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Adopting learning circle approaches to equip academic staff for community engaged research and learning practices

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Abstract

The purpose is to explore the potential of Learning Circle (LC) approaches with an aim of equipping academic staff for Community Engaged Research and Learning (CERL) practices. We draw on the experiences from a three-year Erasmus+ project, CIRCLET. It aimed to meet the demand to better align higher education with the needs of the rapidly changing 21st century society, by enhancing the professional development of academic staff and fostering a culture of engagement. The article presents a case study-based argument that the LC – as a community of practice approach – is an effective instrument for, and has the potential to tackle, many of the challenges of professional development. We draw on a combined method, building case studies from post-interviews, personal notes and observations. We present four different cases, and offer suggestions for how LCs created a safe space, thus enabling learning at different levels which supported academics to build CERL into curricula.

Keywords: *Learning circle; community engaged research and learning; science shop; community of practice; professional development.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the potential of Learning Circle (LC) approaches to equip and support academic staff in their professional development for Community Engaged Research and Learning (CERL) practices. Research indicates that CERL activities are capable of benefiting teachers, community partners and students (Moriau et al., 2022). However, studies also highlight that academic staff do not always feel equipped to properly design and support such practices, stressing the need for (continued or more appropriate) professionalisation opportunities (Boland, 2014). In recent years, LC approaches have emerged as a promising solution for supporting academic professionalisation. LCs provide a safe and supportive environment for academic staff to reflect on their practices, share their experiences, and engage in ongoing learning. Through regular meetings and activities, participants in a LC can build a supportive network of peers and engage in meaningful dialogue and reflection on their teaching and research practices. In this article, we will explore both strengths and points of attention for adopting LC methodologies with an aim of supporting quality implementation of engaged research and learning in academic curricula.

Our research is rooted in CIRCLET (Curriculum Innovation through Research with Communities: Learning circles of Educators and Technology), a three-year, five partner Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project that ended in 2022. It aimed to enhance the professional development of lecturers for CERL via facilitated participatory peer learning processes with the contributions of various stakeholders – community partners, CERL brokers and support staff, students, educational development staff, university management and involved 104 academic participants.

This paper is organised in three more parts. In the next chapter we introduce the concepts discussed, including CERL, LC and professional development. It is followed by our research methodology and we elaborate on four cases, describing the adopted approach and its impact on the professional development of the participating lecturers.

2. Theoretical Background

In this chapter we provide conceptual foundation for both CERL and LCs and provide a picture on contemporary issues and trends regarding professional development of academic staff.

2.1. Conceptualising Community Engaged Research and Learning

CERL aligns with a socio-constructivist methodology (see e.g. Palincsar, 1998), which supports learners to co-create knowledge. Our approach draws on constructivism, experiential learning and critical pedagogies. The relationship between these has been explored by Tassone et al. (2018). According to Boland (2014) these “approaches to teaching

and learning share an explicit civic focus and combine the features of experiential learning with opportunities for engagement” (p. 180). In CERL students and lecturers are working with community partners on collaboratively-designed, real-life projects, for mutual benefit, embedded in the curriculum (McKenna, 2022). Community partners can have a wide variety of formats from Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), charities, non-profits, via social enterprises, social cooperatives, statutory bodies, schools, to other communities (Bates et al., 2022).

CERL intertwines the three missions of higher education institutions: Teaching/Learning, Research, and Engagement. It is often supported by Science Shops, which are often university-based units (Fokkink & Mulder, 2004) providing responses to questions of communities and civil society organisations through research and learning. Although operations and formats of Science Shops vary, their community “demand driven and bottom-up approach” (Steinhaus, 2014, p. 72) are common characteristics.

2.2. Contemporary Trends Regarding Professional Development of Academic Staff

The key question underpinning this study is how obstacles to professional development of academic staff can be tackled by the adoption of LC approaches. Professional development activities are often seen as an effective means of encouraging academics to alter their teaching practice. Conventionally, the aim of professional development activities has been to provide them with new knowledge, building on the assumption that this will act to alter their beliefs, which in turn will motivate them to rethink their classroom practices. Yet, studies indicate that teachers’ beliefs are resilient, and as Guskey (2002) argues, most often beliefs only change after lecturers themselves have experienced the effectiveness of an alternative practice through improved student outcomes.

