Remodeling Learning Culture in the Workplace – Analysis of Eight Learning Circles Through Action Research

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Abstract. A radical transformation in workplace education practices may imply a shift in the culture of learning. This is the challenge that a French public training organization undertook to tackle from its headquarters on a national level. The shift in practice that the organization has been experimenting relies on the use of Study Circles as a model of Adult Cooperative Learning, sometimes referred to as Learning Circles. Deployment of the model for workplace learning and professional training banks on the potential that this format holds to introduce changes in public services by enhancing the agency of public service actors, enabling them to modify structurally stratified perceptions and practices. After setting up a series of eight Learning Circles, the organization set out to study their effects using a compatible participatory approach. Action Research was chosen. This paper reports on the outcomes of the study the Action Research team undertook during a year-long cycle that ended in January 2023.

Keywords: Action Research · Study Circles · Learning Circles · Workplace Learning · Collective Agency · Professional Development

1 Context

Study Circles are a study format for learning in adulthood, sometimes referred to as Learning Circles (LCs) [16,5]. Study Circles are a model for cooperative adult learning [15]. The model has been promoted by a public French decentralized

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organization. The organization supports local authorities and their agents in executing their public service functions primarily through training.

The organization inaugurated its first Study Circle within the directorate of instructional design and training operations in 2012, supervised and facilitated by the author of this paper. The Study Circle was followed by numerous other initiatives, aimed at continuing experimenting innovative organizational learning, both for territorial agents and for its own staff. In 2022, the author of this paper was approached by the organization to lead an Action Research (AR) group. The first year-long research cycle ended in January 2023. This paper outlines the process, describes the results and discusses the analyzes that followed.

1.1   Learning Circles

Study Circles or Learning Circles [6] are small groups of adult learners who get together on a regular basis to gain knowledge and develop new understandings, approaches, and sometimes newly thought solutions to a problem. Learning can range all domains and can lead to further action once the LC ends if its participants so decide. LCs are organized usually around one or two weekly sessions, each lasting two to three hours. Ultimately participants determine their learning objectives and the means to attain them. One of the participants acts as a facilitator. Study Circles have been depicted as varying in practice, a feature that in fact characterizes them [2]. It therefore makes sense to define Study Circles or LCs on the premise of their guiding principles. Going into details would require a separate paper. Nevertheless, a quick look at underlying epistemological foundations may help to get to grips with this learning model:

- A humanist and constructivist orientation.
- All participants are likewise bearers of knowledge.
- Passed experience is central to the process of learning.
- Knowledge is shared for the benefit of the group's learning.
- Equal chances for expression are provided to all participants.
- Meanings and understandings are shared through dialogue.
- The group self-governs and self-regulates its learning.
- Action can be undertaken in the wider community following LC conclusion.

Some research has been conducted on Study Circles, primarily regarding the practice and the enactment of facilitation by the Study Circle leader, but LCs have gained little scholarly attention [1], in particular within corporate settings or professional organizations. Exceptions include the use of LCs for teacher [8], for nursing [23] and for evaluators' [18] professional development. Learning Circles were also used to produce knowledge in social action research [19] but little else was found documenting such use of LCs within scholarly publications.

1.2   Action Research

Action Research in a public sector undertaking within the context of efforts to reform its corporate culture of adult education, is an educational centered approach that can be referred to as Educational Action Research [11]. Study Circles have a long history as a means for popular education and trade union education, common during the socially charged period of industrialization at the beginning of the twentieth century in France too [17]. Renewed interest in the format and its reintroduction since the mid nineteen eighties has mostly been for community development.

Using a research approach that shares an epistemological perspective similar to that embodied by Study Circles or LCs was a sensible choice. In order to generate knowledge in AR, an encounter between insights embedded in local situated practice needs to connect with research-based knowledge brought in from the outside to form a shared understanding that serves to solve a practical problem[11]. For AR to be understood in the context of social action which was the intention of the research as outlined earlier, epistemological beliefs need to be considered. Gergen and Gergen[9] consider social construction as originating mainly from three movements: critical theory that questions relations of authority; literal theory and rhetorical study which posit that theories, explanations and descriptions of realities are dependent on discursive conventions; and, social studies of the history of science as well as of knowledge and science themselves. The constructionist outlook according to these authors directs attention away from the individual actor to the coordinated interactions of social groups. The group of participants in AR therefore questions and observes past and present action with the intention of rendering a nuanced understanding of practice through critical observation and communal action.

