



LEARNING CIRCLES
IN LIBRARIES

FACILITATING LEARNING CIRCLES

Facilitator Handbook

Part 4: Virtual Learning Circles

Co-funded by the
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Introduction

This Facilitator Handbook was developed as part of the Learning Circles in Libraries project, oriented at making adult learning more organized, interactive and fun. The purpose of this handbook is to help facilitators understand how people acquire knowledge through self-learning, as well as how they learn from others, so that they could subsequently train facilitators in running their own Learning Circles. This manual will guide you at every step of the process.

Facilitating Learning Circles - Facilitator Handbook is composed of 4 parts. You are currently reading Part 4 which focuses on running Learning Circles online. It was created in collaboration with volunteer P2PU community members around the world. Over six weeks, we met in working groups to discuss emerging practices, explore effective strategies for virtual learning circles, and support one another through challenging times. Thanks to everyone participating in these calls! We couldn't have done it without you. All materials in this guide are licensed for reuse under a Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 license.

Part 1: Learning About the Learning Circles of this Facilitator Handbook brings the concept of learning circles closer through a complete course, designed as a learning circle. *Part 2: Self-Learning* focuses on the concept of self-learning and *Part 3: Facilitating Learning Circles* explores how to best facilitate Learning Circles.

The Learning Circles in Libraries project is a collaboration of 6 institutions: Information Society Development Foundation (Poland), Stadtbibliothek Köln (Germany), Suomen eOppimiskeskus ry (Finland), Biblioteca Lúcio Craveiro da Silva (Portugal), Fundatia Progress (Romania) and Peer 2 Peer University (USA). It is implemented as part of the Erasmus+ program, administered by the European Commission.

How to use this book

We've structured this document in four sections: I) a series of case studies detailing how facilitators ran virtual learning circles in early 2020; II) the major checkpoints of setting up and running a learning circle; III) an exploration of low-bandwidth ways to run distributing learning circles; and IV) everything else that didn't fit.

Virtual Learning Circles

Hello! We created this handbook to support those exploring accessible adult education in a time where traditional resources are limited. This guide focuses specifically on learning circles, a free in-person community-based learning method, and draws from practices and experiments that have emerged from the P2PU community during this unprecedented time.

Learning what?

A **learning circle** is a group of people who gather to learn something together. Each learning circle typically has:

- A facilitator who need not be an expert in the subject
- A free online course or other accessible learning resource
- A group of learners who meet regularly (usually weekly for 6-8 weeks)
- A dedicated meeting room (usually at a public space such as a library, or community center; but recently online!)

This handbook is a supplement to existing resources for getting started with running learning circles—if this is your first time encountering this method, make sure to check out the [Learning about Learning Circles](#) online course and the [Facilitator Resources page](#) for a comprehensive overview.

P2PWho?

[Peer 2 Peer University](#) (aka P2PU) is a non-profit organization and global community dedicated to creating equitable, empowering, and liberating alternatives to mainstream higher education. We work towards this vision by creating and sustaining learning circle communities in public spaces around the world. [Learn more about us.](#)

About This Document



This handbook was made in collaboration with volunteer P2PU community members around the world. Over six weeks, we met in working groups to discuss emerging practices, explore effective strategies for virtual learning circles, and support one another through challenging times. Thanks to everyone participating in these calls! We couldn't have done it without you. All materials in this guide are licensed for reuse under a **Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 license**.

Add Your Voice (Please!)

This handbook is an evolving resource. The experiences shared within these pages are invaluable and we welcome yours: please add comments and suggestions wherever you can.

We also invite you to browse and contribute to our [online forum](#), an indispensable resource maintained by librarians, educators, and organizers around the world. (p.s. There's an entire section on [COVID-19 Support!](#)) We also host [monthly public](#) community calls to offer support and opportunities for discussion for those interested in or running learning circles.

Facilitator Case Studies

To get an idea of what online learning circles look like in practice, we have created case studies of some early programs run by facilitators worldwide.

