



# Evaluating Learning Circles

*the impact of ALA Learning Circles  
past and future*

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## EXECUTIVE ACTION

### PRIORITY RESEARCH RECOMMENDATION

#### **Action Research in-Development**

This evaluation is a snapshot review of past and present learning circle activities. The research is intended for on-going development of Learning Circles within Adult Learning Australia Inc (ALA).

#### **Researching within the Context of Community**

Learning Circles operate within the communities that activate them. Wherever Learning Circles are used there is open encouragement to copy printed materials and use the ideas and concept of Learning Circles within the context of the users.

This flexibility is a highly valued quality of Learning Circles. It means that there is little control over where, when and who attends in many cases. Collecting hard statistics in such an open environment has restrictions, especially many years after the event.

This report then, analyses available data including evaluations of specific learning circle events, interviews with users, representatives of funding organisations, users and ALA staff.

#### **Two Executive Recommendations**

It will be useful to ALA to be able to be equipped to present on-going evidence of usage of Learning Circles. It is recommended that:

1. **Efficient and effective data collection strategies be explored, developed and applied within the operating context of Learning Circles.**

For the data collection to work, the strategy needs to be a quick and efficient method of recording information that is revealed to ALA through their website and reported to staff as well as including data revealed through specific evaluations. It is realistic to expect that not all active Learning Circles can be counted, nor the participants but significant records can be a basis for realistic estimates backed up with statistics. Staff of ALA who maintain the existing data base will have valuable input in terms of what is working, what is useful and what can be tailored to suit current and future demands for evidence of Learning Circles' impact.

2. **ALA develop and disseminate evaluation processes that can be applied by any users of Learning Circles as a best practice tool to accompany new programs.**

Identification of best practice in evaluation and development of appropriate strategies are outcomes emerging from this evaluation methodology (listed in Appendix 1). The plan is to develop an *Evaluation Toolkit* in consultation

with users given further funds to enable opportunities for this best practice approach.

**The tool kit will be attractive to any future learning circle program client. Designed to be easy to use and provide useful information to enable learning circle clients to build learning communities (including Learning Cities) where people pool their resources, skills and knowledge to build community capacity.**

Using action learning, the evaluation process will be built into each learning circle activity. We use what we know about the *practice* of Learning Circles to apply to efficient and effective on-going evaluation. Such *thinking* promotes *planning* for new *action*, which in turn is *reflected upon* - the full cycle of Learning Circles.

## 1. EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS

### *Study Context*

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Adult Learning Australia (ALA) promotes the learning circle concept and develop, promote and support the running of Learning Circles.

This evaluation is a brief review to extract useful learning from past activities in order to establish a reflexive view to indicate future directions. This report presents the first stage of evaluation - review. Two future stages are proposed to develop and implement an on-going evaluation strategy in collaboration with learning circle users. Designed to be integrated into the learning process, traditional reflection and innovative measurement strategies can then be used with Learning Circles in all contexts where specific outcomes are required or feedback is helpful.

### *Evaluation Methodology - Action learning*

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It is the nature of community activities and a valued quality of the learning circle approach, that communities take the strategy and adapt it to fit their learning needs. This can mean that a learning circle kit may lay dormant for a few months, or a year, then be re-activated without any feedback to ALA.

Learning Circles are designed to run independent of the source and as such are intended to be out of ALA 'control'. As this evaluation examines learning circle activities from the first ALA kit in 1996, an effective methodology had to be devised to work with the information available. A multiple method, three phase approach was applied, to answer the following questions and inquire further where more data was revealed.

#### **What do we know about the usage and impact of Learning Circles?**

- a) Desk review of ALA learning circle records including evaluation reports from specific kits:
  - Evaluation and project reports external to ALA identified and examined.
- b) Fourteen interviews with existing staff and learning circle leaders, managers and co-ordinators revealed:
  - Responses to questions on evaluation and development.

- c) A focus group with ALA staff and nation wide learning circle users. The focus group tested findings and discussed:
- What are the best practice elements of Learning Circles?
  - What strategies are useful in evaluating Learning Circles? Including innovative learning methods that re-inforce learning while evaluating.
  - What directions can ALA develop now to maximise opportunities, apply evaluation where useful and increase sustainability?

## *Conclusions*

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### *Who participates in Learning Circles?*

This research revealed that both formal and informal Learning Circles include all ages and backgrounds. The highest users of Learning Circles are over 55 and female. When kits are prepared around areas of interest to men or younger people, they are successful in attracting and keeping their interest to the extent that they arrange their own learning circle activities.

### *What works and why?*

Evaluations repeatedly report that a successful learning circle is one that results in **participants' learning and activities arising from the sessions including individual action.**

Another success marker is **sustainability.**

### *In what situations do Learning Circles work best?*

Learning Circles operate in a moving spiral with the energising spin being the health of the community. Learning Circles build upon opportunities and strengthen that community's capacity.

A learning circle approach used for population health projects specify **carefully defined populations.**

*"Successful projects depend upon multi-sectoral involvement. The participation of older people themselves as active players and role models, reinvesting in health as they continue to age, greatly strengthens the process."*

*"Firm partnerships are needed with many other agencies and sectors - NGOs, governments, educational bodies, the media and the private sector."* Bodies Matter Report

A **pilot** run of a learning circle in-development, is made possible by funding that includes the capacity to revisit the draft and refine material. This critical step means that not only is material tested, but also the strategies to activate community involvement including identifying key community leaders or catalysts.

### ***Limitations***

#### *Limitations of this evaluation*

There is a lack of quantitative data in terms of numbers and locations of Learning Circles. Learning Circles are known to be flexible. This research limitation arises directly from the valued quality of 'handing over' the learning process to the community involved.

Tables 1 and 2 (pages 15 & 16) identify known learning circle activity with numbers of groups or kits distributed where known. Even where numbers are known (as with Reconciliation ) community members photo copy material (it is copyright free) and run Learning Circles on their own choice of topics without discussion guidelines.

Users were concerned that the need to demonstrate how effective a learning circle may be, should never alter this flexible quality. ALA continues to receive feedback appreciating the flexible nature of Learning Circles and the copyright free policy.

However, where project funding specifies key performance indicators or outcomes, reports do quantify usage rates e.g. the *Bodies Matter* trial reached over 200 NSW women who provided 181 evaluation forms.

Future evaluation strategies do not need to quantify *all* learning circle activity. As this report demonstrates, a great deal of data is able to be collected from the people involved. However, where quantitative data is available as in funded projects which require and fund data collection, it is recommended that ALA be funded and equipped to develop an on-going evaluation data base (identified as R1 in Recommendations). Such quantitative data gathered will serve as concrete evidence to contextualise available qualitative data.

#### ***Limitations of Learning Circles - The need to know the context...***

Learning Circles are valuable for community and individual learning leading to action where local or interest networks exist or are formed around an issue.

All limitations listed over, conversely identify the activity required to improve the situation - that is the groundwork necessary to ensure Learning Circles do work well. This development work also impacts upon sustainability - discussed in the next section.

Learning Circles rely upon the formation of interest groups. This is a key factor to their success. **Without a group there is no learning circle.**

Careful consideration of the limitations in any situation where Learning Circles are being proposed should include research and development of community capacity. Learning Circles develop this quality activated by key pathways into the chosen community. The following limitations particularly appear where links into community networks are not readily identified.

