

P2PU  
LEARNING CIRCLES

# FACILITATOR HANDBOOK



**L**earning Circles are lightly-facilitated study groups for learners who want to take freely available online courses together, in-person. We believe that anybody can become a facilitator, and whether you want to run a single Learning Circle in your home or organize 100 across an urban library system, this guide is here to help you get going.

The first part - **Background** - provides introductory information about Learning Circles and the type of learning that the format aims to develop. The second part - **Getting Started** - includes the steps you need to check off before beginning. The third part - **Running a Learning Circle** - introduces facilitation tips and the guidelines for the routine you'll develop each week. The final part - **Appendix** - includes additional tools and templates to make your Learning Circle as good as it can be.

## A FEW THINGS BEFORE WE BEGIN



**USE OUR TOOLS.** You can run a Learning Circle with just this guide and an online course, but our open source facilitator dashboard will help you promote your Learning Circle, manage sign ups, communicate with learners, and share feedback on a weekly basis. Throughout this guide, you'll see **green highlights** where the software can support your Learning Circle. To get your own facilitator dashboard, you just need to create a Learning Circle at [p2pu.org/facilitate](http://p2pu.org/facilitate). It's free for everyone.



**LET US HELP.** P2PU can consult with individuals and organizations looking to get started with Learning Circles. Our services include facilitator training workshops, course selection and development, ongoing facilitator support, web hosting, and software tool integration. We are happy to have a **15 minute call** with you to talk about strategy and answer any questions you might have - email [thepeople@p2pu.org](mailto:thepeople@p2pu.org) to get that set up.



**SHARE YOUR STORIES.** We rely on input and participation from the community, and your feedback will make Learning Circles even better going forward. Head over to [community.p2pu.org](http://community.p2pu.org) to share feedback, photos, suggestions, and questions with facilitators from around the world.



**FOLLOW OUR TIPS.** The green notepad symbol and dashed lines denote a template or resource that can aid you in preparing for and running your Learning Circle.



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# Background

For decades, online learning has offered the potential to deliver cheap, flexible education to a large audience. As the field of online learning has increased rapidly in the past few years, many advocates have claimed that online learning will democratize higher education and even make universities obsolete.

However, there are several barriers that have prevented such a democratization from occurring. In order to succeed in learning online, individuals must already be web savvy, self-directed learners with a great deal of intrinsic motivation and discipline. Given this, it is not a surprise that the vast majority of those who complete online courses already have a Bachelor's degree.

It is these two phenomena – the volume of high quality online learning resources and the mounting evidence that they have not leveled the educational playing field – that inspired Learning Circles. In early 2015, P2PU and Chicago Public Library started working together to deliver online courses in supportive and engaging library environments across Chicago. Specifically targeting adult learners who do not yet have an undergraduate degree, Learning Circles were designed to equip participants with confidence and motivation, springboarding them into future educational and professional endeavors.

## Open Educational Resources (OER)

Online learning has been around for decades. While some institutions pioneered online learning with low-cost degree programs, others worked to publish stand-alone course material online for free. By the early 2000s, many freely-available online learning materials became unified under a banner known as Open Educational Resources (OER), broadly defined as “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others”.

Around 2008, a few individuals and institutions began to take OER one step further. Instead of just sharing learning materials online, they started “running” free online courses synchronously, where learners from around the world could sign up and work through course materials together as an online community. These experiments were coined as MOOCs: Massive Open Online Courses.

# Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

It didn't take long for MOOCs to catch on, and soon large universities such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford started designing their own MOOC platforms and partnering with universities around the world to transform university courses into MOOCs and publish them online for anyone to access.

Some MOOCs are digital versions of existing courses, where professors deliver their lectures via video and upload readings to a website. Other MOOCs take advantage of the online medium, and create new types learning experiences for online learners. One thing most MOOCs share is that they require learners to be self-directed and motivated, and to be comfortable working online. Partially because of this, the vast majority of MOOC participants drop out without finishing their course.

To support learners who lack these requirements (or just enjoy learning together), Learning Circles position MOOCs in a social space. Emphasizing **peer learning** and **academic mindsets**, a diverse group of learners can now benefit from online learning as they develop cognitive skills, explore new learning strategies, and improve their digital literacy with others from their respective local communities.

## Peer Learning

There are three values that underlie P2PU's concept of peer learning:

- Everybody is an expert in something
- Sharing is how we learn best
- Feedback is necessary in order to improve

By convening a group of learners who are interested in a similar topic, you've got the basis for an open, collaborative learning environment that has the potential to be the support system many learners need. Peer learning can create a rich learning environment in which everyone simultaneously teaches and learns, acts and observes, speaks and listens. This exposes learners of all stripes and sizes to new perspectives, provides an opportunity to develop useful social skills, and allows individuals to achieve something greater than they could have on their own.

## Academic Mindsets

Academic mindsets is a term used to describe the beliefs that learners have about themselves, their intelligence, and their abilities. These mindsets influence a learner's motivation and perseverance, which in turn influences their study habits and overall academic performance. A positive academic mindset is described in four statements:

- “I belong to this community”
- “My ability and competence grow with my effort”
- “I can succeed at this”
- “This work has value for me”

Learning Circles support academic mindsets by combining group activities with course content. These activities will help learners develop a learning community, set and achieve attainable goals, develop new learning strategies, connect the work to their goals, and reflect and improve upon the Learning Circle model. Many learners have told us that the development of these skills is equally or even more powerful than learning new content from the online course material.

### *“What was the best thing about your Learning Circle?”*

“Interactions with others. Constructive feedback and practicing with people.”

“Learning together.”

“Meeting students with similar interests.”

“Learning something new.”



# Getting started

Here you will find a checklist that outlines the steps needed to get your Learning Circle running. Do not worry - each of these steps is explained in the following pages. You can compress or expand this timeline to suit your needs. However, if you don't already have a dedicated group of learners, we recommend spending four weeks promoting your Learning Circle once you've finalized the date, time, course, and location.



## 6 WEEKS PRIOR

- Discuss plans with any affiliated organizations
- Choose a course
- Find a space
- Choose date and time
- Confirm supplies will be available

## 4 WEEKS PRIOR

- Establish a web presence
- Prepare application
- Customize the flyer
- Connect with local communities
- Publicize online and offline

## 2 WEEKS PRIOR

- Confirm attendance with all applicants
- Confirm space reservation with venue
- Gather supplies

## BEFORE EACH LEARNING CIRCLE

- Send reminder email
- Explore the online course
- Review recipe card

# Choose a course

There are many online providers that offer free online courses. But not all courses are created equal. Here are 3 steps to choosing the perfect course for your Learning Circle.