Sébastien

BosLabs (Boston, MA, USA)

Sébastien facilitated an engaging virtual 3-week learning circle using FutureLearn's online course about COVID-19. [Read the full case study.](#)

Topic: COVID-19: Tackling the Novel Coronavirus ([Facilitator Guide](#))

Participants: 9

Learning Format: Videos, independent exercises, group discussions Meeting Method: Jitsi video and Etherpad notes

Unique Qualities: Good use of breakout rooms for small group activities.

Nicole

Stadtbibliothek Köln (Cologne, Germany)

Nicole ran a learning circle pilot with her colleagues to understand planning and running effective online study groups. [Read the full case study.](#)

Topic: Work/Life Balance

Participants: 6 (library colleagues)

Learning Format: Videos, independent exercises, group discussions **Meeting Method:** Zoom video

Barbara

Los Angeles Public Library (Los Angeles, CA, USA)

Barbara transitioned her active language learning circle to a weekly phone conference to support varying access to digital devices. [Read the full case study.](#)

Topic: Learn Latin American Spanish

Participants: 5

Learning Format: Audio

Meeting Method: Phone (Zoom/Dial-In)

Matthew and Zamira

Saint Paul Public Library (St. Paul, MN, USA)

Matthew and Zamira adapted in-person learning circle curriculum to virtual meetings while considering limited tech access and digital literacy. [Read the full case study.](#)

Topic: Job Skills ([Facilitator Guide](#))

Participants: 2-3

Learning Format: Video, group discussions, group activities

Meeting Method: Jitsi

Grif

Peer 2 Peer University (Cambridge, MA, USA)

Grif facilitated a learning circle for 19 librarians and educators from eight countries. Over five meetings, they worked through P2PU's learning circle facilitation course, adapting many of the activities to a virtual setting. [Read the full case study.](#)

Topic: Learning about Learning Circles

Participants: 19

Learning Format: Group discussion and breakout activities

Meeting Method: Jitsi and Etherpad ([see shared Etherpad](#))

The Learning Circles Process

Set Your Intent

Whether in-person or online, learning circles are rooted in P2PU's [three core values](#): community, peer learning, and equity. As you work through this handbook, it's useful to keep these values in mind and refer back to them when you hit a roadblock.

Learning circles work best when learners can identify what motivates their participation, and the same is true for the facilitator. The questions we've been asking new facilitators for five years are still relevant for virtual programs:

- What are you personally hoping to achieve by facilitating a learning circle?
- What need are you trying to address in your community?
- Who do you expect to reach?
- How will you know if your experiment was a success?

Check in with your people

Once you've established your personal goals for a learning circle, you'll want to start sharing your ideas and gathering buy-in from people who will help you along the way. This may include reaching out to people who you think might want to participate, organizations that might help you promote your learning circle, or a group that you are part of that can give you feedback on your idea. You are also, of course, welcome to reach out to P2PU at any time if you want our input!

Check in with the wider community

If you want to solicit feedback from a wider audience, such as your library's mailing list, you may need to come up with a more scalable solution than soliciting 1-1 feedback. Our favorite strategy for doing this is called the [Q Method](#), a dot-based voting methodology that we've used for years to solicit interest for potential learning circle topics. To try this online, you can use a standard survey tool (such as [Google Forms](#), [Typeform](#), or [SurveyMonkey](#)), where responses are aggregated and shared with you privately, or a collaborative polling tool (such as [Tricider](#), [Mentimeter](#), or [AnswerGarden](#)), where responses are shared publicly.

- If you are looking to ask multiple questions and/or be able to connect responses to individual respondents, then you are best off using a standard survey tool. We use Google Forms frequently at P2PU, and we've made a [Q Method survey template](#) that you can riff off of for your own uses.
- If you're only interested in asking a single question (e.g. what topics are you interested in learning?) and you want respondents to be able to see what other people have suggested, then you should use a collaborative polling tool. Tricider works well if you want people to share more complex thoughts and upvote/respond to one another, and AnswerGarden works well if you want to gather short responses that become visualized as a wordcloud.