***Learning Circles do not form as well where:***

- § Users do not have access to active networks from which to form user groups.
- § Users attempt to work with existing groups who do not see the learning circle activity as relevant to their usual group activity. e.g. running a learning circle with a bowls group. However, if water restrictions were likely to effect the bowling green, then a learning circle on saving water is likely to be welcomed.
- § A relevant example from Campbelltown Stormwater project: *"Some environmental groups have a narrow focus or need re-energising. To successfully engage them will require the development of links between their interests and the stormwater project."*
- § Facilitation of Learning Circles is directed as a teacher with didactic practices rather than facilitating a group of peers investigating new learning. Adult learners work best in shared learning environments. There are cultural exceptions to this situation described in the next limitation.
- § There are cultural limitations to the notion of learning from peers in communities who value rote and structured learning as well as bestowing status on elders and experts. This applies where cultural expectations believe that learning is only acceptable from an expert or an elder who act in a supervisory role.<sup>1</sup>
- § Group members perceive that facilitation is 'too much work' when previous facilitators are no longer available.

Most Learning Circles attract more women than men however the *Memories and Memorabilia*, a program about wartime, did attract a significant number of male participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Reported from a range of activities including Tamil Community Learning Circles started in Sydney by a Tamil community member. Only two sessions ran. The interviewee observed that the community have more pressing survival needs at this time. He will try again with the already existing group of parents who enrol their children in Tamil school.



*Memories and Memorabilia* provided an opportunity for returned soldiers to talk about the impact of war on them and their families. Evaluations revealed a hunger and an appreciation for learning circle activity.

*Comments from facilitators:*

*“Keen interest shown from a group of men who had never before experienced group discussion” and*

*“Material worked to assist the men talk about their own war experiences.”*

### ***Sustainability Issues***

Knowledge of these limitations informs users of strategies to strengthen approaches. E.g. Campbelltown *Full Circle Full Cycle (FC<sup>2</sup>)* community stormwater project, found in their trial that...

*“A learning circle program is not going to work if it is designed around the concept of individuals coming together to discuss stormwater issues. It needs to harness communal energy, have a specific action focus and a hands-on approach.”*

### ***Copyright Free***

All ALA Learning Circles are copyright free. This enables communities to reproduce and distribute material long after specific project funding has run out.

Veteran's affairs networks activated *Memories and Memorabilia* and extended distribution far beyond the 60 kits provided. The discussion support material was simply designed to enable photo copying. Reports indicate copies were and continue to be widely distributed.

Many users appreciating the copyright free policy, also ask for learning circle support material to be posted on the ALA website.

### ***Recommendations for Sustainable Product and Evaluation Development***

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The following recommendations are presented with an acknowledgment of the current effective management of ALA Learning Circles. A strong network of users and potential customers has been developed over the years of learning circle operations. Recommendations need to be supported and made sustainable with ongoing funding.

### ***R 1 Ongoing Evaluation Strategies and Tracking Learning Circle Activities***

- a) ALA be resourced to extend and maintain the data base to record kit distribution and usage and invite feedback in a user-friendly way. Include the capacity to post documents (such as reports on learning circle projects) and other strategies to support learning circle users.

The ALA web system currently logs reports of learning circle activity. Where ALA staff are informed of activities through their many networks, they add a posting. This approach serves to include reports of learning circle activities whose members do not have web access.

External reports such as *Bodies Matter*, *Learning in Circles*, *Full Circle Full Cycle (FC<sup>2</sup>)* are valuable documents to ALA and should be archived and logged. Such external reports are valuable selling documents to organisations and government staff who are not familiar with the approach. These reports demonstrate the capacity of learning circle methodology to achieve major advances in community learning, leading to changes in behaviour such as changed water usage practices and responsible personal health checks.

- b) Develop an evaluation strategy toolkit.
- c) Interviewees indicated that the need exists for ALA to provide evaluation strategies to learning circle users.
- d) Develop a specific kit on evaluation for community workers use.
- e) The core material can be adapted for professional and business use as a value added product.
- f) Post a range of evaluation tools on the website and invite innovative contributions.

### ***R 2 Increasing Sustainability***

- a) Continue to design learning circle material that is easily photocopied and remains copyright free.
- b) Post learning circle material on the web site for continued access.
- c) Continue to invite learning circle news on the web site including those that are generated without centrally developed kits.

These recommendations raise the issue of sustainable web site funding and management. An associated issue is the expense of producing printed material and shipping costs compared to increasing web capacity. Further - there is still the issue of community groups who do not have web access.

Where Learning Circles are developed for **specific learning outcomes**:

- d) Population groups need to be carefully defined and targeted (as in *Bodies Matter, Learning in Circles* for teenagers with truancy problems and *Learning Circles for Lone Partners* at Mt Druitt).
- e) Pilot sessions are an essential development stage for specific purpose built kits. Pilots provide feedback on material and the community access strategies employed as well as identifying community leaders and catalysts to sustain appropriate content and access to target population groups.

### ***R 3 Opportunities for Learning Circle Development***

The following recommendations are based upon input collected during this evaluation.

There is repeated comment from users upon the lack of understanding around the terminology and the process of Learning Circles. Once people experience a learning circle – the problem dissolves. There is greater understanding around learning organisations, learning cities and learning communities. It may be easier to sell the concept of Learning Circles if instead they are referred to as Learning Community Action Groups or Action Learning Groups and be marketed alongside the current development of Learning Communities, Learning Cities and Learning Organisations.

- a) **Learning Circles be re-branded with a name change to Learning Community Action Groups or Action Learning Groups.** It may help to mark the process of name change to do it in consultation with users including canvassing for a more understandable name. This may involve no more than putting it on the web site and inviting feedback for one month only.

Feedback from learning circle projects involving health and environment, strongly indicate that the learning circle model is highly effective for promoting and educating health and environment developments.

- b) *"This model of adult learning may be utilised for the dissemination of other health message for older women."* Recommendation from the Evaluation Report of *Bodies Matter* NSW Cervical Screening Program 2002.

Interviewees within professional organisations all report they would use and promote accredited facilitation training designed for professionals, bureaucrats and community and health workers.

- c) Develop an accredited facilitation kit, promote and deliver to professionals, bureaucrats and community and health workers.

Interviewees were similarly enthusiastic about the prospect of a kit on Learning Circles. This would impart the process of Learning Circles and include facilitation training. As a professional development strategy, Learning Circles are useful for a range of different work situations e.g. professionals, office workers, community or

health workers meeting regularly in a learning circle framework to address work and organisational issues and development opportunities. (It was reported that Travel Smart in Western Australia use the process as part of their public transport program.)

There is a risk management side to this recommendation. Poor facilitation at its worst can mean that 'at-risk' participants may be exposed to emotional and psychological discomfort or damage. Groups comprise all aspects of the Australian population and it is not possible or appropriate to 'screen' participants as may be possible for applicants enrolling for a formal or community course.

An accredited facilitation program will mean a greater understanding of the skills required throughout the community as well as providing a pool of known skilled facilitators for future programs. There is a marketing flow-on to the training in that people will become aware of the learning circle process and may be in professional positions to promote the process.

The proviso to this request from users directed that community based Learning Circles must not insist on trained facilitators. The flexibility of people meeting together to learn and act around a common issue of concern or interest must be maintained and supported.

- d) Develop an accredited program on Learning Circles for a professional development tool and promote it as an Human Resource strategy.

There emerged the suggestion that learning circle material be produced on compact disc and be available on-line. To be sustainable for ALA there needs to be examination of cost retrieving possibilities and demand. While on-line development is probably inevitable, a staged process will need to be costed effectively.

While it is feasible to take a fully funded product and put it on the web site to be downloaded, several issues arise including cost retrieval (web maintenance), design for web use - as opposed to print material and feedback on usage. Other issues will no doubt be identified.

- e) Examine feasibility and sustainability of developing on-line and CD Learning Circles.

## 2. BACKGROUND: WHY FOCUS ON EVALUATION? - OBJECTIVES

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Learning Circles Australia products were reviewed along with successful Learning Circles external to ALA, to identify:

- § What works well and why?
- § In what situations do Learning Circles work best?
- § Limitations.
- § Sustainability issues.
- § Opportunities for Learning Circles development.
- § The collected information is intended to serve as a basis to develop an on-going evaluation strategy that can be used with any learning circle activities where appropriate.