Xethakis (2019, p. 46) states that “for any proposed change or reform to be effective and take hold in the classroom, teachers themselves have to buy into the proposals, change their way of thinking about teaching and adopt new classroom practices themselves”, calling for models of professional development that allow teachers to take a more active role in their professional development. More impactful professionalisation initiatives, according to Drijs-Esser and Stark (2015), demand a shift in agency – a move “away from programs that focus on creating change in teachers” to activities that focus on “providing opportunities for active engagement, influencing teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and to reflect on their practice” (Drijs-Esser & Stark, 2015, p. 1). Building on these observations, one might argue that a different conception of professional development is needed. One in which lecturers themselves generate the kind of knowledge that can aid them in altering their beliefs and adopting new practices in order to achieve the successful implementation of reforms and curriculum changes.

2.3. Conceptualising Learning Circles as Community of Practice (CoP)

Our study builds on a LC approach. LCs are small gatherings of people who meet to study a subject of interest to its members. LC members share their knowledge and experience, learn to apply and test new information, skills, methods and ideas. The goal of LCs is to support participants to develop new practices or action plans they can take back to their working contexts. For the purpose of this study, we will frame LCs as a Community of Practice (CoP). A CoP promotes collaboration and relationship-building among its members, leading to a sense of belonging and support (Wenger et al., 2002).

It could be argued that LC approaches offer a flexible, relevant, and sustainable alternative to traditional training initiatives aiming to inspire academic development of university lecturers and researchers. By being participant-driven, LCs ensure that the content covered is relevant and responsive to the needs of academic staff, resulting in a more personalised and effective learning experience. The peer-to-peer nature of LCs helps to ensure their sustainability over time, as participants are able to continue learning and sharing with each other beyond the formal learning event. LCs promote collaboration and relationship-building among participants, leading to a sense of community and support.

3. Research Method

This qualitative research applies a case study method to show the practical relevance, and the diverse applicability of the approach applied in CIRCLET. It builds on the works of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1994) for whom the main goal of the case study methodology was to build a theory. This aim has been slightly revised as building and showing viable and inspiring practices with useful implications both to theory and practice. According to Yin (1994) case studies investigate a contemporary phenomenon – in this case: CERL, supported by the LCs – within its real-life context, “especially when the border line between the examined phenomenon and context cannot be drawn clearly, therefore there is an opportunity for a deeper analysis of contextual factors” (p. 13).

A combined method was used to select cases with a goal of finding confirming, and theoretically supported ‘typical’ cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28.), while also showing challenges and opportunities. Of the five universities participating in the project, four adopted similar approaches and these were selected as cases to include for analysis. Due to a very different local context, the fifth university chose an alternative LC aim, process and structure which is not discussed in this paper. Following Yin (1994) the research relied on data from several sources such as LC plans and facilitation guides, interviews with facilitators, reflective journals of participants in the LC process (including participant lecturers and facilitators), and participant observation from other contributors, all of these inputs are coming from different angles for triangulation reasons.

4. Findings and Discussion

The LC processes were collaboratively designed across the four cases and consisted of a series of whole group workshops interfused with small group discussions. Since LCs are driven by the needs and expectations of the participants to a large extent, the shared basic design resulted in local variations based on local considerations. Table 1 introduces the key aspects of LC cases in a summative and comparative manner. Besides enumerating the considerations in setting up and running an LC, the table also provides insights on the similarities and differences of local LCs. The Shared/Varied column gives an overview of the cases from this respect.

Table 1 also describes foci of participants' diversity, a key element for encouraging peer discussions and learning on CERL approaches which inherently build on diverse voices. LCs were designed to make space to incorporate the various experiences of participants and to integrate the areas of expertise of the lecturers, to give them the opportunity to showcase and develop their strengths (e.g., their expertise in their field of research and teaching; their experience of being engaged with community partners outside of work, etc.). Key LC elements included implementing experiential learning cycles, identifying learning styles (see Kolb & Kolb, 2005, Manolis et al., 2013), and using reflection tools supporting reflection by lecturers as well as learning about reflection in a way to support student reflection in CERL projects (Matolay & Frigyik, 2022).

Our data offers insights into the experiences of participants in the CIRCLET project. Participants highlighted the feeling of being part of a safe and supportive group and the ways in which this served as a foundation for awareness raising and learning necessary to build CERL projects into curricula. They appreciated meeting "*people who are like minded*". This sense of being part of a community created commitment towards the group, its members and to support each other's learning by sharing their own experiences.

In addition, they highlighted that their experiences in the LC created the condition not only to reflect on their teaching practices, but to discover their blind spots, those values, beliefs that may limit their learning new ways of teaching for CERL: "*It was quite unexpected to see how similarly we reacted when ... told us about the communication of one of her projects. It was uplifting to see that academics all around Europe face the same challenges and struggle with mental blocks that stop us from doing something in a new way*".

