

English Now!

Learning Circles

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Facilitators' Guide
to Implementation





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This guide prepares staff and volunteers to successfully facilitate blended learning circles for learners at adult education programs and libraries. The first section describes the role of the facilitator and methods and behaviors that lead to effective learning circles. The next section describes the four elements of a learning circle with sample question prompts, activity ideas, and lesson plans for both in-person and remote learning circles. You will also find a discussion about online learning and remote learning formats. For more information about learning circles, please visit the EdTech Center at World Education website: <https://edtech.worlded.org/project/english-now-learning-circles>

Goals for Facilitation

As a facilitator, your role is to guide learners to take charge of their own learning in the learning circle. You will prepare for and moderate sessions, ensuring that all participants have a voice and opportunities to work together with peers. Since digital learning may be new to some participants, you may have to focus on these skills before learners can become independent users of the online course.

Facilitation is different from teaching and it may take time and practice to develop facilitation skills. Learners, too, need to understand that this is not a class and you are not the teacher. Describe how everyone brings some expertise to the group. Let them know that they will learn more as they share and provide feedback to their peers. See the lesson plans with activities to facilitate peer learning opportunities.

Facilitators should help learners articulate their motivation for joining a learning circle and cultivate an environment in which learners can clearly see how they can achieve their desired goals. Encourage them to set realistic goals that can be accomplished in whatever period of time your learning circle meets. It could be as simple as, "make new friends" or "learn how to learn English online."

To help you accomplish this, we have included some recommendations from experienced facilitators, followed by an outline of the general flow your learning circle will follow. The following resources have been adapted from P2PU's Facilitator Handbook, with revisions to account for the learning circle approach to English language skill-building.

Characteristics of effective facilitation:

- Listening to learners
- Asking clarifying questions
- Providing constructive feedback to encourage a growth mindset
- Keeping discussions on task

- Probing assumptions and evidence
- Eliciting viewpoints and perspectives from all learners
- Mediating conflicts
- Summarizing and presenting findings
- Building peer support during face-to-face meetings and, if possible, through online interaction of participants between meetings
- Building in leadership opportunities

Building rapport within the learning circle is essential. Some examples for encouraging social cohesion include the following:

- In the first two meetings, having an activity where people learn and practice using each other's names (see *Sample Weekly Session Plans #1 and #2* in Resources)
- Choosing a group name
- Establishing classroom norms and rituals
- Building an environment where mistakes are seen as learning moments rather than something to fear
- Encouraging the use of an online chat tool (such as Facebook, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or something else) to keep the group connected between sessions
- Shared emotional connections serve the dual purpose of helping individuals learn and reinforcing community. Watch for questions or conversations that cause the group to lose focus and try to steer the conversations back on track. Other participants will greatly appreciate this.

Independent Learners & Leadership

Facilitators have a unique role in a learning circle. Participants are driving their own learning, and you are there to guide them using the flexible learning circle framework. Each part of the learning circle allows for opportunities for learners to reflect on their learning. Encourage learners to share their reflections and build awareness among the group about learning to learn. Set aside time for learners to share about the learning they do in the online course outside of the group session. As learners describe their own learning choices and listen to their peers, they will develop **self-efficacy** as learners.

Facilitators seek learner contributions and suggestions while also ensuring that decisions are made and the group moves forward. The consistent format of the learning circle provides a level of safety where learners know what to expect and can take risks. Ensure that everyone participates. Create an environment where learners look to each other for answers rather than relying on the facilitator. Facilitators can model their thought process when they learn something new and encourage participants to do the same. Encourage participants to adopt a **growth mindset**: the belief that through hard work and persistence one can continually develop skills and abilities.