Dr Virginia Kaufman Hall (evaluator - Director, of Human Centred Solutions) talked with Mary Hannan (Manager, Learning Circles Australia) about the value of such an evaluation in 2001. In March 2002 Dr Hall wrote a proposal for ALA's President (then acting Executive Director, Ned Dennis) to discuss with ANTA. The proposal was entitled *Evaluating Learning Circles- A proposal to develop an evaluation process to demonstrate the impact of ALA Learning Circles past and future*. With an extended budget this project suggested an outcome of developing a Tool Kit for Evaluation on the ALA website.

Later in 2002 Francesca Beddie, ALA's newly appointed Executive Director, also discussed evaluation ideas with ANTA with the view of using specified funding to develop strategic planning for Learning Circles Australia to build upon sound research information. Ms Beddie succeeded in directing seeding money to the evaluation project as a *first* step in the evaluation and development process.

The proposed evaluation was reframed as a two-phase project with the concluding phase dependent upon further funding. To accommodate available funding the methodology was condensed and adapted to achieve targeted and efficient ways of collecting and analysing data.

### 3. FROM FEEDBACK TO STRATEGIC PLANNING

#### RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION LEARNING METHODOLOGY

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ALA aims to develop strategic directions for Learning Circles building upon the major determinations of this evaluation.

This project uses an evaluation process based upon action learning methodology that is congruent with Learning Circles. To draw the most up-to-date information and integrate with current and recent projects, the staged processes incorporated:

*Initially:*

- § An evaluation strategy devised by Dr Hall was used to identify outcomes of the Learning Circles used in the Campbelltown storm water project *Full Circle Full Cycle (FC<sup>2</sup>)*.
- § Collecting and analysing existing data within ALA systems and staff.
- § Identifying good practice in design and delivery of ALA Learning Circles through consultation with key users to identify and develop innovative evaluation strategies.

*With further funding in 2003 it is planned to:*

- § Develop an evaluation toolkit for future ALA Learning Circle programs.

*With funding for web-based strategies:*

- § Devise (as an option) on-going evaluation to create an on-line Learning Circle Evaluation kit that can be adapted whenever required. Funding needs to include the costs of printing and postage of the evaluation kit and distribution to those community agencies *without* web access.

This report covers the first three stages performed from October 2002 to February 2003.

#### 4. HARVESTING DATA - ACTION LEARNING ON-THE-RUN

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*What Learning Circles have been developed?*

Quantitative data was sourced through a desk review of records selected by LCA manager Mary Hannan and other ALA staff. The resulting table is a list of ALA Learning Circles, dates and sponsors. The initial plan was to collect information at a group meeting of ALA staff to identify the sources and systems to gather the data and to collect the information over a to-be-negotiated time period. The listing here is reviewed by the researcher.

This project is *not* a comprehensive review of all Learning Circles. Given the range of anecdotal reporting of activities across the country, this would be an extensive research task.

The most active and enduring Learning Circles are here considered as learning experiences not only for participants but also for ALA. The Learning Circles listed in the first table were developed by ALA itself or in partnership with other state organisations or individuals. These products serve as useful sources for critical reflection.

Table 1

*Learning Circle Kits developed with ALA*

<b>Learning Circle Name Numbers printed if available</b>	<b>Funded by</b>	<b>User Organisation / Location</b>	<b>Date Developed &amp; approx \$</b>
<b>Blue-green Algae 1300 kits Dryland Salinity 1000 kits Coastal Management Wetlands Care</b>	Murray Darling Basin Commission with the then Dept. Environment, Sport and Territories	Initially used within the Murray Darling Basin. Used sporadically in different locations - occasional feedback	1997 - 98 \$128,000 \$25,000 \$25,000
<b>Citizens &amp; Crime: Building Safer Communities First &amp; Second Phase Awaiting approval for publication</b>	National Crime Prevention (NCP) Attorney General's Department	<i>Finished product Waiting for ministerial approval for over 18 months</i>	1999 – 2000 \$154,000
<b>Centenary of Federation 100 kits</b>	Commonwealth Federation funding for two electorates in Sydney	Learning and Living in the 3 <sup>rd</sup> Age (LL3A)	2000 \$40,000
<b>Discovering Democracy 2000 Kits plus 1000 CD's</b>	C'wlth Dept of Education, Science & Training	Local Government, U3A, Schools and more	2000 \$290,000
<b>Wartime Memories and Memorabilia 8 discussion guides 60 kits distributed for Anzac Day</b>	DVA (minimal funding) \$1500 supported by ALA input required to complete successfully.	Commemorations Branch of DVA in <i>Their Service - Our Heritage program</i>	2000 \$1500
<b>Learning and Living in the Third Age</b> Includes 15 discussion guides including GST, and health and wellbeing issues <b>1400 kits distributed</b>	Commonwealth Government - Office of Aged Care funded through the International Year of the Older Person	LL3A networks combined with ALA Well used. New topics developed by users and continuing to develop within the community.	2000 \$134,000
<b>Reconciliation</b> 2,500 in each edition = <b>5000 kits</b>	Council of Australian Reconciliation - Estimated 5,000 kits distributed 50% of each edition.	2 editions, wide use nationally with Australian for Reconciliation and other groups continuing.	2001 & 1992 Re-dev Stage \$60,000
<b>Crime Prevention and Community Safety</b> Initially 30 Learning Circles	Parramatta Council	Targeted Parramatta communities  On-going	2002 \$3,500
<b>Bodies Matter - peer education kit for older women Pilot over 200 women in learning circle groups</b>	NSW Cervical Screening Program	Western Sydney Area Health Service - On-going state-wide	2002 \$33,000
<b>Full Circle Full Cycle (FC<sup>2</sup>) Stormwater community development project</b> <i>in development</i>	Campbelltown City Council with Environment Protection Authority NSW	Wide spread of Campbelltown community localities	2002 \$39,000
<b>Learning Circles for Lone Parents</b>	Blacktown City Council, GROW, The WASH House Mt Druitt	3 groups of disadvantaged lone parents in the Mount Druitt area	2003 \$11,000
<b>(Y)Our Community (L)Earning</b> <i>in development</i>	Queensland Community Benefit Fund - for small business and portfolio work development	Community Learning Initiatives planned to distribute on-line to local government	2003
<b>Falls Prevention Learning Circle Pilot Project</b> Phase 1 – Kit development	Funded by WA Health Dept, Cwlth Dept of Health & Aged Care & coordinated by WA Branch ALA	Second phase of this project will disseminate the material to senior groups in Western Australia.	2003

\*Although approximate funds are stated it should be noted that these figures in some cases do not reflect the full cost of the various projects. In some cases graphic design, printing and dissemination of the Kits were undertaken separately by the funding government department or organisation.



The Learning Circle activities listed below are not ALA products. The following are developed by people on site to fulfil a specific situation. They are included to show the capacity of the learning circle model to be adapted to use in particularly difficult or complex situations and as such were selected to be included in this review.

Table 2

***Learning Circle Activities developed externally to ALA  
Considered for this evaluation***

<b>Learning Circle Name</b>	<b>Funded by</b>	<b>User Organisation / Location</b>	<b>Dates in Use</b>
<b>Learning in Circles</b> 2 groups of 8 young people in each	ANTA Adult Literacy Project	SkillsPlus Mornington Peninsula, Victoria	2000 - 2002
<b>Swan River Action Kit</b>	Swan Catchment Centre WA State Government, Lions & Rotary	Taps into community centres, local government, learning circle networks, mature Adult Learners Australia	2001 - 2004 Funded 3 year project with full time Community Education Officer
<b>Building Rural Futures through Co-operation</b>	5 grants from trusts and foundations	Centre for Rural Communities Inc., Co-operative Federation of Victoria & Co-operative Energy Ltd.	Undated - reported at 1998
<b>Rural Men's Workshop</b> One-off session	NSW Dept. of Health Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI)	UNE Research Project	2002
<b>Tamil Community Learning Circle</b> 2 sessions only	Unfunded - Initiated by Tamil community member	Sydney community	2002

**Interviews**

For this first stage of inquiry, 12 interviewees were selected for their knowledge and experience of a range of Learning Circles as well as their availability. ALA staff have more contacts in their active networks who will be useful to contact for future research and development. The interview schedule is included as Appendix 2.