## 1. KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

You need to identify a course that will resonate with the learners you anticipate working with. Here are a few questions to get you thinking:

### WHAT KNOWLEDGE GAPS EXIST IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Is there a need for subjects that aren't available where you live? Examples include learning Spanish, preparing for the GED, or building a website with HTML/CSS.

### WHO DO YOU EXPECT TO ATTEND?

If you'll be working with learners who aren't fully employed, you may want to choose a course that supports finding new work or skilling up (such as resume writing, public speaking, or academic writing). Be sure to look at the prerequisites for the courses and make sure the content isn't too basic or too advanced and advertise appropriately.

### WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN?

If you are passionate about the subject matter, it will resonate with learners.

## 2. IDENTIFY POSSIBLE COURSES

There are a number of ways to search for online courses. Here are a few options:

- Check out [learningcircles.p2pu.org/courses](https://learningcircles.p2pu.org/courses) to see courses we've used in the past.
- Head over to [class-central.com](https://class-central.com), a good aggregator of all online courses.
- Search by subject by platform. Platforms we've worked with in the past include:
  - [Codecademy](https://codecademy.com)
  - [Coursera](https://www.coursera.org)
  - [edX](https://www.edx.org)
  - [FutureLearn](https://futurelearn.com)
  - [Khan Academy](https://www.khanacademy.org)
  - [MIT OpenCourseware](https://ocw.mit.edu)
  - [NovoEd](https://www.novoed.com)
  - [Saylor](https://www.saylor.org)
  - [Udacity](https://www.udacity.com)

Download platform guides at [p2pu.org/facilitate/downloads](https://p2pu.org/facilitate/downloads) before the Learning Circle begins. This will help learners log in to the course platform for the first time.

### 3. CHOOSE THE BEST FIT

Once you've identified a few courses that will interest your community, whittle the list down further. Use these criteria to identify good courses for your Learning Circle:

#### **LOGISTICS: DOES THE COURSE MEET THE COURSE CRITERIA?**

- Free (free enrolment and free access to all course materials)
- English-medium (or whichever language you choose)
- CC-licensed (ideal, but not essential)
- Either open enrollment or a start date that suits your schedule
- Not too long (we recommend 5-8 week long courses)
- Low weekly commitment (varies if learners commit to doing additional work)
- No additional software required aside from browser and a word processor

#### **RELEVANCE TO YOUR COMMUNITY**

- Is the subject matter interesting and relevant to the learners you anticipate working with?
- Are there prerequisites that will prevent many people from taking this course?
- Is the subject matter interesting for you to facilitate/study alongside learners?

#### **QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION**

- Does the mode of instruction seem engaging and effective?
- Are the course materials and the platform intuitive to use?
- Is there a clear sense of expertise present in the course materials?

#### **COHERENT AS A LEARNING CIRCLE**

- Is it easy for learners to give and receive feedback to each other?
- Do the activities make sense being done together as group work?
- Can you imagine this course being run in person?

#### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEEDBACK**

- Do the assessments seem to reinforce course materials?
- Is there an active online community/access to mentors?
- Is there a clear way to get in touch with someone on the website if you run into technical difficulties?



You can use this table to rank the courses you've selected. Just score the courses 1 through 5 against each of the criteria, and the total the score in the column on the right. Highest score wins!

## **LEARNING CIRCLE COURSE SELECTION TABLE**

**Score each course against the five criteria:**

## Find a space

Find a quiet space you can use consistently for the duration of the Learning Circle for about 90 minutes/week. If possible, reserve the room ahead of time.

### ESSENTIALS

- Easily accessible space
- Consistent access to power
- Consistent access to free internet
- Restroom availability

### DESIRABLES

- A large wall that you can project onto
- Natural light (**studies show** that people learn better with it)
- Modular seating arrangements
- Near public transport / free parking

### MAKE SURE

- Have the times been booked for all 6 weeks?
- Do you have access to any keys that you need?
- Do you know the wifi network name and password?
- Do you know where chairs, tables, and additional supplies are stored?

## Gather supplies



### A FEW THINGS TO HAVE READY BEFORE LEARNING CIRCLES BEGIN

- Laptops for all participants (if they don't have their own)
- Headphones for participants (if they don't have their own)
- Internet browser (such as Google Chrome) and word processor such as Google Docs, Pages, or Microsoft Word
- Any additional software the course might require (this is rare)
- A projector and relevant HDMI or Mini DisplayPort adapter
- Adequate number of powerstrips and adapters
- Phone/camera (to record and share materials)
- Notebook and a pen
- Name tags (use them until you are sure everybody is familiar with each other)
- A few extra applications (for walk-ins)
- Snacks (if possible/appropriate)

# Identify learners

Learning Circles work best with small, enthusiastic groups of people - ideally between 4 and 10 learners. We recommend that you start these promotion activities 4 weeks before your Circle starts.

## 1. ESTABLISH A WEB PRESENCE

Create and share a public event on your blog, [Facebook](#), or an online event registration site such as [Eventbrite](#) so you can publicize your Learning Circle electronically.



If you are using our software, you'll have you very own Learning Circle webpage that you can share far and wide.

## 2. PREPARE THE APPLICATION

The purpose of the application is to get a little background on the learners, not to create a selective admission process. If there are prerequisites for the course you are facilitating, then you should make that clear in your messaging. You'll find a short application in the Appendix that you can either print out for learners or share electronically.



If you are using our software, learners can sign up directly on your Learning Circle website and you can monitor signups from your facilitator dashboard.

### THE APPLICATION INCLUDES

- Name and email address/phone number (so you know can contact them).
- Goals (so you know what they are looking to get out of it).
- How they'll help their peers (to get them thinking about peer learning).
- Quick digital skills self-assessment (so you can see the range of digital comfort in the course). We find that scoring 15 or higher makes you a good candidate for a Learning Circle.
- Whether they have a laptop and headphones (if they don't have a laptop and you can't provide extras, then these people will not be able to attend unless they can figure out a way to borrow one. Headphones are useful but not essential in some courses).