A facilitator makes their own role smaller over time. As the learning circle progresses, the facilitator can offer learners leadership roles such as:

- Welcoming newcomers
- Leading the check-in time
- Sending a wrap-up email afterwards reflecting on the week's meeting
- Summarizing or highlighting what they learned from the week's online activities and material
- Acting as the vocabulary recorder
- Monitoring the Zoom waiting room
- Sharing a resource or article that relates to the course content

Before the Learning Circle Begins:

- Meet with your Site Coordinator to obtain more information about how learning circles work. Read the World Education blog [8 Tips for Implementing Learning Circles in Any Program](#). Choose a startup date, time, and location with the Site Coordinator that works best for all involved.
- Confirm that your organization is either providing the necessary supplies and computer equipment, or check that participants have what they need for the learning circle. See the list of supplies in the Space, Equipment and Supplies section.
- After meeting with the Site Coordinator, familiarize yourself with the online learning tool or app your organization has chosen. Create a practice learner account on the platform so you can see what the learners will be using. If there is a teacher account with a dashboard, you can sign up for that so you can see learners' usage and progress reports. And, if your organization uses a Learning Management System (LMS), be sure you understand it and can onboard learners to it. See more in the online courses section below. Use the Onboarding resources on the [EdTech Center mLearning](#) website.

Once content and logistics have been established, facilitators take the lead to communicate ahead of time with learners.

- If participants will be using a smartphone for learning during the learning circle;
 - Let them know that they will be using their internet service provider account data (unless the app allows them to download and use lessons offline).
 - Record the type of phone they have—Android or (iOS) Apple so you can prepare onboarding materials for them.
- Confirm attendance with all applicants. Be sure your organization gives you the list of learner names and contact information. If learners have already agreed to use WhatsApp or Remind, contact them via that communications tool.

Before Each Learning Circle Session

- Send a reminder email or Remind/WhatsApp message.
- Explore the online course material. Prepare check-in questions or activities that tie in with the new materials and learner interests and goals. See if there are parts of the upcoming course that lend themselves to peer work or group activities.
- Review and customize the Weekly Planning Template for the next lesson.

During Each Learning Circle Session

The English Now! weekly session framework divides each learning circle session into four components that combine an online course and face-to-face session activities. In this document, we have provided examples of activities you can choose from and adapt for English language learning circles. In addition to this framework, there are five weekly session plans, a sample lesson plan template, and five remote lesson plans in the Resources section. These are the four basic components of a learning circle:



1. Check In

The check in serves to build community within the group and lay the foundation for that day's learning activities. It is a good idea to review what you did in the last session, providing some repetition and practice for the newly learned language, and also using this as a time for learners to engage with each other. Below are some small group warm-up activities that build rapport and prepare for the learning they will be doing during the session.

Conversation Options (Do in pairs, small or whole group. Note the answer prompts for lower level learners who are still learning these structures.) If in a remote setting, consider using breakout rooms.

Updates

How are you?

I am... (e.g., tired)

What's new?

I went... (e.g., to see an English movie)

Review

What are you studying?

I am studying... (e.g., past tense, health vocabulary)

What did you learn last week?

I learned... (e.g., a new word for sick)



Everyday English

Are you using any new English? Do you have examples?

- *When I speak... (e.g., can use the past tense now)*
- *I spoke with... (e.g., my neighbor)*

Questions

Do you have any questions (from the last meeting or from outside class)?

- *I want to learn how to... (e.g., call in sick)*
- *I need help with/on... (e.g., my pronunciation)*

Tap Prior Knowledge and Pre-Teach

Before ending this warm-up and moving to the online course, help learners get ready for the content and skills to be covered. Discuss what unit or lesson learners plan to study and guide them in conversation about what they already know about the topic. Use a KWL visual to draw out what learners know (K), want to know (W), and what they learned (L). Have them predict what the unit will include and use that information to introduce background information learners need to know about a topic including key vocabulary.

2. Online Learning

Online learning on an effective learning platform, such as ones we have listed in the Online Content Resources document, one your program has purchased, or others that perhaps your state approves and provides free access to, can supply much of the educational content of the learning circle. Whether your learning circle meets in an in-person or remote learning environment, online learning enables participants to work at their own pace. Online learning can also offer an opportunity for the facilitator and participants to customize content to learners' interests and proficiency in English. Work with your program and learners to decide what online content to use.

Digital Literacy Proficiency

For participants to maximize their learning online, they need proficient digital literacy skills. Participants will be using digital tools for work, education, or daily tasks, and the learning circle is a good opportunity to practice using them. You will likely have learners with varying digital skills, some of whom will need help learning how to enter a username and password while others may be ready to jump onto a course. It is helpful to have another facilitator in the room (in-person or remote) during the first few weeks, to assist learners. In the Resources section, you will find a program-made Sample Welcome Packet for learners which includes a place for learners to record their credentials for their online learning platform. Adapt the packet to your learning circles. Also note that there are resources for teaching and learning about various digital skills in the [Digital Learn](#) and the [Digital US Resource Hub](#).