The AR presented here was confronted with power struggles with executives who were disturbed by the questioning and potential displacement or necessary reconfiguration of ownership and power in the realm of workplace learning. Stepping out of conventions was at the core of this inquiry as it focused on a research question, defined through dialogue among participants, that had the intention of actuating a cultural shift in workplace training.

Group meetings were mainly conducted through weekly online meetings. The group's method was that of cooperative inquiry [12] in which discussions were guided by dialogue [13,14].

2   Action Research Participants, the Research Question and Method

Participants in the group were persons from different organizations or self-employed consultants that all worked either at or with the organization on developing professional educational practices through the use of LCs. Some of the AR group members could not take part in each meeting. The number of participants varied between six and 13 with a median number of nine members taking part in each meeting.

With the guidance of the author the participants arrived at a research question defined as seeking conditions for promoting the agency of territorial actors through the use of LCs.

The AR group met on a regular basis between early February 2022 and late January 2023. Thirty-one weekly meetings were held online, plus a day-long gathering at the organization's headquarters in order to analyze preliminary results, on Sep. 21, 2022.

The AR group online meetings were carried-out using MS Teams®, mainly by means of audio and webcam video chats. A written record was kept of discussions using a separate shared Web application notepad. The year-long group's meetings was a first cycle which could be followed by a second new research cycle, thereby continuing the exploration and action around means to support LCs and promote their practice in French administrative localities. In so doing, the AR group would study new questions that emerge as ramifications of the question that guided the initial cycle described here. Outcomes of this first cycle are based on transcriptions of online focus groups that were held with participants who took part in LCs organized during the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the Covid-19 health crisis, the organization was contacted with a request on behalf of a collective to support local government leaders at the time of the announcement of the general lock-down in March 2020. The organization suggested using the Study Circle model. The collective found the idea compelling.

An agreement was reached to launch LCs, even though the lock-down was no longer in effect, thus allowing the collective's momentum to persist. Executives at the organization, with the collective's leader, initiated the setting up of LCs and supported the facilitators who were interested in organizing them.

Eight LCs were set up on various topics and held mostly online. LCs covered topics such as co-development, exploring theories of behavioral change and neuroscience, as well as understanding ecological transitions and the power to act on them. Persons who had taken part in these LCs were invited to engage with the AR group in May 2022, thus contributing data for the research. Recruitment was carried out by sending e-mail invitations. Participation in the study was voluntary.

The first study of the AR members, described here, was based on the data collected by the AR group on May 9, 2022 during focus groups organized for this purpose with the former LC participants (see Table 1). The event took place online. Four focus groups were organized (A, B, C, D). The discussion in each group was facilitated by a member of the AR team and accompanied by an observer tasked with recording the exchanges and observing the proceedings.

Discussion in each group lasted 90 minutes. It was guided by five questions. The interviewer asked the questions and facilitated the discussion. The observer audio-recorded the conversation and took down notes. Recordings of the sessions were transcribed verbatim except for one focus group that experienced a technical problem and who resorted to using observer summaries.

The outline of the procedure used to analyze the data from the discussions with participants follows:

- Verbatim transcriptions of discussions from four focus groups.
- Semantic and thematic analysis.
- Identification of themes and categories.
- Peer agreement for classification of passages under themes, categories and sub-categories.
- Exploration of associations between themes.
- Interpretation of meanings.

Table 1. Participants in former Learning Circles

Participants* $N = 25$ (A $n = 7$, B $n = 6$, C $n = 6$, D $n = 6$)	
Gender	18 women (72%), 7 men (28%)

*Note: Three groups with 4 persons, one with 5 (group A), plus one interviewer and one observer.

3   Results

Data were analyzed to identify themes then categorized within the found themes. Occurrences of categorized data allowed identifying and classifying salient ideas and topics. All coded passages were further categorized within the themes. Initially, these operations were carried out by the author. Subsequently, the categorization of passages from transcriptions was reviewed within teams formed among the members of the AR group. The teams initially worked during a one day workshop at the organization headquarters followed by further discussion carried out remotely.