<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Phil Robson	ALA Business Manager
John Cross	ALA Research Manager
Leon Tannerhill	ALA consultant
Sue Williamson	Enabling Outcomes - consultant to ALA in Kangaroo Valley NSW
Karen Ireland	Swan Catchment Centre W.A.
Kris Helisma	Skills Plus Mornington Peninsula Vic.
Dina Retter & Amanda Niciak	Health Promotion & Communication NSW Cervical Screening Program Westmead Hospital NSW
Dorothy Lucardie	Central Aust Remote Health Development Services Alice Springs NT
Devondram Dharmaratnam	Tamil Community Sydney NSW
Ellen Thomas	Tuggeranong Community Centre Learning Circle leader /co-ordinator ACT
Helen Schwencke	Community Learning Initiatives and Lifelong Learning Council of Queensland

Main points made by interviewees are included in this report, selected by relevance to the developmental purpose of this evaluation.

## 5. MARKED SUCCESSES WITH LEARNING CIRCLES

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A major reason for any learning circle's success is the use of existing networks. The context of each learning circle is defined by purpose, subject matter and intended participants. It could be said that every sponsor (including ALA as initiator of Learning Circles) are responding to a 'situation' where learning and community and/or individual action are desired outcomes.

### *Outcomes of Successful Learning Circles - learning, action and sustainability*

Evaluations repeatedly report that a successful learning circle is one that results in **participants' learning** and **activities arising from the sessions including individual action**.

Another success marker is **sustainability** - members returning for more sessions as well as initiating their own topics for the group to study.

Outcomes are obviously of interest to funding bodies and the host organisation as well as the learning circle writers and LCA. For participants, a successful learning circle means engagement, enjoyment and the desire to repeat the experience. Activities that are desirable after the learning circle group disbands include individual behavioural change and increased knowledge.

Learning Circles that are repeatedly used and/ or those that are commonly reported as highly effective are discussed below. Including: *Bodies Matter* successfully developed to increase older women's knowledge of Pap screening; *Learning and Living in the Third Age*, *Memories and Memorabilia & Centenary of Federation*; *Australians for Reconciliation*.

### *Bodies Matter 2002*

Clearly considered a successful learning circle, the Bodies Matter report recommends that

**"this model of adult learning may be utilised for the dissemination of other health messages for older women"**<sup>2</sup>

LCA was commissioned by NSW Cervical Screening Program to develop the Bodies Matter Learning Circle Kit. Knowledge and attitude change was evaluated by McNemars Test (a measurement

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<sup>2</sup> NSW Cervical Screening Program, Western Sydney Area Health Service 2002 *Bodies Matter* Draft Report 7/8/02

of health outcomes) applied before and after the learning circle sessions.

Over 200 women participated in the learning circle groups and 181 completed evaluation questionnaires. Ratings of participants' knowledge increased significantly pre and post the learning circle. Knowledge ratings of very good and excellent increased by 17.4% and 13% respectively. There was an increase of 41.6% of participants able to answer all knowledge questions correctly from pre-test to post-test. The proportion of those who believed the Pap test was not effective dropped from 5.6% pre to 1.2% post test. 65.2% reported learning something they didn't know before the sessions.

Bodies Matter participants included women throughout NSW who reported upon their experience of learning as relaxed and fun - especially significant for sessions on Pap Smears where women report not attending for regular Pap Smears because of their discomfort and embarrassment.

*Comments from participants:*

*"As well as being very educational I have made new friends and shared lots of laughter."*

*"I enjoyed listening to other members of the group and their own experiences regarding testing. Funny stories regarding old fashioned attitudes to sex and personal health."*

Bodies Matter is continuing into 2003 - beyond the evaluated pilot. The kit is circulating and being used by health and community workers to extend its reach to the target group - older women in NSW women aged 50-69 years.

***Learning and Living in the Third Age 1999, Memories and Memorabilia 2000, Centenary of Federation 2000***

These three learning circle kits are successful, particularly because of their sustainability in terms of re-use and feedback for over three years and continue to attract a high demand for the material.

LL3A kits were first distributed in 1999, the program receiving funds from the Commonwealth Government for the International Year of the Older Person. 1400 kits were distributed through LCA and U3A networks, Local Government, Retirement / Nursing Homes, organisation who arrange activities for older Australians, exhibitions and inquiries generated from advertising.

*Memories and Memorabilia* had minimal funding from the Department of Veteran's Affairs with 60 kits sent out before

Anzac Day. ALA provided resources to ensure the quality and delivery of the kits.

*Centenary of Federation* kits were developed in 2000 and tapped into similar networks, expanding topics and interests of existing groups as well as stimulating new ones.

One major reason for the sustainability of these three Learning Circles, is the strength, breadth and cohesion of networks of older Australians. The distribution of LL3A material tapped into active networks that reached Australians with interests and commitment to group and/or community activities.

Veteran's Affairs networks activated *Memories and Memorabilia* far beyond the 60 kits provided. The discussion support material was simply designed to enable photo copying and reports indicate copies were and continue to be widely distributed.

Certainly the publicity and marketing of the International Year of the Older Person and Federation widened knowledge and resulted in inquiries and the setting up of new groups.

LL3A participants commented:

*"The world tells me I'm on the shelf. This discussion tells me I'm not."* and

*"It means mateship, having a lot of fun, gaining or refining your memory."* and

*"Puts older Australians in the position of actors, rather than subject or objects."*

Health and community workers commented:

*"Participative and flexible, people are in charge of their process."* and

*"Accessible and affordable cost - no copyright - offers scope for people to produce their own topics and discussion resources"* and

*"User friendly (often repeated) without a controlling hierarchy"* and

*"We're all impressed with the level of preparation in the group. Seniors helping other seniors to keep their minds active and experience the joy of learning."*

***Memories and Memorabilia*** provided an opportunity for returned soldiers to talk about the impact of war on them and their families. This kit attracted more men than other learning circle topics. Evaluations revealed a hunger and an appreciation for learning circle activity.

*Comments from facilitators:*

*"Keen interest shown from a group of men who had never before experienced group discussion"* and

*"Material worked to assist the men talk about their own war experiences."*

### *Australians for Reconciliation*

A detailed evaluation reported upon the success of the first Reconciliation study circles. Funding was then committed to produce an updated and redesigned kit.

Two kits were developed, the first in 1992 and the second in 1998 around 2,500 for each edition. Their success was enhanced by distribution through Reconciliation networks.

#### *Participants comments*

*"A deeper understanding of the issues" and*

*"Talking about beliefs and sharing knowledge is a much better way to learn than reading textbooks."*

*"I feel more confident about communicating and commenting on the issues."*

## 6. STRENGTHS OF THE LEARNING CIRCLE MODEL

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Evaluation forms and feedback commonly report participants' preference to being in charge of their own learning. Learning Circles are enjoyable experiences. Participants recognise that old or young Australians can learn in a relaxed and stimulating learning environment.

Two major strengths also describe core qualities of Learning Circles - flexibility and establishing a forum where behavioural change and action arises from new knowledge and understandings.

