



# Transforming Immigrant Digital Equity: Effective Strategies for Learning

## Virtual Learning Circle Model

“What the learning circle model provides is twofold; flexibility around barriers and a reconstruction of “expert”. More student choice and voice exists in this model, giving students the skills to assert themselves in community, education, and work settings.”

–**Bonnie Taylor**, Education Director of Day Programs at [Genesis Center](#) (Providence, RI)<sup>1</sup>

### What are learning circles?

The learning circle model combines independent learning with group sessions that foster peer learning. Learning circles intentionally create supportive communities in which English language learners (ELLs) can build their digital literacy skills, become comfortable learning online, and develop their self-efficacy and learning strategies as lifelong learners.<sup>2</sup> World Education has been piloting and developing a successful learning circle model for ELLs over the past several years through its [English Now!](#) project.

Learning circle participants meet weekly for group sessions, which are guided by a facilitator. Each session starts with check-in activities, then learners work – either individually or with peers – through their online coursework. Afterwards, participants regroup to discuss the content, participate in other learning activities, and reflect during the final wrap-up. With the guidance of the facilitator, learners build group cohesion, a growth mindset, and leadership skills during each session.<sup>3</sup>

The graphic below shows four ways programs have implemented the learning circle model in virtual settings:

### Virtual Learning Circle Formats

#### Option 1: Independent learning outside of class

Learners work on their own between sessions – flipped classroom approach

#### Option 2: Independent learning during the session

Learners use USA Learns or Burlington English during the session



#### Option 3: Facilitator shares own content

Peer sharing and learning elements incorporated into lesson design

#### Option 4: Facilitator shares publisher content

Facilitator shares screen with resource content ensuring that those on phones can participate

## How do virtual learning circles tie into a remote ESOL ecosystem that centers digital equity?

Virtual learning circles increase access to ESOL instruction by addressing multiple common barriers to learning, including personal schedules, transportation, and childcare.<sup>3</sup> The model also provides programs with a “low-touch,” low-cost way of serving learners beyond the capacity of a program’s regular and/or intensive classes, with the additional benefit of readying the learners for possible future enrollment.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, learners build their digital skills and digital resilience - that is, the awareness, skills, agility, and confidence to be empowered users of new technologies and adapt to changing digital skill demands.<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming majority of adult learners fall into one or more of the “covered populations” categories under the [Digital Equity Act](#), including individuals with a language barrier, individuals at or below 150% of the federal poverty level, and individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority. Virtual learning circles can play a critical role within a larger remote ESOL ecosystem by pairing ESOL instruction and digital literacy for learners who are unable to commit to higher-intensity classes.

## What kinds of learners benefit from virtual learning circles?

Learners who cannot commit to time-intensive or in-person classes, as well as learners on a program’s waiting list, are ideal for the virtual learning circle model. Learning circle participants should also be willing to engage in peer learning, community building, and leadership development activities in addition to independent learning.<sup>3</sup>

Learners who prefer a traditional classroom experience with a teacher (as opposed to a facilitator) may not be the best fit for a learning circle. In addition, depending on the level of support the program is able to provide, learners who do not have sufficient digital literacy skills or access to technology and/or internet may not be able to fully participate.

## Are virtual learning circles right for your program?

	Benefits	Challenges
For Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Center learner voice and choice</li> <li>▶ Learners build digital literacy, academic, and leadership skills</li> <li>▶ Learners participate in a supportive community of peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Learners need digital literacy skills and consistent access to technology and internet</li> </ul>
For Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Serve learners who cannot attend regular or time-intensive classes</li> <li>▶ Serve learners on waiting lists</li> <li>▶ Build a cohort of learners who are ready to engage</li> <li>▶ Build learner interest in and skills for remote learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Teachers need time and practice to become successful facilitators</li> <li>▶ Need to orient learners to remote learning platform(s) and resources</li> <li>▶ Need to invest in remote learning platforms</li> </ul>

Programs who are interested in further exploring the virtual learning circle model can refer to the [English Now! Implementation guide](#). English Now! has been generously supported by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation for several years.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> World Education. (2022, March 21). *Learning Together, Online – Highlights from English Now! Learning Circles*.  
<https://worlded.org/learning-together-online-highlights-from-english-now-learning-circles>
- <sup>2</sup> World Education. (n.d.). *English Now! Learning Circles*.  
<https://worlded.org/project/english-now-learning-circles-phase-3>
- <sup>3</sup> World Education. (n.d.). *English Now! Implementation Guide*. EdTech Center @ World Education.  
<https://edtech.worlded.org/english-now>
- <sup>4</sup> Digital US. (2020). *Building a Digitally Resilient Workforce: Creating On-Ramps to Opportunity*.  
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## About Transforming Immigrant Digital Equity (TIDE)

To create a transparent, efficient, and effective adult ESOL ecosystem, there is a pressing imperative to incentivize and educate national, state, and local policymakers, institutional decision-makers, and advocates for reform in immigration, workforce development, and digital infrastructure policy. The ESOL ecosystem must further build out existing services with remote learning complements and ensure immigrants and refugees are made aware of tech-enabled ESOL opportunities and be supported to access and participate successfully in them.

[Transforming Immigrant Digital Equity \(TIDE\)](#), which builds upon the findings of the [Remote ESOL Project](#), will dramatically expand access to ESOL learning and related immigrant integration supports for immigrants and refugees through scalable, sustainable program models and services that optimize the use of technology. It will also educate service providers and policymakers at three tiers of the ecosystem: effective practice, effective advocacy, and replicable local models. This project is generously supported by an anonymous funder.



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