Check out the Setup & Promotion section for more ideas about how to reach your community if you don't have direct contact information like phone or email lists.

More in the forum:

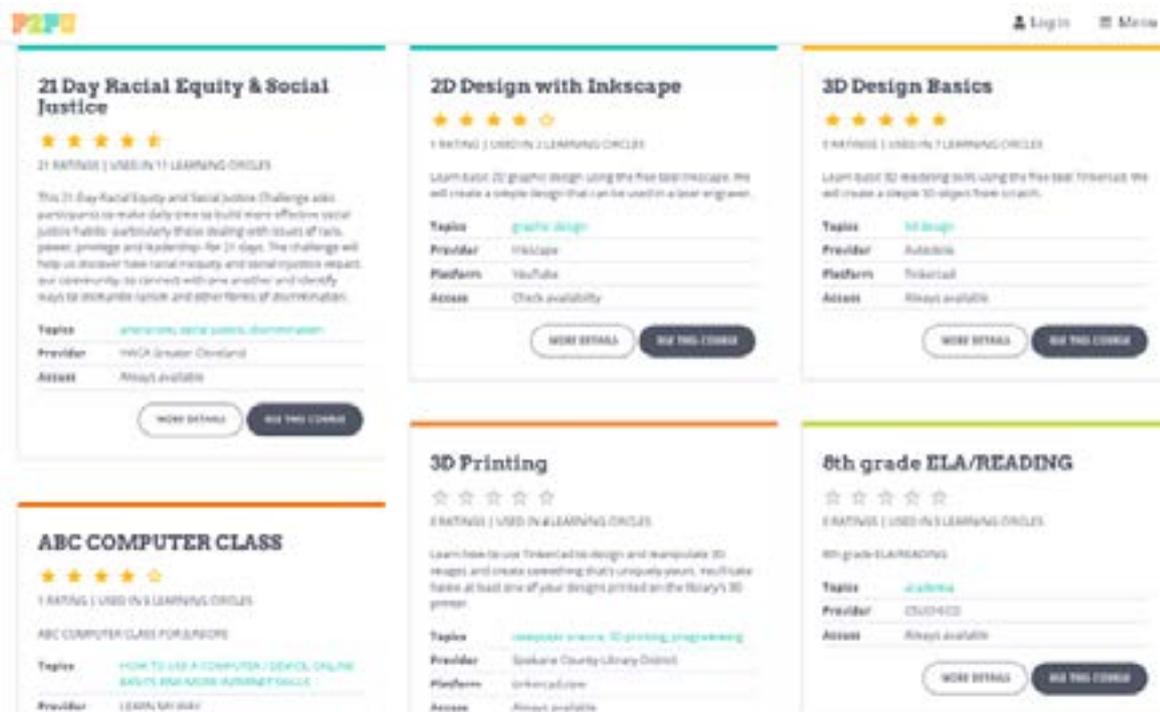
[How do I know what topic people want to learn about?](#)

Find Your Course

[P2PU Online Course Library](#)

Learning circle participants come together around a common interest, supported by freely accessible learning materials. As the facilitator, it is your job to identify these materials before the learning circle begins. Most facilitators use free online courses as their subject material because they are widely accessible, developed by subject matter experts, and often designed in a linear format that is easily adaptable to group study.

Our community collects great online courses in the library linked above. Use any of these courses from this database or use any course or resource that you find online that suits you.



More in the forum:

[How do I find a good online course?](#)

Considerations

Public access to library equipment, internet connection, and in-person support are now a limited option in many communities. As you're assessing courses, here are some extra considerations for choosing the right material:

Support for low bandwidth. If your learners don't have reliable internet connections at home, courses with fewer videos and interactive elements might be more accessible. See [Supporting Limited Access](#)

Mobile first. Many learners may not have a computer but can still participate via a smartphone or tablet. Fortunately, some course providers (including edX, FutureLearn, Coursera, and Udacity) offer mobile apps.