One of the biggest and unlimited qualities of Learning Circles is flexibility. Learning circle principles of adult learning invite groups to investigate their own topics and develop their own strategies for working with areas of interest. The following two examples show success because of this flexibility of learning content.

*Example 1- Learning in Circles- an innovative literacy program for young people that changes learning attitudes.*

Specially developed Learning Circles have not often been used with young people. Yet popular and effective teachers of young people use this collaborative learning model for informal discussion in classrooms all over Australia from Primary school onward. In Mornington Peninsula Victoria, SkillsPlus used Learning Circles twice in 2001 and 2002, as a central learning process to turn around young people with traumatic school experience. Participants 'graduated' from truants to school and TAFE to complete their basic education. The learning circle process was chosen to meet the need for...

*"Relevant, flexible and credible programs developed to incite the interest of the target group".<sup>3</sup>*

The SkillsPlus report also states:

*"The Learning Circle framework allows young people to experience real and powerful learning because it enables the programme to be driven by their interests. Participants realised that they have their own learning potential and they knew they could learn because of increased literacy and oral capacity."*

The manager revealed in interview that she heard about Learning Circles from a passionate person speaking at a forum.

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<sup>3</sup> SkillsPlus 2001 Report on Learning in Circles.

The only learning circle she had seen was the *Discovering Democracy* - not a relevant topic for these young people.

What is significant in this example is the capacity for the learning circle model to be developed by users and applied to a specific learning need.

*Example 2- Rural Men's Workshop*

In Armidale in November 2002, UNE academic Ros Foskey ran a three day workshop to develop community and sector responses to her research *Mature Men Matter* - focussing upon farmers. Day Three was devoted to a learning circle format when service providers joined the group. A plan of action included replicating the workshop in a number of towns in 2003, using the men who were participants of the workshop as 'experts'.

Learning does not stop when the circle stops talking. Action continues into families, neighbourhoods and communities.

*Such best practice elements demonstrated in learning circle projects are identified in Section 8.*

***Optimum Numbers and Costs - a sliding scale***

The flexibility of the learning circle model means that resources can be tuned to people, printed or web-based resource material, as well as all the associated costs of running a group such as transport, venue accommodation, catering and any related support such as child care.

The reality is that anyone can establish a learning circle anywhere with available resources. A member of the Sydney Tamil community ran two sessions with community members using an already available venue. A parents group may meet at a park while their children play. The other end of the scale is substantial funding for federal projects such as *Discovering Democracy*. Many projects are localised such as Parramatta City Council establishing an initial 30 Learning Circles for *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*.

ALA support projects that are not fully funded as part of their charter to promote the learning circle concept within the wider community e.g. *Memories and Memorabilia* received minimal funding and is still being photocopied out in the community.

The learning circle model is not 'owned' by anyone and can be activated to suit resources available. Where resources are



applied to development, research, writing, pilots, printing, distribution and evaluation the full itemising of budgets must include the development of pathways into the community involved.

This economic flexibility is a strength. Careful planning for each project prevents an ever-expanding framework turning into a liability where people are stressed and resources stretched beyond capacity.

**Flexibility of capacity means that design of projects needs to match resources.** ALA staff and partners in learning circle development meet this ever-moving challenge well. Continued effective costing includes communicating to funding bodies the cost of fully supporting essential networking and community capacity building for successful projects.

## 7. LIMITATIONS OF LEARNING CIRCLES

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Limitations to learning circle's effectiveness are worth noting, and flag consideration of the situations where Learning Circles are applied.

*Its too much material / There's no material for a discussion on...*

Feedback that the program could be shorter alongside requests for more related topics to be included are common to many Learning Circles.

*"Both improvements identified ... can be achieved by encouraging groups to be more self-directed..." (Bodies Matter p. 20)*

The very flexibility of the learning circle model can be threatening to participants. With 'learning' in the title, the traditional expectation is to be 'taught'. However many participants are not motivated by the 'learning circle' title and in some projects it is not used. People come initially to focus upon areas of interest such as: local environmental concerns, personal health issues, or to celebrate and honour veterans or historical occasions.

Only after experiencing the learning circle process, do participants look around for more. Swan River Catchment Area Community Education officer reported that participants "*love the process*" and look for more ways to experience it.

***Material must be relevant to the participants - for environmental projects this means presenting local evidence:***

*"Repeatedly with different groups in Campbelltown, participants reported that material used must be local and relevant to the group's day-to-day life. Interest was highest when a local group recognised a photo of the creek that flows behind their backyard as a stormwater drain. Identifying items caught in the traps, succeeded in behaviour change intentions such as not putting cigarette butts down the drain."*

*From Campbelltown stormwater project Full Circle Full Cycle*

***Local co-ordination of groups takes time and resources - Facilitators need support.***

*"The big problem with local groups is that they are under-resourced. Volunteers don't have a lot of time to keep the groups together. They need support like a contact list and phone numbers, to keep the group together."*

*U3A On-line Co-ordinator*

*"Facilitators need support. The challenge is to find the people to make a learning circle group. After facilitators' training, co-ordination, mentoring and networking is critical."*

*Swan River Catchment Community Educator*

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## 8. QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE LEARNING CIRCLES

### BEST PRACTICE ELEMENTS

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This evaluation was designed to draw out best practice elements. This report identifies the best practice described below. ALA plans to develop evaluation strategies for quality assurance of future programs. This is dependent upon further funding.

#### *8a. Essential*

##### *Tapping the networks*

The most effective Learning Circles tend to work with already existing groups. ALA maintain extensive 'live' networks that are responsive to and enjoy applying learning circle processes demonstrated with LL3A.

##### *Publicity*

Launches of government funded projects raise the publicity profile. ALA reported receiving phone calls from people who read media articles about the learning circle programs. In rural and regional areas, local media is often more effective than national and expensive publicity campaigns.

##### *Learning Circles to suit the situation*

Given even minimal funding (as with *Memories and Memorabilia*) LCA capably develop and produce effective Learning Circles on a large range of topics and for a variety of situations. Sufficient funding enables a more developmental approach that builds in consultation through the writing stage. **Realistic funding means that a pilot includes the capacity to revisit the draft and refine material.**

This critical step means that reaching specific target populations is more effective and demonstrable. Consultation and partnership are essential for sound outcomes such as that with NSW Cervical Screening resulting in *Bodies Matter*:

“We wanted to work out how to target older women who knew about Learning Circles. We did not want to change the structure of Learning Circles as it was to put the health message into a pre-existing structure. We were not the dictators, we were partners. While we had total control over the content especially about cervical screening there was highly effective mutual respect between ALA and Cervical Screening Program staff.”

### *Sensitive Publicity*

Pap smears are not a topic that women will respond to if publicised. Women participating in the sessions were usually members of already existing groups (*tapping the networks*). The project officer reported that:

*"We almost had to hide what the session was going to be about."* and

*"We had to be careful with the marketing behind the first session. Facilitators did not talk about cervical cancer until session 2."*

### *Personal Contact*

Throughout all the interviews, the best method of recruitment reported was word-of-mouth. While some projects use fliers and articles in the local media, it is personal contact that sells the experience as well as the product. That the general population and government bodies do not know what a learning circle is until they experience it, is not a news item to ALA or their wide network of community users.

### ***8b. Specific Situations and Localities***

Learning about where we live sparks interest. Campbelltown City Council submitted for funding from NSW Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) and contracted ALA to produce an issue and locality-specific learning circle. As previously mentioned, greatest interest was raised when photographs of specific areas were participant's home.

#### *Local - local - local*

*"People are most interested when the issue is **local**. This is particularly true of people on Housing Estates who are concerned about the rubbish that is dumped in their bushland, parkland and in people's own yards. Other participants with a broad perspective still are most interested in activity that is local to where they live. Issues that arose in the workshops included rubbish in the bush, water quality at swimming holes, weeds and rubbish in local waterways, connection to maintenance of koala corridors."*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Community consultation results* from Campbelltown City Council with EPA NSW report on *Full Circle Full Cycle (FC<sup>2</sup>)* learning circle used to consult with the local community.