### 3. CUSTOMIZE THE FLYER

Eye-catching flyers and posters are an excellent way to promote your Learning Circle, both digitally and in print. We've included a template (see Appendix), but feel free to get creative and make your own! Just remember to include the following information:



- Name of the course
- Date, time, and venue of the meetings
- How many weeks the course will run for
- Anything participants should bring with them
- Any prerequisites
- A contact number, weblink or email address where people can find out more

Print the poster and put it in noticeable places around your venue, such as entrances, information or library circulation desks, computer terminals, or near other resources related to the course you are running. You can also share the flyer with organisations, community groups, local coffee shops, or bookstores - any place where potential learners may wander!

### 4. REACH OUT TO YOUR COMMUNITIES

Now that your materials are ready, you can start identifying learners. Nobody understands your networks better than you do, so you'll know the best way to reach them. We've provided templates that you can use to get started in a number of different mediums.

#### EMAIL

Got a mailing list? If so, you might want to use this message to find potential learners. If you don't have a Learning Circle website, make sure you attach the application!



- Are you interested in taking a free and open online course, but don't want to study alone? Why not join our Learning Circle, and study face-to-face with your peers?**
- From \_\_\_\_\_ (date) \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ (date) \_\_\_\_\_ we'll be meeting in \_\_\_\_\_(venue)\_\_\_\_\_ to work together through a course on \_\_\_\_\_ (subject) \_\_\_\_\_ in a supportive, peer-oriented group. We won't have a teacher - we'll be teaching each other!**
- There are no prerequisites for the course, but access to a laptop and some experience of using the Web would be helpful.**
- For more information, visit \_\_\_\_\_ ([link to website](#)) \_\_\_\_\_ or send an email to \_\_\_\_\_ ([your email](#)) \_\_\_\_\_.**

## FACEBOOK

Does your community use Facebook? If so, try this post as a first step. Remember, people get a lot of information via social media, so to be really impactful, post reminders to Facebook about once per day. Remember to tag any individuals, projects, locations or groups who you think might be interested in joining your Learning Circle.



- | Interested in \_\_\_\_\_(course subject)\_\_\_\_\_? Don't want to learn alone? Join a #LearningCircle at \_\_\_\_\_(venue)\_\_\_\_\_ to meet each week and work through an online course together. The Learning Circle starts \_\_\_\_\_(start date)\_\_\_\_\_. For more information and to apply online: \_\_\_\_\_(link to website)\_\_\_\_\_.

## TWITTER

If your community uses Twitter for sharing information, then you can use the two template Tweets below to get started. To really get noticed, you should tweet these messages at least 3 times per day, and come up with a hashtag so people can search for the messages. Remember to add the link to your Learning Circle website, too!



- | Learn \_\_\_\_\_(course subject)\_\_\_\_\_ together, at \_\_\_\_\_(venue)\_\_\_\_\_. #learningcircles start \_\_\_\_\_(start date)\_\_\_\_\_. Sign up: \_\_\_\_\_(link to website)\_\_\_\_\_.
- | In #\_\_\_\_\_ (city\_\_\_\_\_)? Want to learn together? Join #learningcircles at \_\_\_\_\_(venue)\_\_\_\_\_. Sign up: \_\_\_\_\_(link to website)\_\_\_\_\_.

## 5. REACH OUT TO OTHER COMMUNITY GROUPS

Depending on the topic of your Learning Circle, you should consider reaching out to other local organizations who share an interest in the subject. For example, local historical societies will have members who are interested in history courses and youth groups might be interested in courses that train young people who are looking for jobs. Check out the email template on the following page.

If your Learning Circle is taking place in a venue that has a schedule, public calendar, or newsletter, ask the administrators if you can add a notice about the Learning Circle - these are very good ways of reaching potential participants. Likewise, if your venue uses social media ask them to post and tweet on your behalf.



Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

We thought you might be interested in a learning project taking place in your community. We are going to be hosting a Learning Circle - a free, peer-led study group for learners who want to take online courses together in a public space.

Each week, learners will meet for approximately 90 minutes to work through learning materials about \_\_\_\_\_(subject)\_\_\_\_\_ together.

The Circle will run from \_\_\_\_\_(start time)\_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_(end time)\_\_\_\_\_ on the following dates \_\_\_\_\_(Circle dates)\_\_\_\_\_. in the following venue \_\_\_\_\_(venue)\_\_\_\_\_.

Learners can learn more and sign up at: \_\_\_\_\_(link to website)\_\_\_\_\_. Please pass this message on to anyone in your community who you think might be interested, and get in touch if you have any questions.

Regards,

\_\_\_\_\_

## 6. CONFIRM WITH THE LEARNERS

As learners apply, you should confirm whether or not they will be part of the group. If their skill level seems too low, suggest that they turn to their local library or other community learning space where digital literacy is taught. Remember, everyone is a beginner sometime, so be sure to be encouraging and supportive when you direct people elsewhere. Below, we've created a sample acceptance and decline message that you can use when you respond to applicants.



If you are using our software, you can log on to your dashboard to view applications and get in touch with applicants that way.

### SAMPLE ACCEPTANCE MESSAGE



Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thanks for getting in touch and wanting to join the Learning Circle about \_\_\_\_\_(course subject)\_\_\_\_\_. starting \_\_\_\_\_(date)\_\_\_\_\_. From the signup information you shared, you look like you'll be a perfect fit for the Learning Circle. We look forward to having you join us.

We'll be sending more information about the Learning Circle soon.

**SAMPLE DECLINE MESSAGE**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thanks for getting in touch and wanting to join the Learning Circle on \_\_\_\_\_ (course subject) \_\_\_\_\_ starting \_\_\_\_\_ (date) \_\_\_\_\_. From the signup information you shared, it looks like your digital skills aren't quite high enough to benefit from Learning Circle. You might want to consider approaching your local library, community center, or \_\_\_\_\_ (specific resource in your community) \_\_\_\_\_ to find out where you can boost your digital skills so that you can participate in the future.

Good luck with your online learning adventure!

*"It was very intimate and I enjoyed our weekly sessions. I learned lot more than I knew about public speaking. I feel it helped my confidence level to be a better public speaker."*

*"I met others to talk over obstacles; provided a weekly structure to stay on task."*



# Running Learning Circles

Everyone attends Learning Circles for different reasons. Some people want to build social relationships in a quasi-academic setting, others are there because they want to learn the skills they need to get a new job, and others attend purely for the sake of learning something new. As a facilitator, it is your job to understand each individual's motivation for joining and cultivate an environment in which learners can clearly see how the Learning Circle will help them achieve their desired goals.