Six main themes were identified and named: Effects, Community, Future Action (to denote future action following participation in a LC), Barriers, Paradigm, and Emotion. An analysis of the results of the categorization into these themes followed. This analysis was conducted after a re-coding of passages according to the indications provided by the teams that had examined the initial classification. Re-coding passages based on feedback from teams that had reviewed the initial classification and analysis of the ranking results into categories and sub-categories were done using TAMS Analyzer software, version 4.56b4. The use of the software enhanced means to analyze relations between themes and variables.

The distribution of coded passages within each theme (see Table 2) was examined in relation to the focus groups from which the data was collected. A Chi-square test was applied with Monte Carlo simulation involving 10,000 replications. The proportions were statistically significantly different ($\chi^2 = 56.30$, df = NA, $p = .000$). Discussions in focus group A centered more on Community and less on Effects compared to other groups. In focus group B discussions were proportionally more often classified under the Effects theme. The distribution

of texts between themes arising from discussions in focus group C was proportionally slightly higher for Emotion and for Paradigm. As for focus group D, discussions were proportionally more often classified under Barriers compared to the other focus groups.

Table 2. Ranked occurrences per theme and per focus group

Theme	Group				Total
	A	B	C	D	
Effects	3	32	8	8	51
Community	26	11	8	3	48
Future Action	6	10	5	4	25
Barriers	8	2	6	7	23
Paradigm	8	4	6	2	20
Emotion	10	2	6	1	19

3.1   Effects

The perceived effects by the participants following their involvement in LCs cover various aspects. Firstly, effects related to learning (10)[3] surfaced after the analysis of discussions. Effects linked to a perception of gaining the ability to act (Empowerment, 7) are noteworthy. Certain categories intersect. The category Empowerment is also present in the occurrences of expressions classified under the theme Future Action. The category Learning is also present under the heading Community. This is also the case for Confidence (6), expressed under the category Community, but also as an effect. This confidence was, for one person, self-confidence; for another, it was about "confidence in the territorial public service's ability to transform itself" (B)[4].

3.2   Community

The idea of community was omnipresent in the discussions. In reference to learning (12), emblematic expressions included "co-learning" (A), a "collective intelligence dynamic" (A), and the act of "learning together" (A, B). The sense of social inclusion (7) expressed with terms such as "belonging to an active community" (A) emphasized connection to others. Commitment (5) in and with the

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[3] The numbers in parentheses refer to the number of occurrences of a classification within the subcategory.

[4] An indication of who spoke is absent due to the discussions taking place in groups where it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between speakers during the transcription of recordings. The letter in parentheses indicates the focus group in which the speaking took place.

community were expressed in a relationship of mutual support (3) and trust-building (4) where kindness (3) and boldness (3) characterized the sense of belonging in order to "dare to venture on the path of innovation" (A). The community supported motivation during action (Volition, 2). "It is necessary to have a framework of trust with shared values to transform oneself" (B) said one person. This trust was also required for a collective process. It involved "trusting collective intelligence" (B).

3.3   Future Action

Aspirations expressed for future action were initially aimed at transforming training practices (11). A transformation of individual practices was accompanied by a desire for actions with others to "work more coherently [...] with colleagues" (B); "to reshape a public service" (B); or even, "in partnership with the university" (B). Future actions included participating in or organizing new LCs (7) within a "community of peers" (C) or for "conducting co-development workshops with different groups" (B). The sense of empowerment to "authorize oneself to test proposals" (B), self-confidence provided by the Circles, and the strength to engage in the face of resistance in professional environments were also expressed (Empowerment, 3).

3.4   Barriers

The main obstacles were found to be related to the recognition (6) of LCs. The lack of sufficient recognition was attributed to the "informal nature of the Circles" (D) and the absence of "official consideration" (D). The lack of recognition by internal bodies of the organization could be linked to a paradigm shift in the conception of learning and training. This was mentioned regarding the paradigm (5), and the realization that it is "sometimes difficult to grasp this concept initially" (A) as well as that "one needs to go beyond [routines], think of different ways" (C).

