SYLLABUS

TITLE PAGE - LEARNING CIRCLE COURSES

Please include the information below for each participant

Course Title: ***Learning Circles: Professional Conversations for Change***	**Course Number:** EDIU 9124
First Name:	**Last Name:**
Grade Level/Content Area:	
Email:	

FINAL INVENTORY CHECKLIST FOR PARTICIPANTS

Please check each completed item:

_____ Title Page

_____ Learning Circle Rubric (Fill out top and instructor will complete and return)

_____ Facilitator Worksheet

_____ Questions and Goals

_____ Action Plan Worksheet

_____ Learning Circle Journal

_____ Reflections

_____ Course Evaluation

Please email this form with all completed course requirements to:

Gretchen McKay
Email: gmckay@umassglobal.edu

LEARNING CIRCLES: PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE
3 UNITS

Introduction

A conversation with one person can solve a problem, or help heal a wound. A conversation with several people can generate commitment, bond a team, generate new options, or build a vision. Conversations can shift working patterns, build friendships, create focus and energy, cement resolve."

- R. Brian Stanfield, ed. The Art of Focused Conversation, p. 6.

The concept of Learning Circles has long been recognized as a powerful method of learning and sharing. "Over time and across countries, civic organizations, neighborhood communities, trade unions, churches and social justice groups have used learning circles to empower their members to make choices and take action."1 Variations on this concept include wisdom circles, quality circles, and study circles.

For the purpose of this course, a Learning Circle is defined as a group of educators who come together to learn, discover, and share using the democratic approach. This kind of learning experience is sometimes called peer-to-peer learning and is an effective way to focus thinking on a common concern with the intention of creating a plan of action. A Learning Circle allows discussion to flourish in an atmosphere of trust and caring. In a Learning Circle every member has an equal voice and is expected to contribute to the learning experience.

A Learning Circle is different from a discussion group in that a Learning Circle is more focused and seeks to create some kind of change. A Learning Circle has a well-defined goal and an agreed upon facilitator who helps keep the discussion on target.

This course was designed to meet the needs of administrators or other staff developers including groups of teachers who wish to engage in an individualized course that would respond to a common need at their schools/districts. Learning Circles provide an excellent process and format for creating a scheduled time, place, and purpose for discussing and reflecting upon the different issues that have mutual meaning for all participants. In this course, reflection and discussion will lead to creation of an *Action Plan* that will lead to further reflection, further discussion, and refinement of professional practice.

In many cases a group of educators already has a book in mind and wishes to design a Learning Circle discussion course based on that book. This syllabus provides the structure to help the group reach its goals in a timely and orderly manner.

OPTIONS FOR CONTINUED CONVERSATION

The Learning Circles format provides educators with the incentive and direction to form and maintain collaborative learning communities. In this first course, participants will establish the Learning Circle group, determine the topic, begin research and professional discussion, and create an Action Plan. Many groups find this method of learning and discovery so powerful that they want to continue.

Two options are available for groups who wish to continue the process:

- Register for a second identical course and either continue with the same topic based on a different book and focusing question or research a completely new topic and text.
- Register for Learning Circles: Practical Applications. In this next-step course the group will take their Action Plan to a new level and work together using an informal Action Research model to discover if their Action Plan actually produces the desired results.

Whether or not you have previously participated in a book group or some other form of directed group learning, you might find the book Learning Circles: Creating Conditions for Professional Development a useful tool to enhance your Learning Circle experience. Information about this book is listed in the Resources section for this course.

"(This class) has made me realize that there are many valuable teaching tools available and I am excited to continue to participate in the Learning Circles to enhance my teaching."

-Ann Miller, Literacy Coach, Saginaw, MI

PREREQUISITES

The main prerequisite for involvement in any Learning Circle course is the commitment to stick with the process and be a contributing member of a professional group. In addition, you will need:

- A group of between 3-15 educators who wish to explore an important personal or professional issue related to education.
- A common question that will focus the group and lead to potential action.