To help you accomplish this, we've included some handy tips from past facilitators, followed by an outline of the general flow that your Learning Circle will follow.

## Facilitation tips

Good facilitation includes a number of different tasks:

- Listen to learners
- Ask clarifying statements
- Provide good feedback
- Keep discussions on task
- Probe assumptions and evidence
- Elicit viewpoints and perspectives
- Mediate conflicts
- Summarize and present findings

That's a lot, but don't worry, nobody is expecting you to be perfect from day one, and it will become much easier with practice. Here are some suggestions:

### MODEL PEER LEARNING

For most people, learning has been a passive experience of “receiving” instruction. They may be unaccustomed to taking responsibility for their own and the group’s learning. This is not what Learning Circles are about, and it is important to be clear about this, especially in the first few weeks. As a facilitator, you can be a role model for the group by engaging learners in problem-solving and actively reaching out to help when possible.

## **MAINTAIN AWARENESS**

Be observant, and learn to read the energy of the room. Who seems really motivated today? Who is particularly quiet? Once you have an understanding of each learner's goals, you'll be able to respond to this energy productively. Is one learner quiet because they are struggling with a basic concept? Ask somebody who is a few steps ahead if they don't mind helping out.

## **STRIVE TO HELP PARTICIPANTS SELF-IDENTIFY AS MEMBERS OF THEIR GROUP**

This is called social cohesion. Social cohesion begins to develop within an hour of people being together. Some examples for encouraging social cohesion include:

- Agreeing on a group name
- Using non-verbal symbols (mascot, logo, colors)
- Establishing rituals (traditions, habits, weekly activities)
- Using plural pronouns ("we" instead of "I")
- Invoking group metaphors (referring to group as family, team, etc.)
- Making verbal pledges (commitments to future action)
- Establishing group narrative (saying things like "Remember when we...")
- Developing groupspeak (inside jokes, jargon)

## **ASK PROBING QUESTIONS**

Learners will ask you many content related questions, since you are the closest thing to the traditional teacher in the room. When a learner asks, your response should demonstrate that their peers are a valuable resource, and that most questions are answerable if you know where to look. Examples of responses you might give are:  
I'm not sure, did you ask anyone else if they ran up against the same problem?  
Hmmm, where would you start looking to figure that out?

## **ENCOURAGE MEANINGFUL, FREQUENT INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MEMBERS.**

Shared emotional connections serve the dual purpose of helping individuals learn and reinforcing community. Watch out for questions or conversations that de-focus the group, and get comfortable steering conversations back on track. Other participants will greatly appreciate this.

## MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

When learning something new, there is a fine line between being optimistic and discouraged. To navigate this, express confidence that learners can achieve their goals, while also being realistic and aware of what is possible in six weeks. For instance, it's unlikely that somebody with no programming background will get a programming job after one HTML/CSS Learning Circle. However, they will gain a better understanding of how to build a website, get a sense as to whether this is a subject they'd like to continue in, and have a peer group of like-minded individuals they've gotten to know.

## ENCOURAGE GROWTH MINDSETS

A growth mindset is the belief that one's skills and abilities can be continually developed through hard work, rather than stay fixed at a certain level. As a facilitator, try praising a learner's processes (effort, strategies, choices) rather than their innate intelligence (e.g. "you're so smart!").

## TURN FRUSTRATIONS AROUND

Try to flip frustrations into positive statements and involve the group. For example, when one learner felt that the interview tips in a Job Training course were too basic, the facilitator asked the group if they could come up with better tips. This re-framed the frustration in a positive way and served as an opportunity for learners to work together.

## DELEGATE RESPONSIBILITIES

A good facilitator empowers learners to take charge of their own learning, making the role of the facilitator smaller and smaller over time. As the Learning Circle progresses, the facilitator can start asking learners to take on some extra responsibility, such as:

- Send a wrap-up email afterwards reflecting on the day's class
- Summarize the week's material at the beginning of each class
- Set up/clean up the space
- Share a resource or article that relates to the course content
- Help a learner who is struggling
- Bring snacks

## BE REFLECTIVE

As a facilitator, you have a great deal of influence over the atmosphere in your Circle. Ask yourself the following questions as you work through the six weeks:

- How might my cultural assumptions influence my interactions with learners?
- How might the backgrounds and experiences of learners influence their motivation, engagement, and learning?
- How can I modify course materials, activities, facilitation techniques, and expectations to be more accessible to all the learners in my Learning Circle?

*"The Facilitators continually made me feel comfortable, which I really appreciated this, the informal atmosphere was great!"*

*"Independent and group participation. The combined interaction of books and online study guides."*

*"1-on-1 contact, the facilitator as a guide and support, working at our own pace."*

*"Getting support from others, and having to commit to a schedule."*

*"It was good to have someone there if you had questions."*

*"Immediate feedback from other participants."*

*"The group setting and the facilitator"*

*"Was able to meet other peers in the same situation as I am."*



## Beforehand

There are three things to do each week about two days before your Learning Circle.

- Send confirmation email to all participants.



| “Hi everyone, this is a reminder that we have our Learning Circle in two days on  
| \_\_\_\_\_(date)\_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_(time)\_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_(location)\_\_\_\_\_. Please let me know if  
| you can’t make it. I look forward to seeing you all!



If you are using our software, these reminder messages will be sent out automatically 48 hours before each Learning Circle. You will receive an email beforehand giving you the option to edit the text before it is sent on to learners.

- Review the supplies checklist to make sure you have everything you need.
- Familiarize yourself with the week's learning materials.
  - What is the main subject matter learners will be covering this week?
  - How does this tie in to the major goals of the course?
  - Are there any activities this week that could easily be done as a group?
  - How can the weekly recipe card activities support the course content?