Independent Online Learning

Independent online learning refers to learners working independently through self-paced courses. This can happen during the learning circle meeting, outside the session, or ideally in both. Many facilitators build in 20-30 minutes of independent online learning so that participants build the skills and are ready to learn online independent of the supportive learning circle.

Collaborative Online Learning

Encourage conversation and peer learning by suggesting learners work collaboratively on at least one portion of the course. Example of cooperative learning include:

- Asking each other questions about vocabulary, phrases, grammar, or pronunciation
- Viewing, summarizing, and discussing a video or reading
- Doing short tasks related to content (creating a short skit to act out for the group)
- Challenging each other to timed games
- Asking for technology help from a partner

Remote Learning Formats

Remote learning refers to classes where participants do not gather in person but instead use their smartphone or a computer, and connect through an online video conferencing platform such as Zoom. If your program chooses a remote learning circle, as the facilitator you can assess whether your group of learners are ready to work on online coursework independently or if they need to develop digital literacy skills first.



If necessary, facilitators can use the first few classes in a remote learning circle to teach some of the essential digital skills learners will need in order to participate fully in online learning. See our five EN! Virtual Lesson Plans including the first one about learning to use Zoom. Many of those activities could be done over several weeks until learners have become comfortable and fluent in using the online tools.

Facilitators in English Now! learning circles have approached online learning in remote classrooms in many different and creative ways. If you are doing remote learning, choose what works best for you and your learners. Here are a few of the formats:

- 1. Facilitator Led:** The facilitator shares the online content with the group via Zoom or another video conferencing tool. This works well when a majority of the class is using a mobile phone for learning and is unsure how to toggle between open sites. You can get learner reactions and promote conversation, at the same time demonstrating how to move through the course. Facilitators can encourage learners to independently access the course over time.
- 2. Online learning during meeting time:** In this format, participants check in to the learning circle via WhatsApp or another familiar communication tool. The facilitator posts the assigned online work and the Zoom link. Learners then meet on Zoom to check-in before they move on to an online learning platform for an agreed upon length of time. If they leave Zoom open, they can check in with the facilitator while on the learning platform. The whole group comes back to Zoom following the online work for group activities. This method works well for a small group who are comfortable using smartphones and toggling between several open sites on their phones, tablets, or computers. The independent online learning during class builds confidence and encourages online learning outside of the learning circle.
- 3. Flipped Classroom:** In this framework, learners complete all of the coursework outside of the learning circle meeting. During the meeting, the facilitator follows the learning circle structure with a check-in, group activities, and a wrap-up. The group activities may happen in breakout rooms where learners can talk about what they learned, ask questions of each other, and apply their learning in conversation and writing activities. Generally, programs enroll learners who have the appropriate level of digital literacy for this type of learning circle. Please see the blog, "[Learning Circles Thrive in Remote Classrooms](#)" for more.

With each of these formats, there is an opportunity to expand participants' learning. You can model how to develop questions and how to evaluate the online course or app. You can ask them to write or speak about questions they had before the session, or an activity, and those they have afterwards. Please see [Six Tips for Hosting Virtual English Now! Learning Circles – The Well](#).

3. Group Activities

Here are some examples of using face-to-face activities to support online coursework or English language learning activities. For remote learning circles, many of these can be adapted to group work in the main room and pair or small group work in breakout rooms. If possible, plan for ways learners in all activities can work together collaboratively on a task. Remind them that this kind of activity is a good way to practice their communication skills and apply what they are learning online.

Listening

Listening carefully—Ask learners to share what they watched or listened to. For deeper practice, do a structured exercise where the listener restates or summarizes what the first person said, and the third person asks clarifying questions. Or, for an activity that is separate from the online learning, share a discussion prompt and follow the same format for structured listening practice. After learners have done this a few times, it will become more natural and they may take more risks in expressing themselves in more detail.