HOW TO ESTABLISH A LEARNING CIRCLE GROUP

- Choose a facilitator, or convener, for the group. The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic under consideration. The facilitator's role is to guide the group's inquiry.
- Establish a method of documenting the group's discussions and ideas.
- Decide how the group will review past proceedings and evaluate progress.
- Discuss expectations of each member related to the group process.
- Decide on meeting times/places. The group can meet anywhere at any time that is agreeable to all members.
- Establish rules for ensuring a comfortable, respectful, and nurturing environment where all viewpoints are heard.
- Remember that the purpose of the group is to engage in serious professional dialogue in a relaxed setting.

CHOOSING THE FACILITATOR

Decide who will be the facilitator/convener for this *Learning Circle.* The group **must** have a facilitator. The main duties of the facilitator are:

- Help the group determine ground rules so everyone will feel heard and valued as an important member of the group
- Facilitate decisions regarding meeting dates/times/locations
- Set up procedures for who will be responsible for what

- Lead the discussion regarding the group's goals and possible outcomes including products and/or projects
- Determine a way for all group members to be reminded of meeting dates/times/locations/responsibilities.

FACILITATOR GUIDE

Fill out the Facilitator Guide (below) and include it with your completed packet. Groups without a facilitator are seldom successful.

Name of facilitator: _____

Email address: _____

Ground rules for group discussions
What should each member do to make the group experience positive and productive?

Examples:
Come to the discussion prepared by having read the week's reading. Make sure electronic devices are set to silent.

Please record meeting dates/times.

As the facilitator, you might want to vary the meeting places. Many groups like to meet over coffee, at a park or at a member's home. There is no rule that says you can't make the experience enjoyable!



ASSIGNMENTS

This course requires completion of six assignments. Each assignment will be explained in detail.

Assignment #1	Determine the Question and Goals
Assignment #2	Choose the Text and Complete Reading
Assignment #3	Create the Learning Circle Journal
Assignment #4	Write an Action Plan
Assignment #5	Complete the End of Course Reflections

Assignment #1 - Determine the Question and Goals

The Question

The group's question is usually the outgrowth of a problem or concern common to all members of the group. Before you discuss a possible question, determine the following:

1. Is this a problem/issue we have the ability to change given our current or expected resources?
2. Is this something that we feel is really important and worth our time?

As a group, formulate a question that will guide the group's research and discussion. It should be a broad question that relates to the general issue at hand, merits time, and has the potential to encourage conversation and action. For instance, if the members of the group are concerned that many of their students are not interested or engaged in math, the question might be: What techniques could we employ in our classroom that might better facilitate student involvement in math?

Another common classroom issue is how to better facilitate transitions. The question might be: Are there any techniques we haven't tried that might lead to less time and disruption during transition time?

Educators who are more specialized such as resource teachers, GATE teachers, high school choir directors, etc., might want to come together as a group to explore common concerns. GATE teachers could collaborate to research and discuss successful delivery of GATE programs for a district or county. Their question might be: Can we find model programs to examine with the idea of possible modification and/or implementation?

As you reflect on the question, consider:

- Who or what is causing the problem?
- What have we tried that wasn't effective?
- Do we have the resources to effect a change in the situation?

The Goals

After the focusing question has been determined, decide on at least two goals for the group. The goals are what the group wants to take away from this course. Be as specific as possible. The goals should be written at the top of the *Learning Circle Journal*. An example of goals is provided with the *Journal* example.

Please take time in the first session to communicate with each other about what you want to accomplish individually in this Learning Circle. Be honest with the rest of the group about your expectations and needs.

Assignment #2 - Choose the Book

The next step is deciding which book(s) or other material the group will read and discuss. It is best if everyone reads the same material, but certain groups/topics might be better served with a variety of resources especially if the group is fairly large or wants to discuss the merits of two or more different approaches to the topic.

Please email the question, goals, and text information to me at gmckay@umassglobal.edu before you continue.

