to plan, still others to think up abstract concepts, some to observe and reflect and carefully check things out. All these aspects are equally important and contribute equally to the end point of the action. In developing these learning circle topics we have attempted to cater to the full range of preferred ‘learning styles’.

There are many tools available to assist participants to understand their learning style. A search of the internet under the term ‘Learning Styles’ will reveal a range of these. It can be useful for participants to understand which approach they prefer.

[D] About learning circles

A learning circle can develop, over time, as a community of practice - *a process where people support each other to reflect, develop clarity to take initiatives and nurture others who seek to do the same*. An action learning circle then extends this to *taking action and learning from the outcomes thereof*. It is useful if membership of Learning Circles is intentionally diverse; that is, people from all ages and walks of life benefit greatly from thinking and learning together. When the learning circle is diverse, new solutions and new friendships are possible.

The following information regarding the conduct of a learning circle has been largely drawn from Adult Learning Australia’s ABC to Learning Circles, see Crombie (1999). Though somewhat dated this is the best overview we have come across. This is a comprehensive guide to organising, facilitating and participating in learning circles.

What is a learning circle?

In short a learning circle is a group process involving 5 to 15 people (I have found 8-12 to be the optimum) who meet to discuss and learn about a topic of interest to them and their community. The learning circle is designed to lead your group through developmental process to take sustainable DA actions. Generally the meetings are 2 hours each (3 hours if a meal is

included). They are held weekly for a study circle, and fortnightly for an learning circle, where actions/homework are undertaken in the interim week. Generally Learning Circles are thought of in terms of around 5 topics over as many meetings in no more than 3 months. This cycle can then be started over again for a different circle.

Essentially learning circles are self-managed and group-directed learning processes that do not require specific outside expertise. Participants draw on their own and other members experience, and draw in outside information as required or desired. The information provided with each topic will be helpful in this regard.

Organising a learning circle

As the initiator or organiser, you will be able to see how holding a learning circle can be a good way for its members to enact eco-social change at the local level in a practical way that is personally beneficial and yet is also globally relevant. Membership can be yourself, your family, community, or environmental type NGO's you are involved with. As you can see a learning circle can have several topics for its particular empowerment focus, in this instance DA, Biochar, Community Economy Development

The learning circle will now need to be promoted to particular people depending on the focus you choose, and perhaps your community at large, so that others who could be interested can become involved. It doesn't matter where the members for your learning circle come from as long as they are keen, a cross section of your community and around 10 in number.

There will be a number of tasks that need to be organised including:

- Registering participants, making sure name labels are available, if needed
- Determining any costs and how they'll be met
- Locating a venue
- Ensuring that all participants receive any materials necessary and understand the process they will be involved with during the social interaction of and the practical aspects of the topic
- Making sure that the learning circle is provisioned with any resources it needs, for example, paper, pens, markers, masking tape, audio-visual facilities, etc.

Facilitating learning circles

Learning Circle topics are best guided by a facilitator, drawn either from within the group or from outside as appropriate. The facilitator role could also be rotated for each meeting if desired. The facilitator is not a 'chair' of the meeting nor is it someone with particular expertise on the subject but has the role of keeping the circle process moving and on track. So that if all goes well the facilitator is hardly heard from. To start with it could be helpful to find someone with experience as a group leader or who is a skilled facilitator.

The **role of a facilitator** involves:

- Setting up, including making sure that everyone has a copy of the learning circle topic to read inc. actions to be undertaken

- Encourage at least one person to be the group scribe and record outcomes for the Evaluation section
- Have this Record available for each person at each meeting
- Helping the group set its objectives and ground rules for the operation of the circle inc. its own direction
- Maintain a comfortable impartial atmosphere
- Ensuring that all participants have been introduced to each other
- Encouraging everyone's contribution through active listening, discussion and dialogue within the group, while discouraging dominating contributions
- Taking account of learning styles of participants where this is needed moving the group on when it becomes stuck while also helping participants work through any conflict constructively
- Discouraging any tendency for the facilitator to be treated as an expert
- Summarising where the group is up to, from time to time while asking, and encouraging the asking of, questions that are open ended and encourage discussion
- Helping the group to stay on time, and take appropriate breaks
- Closing the session by ensuring that everyone has a turn to make a final statement and reminding participants about any follow up that has been decided on
- Ensuring that the participants have evaluated the learning circle and that this information is returned as appropriate.