*“I liked the accessibility of peers, building confidence in a safe environment. no pressure with our peer group and learning from our peer group.”*

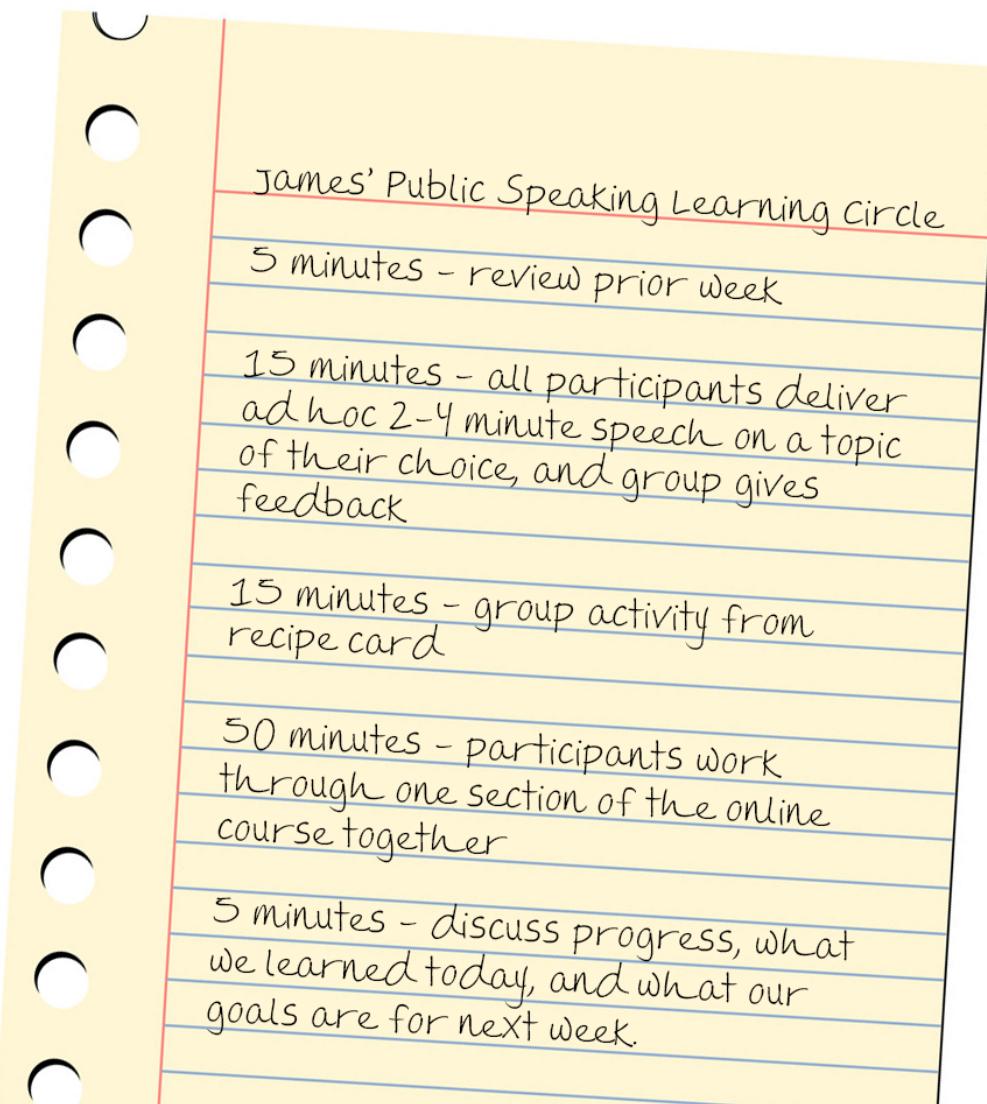
*“There was no pressure to earn a grade or meet a deadline for completing a homework assignment.”*



## During

Each Learning Circle has four components, documented weekly on the recipe cards (see Appendix). You can decide to follow the format of the recipe cards as much or as little as you'd like, as you are in the best position to understand the goals and backgrounds of the learners. In general the four components are:

- **Check-in:** The first ten minutes are spent reviewing the past week and sharing goals for the day.
- **Activity:** Each recipe card has a 10-15 minute activity that you can facilitate before or after the coursework. These are designed to foster community, build learner confidence, and help to bridge the course content and real life. We recommend you explain the activity to learners and then decide as a group if you'd like to do it. Feel free to come up with your own!
- **Coursework:** The majority of each Learning Circle is devoted to working through the online course.
- **Plus/delta:** The last five minutes are spent sharing one thing that went well and one thing that learners hope to improve next week.



## Afterwards

Once the learners leave, spend about ten minutes wrapping up all the week's work.

- Clean up.
- Return anything you borrowed.
- Send a short summary email to all the learners (a template is included at the bottom of each recipe card).



If you are using our software, you can capture your feedback for the meeting on the facilitator dashboard. This feedback will be automatically shared with learners alongside the automatic reminder 48 hours before the next meeting.

- During the final Learning Circle, distribute certificates and surveys (see Appendix).

*"The best thing about participating in the learning circle was learning alongside other people and the learning that it can provide."*

*"Getting feedback from both my peers and the facilitator."*



## *Feedback from past facilitators*

“The activities might not always work, so being able to start conversations is important. Go through the materials first. Look for ways to make an activity an offline engagement.”

- **Kristen** (Academic Writing & HTML/CSS)

“I did my best to offer ideas/options of activities and ways to use the course material. I asked questions such as “what topics are you struggling with” or “which areas do you want to review most?” to see if there were any common content areas the learners were interested in. From there, I recommended that they answer the question set for that content together.”

- **Sarah** (Registered nursing exam prep)



“Understand the course structure by browsing whole week works even though you don’t need to know content.”

- **Young** (HTML/CSS)

“I can apply some of the things to other programming, and it was fun to offer such specific learning to people.”

- **Kimberly** (Fiction writing)

“Personality and skill levels matter! Learners with big personalities might alienate learners who are more shy. Part of your role is to look for this and make everyone feel their voice is valued. Redirecting questions learners ask you and asking the back to each learner helps.”

- **Alenka** (Resume writing and interview skills)

“I feel pretty lucky, I feel like we became friends and I am part of their group and learning process”.

- **James** (Public speaking)



# Appendix



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Alike 4.0 license**.*

# Application form

Learning Circles are free, lightly-facilitated study groups for learners who want to take online courses, together and in person. The facilitator is present to help support your learning experience, but he or she is not an expert in the content you'll be covering. Rather, the expertise resides in the online course, your peers, and yourself. What Learning Circles offer is a support group for learning, access to new studying strategies, dedicated weekly study time and space, a network of colearners, and the ability to learn in low pressure environment.