Assignment #3 - The Learning Circle Journal

The Learning Circle Journal is for documenting your work as well as reflecting on assignments and discussions. Your journal should show evidence of your reading/thinking/reflecting on the group goals. Each group member must log a minimum of 45 hrs. (including group discussion time) to receive credit for this course.

You may not include time spent on regular classroom activities for which you are already compensated.

Create your journal using the format in the example. Each participant must turn in a separate journal. **Begin by writing the group goals for the course at the top of your journal.** A sample mini journal (including goals) is provided.

Creating a Table Using the Computer
You may use any software program to create a table as long as it is compatible with Microsoft Word. If you use Word, choose the "Table" option, then choose "Insert." Choose "4" for the number of columns. You can start with "4" for the rows also, but will add rows as you go. To add/delete rows go to "Table", then "Insert" or "Delete" and choose the appropriate action. If you want to add another row, put your cursor in the last row of your table and choose "Rows Below."

The sections will expand as you type. The columns can be made wider by using the cursor to drag the lines. Here is an example of the required categories and how the table will look when completed.

The Learning Circle Journal - An Example
GROUP GOALS

1. Explore effective ways to integrate the arts into the current reading program at the K-3 grade levels at Greenville Elementary.
2. Develop an Action Plan based on our research, reading, discussion, and experience

DATE	TIME	ACTIVITY	REFLECTION
Month/Day/Year	1 hr.	Read from Strong Arts, Strong Schools.	I was impressed with the need to include instruction in music and the arts into the school curriculum. I am anxious to see if our group can come up with a

			way to integrate the arts into our current reading program.
Month/Day/Year	1 ½ hrs.	Our group met at Starbucks after school.	We decided we would each think of two innovative ways to integrate arts into our reading program keeping in mind our grade level standards. We agreed that we'd try each other's ideas and report to the group.

Total: 2.5 hours
Note: At the end of your journal, total your hours (at least 45) and enter them at the end of the journal.

Assignment #4 - The Action Plan

The Action Plan is based on the initial question of the group as well as the group's goals. It is a written account of what was learned and a plan for implementing the new learning into your teaching situation.

If you decide to take Learning Circles: Practical Applications you will have the opportunity to actually implement and test your plan in an organized way to see if it really works. This is a powerful step since it allows you to validate your thinking and even to present your plan in a convincing manner to others. It also allows the group to try something else if the Action Plan proves to be less than effective. **Turn in ONE Action Plan per group.**

Action Plan Study Guide
The *Action Plan* is the group's plan for implementing learning. Your plan will be based on your research and professional discussions. The outcome may be effective and meet the goals of the group, or it may prove to be ineffective and need modification. Either way, it is a learning situation if reflection is a part of the process.

Include as many pages as needed to complete this assignment. Make sure each of the five items/questions is addressed completely.

BOOK TITLE AND AUTHOR (And Information regarding any other research materials you used)

LEARNING CIRCLE FOCUSING QUESTION

PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING NEW LEARNING

1. Based on your reading and discussion, what specifically might you be willing to try in your teaching situation?
2. How could you best implement this new learning?
3. What additional resources/research/supplies would you need to implement your new learning?
4. What obstacles might stand in the way of you implementing your plan?
5. Upon reflection on your focusing question and after your research and discussion, is this an issue or problem that the group feels needs further thinking before implementation would be possible or effective? What are possible next steps?

Assignment #5 - End of Course Reflections

Please reflect on your Learning Circle experience, using the questions below as a guide. Your End of Course Reflections should be approximately 1 page (typed, 12-point font, double-spaced) and submitted with your coursework.

Group members must do this assignment **individually**, since each person will have experienced the course differently.

Reflection Questions

1. How was this Learning Circle successful in meeting the goals of the group? If you felt the group did not meet the goals, explain why you think this occurred.
2. What, if anything, would you change if you were to be part of a Learning Circle group again? What additional information would you have found useful related to the topic?
3. How has the book(s) and discussion changed or strengthened my professional practice? What am I doing differently?
4. How has working with a Learning Circle changed my teaching or learning? My relationship with colleagues? My relationship with students?