## 9. DO LEARNING CIRCLES STIMULATE ACTION AND/OR CHANGED BEHAVIOUR?

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All evaluations reviewed, report increased knowledge, awareness and generated activities. Members of Learning Circles initiate their own research and discussion with on-going groups. Researching and sharing the learning is clearly a defined action that generates further activity.

Action moving outside the group to other people is also reported as in talking to family and friends about the learning circle discussions.

A learning circle group in Mudgee made contact with their local council community development officer to pass on their local concerns. They also wrote to their federal member after discussing issues of national concern in their learning circle. This group incidentally included a blind member - demonstrating the flexibility of the process to meet the needs of different members. In this case group members read out some of the factual material to assist informed discussion.

With the Reconciliation kit, this step often took focussed preparation to be armed with information and ways of re-interpreting school-learned history.

Where kits are specifically prepared to stimulate action, funding bodies are of course keen to see results. In these cases, evaluation is built into the project from the start as in the cervical screening and the stormwater kits.

*"Feedback from participants show it is a very effective tool in raising a sensitive and non enjoyable subject. Attitudes and knowledge did change. Behaviour is still being worked on to change."*<sup>5</sup>

*Bodies Matter*

In the *Bodies Matter* program, the desired behaviour was measured through a postcard providing evidence of a Pap smear with the health provider's stamp. 37 postcards were received from 181 distributed. None of these were stamped. 15 reported having a Pap test since the learning circle sessions. The remaining 22 reported that their Pap test was not due.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with *Bodies Matter* project officer and manager.

*Finding appropriate ways to report behaviour change*

There are as many ways to report upon behaviour change. Most people work toward changes step-by-step. In these situations, qualitative research can be more informative than one statistical measure. In all learning circle situations, people and their lives are being developed. Change is often an intended outcome. How people embrace change is complex. Individual reports and stories can provide the most effective research material from which emerging trends can be analysed.

For the Bodies Matter project, epidemiologists required hard statistics to show that their funding fulfilled government requirements. Longitudinal follow-up will reveal further information. Project staff are aware of this complexity and are looking at different ways to report upon behaviour.

Less intimate and more public activity is easier to report:

*Campbelltown evaluation report*

*"Changed behaviour included being more aware, not dropping cigarette butts and picking up dog droppings, the need to involve environmental groups like Land Care in the local community, participate in the coalition to conduct a full program, and be trained as a facilitator for Learning Circles."*

*Australians for Reconciliation*

72% of participants reported some action and 69% reported making contact with indigenous organisations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Australians for Reconciliation Study Circle Project - Evaluation of Current Study Circle Kit: Phase One* 1998 Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Commonwealth of Australia

## 10. TO TRAIN FACILITATORS OR NOT TO TRAIN?

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Interviewees on the whole value the training of facilitators. But this is dependent upon the group and the learning circle topic. Some were pedantic about keeping the essence of Learning Circles. “*Don’t lose the learning circle process*” was cautioned especially in relation to accrediting training.

**Training facilitators with accreditation** was welcomed as a potential program people want to use - within the given provisos:

Facilitator training for specific Learning Circles may be a short session integrated into a special event such as was used for the launch of *Discovering Democracy Learning Circle* program, or a taster included as part of a special day-long event such as the training of volunteers at the National Portrait Gallery. Even long-term health and community workers in Sydney and in Alice Springs, report valuing the special skills and also recognise it takes practice to refine the art of facilitation.

There are risks in *not* training facilitators for specific programs. Participants include all segments of the Australian population. A skilled facilitator keeps the focus on the issues, not the people present. A stronger learning outcome is better supported with training and reduces the risk of emotional or psychological damage to any participant whose background is unknown.

All specified that any training needs to work within the nature of Learning Circles. Warnings like “*Need to be sure they don’t impose structure on the learning*” were plentiful.

Dorothy Lucardie past president of ALA and current Director of Central Aust Remote Health Development Services (CARHDS) in Alice Springs saw the issue dependent upon the learning circle: “*In Learning Circles that are not controversial... (such as the environment USA group running for three years in Albury/Wodonga)... groups elect a facilitator who might change each week. That person does not require training.*”

“*Once a learning circle challenges people’s perspective of themselves, then it’s a bit of worry if things go wrong. E.g. Whities Like Us video is emotionally charged. As an adult educator ...we learn ... to debrief people, and do not do it unless we have the skills to handle stuff. People’s emotions and self worth get involved. And some understanding is needed.*”

There are professionals and situations where training is not so readily appreciated. This evaluation revealed a strong impact of

culture in institutions who perceive status from their expertise in all areas whether its medical, historical (Australian War Memorial,) or archival as with libraries (State Library of Victoria).

Leading learning circle training within cultures based upon knowledge as content and expertise hard-won over long periods of time, is not easy. When an institution offers community programs, communicating the qualities of Learning Circles to internal stakeholders is a complex and difficult task.

There is value in recognising the separate nature of tutoring and facilitation skills. It takes intent and practice to develop the ability to move in and out of these roles as perceived by the SkillsPlus manager:

*“Helping young people to develop their literacy skills within this learning context presented the facilitator with a number of challenges as they were required to take on the dual role of guide and tutor... The tutor/facilitator needs to be very conscious that they are playing a dual role. When the group is involved in the Learning Circle, he/she must act as a guide and at other times, he/she is a tutor. Participants need to be made aware of these differences and the reasons behind them.”<sup>7</sup>*

*Bodies Matter* did a semi-formal evaluation of facilitator training. They held a two day session with co-ordinators on other issues. All were experts in some health area and were used to being the chalk-and-talk expert. They felt comfortable about taking the product out because they now felt they knew the learning circle approach. Their comments:

*“Facilitators are the lynch pin and training core.” and*

*“When working with community groups we can’t expect women to be experts.”*

Clearly providing facilitator training is a critical element for sustainability. In Western Australia the Swan River Catchment Community Educator reported that out of fifteen facilitators she trains, around one third either start a group or lead at least one learning circle in their own areas.

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<sup>7</sup> *Learning in Circle* SkillsPlus report.



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## 11. EVALUATION OF LEARNING CIRCLE PROJECTS

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Evaluation of an informal learning circle sets some challenges. Many of the thousands of Learning Circles run around Australia over the last decade are not evaluated at all. That situation is appropriate in most cases.

This current evaluation raises certain questions:

- § How to evaluate informal learning in an appropriate way?
- § How can we measure knowledge and attitudes without the participants *feeling* they are being asked to complete a test of their knowledge and/or participation?

To date only well-funded learning circle projects include resources for evaluation. Even with resources it is a complex challenge to accurately report upon outcomes. Activities arising from groups provide clear evidence of emerging action. Knowledge and attitudes can be measured with tested instruments such as the McNemars Test used with sound results in *Bodies Matter*. In most learning circle situations such an instrument is not relevant.

Evaluation strategies for Learning Circles then usually require specific strategies for specific situations. This section reports upon selected examples.

### *11a. Notable evaluations*

It will be noted that this evaluation relies heavily upon only a few reports available. The full list of references is given at the interim report's end. Three evaluations are listed here to highlight specific approaches.

#### *Australians for Reconciliation*

This evaluation reviewed response forms over a few years of use and used the analysis to inform the development of a new kit. Significant funding made possible a detailed analysis of 500 evaluation forms from 70 Learning Circles from 1993 to 1997. These forms as well as project reports were used to inform the development of the new Reconciliation Learning Circle kits produced in 1998.