**Return this application to:**

**Name:**

**Email Address:**

**Phone Number for SMS** (if no email available):

**In one sentence, please explain your goals for taking this course.**

**A successful study group requires the support of all of its members. How will you help your peers achieve their goals?**

**How comfortable are you doing the following tasks?**

0	1	2	3	4
Can't do	Need help doing	Can do with difficulty	Can do	Expert (can teach others)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Send an email			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Delete spam email			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Find stuff online using Google			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Watch a video on Youtube			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fill out an application form or buy something online			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use a mobile app			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Evaluate whether a website is safe/can be trusted			

Write a value  
form 1 to 5  
in each box

**Can you bring a laptop and headphones to the Learning Circle each week?**

**Check  
one of the  
boxes**

<input type="checkbox"/>	Both
<input type="checkbox"/>	Just a laptop
<input type="checkbox"/>	Just headphones
<input type="checkbox"/>	Neither

# **Master new skills. Together. In the library. For free.**

Join a study groups for learners who want to complete online courses together, in-person. These are free, peer-supported courses designed to be taken by anybody.

**Course:** \_\_\_\_\_

**First meeting:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sign Up:** \_\_\_\_\_

# Week 1 | Getting Started - Part 1

This recipe card covers important introductions that should happen during your first meeting. Take about 10 minutes to give an overview of the Learning Circle process.

## INTRODUCTION (10 MIN)

Start by introducing Learning Circles and the course you are facilitating. Then take some time to answer logistical questions from participants. Talking points are below.

## INTRODUCING LEARNING CIRCLES

- Many universities and institutions have begun developing free, online courses as a way to increase access to education.
- These courses have very low completion rates, because taking a course alone, online, requires a lot of self-discipline, motivation, and prior knowledge of how online learning works.
- Learning Circles, developed by Chicago Public Library and Peer 2 Peer University, are an attempt to create a more engaging learning experiences using this free, online content, but doing it in-person!
- Learning Circles are free peer learning courses; a combination of a book club, study hall, and support group. Together we will try and help each other accomplish our learning goals.
- There are many ways to contribute. Some people might be more advanced technically, but other people might have unique insights that other people would not have noticed.

## COURSE OVERVIEW AND LOGISTICS

- Discuss some of the specific themes of your course, what the learning goals are, what kind of work participants can expect to be doing.
- There are few prerequisites for taking this course: basic digital literacy, a desire to learn, and willingness to work together with your peers.
- We will meet at this time, for 90 minutes, for the next 6 weeks. Each week I will send you a reminder about our next meeting and a summary of what we did the week before.
- There is no necessary work outside of the Learning Circle, but as a group we can decide if we want to work on the course material outside of the weekly session. (The more work we do, the more progress we will make!)
- You can get a certificate if you complete the online course and/or attend 5 Learning Circles.
- My role as a facilitator is to support you in your learning. I am not a teacher or content expert.
- This is the most I'll ever be speaking at once during the Learning Circle. I have these cards which suggest activities and discussion points, but this is our space and we can choose to use it however we want.

## QUESTIONS (10 MIN)

Open the floor to questions from participants.

*The rest of this week's activities are outlined on the following card.*

# Week 1 | Getting Started - Part 2

The goal for the rest of the session is to strike a balance between giving learners a chance to jump right into the course and taking time to create a comfortable space for the fledgling community. Both are important to the success of the Learning Circle.

## GET TO KNOW ONE ANOTHER (10 MIN)

As the facilitator, it is important for you to prompt personal introductions in a way that will encourage conversation amongst the whole group. Frame this activity as a way for all of the participants to get to know one another, as a starting point for the work they'll be doing together over the next 6 weeks – this activity is for them, not for you.

- **First:** Ask learners to share why they came to the Learning Circle and an example of a good learning experience they have had in their life.
- **Next:** Model an introduction by re-introducing yourself to start.
- **Finally:** Afterwards, summarize the learning experiences and share how you think this Learning Circle can develop into an inclusive learning community.

## COURSEWORK (45 MIN)

- Direct participants to the course website and have them create an account on the platform. Use platform guides on P2PU website as needed.
- Encourage learners to poke around on the platform, together or on their own.
- To wrap up, ask participants to come back together as a group and share with the broader group some of the things they learned or are excited to start learning about.

## ACTIVITY: GROUP EXPECTATIONS (10 MIN)

Talk about expectations for the group to draw in participation from all group members and help craft group identity. It's okay if not everybody agrees on everything!

- **First:** Ask learners how they want to work with their peers in the coming weeks. Prompt learners with these questions:
  - Do you want to work through activities on a projector or work on their own?
  - Do you want to commit to doing work outside of the Learning Circle?
  - Do you feel like you have enough time to complete the course?
- **Next:** Based on the discussion create a list of expectations for their group and discuss the list, leaving room for last minute additions and any disagreements.
- **Finally:** Once the list is final, read the final list to the group.

## PLUS/DELTA (5 MIN)

Ask learners to share one thing that went well for them today, and one thing that they would like to change for next week. You should record these weekly, as each subsequent Learning Circle will begin by revisiting the prior weeks plus/deltas. This activity is a great way to reflect on the course and constantly strive to improve the experience for learners. Make clear that the changes the participants mention will be revisited in the following class and integrated into the flow of the course.

## FEEDBACK (AFTERWARDS)

Send a wrap up email to learners each week. Include your impressions of how it went, plus/delta feedback, and anything the group agreed to for next week.



If you are using our software, you can submit this via the facilitator dashboard.

# Week 2 | Goal setting

As the group continues to evolve into a learning community, this week's activity is designed to support learners in defining and setting personal goals for the Learning Circle. These goals will become the focal point of the weekly check-in for subsequent weeks.

## CHECK-IN (10 MIN)

- Recap last week's plus/delta
- Start **stand-ups** this week. Go around and ask learners to share "what I worked on last week, what I am working on this week, and what I'll need help on."

## ACTIVITY: GOAL SETTING (10 MIN)

Goal setting and sharing is a powerful tool to help learners craft group identity, increase motivation, and build confidence. By setting goals early, learners will be able to refer to these on a weekly basis to track their progress over time.