Participants learned teaching techniques to support CERL, that may be put into practice immediately. This gave a sense of learning about changing their teaching practices but does not necessarily reflect a readiness for more in-depth changes. The first step towards in-depth changes were made by increasing awareness on their teaching practice through a better understanding of CERL: "*Community partner speakers ... allow for deeper discussion of the topics, how to do things better, what to keep, what lose and how to develop further*".

Participants learned from each other, so next to relevant content and techniques, they also learned how to get in meaningful contact with each other, and with other relevant stakeholders, the community partners and students: *“I particularly found useful hearing the feedback of a student who took part in a CERL course and [of] a community partner.”*

Table 1. Learning Circles: Design Considerations and Variations for Embedding CERL.

Aspects of LCs	Description of Aspect	Shared, Varied	Explanation of Similarities/Differences
Key foundations of Learning Circles for CERL			
Goal	Professional development of lecturers to embed community engagement into existing courses	Shared	All LC processes were set up with the shared goal of promoting CERL via engaging and upskilling lecturers. Focus was on already existing courses with the potential to experience transformation for CERL and to prevent obstacles of major changes of – e.g. launching new courses in – curricula
Format	Facilitated peer learning	Shared	LC design for learning with and from each other with the potential to build a CoP, facilitated by CERL experts/support team
Other	Reflection	Shared, Varied	Reflection by lecturers and equipping lecturers to support student reflection were central to all LC, various tools and activities applied though
Learning Circle Participants			
Numbers	5-12 lecturers per LC	Varied	The general aim was 6-10 persons, this varied due to differences in numbers of local applications
Diversity	experience - in teaching - in CERL - disciplines	Shared	A key aim – reinforced in the call for and selection of participants – was to create diverse groups within the LCs to allow for peer learning
Learning Circle Process and Structure			
Length	1 or 2 semesters	Varied	Building on CERL principles, the 1st was designed and decided collaboratively, the 2nd was customised by feedback/needs of local participants and facilitators
1st semester process	3+3	Shared	3 large group sessions of 2-3 hours + each followed by 1-hour small group sessions
2nd semester processes	- Same as in 1st semester - Check-in and show & tell sessions - Indiv. check-ins	Varied	Based on CERL principles, considerable variation – where appropriate to local context, facilitators worked one-to-one with academics or continued with full LCs and/or small groups
Access	Online, in-person, both	Varied	Online due to local characteristics (e.g. distances between campuses) and to COVID. In-person options offered where possible

Source: Compiled based on data collection for cases and Matolay & Frigiyk (2022).

The stress and time pressures of academic life impacted the CIRCLET project, resulting in participants not being present physically or emotionally, not having time to read and prepare, or to share and fully support peer learning. This generated further negative feelings, an

internal conflict: “sadly I had to miss some, but that is not a reflection on my peers but me as a member”. Lack of time may limit the desired learning and change too: “interesting conversations, but the benefits are not always that visible or plausible (maybe need more time to mature)”, “It was an excellent source of learning, exchange of ideas and experiences!” The LC community could be a source of inspiration and practical learning, with experiences and impacts on a spectrum from limited reflection to in-depth changes related to the lecturers’ identity and/or teaching practice.

5. Practical and Theoretical Implications

In conclusion, LCs offer important vehicles for professional development of academic staff in the context of CERL. CERL is acknowledged as a challenging pedagogy to implement, and the opportunity for peer-learning, self-reflection and sharing of experience offered by the LC approach was evaluated as successful by project facilitators and participants, notwithstanding the time pressures that many experienced. Participants particularly valued hearing the experiences of others who had undertaken CERL projects, including students, community partners and other lecturers, and valued the role of the facilitators in supporting relationship-building with community partners. Whilst participants acknowledged the challenges for workload in implementing CERL, many have gone on to extend and deepen their CERL practices. Through CIRCLET, 53 modules were redesigned and over 3,000 students participated in CERL projects.

LCs were seen as safe and inspiring learning spaces, where a sense of belonging was created, and peer learning was possible. The diversity of participants and the experience sharing by/with different stakeholders led to a better understanding of CERL, increased awareness on their own teaching practice and changes needed. The latter requires sustained effort from the individual even after the LC: learning in LCs serves as foundation, and the relationships may continue to fuel peer learning, even against the experienced time and workload pressure.

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