

The ties that bind

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CAN LEARNING CIRCLES STRENGTHEN KĀHUI AKO?



Tokomairiro Kāhui Ako's Early Childhood, primary and secondary school teachers meet at Tokomairiro High School

Communities of Learning or Kāhui Ako bring together education providers who may have never met or shared a conversation with each other. So how can these teachers start talking together?

Harvard writers, Gratton and Erikson, in their [Eight Ways to Build Collaborative Teams](#), tell us that it's not an easy task to build new teams — the more experts we have in a group — the harder it is to build a community:

We found that the greater the proportion of experts a team had, the more likely it was to disintegrate into non-productive conflict or stalemate...

But they offer some hope...

Under the right conditions, large teams can achieve high levels of cooperation, but creating those conditions requires thoughtful, and sometimes significant, investments in the capacity for collaboration across the organization

(Gratton and Erikson, 2018)

So, what are the *right* conditions?

It might be useful to look at the Nordic countries where there is a long tradition of collaborative adult education and an established practice of lifelong learning through Learning Circles.

Sweden's late Prime Minister, Olof Palme, often called Sweden 'a study circle democracy', which reflected the Swedish government's policy around adult education. This national commitment currently sees nearly two million Swedish people annually benefitting from taking part in Learning Circles.

In small groups of 7–12 people, study groups share the knowledge and skills of their members or make use of external experts. They might be gaining new knowledge in a particular field or working to solve a problem. The most important factor at play here is that the focus for learning is decided by the participants themselves. Members choose a leader from the group, and the group's activities are supported by a facilitator who is a representative of a learning organisation. The work of every group ends with an evaluation of results.

This enthusiasm for learning together is not surprising given the government policy on developing a love for learning. The Swedish government sees the practice of self-directed learning as essential to a healthy democracy because it:

- supports equality and an understanding of the perspectives of others
- starts from the individual's voluntary, personalised search for knowledge
- is characterised by shared values and cooperation
- aims to strengthen individuals' ability to gain agency and influence in their own lives and be able, together with others, to change society in accordance with their values and ideals.

Where did the idea come from?

The Swedes were by no means the first to popularise the learning circle as a mechanism for capturing the collective wisdom of the group.

The method has been central to many indigenous cultures for millennia. Early talking circles were often seen as wisdom circles, serving as more than just a place for talking together. Indigenous peoples in North America have always seen Circles as a way of life — they embody a philosophy, principles, and values that apply whether people are sitting in a circle or not.

Clearly, this powerful community process has merit, surviving over time and reaching across the cultures of the world. Civic organisations, neighbourhood communities, trade unions, churches, and social justice groups have used, and are using, learning circles to empower their members to share, make choices, and take action.

In the 1980s, The Quality Circle was a term used to describe the same practice in corporate settings. In Quality Circles, the hierarchical boundaries between workers and managers were flattened to encourage participatory management and shared team leadership.

Originally associated with Japanese management and manufacturing techniques developed in Japan after World War II, the business Quality Circle was based on the ideas of [W. Edwards Deming](#). The goal was to encourage everyone to develop a strong sense of ownership over the process and products of their company — and the practice continues in many socially responsible businesses today.

It seems that no matter what the name — study circles, peer learning circles, talking circles, or dialogue-to-change programmes, the principles remain the same — they are spaces where learning is collaborative, participation is democratic, there's respect for every voice, and participants learn from the collective wisdom of the group.

Back home in our Kāhui Ako, could this work?

Last year, the Lead Principal of the Tokomairiro Kāhui Ako, Tania McNamara, thought it might work, saying:

We know what we're trying to do in terms of student learning – but we need a method to bring people together in a way that really engages everyone.

After seeing the potential of Learning Circles, Tania visited all the schools and centres in the Kāhui Ako and listened to leaders and teachers talk about their interests and passions. Getting a big-picture view of educators across the spectrum — in ECE, primary and secondary education centres — she was able to identify strong common themes of teacher interest and expertise.

The most interesting and exciting thing about mapping the educators' passions in this way was the discovery that there were areas of common interest running across all these educators. This made for diverse, cross-level interest groups who might be able to share knowledge and collaborate in a genuine way.

The Tokomairiro Research Pods were formed with the focus areas including work on cultural responsiveness, co-teaching and collaborating in innovative learning environments, developing learner agency, integration of digital technologies, and passion for learning.

Tokomairiro Kāhui Ako is trialing the idea of Learning Circles — called Research Pods — by arranging for groups to meet together twice a term.

The initial buzz and enthusiasm as teachers make personal connections across areas of interest bodes well for this simple initiative.

To be continued...the next chapter is in process.



Research Pod meetings at Tokomairiro Kāhui Ako

Sometimes the most important thing you get from the network isn't an idea but the inspiration or courage to try something new

#innovatormindset George Couros

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Liz Stevenson

[Liz Stevenson](#) supports Kāhui Ako/Communities of Learning as an Expert Partner. Previously co-leading the Learning with Digital Technologies project, Liz has also developed an online coaching room for sportspeople with AUT and, at the University of Waikato, designed an online mentoring programme for secondary school art students and professional artists. Recently, as a result of her ongoing research into Learning Circles, Liz developed the peer learning process, Story Hui – a method now being used by [teachers](#) to describe learners' achievement in play-based or project-based learning, and by students to talk about their learning strengths and capabilities.