3.5   Paradigm

The Paradigm theme encompasses expressions from participants about a change in the conception of training processes. This implies, beforehand, a modification in the understanding of what represents knowledge. The expressions primarily emitted by members of the focus groups were aimed at characterizing the stance of participants (5) in LCs. According to one participant, "it's participating in the transition from one [model to another] model, from one [paradigm to another] paradigm" (A). It was stated that the "participant is an actor in their own learning and is already on the path to action" (A). The connection with future action is noteworthy. The knowledge developed in the LC is grounded in personal and professional reality. It is intended to meet identified needs and serve future activity as well as well-being. Participation in a LC had consolidated for some participants a sense of a different outlook on learning. This

confirmation (3) of the validity of a vision and practice was upheld, saying that "it's really possible, and it's even almost easy" (A). It also involved a "consolidation of the importance of the facilitation function" (B). Openness (3) and process (3) were other subcategories in which passages were classified. One participant had indicated the importance of "not being self-centered [on] the public service but [keeping] this principle of openness [to other audiences]" (B). The difference between paradigms was expressed by a participant when she said that it's "[d]ifferent as a training paradigm, and it's not a method, and I think not all effects are measured. It's difficult for me today to learn differently. Learning is not an acquired stock but a path, a flow" (C).

3.6   Emotion

Under the Emotion theme, a significant number of passages denoted a feeling of joy (8). The Circles were "generators of joy" (D). The happiness of sharing was expressed simultaneously with the feeling of trust.

4   Analysis and Discussion

It would be premature to draw conclusions regarding increased individual and collective agency through the use of the LC model. Nonetheless, the groundwork provided by this study suggests purposeful directions for followup. Belief in the collective capacity to act (collective efficacy) is a prerequisite for collective agency [10]. The study conducted by the group, based on data from discussions in focus groups with former participants in LCs, offers some insights. Among the most noticeable effects of participation in LCs was substantial learning. "It is deep learning that can be replicated. It is very suitable for emerging problems." (D). Learning accomplished by a community of learners through the interaction of individual members based on their practical knowledge and their creative interventions was intertwined with well-being and inspired future action. Co-learning [7] in LCs also revealed the link between positive effects and a sense of community. Concepts of learning together and doing together coexisted with feelings of social inclusion, engagement, and trust. Trust was conveyed as self-confidence as well as the belief in the group's ability to act together.

The capacity to act extended beyond the LC. Participants primarily mentioned a transformation of training practices. The transformation was expressed by one participant who said "I am convinced of the need to develop this model in training" (A) or as another participant said, "I want to reproduce this formula" (A).

The momentum expressed by some is a force to promote and participate in the implementation of future LCs. This momentum follows a change in perspective and stance toward adult education in the workplace.

Recalling participation in LCs occurred with a sentiment of joy. Well-being in learning results from fulfilling psychological needs which are the perception of competence to carry out the activity, the exercise of autonomy, and the fact

of being in relation with other people [20]. The feeling of competence finds an equivalent study field in the works of Albert Bandura [3,4], under the term self-efficacy beliefs.

Considering weaknesses related to the research, one was the recruitment method which was voluntary. Participants in the four focus groups volunteered and were possibly enthusiastic former learners. They may have felt motivated to participate in the study because they experienced enthusiasm following successful past experiences in LCs. People who were less enthusiastic may have therefore been underrepresented.

Although participants perceived positive repercussions that were identified in the outcomes of the research, understanding reasons for people who did not engage in LCs will enable to better tackle eventual obstacles. Positive experiences by participants in LCs can be used to develop strategies for disseminating the learning model and promoting its practice, while there is also a need to study and experiment with ways to reduce obstacles. It is therefore necessary to consider the barriers expressed by the subjects who participated in the study and further explore hindrances weighing on the expansion of LC use. A notable hindrance uncovered is one that can be expressed as the difficulty in breaking away from one learning culture and embracing another that allows knowledge generation. The paradigm shift in organizational learning requires decision-makers to adopt a different perspective before one may hope for increased recognition of the model.