- **First:** Ask the learners to spend 5 minutes writing down one or two major learning goals for themselves for the Learning Circle. Encourage them to look through the course syllabus online to help identify course goals that resonate with them, or identify other personal goals they might have. Prompt learners with this question:
  - "What do you want to know or be able to do by the end of this course? Some examples are "I want to do all of the readings, or I want to complete the final project, or I want to help everybody in the Learning Circle at least once." These are all good goals because they are specific, difficult yet achievable in 6 weeks, and have clear checkpoints that you can make progress towards each week."
- **Next:** Have learners break into small groups of 3-4 or come together as a larger group (if there are less than 6 people) to share their goals. As each learner presents, the group should help them improve their goals by making them more specific, at a reasonable level of difficulty, and with clear checkpoints. Examples of questions they might ask include:
  - What specific actions can you take to reach your goals? How can we help?
  - Can you break down your goals to checkpoints so that you can see progress each week?
  - Do you think this goal is reasonable in 6 weeks?
- **Finally:** Have each individual write down their individual goals and checkpoints somewhere, and keep a master list yourself that you can refer back to over time. Let everybody know that starting next week, learners will share their goal at the beginning of each Learning Circle.

## COURSEWORK (65 MIN)

Check in with learners who didn't seem confident about their goals to see how they are progressing.

## PLUS/DELTA (5 MIN)

Ask learners to share one thing that went well for them today, and one thing that they would like to change for next week.

## FEEDBACK (AFTERWARDS)

Send a wrap up email to all the learners including a quick summary of the session, the plus/delta feedback, a summary of the goal setting activity, and anything else you want the learners to remember for next week.

# Week 3 | Critique and feedback

Giving and receiving feedback are a very important parts of Learning Circles. This week focuses on building the learners' confidence in turning to the group for help and support, and talking together about what the benefits of critique are and what are good ways to give and receive it.

## CHECK-IN (10 MIN)

- Recap last week's plus/delta
- **Stand-up:** what I worked on last week, what I am working on this week, and what I'll need help on.

## COURSEWORK (45 MIN)

- While working, ask learners to think of one thing from the course that they would like feedback on (such as a draft of a paper, a mockup of a website, or an updated resume). Tell them that, if they are comfortable, they will share these during the activity today.
- Does everyone seem settled into a routine? If not, spend a little extra time with them.
- If digital skills are still holding any participants back, consider recommending a different course for them.

## ACTIVITY: CRITIQUE AND FEEDBACK (30 MIN)

Modeling good feedback and constructive criticism can help make learners more comfortable sharing with one another. If this is something that the learners like, you can incorporate it into future sessions as well. Use a projector if that will help everyone look on together.

- **First:** Introduce the sessions with the following prompt:
  - We all learn from other people, which means that giving and receiving constructive criticism is essential for us to reach our potential. Critical feedback may be awkward sometimes, so there are a few good rules of thumb to follow. First, when you are giving feedback, try to include something positive about your colleague's work, and make your recommendations specific and actionable, so that they know how to address the feedback that you raise. When you are receiving feedback, try to listen with open ears, and remember that we all have each other's best interests at heart. If you feel yourself feeling defensive, try asking a clarifying question rather than assuming the person is attacking your work.
- **Next:** One by one, have learners share their work (either by presenting it verbally or showing it on the projector or a laptop). If learners are looking for feedback on a specific component, they can mention that beforehand.
- **Finally:** If any learners feel particularly distraught about their feedback, help them make a plan for getting back on track during the next Learning Circle.

## PLUS/DELTA (5 MIN)

Ask learners to share one thing that went well for them today, and one thing that they would like to change for next week.

## FEEDBACK (AFTERWARDS)

Send wrap up email to all the learners including a quick summary of the session, the plus/delta feedback, and anything else you want the learners to remember for next week. Remind learners to bring something to share next week (see Week 4 activity).

# Week 4 | Sharing

In the past, learners have enjoyed getting a chance to hear and share stories about past experiences related to the course material. It is a nice way for the learners to bring more of their personality in the group, especially for those learners who tend to be more quiet or reserved.

## CHECK-IN (10 MIN)

- Recap last week's plus/delta
- **Stand-up:** what I worked on last week, what I am working on this week, and what I'll need help on.

## ACTIVITY: SHARING (15 MIN)

Try to strike a balance between learners sharing something personal that also directly relates to the course material. In the past, public speaking learners have shared speeches they love from YouTube, HTML/CSS learners have shared their favorite website, and Registered Nursing exam prep learners have shared embarrassing stories from nursing school.

- **First:** Ask a learner to introduce a relevant resource/story and, if applicable, explain why they like it.
- **Next:** Go around the room and hear from each of the other learners.
- **Finally:** Have a brief discussion about what all the resources had in common, where people's opinions diverged, and how learning about these might impact the work learners do in the Learning Circle going forward.

## COURSEWORK (60 MIN)

Try to engage a bit less during the coursework this week - do you think the Learning Circle could continue next week if you weren't here?

## PLUS/DELTA (5 MIN)

Ask learners to share one thing that went well for them today, and one thing that they would like to change for next week.

## FEEDBACK (AFTERWARDS)

Send wrap up email to all the learners including a quick summary of the session, the plus/delta feedback, any good links shared during the activity, and anything else you want the learners to remember for next week.

# Week 5 | Failing is learning

This week focuses on helping learners to see failure and mistakes as helpful and necessary components of learning, instead of something to be avoided. This activity also gets learners to reflect a bit on the progress they've made in anticipation of the final Circle next week.

## CHECK-IN (10 MIN)

- Recap last week's plus/delta
- **Stand-up:** what I worked on last week, what I am working on this week, and what I'll need help on.

## ACTIVITY (15 MIN)

Sharing some of the mistakes and struggles with the coursework from the past weeks should help learners feel less pressure about always "knowing" the right answer and allow them to feel more comfortable asking peers for help.

- **First:** Prompt learners for a discussion about failure by reading the following:
  - This week we are going to talk about some failures we've had so far. In Learning Circles, failure is not bad; in fact, it is a guaranteed and inevitable part of learning. Just like toddlers fall when learning to walk, we will all experience failure as we grow as learners throughout our lives. If we really try to understand what we get wrong and overcome our failure, we can learn even more from our mistakes than from our successes.
- **Next:** Ask learners to take a couple of minutes to think about an example of a struggle or failure that they've come up against in the Learning Circle, what lesson they learned from that experience, and how they can imagine using that lesson going forward.
- **Finally:** Go around the room, sharing challenges and lessons learned. Try to focus less on the failure itself, and more on what was learned in overcoming it.