LEARNING CIRCLES RUBRIC

The instructor who reviews your work will use the rubric below to assign points that will determine your grade for this course. ***Please fill in the top portion of this form making sure all information is correct.***

Name: _____ ID Number: _____
Course Title_____Course Number: _____

____ TITLE PAGE

2—Includes all requested information (see syllabus)
1—Includes most information
0—Significant information is missing

____ THE FACILITATOR

4—Facilitator Worksheet is complete including meeting dates/times
2—A facilitator was chosen but records were incomplete
0—Facilitator Worksheet not included or no record of facilitator, ground rules or meeting times

____ QUESTIONS AND GOALS

4—Question relates to group goals. Goals are meaningful and clearly stated. Question and goals included in Learning Circle Journal
2—Question and/or goals are adequate but may lack focus, relevance, or value to education 0—Question and/or goals not stated

____ LEARNING CIRCLE JOURNAL

6—Journal contains an adequate number of hours, is neat and organized. Reflections are relevant to course topic
4—Journal contains most of the recommended hours, is readable and shows effort towards effective reflection
0—Journal not included, incomplete, or unreadable

____ ACTION PLAN

6—Action Plan Worksheet is complete and well-organized. Plan based on research and reflection and all questions are clearly answered.
4—Action Plan Worksheet is adequate, based on some research and reflection. Needs additional resources/organization.
0—Action Plan Worksheet incomplete or not included

____ REFLECTION ASSIGNMENTS

4—Reflection assignments show ability to accurately assess learning related to course goals and assignments
2—Reflection paper shows some awareness of learning and course goals
0—Reflection paper not included or incomplete

____ OVERALL QUALITY OF COMPLETED WORK

2—Participant follows the syllabus and presents materials professionally using correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling
1—Presentation of materials is adequate but needs more attention to grammar, punctuation, spelling and/or organization
0—Materials are difficult to read or poorly organized

____ TOTAL

Instructor Comments:

Letter Grade: A= 28 - 26 pts. B=25 - 23 pts. C=22 - 20 pts. D=19 - 17 pts**.** (P/NP only if requested in advance)

Instructor Signature: _____ Date: _____

RESOURCES

The participants and/or facilitator will choose the book(s) for professional discussion for this course. The book choice will depend on the topic to be discussed. Please contact the instructor (gmckay@umassglobal.edu) for prior approval of books/topics.

The following are a few general resources for Learning Circles/Professional Conversation groups:

Czyz, Rich. ***The Four O'Clock Faculty: A Rogue Guide to Revolutionizing Professional Development.*** (2017) DBC, Inc.

Dana, Nancy Fichman, et. at. ***Inquiry: A Districtwide Approach to Staff and Student Learning. (2011) Corwin Press***

DuFour, Richard, et al. ***Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New Insights for Improving Schools.*** (2008) Solution Tree Press

Martin, Terri L. ***Stronger Together: Answering the Questions of Collaborative Leadership.*** (2018) Solution Tree Press

Matos, Mike and Richard Dufour. ***Concise Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Professional Learning Communities at Work (TM) (Stronger Relationships for Better Education Leadership)*** (2016) Solution Tree Press

Spiller, Jeanne and Karen Power. ***Leading with Intention: Eight Areas for Reflection and Planning in Your PLC at Work.*** (2019) Solution Tree Press

Stanfield, R. Brian. ***The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace.*** (2013) New SocietyPublishers

Whitford, Mary Lou (Editor) and Diane R. Wood (Editor). ***Teachers Learning in Community: Realities and Possibilities Restructuring and School Change.*** (2010) University of New York Press, Albany

Wheatley, Margaret J. ***Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future.*** (2009) Barrett Koehler Publisher, Inc., San Francisco