#### *Learning in Circles*

Evaluation was integrated into the daily program. Video cameras used by the young participants themselves provided evidence of the development of the young people. As well, literacy tests and interviews with the co-ordinator, were conducted throughout the program.

### *Bodies Matter*

Statistical data collected before and after measured the learning of facts about Pap smears. The comprehensive report includes the collaborative nature of the development of the kit and piloting as well as the full program.

### ***11b. Innovative evaluation strategies***

*Evaluation-on-the-run* is present all the time with group members who monitor the enthusiasm levels of the group. A skilled facilitator is continuously evaluating progress and adapting pace and material to suit. Capturing this awareness in written form is not always necessary or appropriate.

The following ideas were developed or collected during this evaluation.

#### *Bank of Evaluation Questions*

ALA develop a range of evaluation strategies to be tested / commented upon by users. E.g. an interviewee from the NSW Cervical Screening Program will eagerly use and comment upon what we develop. This affirms the usefulness of an intended next step from this evaluation.

#### *Measure level of awareness and knowledge before and after, quickly and in a non-threatening way*

At registration ask people to indicate how much they know about stormwater (for example) by putting 1 - 5 into boxes. Repeat at the end.

*Video* groups at start, throughout and at the end of the learning circle program. A good example of this approach was the SkillsPlus project which filmed videos of their youth groups for the duration of an eighteen week program.

*Evaluation circles* with Aboriginal Health Workers in Alice Springs. What was learned is discussed in small groups. This approach reinforces and validates members learning from each other as well as being a traditional learning method.

### ***11c. Usefulness of Learning Circle Printed Material***

Development of a specific kit is useful especially where the funding body want to see action arising from the project.

ALA kits over the years have developed material that supports learning and activities beyond the content of the published kits. This is evident in the continuing use of *Learning and Living in the Third Age*, *Memories and Memorabilia* and *Reconciliation*.

*Bodies Matter* project developed material for their highly specific purpose.

*"The resource materials provide direction and an input of knowledge beyond the participant's experience."*

There is strong evidence that where specific information to be learned as well as desired action as an outcome, the use of prepared learning kits is extremely effective. The kits that had development funding enabling pilot runs and the ability to re-write after feedback from the target group, result in participants acting on a strong basis of new and tested knowledge.

## 12. PUBLICITY - HOW DO PEOPLE FIND OUT ABOUT LEARNING CIRCLE ACTIVITIES?

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*Word-of mouth* was reported as **always** the most successful marketing tool. This is working the networks yet again.

When situations outside established networks like U3A arise, partnerships are critical for tapping into existing community networks locally.

For example Campbelltown City Council planned to engage community through...

"Promotion of the learning circle campaign using tools such as:

- ...hold a barbecue near a Gross Particles Trap and invite all local residents. Council comes and cleans up the GPT during the BBQ. People are invited back a month later to see how much litter has accumulated in that period.
- Broad media campaign (local newspaper, radio, newsletters, mail-outs)
- Discussions where people already gather such as Paint & Play BBQs, addressing meetings of groups such as parent groups, churches, service clubs."

## 13. SUSTAINABILITY

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What sustains Learning Circles? Sustainable projects result from a distillation of best practice where resources provide for a **skilled co-ordinator** and **community networking** to support the forming of groups as well as **training of location-based facilitators**.

Such projects, where a **co-ordinator** is in place long term, increase the depth and spread of community capacity and learning. This is evident in the Swan River Catchment where a Community Development Officer is funded for three years. Similar professional support is provided by SkillsPlus at Mornington Peninsula employing a co-ordinator since 2000 for the *Learning in Circles* project for teenage truants.

Some groups meet for years without professional support. Community leaders or catalysts keep the process alive. *Example:* U3A groups in Albury /Wodonga active for over three years. Mudgee group has been active for two years, whilst a Queanbeyan group has been meeting in their Retirement Village for four years. There are catalyst people in all communities who sustain the activities they are involved in. They are often but not always, the leaders / facilitators.

### ***People with Passion***

*Example:* a community centre group in ACT led for 18 months by a committed learner and volunteer community worker - a retired accountant. She was offered the group when inquiring into volunteer opportunities. She took on the group with no materials except for a one-page guide on running a learning circle.

### *Web-based Learning to top up Learning Circles*

The suggestion came from Dorothy Lucardie and other interviewees, to use the web page for putting up *Learning Circles* on current issues e.g. refugees. Also use the website to update topics once a kit goes out.

Phil Robson talked about his experience with e-learning.

*"Once people are over the initial barrier of a computer-based platform, it is very successful."*

### *On-Line Learning Circles*

*"E-forums were delivered to restricted groups of people. Did it with own running of U3A on-line as business side of running organisation. Also used it as method of delivering courses, as one-on-one with presenter, as group talking to each other, and as open access to material."*

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## 14. FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING CIRCLES

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There is recognition that the following suggestions, if adopted, consume time and resources. Presented as a range of ideas, they demonstrate development potential of future ALA products limited only by having the people and resources to make it happen.

Interviewees provided a range of useful contributions to the following:

### *a. Subject areas*

- **Community** areas: parenting, family support issues, resource materials for training.
- **Learning circle on how to develop and run a learning circle** - suggested for Aboriginal Health Workers, for teachers of young people and for youth groups as well as health and community workers.
- **Health** priority areas – falls, exercise, mental health, incontinence, retirement, making or executing a will, investment, subjects relating to grandchildren, Hepatitis C / HIV.
- **Learning Cities** - many regional issues- e.g. Albury/Wodonga amalgamation, local environmental awareness issues e.g. Orbost / Snowy River flow.
- **Youth** are interested in violence in society and survival skills, what do if they come in contact with the legal justice system, sexuality issues.
- **Men's Issues** - engage men in reflexive action for themselves, their families and their communities.
- **Environment** – salinity (update existing material).
- **Refugees.**
- **Homophobia.**
- **Contemporary art** (appreciation).
- **Literacy.**

### ***b. Learning strategies***

Users include innovative learning strategies within their sessions. These include:

- Use of theatre as with men's and youth Learning Circles to demonstrate experiences that men may hesitate to discuss - and so promote discussion after the short play.
- Pre-test and pilot new material. Where funding is included more effective material has been developed which uses appropriate vocabulary for the population sector using the kit. Wrong words can destroy a good product.
- Engage people first in current issues e.g., football tipping competition. *Bodies Matter* used the first session to explore women's experiences in growing up to bridge into talking about cervical health.

### ***c. Publicity - letting people know about Learning Circles***

Interviewees agreed that the most effective publicity (as stated previously in this interim report) is word-of-mouth. There is recognition of the varied and extensive networks of ALA and the ACE sectors that ALA staff work so effectively. Further ideas include:

- Use evaluation to get concept of learning circle exposed with “good news” stories and best practice.
- Continue to market ALA products through existing groups.
- Raise public profile - emphasise the experience and process e.g., documentary on ABC TV, participate in local and community radio (where Learning Circles are active).
- SkillsPlus heard about Learning Circles at Adult Community and Further Education forum where someone spoke passionately on the topic.

### ***d. Distribution and administration of learning materials***

People can only work material at hand. Even city based learning circle groups have not been aware of the range of material they could use. The following suggestions were offered to support greater distribution.

- Local Government Association and other community organisations can be approached to determine their receptivity to participating in these tasks.

- Use ALA website to post and sell Learning Circles including active web-site with modules on it. If modules need to be sold - offer secure payment site feature.
- Keep it simple, design material for easy photo-copying - follow-up with web-based updates.
- Raise research perspective - have evaluation on every learning circle.