Digital literacy: Will learners need guidance or tech support to navigate a course website on their own? See [Facilitator Roles](#)

Tool Requirements: Consider the things your learners will need to complete a learning circle. Are there tools or materials they need to anticipate having access to? See [Pick Your Tools](#)

Workload: It's likely that the online course you choose was developed prior to the pandemic. Be prepared to only use a fraction of the online course and set achievable goals as everyone is learning in a much more demanding and complex environment.

Ready-To-Use Courses

Some of the courses in our [library](#) have been used dozens of times and are popular choices. If you're not sure where to begin, check out some of these options:

[Fundamentals of Public Speaking](#): Learn the principles of public speaking by critically examining your own and others' speeches through interactive practice.

[American Sign Language](#): Teaches basic signs and hand parameters in American Sign Language (ASL). Practices visual comprehension, signing, and basic expressive and receptive skills.

[Intro to HTML and CSS](#): In this course you will learn how to convert digital design mockups into static web pages.

[Learn To Write Fiction](#): In this course you will learn about writing the genres, character development, setting & basic world building, plot & structure, description, dialogue & action, and revision & self-editing.

[The Science of Well-Being](#): The purpose of the course is to not only learn what psychological research says about what makes us happy but also to put those strategies into practice.

[COVID-19: Tackling the Novel Coronavirus](#): What is COVID-19 and how might the outbreak affect you? Find out more about coronavirus and explore its worldwide implications.

Setting An Agenda

Many facilitators find it helpful to adapt course materials into a weekly agenda to structure their learning circle. Some choose to use these just for personal reference while others share them with their learners so everyone can keep track of progress together. Here are some examples from our community:

- [Social Media: What No One Has Told You about Privacy](#) by Dana
- [COVID-19, Tackling the Novel Coronavirus](#) by Sébastien
- [Job Skills Teaching Guide](#) by Zamira

Create Your Own Course

If you can't find a course that fits your facilitation style or learning circle structure, consider creating your own! You can adapt materials from multiple courses, organize resources like YouTube videos, or even write your own from scratch! Here's an awesome series of Fiction Writing learning circle courses from Jordan in Boston: [Writing Courses \(Beginner, World-Building, and Series Writing\)](#).

Pick Your Tools

There are dozens of free tools that allow people to work together in virtual spaces: video conferences, group phone calls, collaborative writing platforms. You shouldn't need to spend any money to run or host an effective online learning circle.

Things to consider when choosing your online setup:

- Are there specific supplies or technical requirements (software, equipment, etc.) needed to complete your learning circle topic?
- What resources (computer, smartphone, tablet, internet access) do your learners have access to?
- What tools do your learners already know how to use?
- Are your learners comfortable appearing in video or phone calls?
- Do you have colleagues who can provide insight, experience, or ideas about the right tools for your community?

Experienced facilitators recommended polling participants before or after sign-up to understand which resources they have access to and are comfortable using. You may discover that your

community has limited access to the tools you planned to use—for ideas and case studies about how to make sure those learners are supported, check out Supporting Limited Access.