## COURSEWORK (60 MIN)

- If some learners seemed like they hadn't resolved the failures they mentioned in the activity, see if another learner who knows the material is willing to help them out.
- Encourage learners to take some time reflecting on how much work they have left in the course and if they anticipate questions or challenges that they might want to bring up before the final Learning Circle.

## PLUS/DELTA (5 MIN)

Ask learners to share one thing that went well for them today, and one thing that they would like to change for next week.

## FEEDBACK (AFTERWARDS)

Send wrap up email to all the learners including a quick summary of the session, the plus/delta feedback, and anything else you want the learners to remember for next week.

# Week 6 | Wrapping up

The final week focuses on making a final push towards learners' goals and discussing ways in which they can continue with the course materials. If your Learning Circle is longer than 6 weeks, you can keep using the same format as prior weeks (repeating or creating new activities) and save this card for the final week.

## CHECK-IN (10 MIN)

- Recap last week's plus/delta
- **Stand-up:** what I worked on last week, what I am working on this week, and what I'll need help on.

## COURSEWORK (50 MIN)

- Support learners in finding a good stopping point if it seems they won't finish the course.

## ACTIVITY (10 MIN)

When you reach a good stopping point, convene in a circle to share your work and debrief about the experience.

- **First:** Go around the room and share a victory they've achieved. This could be by showing an example of their work or sharing an anecdote.
- **Next:** Ask learners if there is anything they'd like to keep learning now that the Learning Circle is over. It could be to continue with coursework they didn't finish, sign up for a new course in a different subject, or a personal goal like explore new job opportunities in the field.
- **Finally:** Brainstorm ways to help learners find ways to reach their goals, by continuing to meet with each other, finding new resources, etc.

## SURVEY (10 MIN)

If you find it beneficial, distribute the learner survey included in the appendix of the facilitator handbook. This will give you some good feedback on the learner's experiences and prime them for an engaging plus/delta.

## PLUS/DELTA (5 MIN)

This week is meta - ask learners to share one thing that went well for them over the past 6 weeks, and one thing that they would like to change for the next iteration of Learning Circles.

## CERTIFICATES (5 MIN)

Hand out certificates to participants who finished the online course and/or attended 5 of the 6 sessions.

## FEEDBACK (AFTERWARDS)

Send wrap up email to all the learners including a quick summary of the session summarizing the experience and encouraging them to keep learning together. We'd really appreciate you forwarding this, and any additional feedback you have, over to us by emailing [thepeople@p2pu.org](mailto:thepeople@p2pu.org). This will greatly help us improve Learning Circles going forward.

**Thank you for all the work you put into this Learning Circle, we hope you'll do it**



## CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT

This certificate is proudly presented to

---

for participating in the Learning Circle

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Facilitator

# Learning Circle Feedback

We're glad you participated in a Learning Circle! Responses to this survey will be shared with both your facilitator and Peer 2 Peer University. Your feedback supports us improving the Learning Circle experience for learners and facilitators in the future. Thanks!

## 1. What was the online course you worked through?

---

### 2. Where did your learning circle group meet?

e.g. "Edgewater branch of Chicago Public Library" or "Chris's house in Wellington, NZ"

---

### 3. How did you hear about this Learning Circle?

*Check all that apply.*

- A flyer/poster
  - Social media
  - Word of mouth
  - P2PU website
  - Other: .....
- 

### 4. Have you taken an online course before?

*Mark only one box.*

- Yes, in a subject related to this Learning Circle
- Yes, but in a different subject
- No, but I knew that free, online courses existed
- No, and I didn't know that free online courses existed

### 5. What is the primary reason you signed up for the Learning Circle?

*Mark only one box.*

- To increase my employability
  - Professional development
  - To accompany traditional higher education
  - Personal interest in subject matter
  - For social reasons
  - Other: .....
- 

### 6. Are you currently working and/or studying?

*Mark only one box.*

- Working full time
  - Working part time (but want full time work)
  - Working part time (and don't want full time work)
  - Unemployed
  - Full-time student
  - Part-time student (and also working)
  - Part-time student (and not also working)
  - Other: .....
-

# Learning Circle Feedback

## 7. Which best describes you?

Mark only one box.

- I signed up, but never attended.
- I attended a few, but didn't stick with it.
- I was a regular Learning Circle attendee, but never got a certificate.
- I received a certificate.

## 8. Aside from the online course platform, what online/mobile tools did you use during the Learning Circle?

Check all that apply.

- Text messages
- Email
- Google calendar
- Google docs
- Dropbox
- Facebook
- Other: .....

## 9. Did you do course work for the Learning Circle outside of the weekly meeting?

Mark only one box.

- No
- Yes, less than 2 additional hours/week
- Yes, more than 2 additional hours/week

## 10. Did you get through the entire online course during the Learning Circle?

Mark only one box.

- Yes
- No, and I will finish on my own
- No, and I will not continue

## 11. What is the best thing about participating in your Learning Circle?

.....  
.....  
.....

## 12. What is the biggest frustration about participating in your Learning Circle?

.....  
.....  
.....

# Learning Circle Feedback

### **13. What is a tip you'd give to future Learning Circle attendees?**

**14. How much do you agree with the following statements about your Learning Circle? Mark only one box per row.**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I set a clear goal for myself at the beginning.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I achieved my goals during the Learning Circle.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
My peers supported me in achieving my goals/ finishing the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Working hard had a positive impact on what I was able to achieve.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
What I learned is valuable to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I'd be interested in attending another Learning Circle.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I feel more capable of academic achievement than I did before the Learning Circle began.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

**15. Overall, how would you rate your experience in this Learning Circle?**

*Mark only one box.*

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	
Extremely Dissatisfied	<input type="checkbox"/>	Extremely Satisfied									

# Learning Circle Feedback

**16. Is there anything else we can do to help improve your experience in Learning Circles?**

.....  
.....  
.....

**17. What is another subject you would like to take a Learning Circle in?**

.....

**18. Would you be interested in being a Learning Circle facilitator?**

*Mark only one box.*

- Yes
- Maybe in the future
- No

**19. Write your name if you give us permission to quote your responses in future P2PU materials.**

.....

**20. Write your email address if you'd like to be added to the P2PU mailing list.**

.....