Speaking

Summarizing—After learners have viewed a short video, ask them to give a brief presentation or role play the topic covered. Have them work together to prepare what each will say, practice, and then share with the larger group.

Filling in the blanks—Show the group an image related to the course and discuss what it means to them. You can present the image with a sentence starter like: *This photo makes me feel _____* or *This reminds me of _____*. Have learners work in pairs for a few minutes. Call out, “Switch speakers!” so both partners have a chance to talk. Then ask the pairs to present to the class.

Feedback—Explain the term “feedback.” Have them discuss the phrase below. Discuss what kind of feedback is the most/least helpful. Then in pairs, have students fill in the sentence and talk about who has given them feedback and how it helped them improve their English.

_____ helped me to improve _____.

Examples:

My neighbor helped me to improve my pronunciation.

My partner helped me to improve how I write.

Reading

Read the text (from online course or elsewhere) collaboratively. Begin with asking the group to predict what the main idea of the reading is based on the title or image. For beginning readers, read aloud or play audio of the reading. Then ask partners to read the text aloud to each other. Make sure partners leave time for the other partner to read. Encourage partners to stop and predict the conclusion, especially if it is a story, and ask questions about parts of the reading they did not understand. Last, come back to the larger group and discuss the reading. For more guidance about reading circles, try *Oxford Bookworms Club Reading Circles*. Their website describes the different roles learners can take on such as the Discussion leader, the Summarizer, the Connector, the Word Master, etc. (See Online Course Content Resources in *Resources* for reading websites.)

Writing

Ask learners to work together on a writing assignment that relates to the course or another relevant topic of interest to the group (e.g., a summary, a description of how they can use what they are learning, or a research topic all agree on). Have other group members read

it, ask clarifying questions, and give positive feedback to the writer. Then discuss how their pieces are similar or different. One learning circle put together a book of learners' writing about famous women in history on parchment paper, giving it a vintage look.

Take a poll. In small groups, have learners come up with questions related to what they are learning to ask the other members of the group. Each group should come up with two to three questions that have a simple answer, such as: yes/no or always/sometimes/never. Make sure they include themselves and their group in the poll to represent the whole learning circle. Give them time to go around, ask, and record the answers to their questions. Or use Google Forms or Polls on Zoom for online learning. The groups can then compile their results and present their findings to the group in graphic representations, like a bar graph, or using numbers. Be sure all group members have a role in each part of the process.

Co-create flash cards. Have partners write down newly learned words and work together to come up with synonyms to write on the other side, going online if possible to find them. See Online Content Resources in the Appendix for an online dictionary or thesaurus. Also, consider using Quizlet, where learners can make their own flashcards. A third option is that you can create a class on Quizlet and make flashcards for everyone to use. (The site charges about \$36/year for a teacher account.)

Use built-in mobile smartphone apps. Create relevant, fun activities with learners using built-in smart phone features such as Voice Memos, photos, maps, text messaging, calendar, and email etc. to build digital, language, and workplace skills.

4. Wrap Up

With the whole group, use the last minutes of each session to close the session, reinforce learning, and see how the learning circle is proceeding. Be open to plus/deltas, ideas for what they want to continue working on, and ideas for improving. Try to get everybody to contribute something. Here are some options for wrap-up questions:

- What did you learn today? (e.g., words, phrases, other)
- What surprised you today? Why?
- Say one word about today's class.
- What would you like to work on in the future?
- Complete the App or Online Learning Reflection Sheet to set a learning intention for the week

Encourage partners to talk on the phone, email, text, use WhatsApp, or Skype between sessions.

After Each Learning Circle

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

- Enter attendance if you are keeping these records.
- Send a short summary email, WhatsApp message, or text to all the learners.

Learning Circle Closure

At the last learning circle session of the cycle, you may want to do a Learner Group Survey to gather feedback from participants. Encourage learners to help each other to understand the questions, but remind them to contribute their own opinions and ideas. This is one more step in building a growth mindset with learners. If meeting remotely, perhaps breakout rooms would serve to generate more ideas and participation. Call on everyone and give them time to respond. Post-testing can occur at the next-to-last or last session as well. Consider distributing certificates to those who completed the learning circle. This is also an opportunity to discuss their educational next steps.