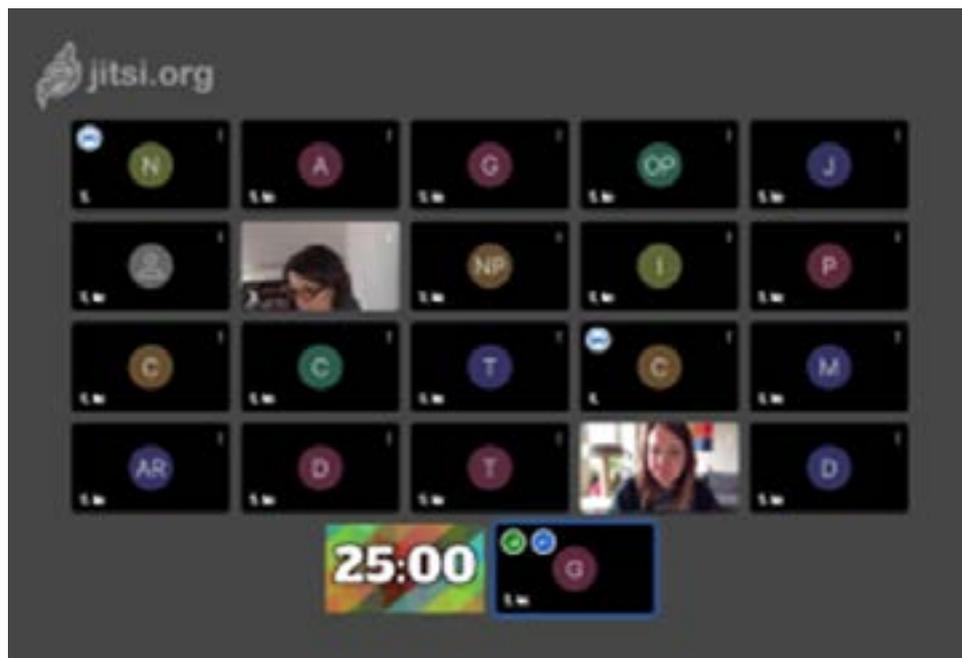
More in the forum:

[Tools to help you facilitate meetings online](#)

P2PU Recommends: Jitsi + Etherpad

Because many facilitators are locked into institutional requirements and it'd be impossible to address every learning circle's unique tech needs, we did not create a hefty tool comparison. (Looking for a comprehensive guide? We recommend [Mozilla's Video Call Apps list!](#)) Instead, we're getting right to our recommended setup: Jitsi video calls + Etherpad collaborative note documents.

[Jitsi](#) (Video Conferencing w/ Screenshare, Dial-In, Text)



Preview of a group Jitsi call during an individual reading activity: most participants have video turned off and one participant is screen-sharing a countdown timer click image to enlarge or download

Jitsi is a free, open-source video tool that takes safety seriously and doesn't require an account registration or software download on computers. No frills or friction: participants can click a link and immediately join. It works in most web browsers and on iOS/Android smartphones with a free app.

Get started: meet.jit.si

Max Participants: Jitsi recommends no more than 35 at one time. In our tests, quality starts to go down with more than 12–15 users.

Dial-In: Jitsi generates dial-in numbers so learners without a videocam, computer, or smartphone can join the room via phone.

Privacy/Encryption: Jitsi is privacy-oriented and keeps participants' data (location, identity) safe and encrypted. More about that at [Jitsi Meet Security & Privacy](#). URLs and Passwords: Jitsi lets you set custom **URLs and passwords** for a meeting room to make sure the right people find it and the wrong people don't. (Note: Password settings reset every time the room is empty, so you must be the first one to join the room to set the password.)

Participant Responsibility: Jitsi is also less hierarchical—anyone can mute or kick anyone—which allows learners to take on co-facilitation roles in the group.

Jitsi Resources:

- [How To Use Jitsi](#) (video, 2:39)
- [Using Jitsi Meet | Video Conference Demonstration](#) (video, 16:24)
- [Jitsi FAQ](#)

Etherpad (Collaborative Text Editor)

Etherpad is a highly customizable open source text editor that allows for collaborative writing in real-time. Each editor sets their own color so you can follow individual contributions. (This can also be turned off.) We've had success using this for sharing meeting agendas, collaborative writing exercises, and silent reflections (like check-in questions or plus/deltas at the end of a session).

Get started: etherpad.p2pu.org



We have hosted an instance of Etherpad on our website so you can just pick a URL and go. If you or a colleague are familiar with Git, you can also [install Etherpad](#) yourself and customize it to your needs with [community-created plugins](#). (Have a plugin request for the P2PU Etherpad? [Email us!](#))

Etherpad Resources:

- [Video Etherpad](#) - An experimental version of Etherpad that includes participants' videos inside the document. We found it didn't work well with more than 10 participants, but it might be a good solution for smaller circles!
- [Etherpad Wiki and FAQs](#)

Unhangout

[Unhangout](#) is an open source platform for running large-scale, participant-driven events online that some facilitators have started experimenting with it for learning circles. The Unhangout team will be lifting the cap on breakout room size before the end of May, at which point we will endorse it as a good alternative. See [Welcome to Unhangout](#) (video, 1:59) for more.