***e. Potential partners to fund and use Learning Circles***

A range of suggestions were presented here. Again there was recognition that all this takes time and resources and that ALA already do many of these things well within the capacity of staff available:

*"grant application writing takes time and expertise and a significant commitment of resources"*

- Refer to Health Departments both Commonwealth and State with the Bodies Matter report:  
*"You're mad if you don't"* Manager of Cervical Screening NSW.
- Arts councils and related arts communities (through educational institutions).
- Community organisations - they tend not to have their own funds but can be partners in specific projects to attract funding.
- Target funding in specific issues where local government deliver and money exists for target populations and issue e.g., Community Development Association and local government.
- Tap philanthropic associations (grants book).
- Develop a data base of companies with a reputation for innovation.
- Cultural institutions can use Learning Circles to train own people, and for interest groups to impart information to them, e.g., War Memorial, Art Galleries, National Museum of Australia etc.
- Introduce Learning Circles into the training of Occupational Therapists.



*f. Learning Circles for professional development programs*

- Open dialogue does not suit all cultures and is limited by fear - example:  
*"your manager is in the room and you can be fired for what you say"*.
- Can be useful for specific and finite area of knowledge on a specific issues outside the organisation e.g., Reconciliation.
- In population health promotion, in project planning, looking at working with community groups. Many area health services are struggling in project planning, management, and governance.
- Investigate the feasibility of community educational centres providing short pilot courses under ANTA, local government community project officers or other auspices unique to the geographical area.

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## CONCLUDING REMARKS

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*Recommendations and key points are summarised in the Executive Insights placed at the front of this report.*

This evaluation reports upon the wide reaching effectiveness of Learning Circles both as a defined and well funded project designed to effect community learning and actions in specific situations such as local environment and health concerns.

The process is also highly effective for learning any range of topic areas where participants can both share current knowledge and research and share new learning. In this context, the flexibility of the learning circle process means that with a minimum of structural information, people can design their own learning circle events as did SkillsPlus in Victoria and Tuggeranong Community Centre in the ACT amongst others.

All interviewees want to see Learning Circles promoted and profile raised, particularly within government to increase funding for more applications.

Adult Learning Australia has promoted and presented Learning Circles for over ten years with impressive results given their level of funding. The recommendations include strategies to increase that impact given there is more funding to do so.



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## **Appendix 1 - Methodology**

### **Stages of Evaluating Learning Circles**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Activities</b>
1	Evaluation for Campbelltown Scoping Report	Before 22 October 2002	Meet with Campbelltown City Council Develop evaluation strategy for participants, facilitators and participant-observers from Campbelltown City Council. Provide evaluation instruction to enable analysis for ALA facilitators to insert observations and outcomes
2	Collect and analyse data on Learning Circles	October and December 2002	Meet with relevant ALA people. Identify sources of data. Dr V K H analyse the data and extract evaluation material from past reports, records and ALA staff
3	Identify and report upon evaluation for Learning Circles past and current.	December	Evaluation strategy and Questionnaire development including draft and meetings
		December	Interviews/surveys with local group leaders & tele - interviews
		February 2003	Focus group at UTS with ALA executive & 2 LC project managers
		February 2003	Stage 1 to 3 Report including analysis of interview results, draft report and consultation meeting

This evaluation process was based on an action learning methodology congruent with Learning Circles. Throughout all stages of the evaluation, users of Learning Circles are positioned as co-researchers. Those who identify a continuing interest became collaborators in this research and development process. These people have asked for copies of reports and evaluation strategies as developed.

**Appendix 2****Evaluating Learning Circles****Interview / Survey Schedule**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Organisation:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Contact Details: Phone:

Mobile:

Email:

Can Virginia contact you for further clarification if needed?     Yes     NoIs there a preferred time to contact you before and after the Christmas break?  
\_\_\_\_\_**Learning Circle Experience**

1. What Learning Circles have you been involved in?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What was your role with these Learning Circles?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What did you do?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Was there any training for facilitators?  
 Yes     No

If yes, what was your experience of the training? *Please circle one*

- 5 - extremely useful
- 4 - very useful
- 3 - useful
- 2 - small effect
- 1 - not at all useful

4b. In your experience, does training facilitators increase effectiveness and sustainability of Learning Circles?

Yes  No

If yes - please describe how.

### **Learning Circle Effectiveness for Participants**

5. Based on your observations, how effective do you think the Learning Circle was in delivering information to participants?

**Please circle one.**

- 5 - extensive impact
- 4 - highly effective
- 3 - reasonable impact
- 2 - small effect
- 1 - not effective at all

Please give any comments or observations you have.

6. a) Was there any activity or changed behaviour in participants that you noticed as a result of the Learning Circles?

Yes  No

- b) If “yes” please describe behaviour changes and activities generated from the Learning Circles?

### **Learning Circle Evaluation**

7. How do you know the learning and behaviour changes resulted from the Learning Circles? Please describe *anything* you think is relevant.

8. Was there any evaluation or feedback on the Learning Circles?
- ☒ Yes ☒ No
9. (If Yes) What form did it take?
10. How useful was this feedback to you in your role?
11. What organisations worked with this Learning Circle? Please Name hosts and/or funding body.
12. How useful was the feedback to these organisations? (*Circle one.*)
- 5 - extremely valuable
  - 4 - highly useful
  - 3 - reasonably useful
  - 2 - limited value
  - 1 - not valued at all

How might the feedback have been more useful?

13. How was the Learning Circle material received by the participants? (*Circle one*)
- 5 - enthusiastic
  - 4 - stimulated a lot of interest
  - 3 - some stimulation
  - 2 - little response
  - 1 - no response

Comment: - You may include how facilitators used the material and any adaptations / innovations here.

### **Evaluation Strategies**

14. ALA are developing a new evaluation strategy for Learning Circles. What might have helped you in your role? What suggestions might you have for evaluation inclusions and/or strategies - including innovative ways of assessing learning? How might getting feedback be more effective?

## Publicity

15. How did participants find out about your Learning Circles?

- ☒ poster    ☒ word-of-mouth    ☒ newspaper
- ☒ Other.....

16. What in your experience is the most *effective* way to publicise Learning Circles?

## Sustainability

17. What do you see are the **strengths** and **limitations** of Learning Circles?

a) **What strengths?**

b) **And limitations** - Have you experienced or do you think there are situations where Learning Circles do not fit so well? Please describe?

18. In your experience, in what situations are Learning Circles most effectively applied?

19. What in your experience would increase sustainability of Learning Circles? (Probe - *Does there need to be another relevant issue for the groups to work on, soon after the first topic?*).

20. Can local stakeholders (e.g. healthworkers or council officers) re-activate Learning Circles if they see the need? What support might they need to do that?

## Future Development of Learning Circles

21. What suggestions might you have for future Learning Circles that haven't already been mentioned?: Please add your suggestions on:

a. Subject areas

- b. Learning strategies
  
  - c. Publicity (or letting people know about Learning Circles)
  
  - d. Distribution and administration of learning materials
  
  - e. Do you know of any likely partners to fund and use Learning Circles in the future?
  
  - f. If a Learning Circle training program was accredited, would you be more likely to use it?
    - ☒ Yes    ☒ No
22. Can you mention any instances where Learning Circles were a step towards more formal education or vocational training?
23. What role do you see Learning Circles might have in professional development in bureaucracies and in industry?
24. Do you have any other ideas or comments?

Thank you for your thoughtful responses. Your time and expertise is valued for this Evaluation and development of Future Directions of Learning Circles.



### **Appendix 3**

PLAN FOR

#### **Performance Indicators for Pilot Learning Circles of Full Circle Full Cycle (FC<sup>2</sup>)**

*Statistics and active identifiers*

<b>Learning Circle Locations and dates held</b>	<b># local participants</b>	<b>Identified communities attending</b>	<b># Council staff participant/observers</b>	<b>Issues / Projects initiated</b>	<b>Number of people who want to train as facilitators</b>	<b>Key contacts</b>
Airds						
Council						
Glen Alpine / Rosewood						
Claymore						

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