An assumption that would merit investigation, is that the recognition of LCs would require a predisposition to conceive learning according to a dialogic paradigm of education. It may be necessary for individuals to acculturate to this paradigmatic change. This would be required for people who are presumably more committed to a conception of the learning process marked by transmission orchestrated by a specialist external to the group. A general question that could be tackled in future inquiry is how to accompany this acculturation. Is it necessary to having experienced learning in a LC before adhering to the model, or would alternative ways enable to back the change? Some questions that emerge and that could be used to shed light on this are:

– How were participants in past study circles or LCs recruited?
– What were the motives of participants to engage in learning within LCs?
– What is the understanding of learning (the epistemological beliefs) of future participants before the start of a LC and what is their understanding after learning organized according to this model?
– What do people who have not yet experienced learning in a LC think of this learning model?

5   Conclusion

At the end of this initial cycle of research conducted by the stakeholders, there is a need to consider possible future actions based on the results of this study.

Enthusiasm, an expression of satisfaction and the keenness for learning and taking action while meeting the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness [22,21], clearly emerged in the responses of the study participants. The positive feedback allows relying on the network of former participants to promote future LCs and draw interest for the enlisting of new participants. Several possibilities are conceivable in relation to four categories of conditions to promote the agency of territorial actors through LCs. Conditions are:

a. Environmental (human, organizational, and material) for the implementation of LCs in a territorial zone;
b. For building upon knowledge generated within LCs and enabling its sharing;
c. For dissemination of the LC approach as a model for territorial agency;
d. For transforming training and social action practices.

Environmental conditions (a) cover two categories when considering the human environment: those related to learners' dispositions; and, those of individuals with decision-making power in organizations and among territorial actors. The research conducted so far does not only highlight the enthusiasm of former participants but also identifies barriers. Some participants saw difficulty in resistance decision-makers may have if they do not embrace the paradigmatic change and do not support the implementation of training following the principles of LCs.

To support this process of perspective change and approach to knowledge development, it is recommended to bolster communications and sustain actions to render results and achievements of past LCs visible. Through these actions, relaying of knowledge generated within LCs would be encouraged (b). This would also contribute to the dissemination of the LC model (c) and support the transformation of social practice in training and action (d).

Diversifying media and communication channels (websites, printed documents, podcasts, etc.) would enable reaching a larger number of people. It is suggested to multiply opportunities to share accounts of experience, lessons learned and actions taken as well as research outcomes. Communication at meetings, gatherings, forums, conferences, trade shows, and other events could also include calls to organize new LCs. Events such as these could serve as opportunities to invite participation in LCs as well as to organize facilitator training.

A transformation in the way learning is conceived can only come about if the relationship to knowledge changes. LCs foster engagement in a process of transformation and knowledge development where participation and perseverance are intrinsically motivated. Communicating about learning and knowledge generation modeled after LCs would foster openness to considering and questioning one's relationship to knowledge. Epistemological outlooks would gradually change, allowing learners a disposition to voluntary, autonomous learning, thus providing a stepping stone for strengthened collective agency. Learning and generating knowledge through LCs should encourage a modification of the understanding of what learning is, its function and its usefulness; in other words, a change in the epistemic stance. This back and forth sway between intrinsically

motivated experiences and modification of the relationship to knowledge should gradually transform the culture of learning. Any cultural change is a life journey, requiring adaptation and progress that to be achieved entails weaving the complex social substrate. This journey is one that leads to an improvement in the fit between the existent and the wished for.

AR is a cyclical process through which people are engaged in a quest to improve their own professional and personal practices as well as their environments. The result of each study cycle can allow participants to try out and experiment modifications in their environments and solutions to issues they have identified. For this the AR group would conduct a new study to measure the effects of changes made to an element or to variables singled out in a previous cycle. By so doing, progressive improvement can be set in motion so that the community involved develops its practices and gradually improves the facets of reality it aims for.

In conclusion, two aspects must be maintained and pursued jointly: the multiplication of acculturation actions to these new learning practices in the form of LCs; and the study of strategies deployed to accompany this acculturation. For these to take shape, it is also necessary to support communication campaigns and organize dissemination actions on the initiatives taken by and around the organization.

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