Participating in a learning circle

This will involve:

- Participating in the meetings within the ground rules inc. doing the *reading* for the meetings and *actions* between meetings
- Listening to the other participants, and trying to understand their viewpoint,
- Helping the discussion stay on track while retaining an open, yet focused, mind
- Speaking freely without dominating the discussion
- Addressing all comments and discussion points to the whole group
- Asking questions particularly of quieter group members, and also particularly if you don't understand something
- Being prepared to disagree without being aggressive, being prepared to work through the differing perspectives, or agree to disagree, as appropriate

- Offering a helping hand, for example, with finding resource materials, preparing refreshments and cleaning up, taking a turn to facilitate, etc.
- Arranging for the keeping of any necessary records

Overall we have found that participants *require an attitude of commitment*: for instance shown by prioritising your involvement in your DA Action Circle Program so all of the above get addressed within and between each meeting and that you attend each meeting. Often 2-3hrs per meeting with 2-3hrs of reading and or actions between meetings of which there are generally 5-6hours per fortnight spread over a maximum of 3 months.

Scheduling your learning circle topics and meetings

The amount of time you and your group will need for each topic will vary, but some topics may take up to six hours or more to give sufficient time for carefully considering the content and actions. The length of time needed will also vary with the amount of preparation participants undertake. Where appropriate, each Topic Guide provides suggestions on preparation, where it is harder for people to get together (through traveling distance, etc.), working through a topic could be done as a one-day activity with follow-up through other mediums including email, skype and phone contact, and if this is not possible then by email with photos etc.

Conducting learning circle meetings

It is suggested that each session needs to start with a welcome, especially to any new members; followed by a review of the previous meeting; and with members clarifying the aim of the present meeting. It is useful for someone to record the key decisions (it is generally not necessary to take detailed minutes). The facilitator can then guide the group through the chosen Topic Guide and its activities. Generally a period of 2 hours at least is necessary to enable effective outcomes, reserving a 10 minute session at the end of your circle meeting for summing, reflecting on the circle process, making decisions about upcoming actions is important as well as materials, facilitator, location and time of the next meeting need to be established.

[E] Bringing the two together

What I have done is to seek to synergise the two through action embedded in the learning that occurs in the interim between the circle meetings. This is a structured action learning is listed in the Topic Guide for one circle meeting and the outcomes are recorded, reported and discussed at the subsequent circle meeting. Generally the actions are related to the topic and are both standalone (allowing for newcomers to the circle) and cumulative should the participant prefer.

In practice I have found this is a particularly challenging process to seek to retain ‘sparkle’ in ‘thoughts’ and ‘deeds’ and ‘thoughts in deeds’ and ‘deeds in thoughts’.

For the purpose of this issue of CRAFT, DA ALC’s have been applied by our Issue Curator Meriel in the design of her home extensions (scheduled to be completed in late 2014). She had two ALC meetings that were organised along the lines of design charettes with the Brisbane Hot Futures Group in 2013-14. Outcomes of these two learning circle meetings have been

incorporated into the subsequent design, now construction, of her home extensions and have fed through to various policy recommendations as found in this Issue.

Expressing the outcomes from your action learning circle

To obtain results from your DA actions, like anything worthwhile, will take time and persistence. You and your learning circle group will need to allow yourself and your circle time for the results from your actions to start to come in. An ongoing commitment over a longer term (at least 3 months beyond the time required for working through the topics) may well enable more consistent outcomes. To help this along you may like to consider forming, or joining, a DA organisation or network especially, if one doesn't already exist in your community.

Making a longer term commitment will allow your learning circle group to take the necessary action learning steps to continue the development of DA in your family, community, NGO or business.

[F] Establish your own Disability Accessibility Learning Circle (DALC)

Spreading the awareness about Disability Accessibility through the use of a DA Action Learning Circle process as described above can take many forms including:

- Getting all the DA key systems and subsystems in the one room, as stakeholders representing these subsystems and using a DALC format to develop and action a systems map as suggested by Neil Davison in Exhibit 23² in this Issue.
- Personal use and demonstration thereof to family and friends
- Community discussion groups about DA and its links to local issues then national issues and its links to global issues
- Civic activities, such as petitions, civic juries to give opinions to council/ors, listening posts on DA and its potential
- Community festivities, celebrations and cultural events. Such activities can include street theatre, music festivals, celebrating the season
- 'Community animation and theatre' around DA as a 'community hearth of wellness'
- Multimedia production such as video, webpages, DVD-ROMs and social media
- Establishing your own DA Action Learning Circle (DALAC) to explore, understand and act on the six dimensions of DA in the context of Practical Hope

The intention is that the outcome will encourage active participation on the part of learning circle as well as spreading the word to other community members.

² Davison, Neil (2014) *A systems perspective on Disability Accessibility*. Exhibit 23 CRAFT 6 www.crafters-circle.com Brisbane, The Kalgrove Institute. 7pgs.

[G] References

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