Considering Privacy and Safety

There are a few different steps that you can take to ensure that your group remains free of people who show up with ulterior motives.

Create very unique URLs for your meeting room and don't post the link publicly on the web (like on your sign-up page). This will minimize random visitors or ne'er-do-wells. You can share meeting links privately with participants via email once they've registered.

Add a password. If you have any concerns, add a password to your room. You can always change this if needed.

Keep an eye on who signs up. Your P2PU facilitator dashboard lets you see who is signing up—if a participant has written anything that raises a red flag for you, you can either send them a message directly or simply remove them from the learning circle.

Learn how to kick users. Most video chat tools have a feature to remove participants from a meeting. However, it may not prevent them from rejoining. Make sure to add or change the room password before kicking a user to prevent them from getting back in.

Setup & Promotion

Once you've selected a course, you're ready to create your learning circle using our [online creation tool](#):

Since this is designed for in-person meetings, there are a few things to keep in mind when you fill in Step 2 (choose a location) for virtual learning circles. We've outlined this with screenshots in a post [on the forum](#).

The image shows a sign-up form for a learning circle. The title is "Sign up for Intro to HTML/CSS: Making Webpages". Below the title, there is a brief description of HTML and CSS. The form includes fields for "Name*", "Email address*", and "What do you hope to achieve by joining this learning circle?". There are also checkboxes for "I give consent that F2PU can share my sign-up info with the learning circle facilitator and send me info regarding the learning circle." and "I would like to receive information about other learning opportunities in the future.". A "Submit" button is at the bottom right. The page also features a "LIBRARY" logo and some text about the course materials and meeting details.

An example sign-up page for a learning circle

Once you've created your learning circle, you'll receive a link to the sign-up page for your group for you to promote your learning circle (above). You'll also get an email pointing you to [promotional and outreach materials](#). Many of the resources there, including the [email and social media templates](#), are still relevant during social distancing.

Virtual Promotion

Without foot traffic and in-person outreach, many facilitators have had to rely on creativity and their existing online networks to find learners for their learning circles. Many successful virtual learning circles have found their participants through posts on listservs, newsletters, NextDoor, and social media. There are three trends that we've noticed taking off with virtual learning circle promotion:

Contacting Past Participants: In Boston, Jordan found 10 participants for an upcoming learning circle simply by [reaching out to past participants](#) and asking them to spread the word amongst their friends and colleagues.

Cross-Promotion Between Programs: Second, facilitators are relying more heavily on promoting learning circles during other virtual programs, as people who are already participating in virtual programs (be they book groups, professional development programs, or training workshops) are likely to be interested in trying out a virtual learning circle. Adding a short teaser to messages that

goes out to those other virtual programs can be a great way to drum up support for learning circles (e.g. “Want to learn to cook healthy meals with others stuck at home?”, “Join your neighbors as we (virtually) practice our public speaking skills.”)

Expanding Worldwide: One benefit of learning online is that it removes geographic barriers! Some online learning circles have brought people together from around the world to learn together. (That said, keep in mind that posting a sign-up form in a very public place (Reddit, Twitter, etc.) may lead to lots of sign-ups from people or bots who don’t plan to attend.)

Places to Promote In-Person

If you’re able to do it responsibly and safely, in-person promotion is a valuable tool to make sure you’re reaching members of your community who won’t see virtual promotion. Post fliers on community boards at essential businesses and other spaces with foot traffic (like parks). Dana in Milledgeville, Georgia advertised her learning circles on the windows of her library branch, as that is an area that still receives foot traffic during social distancing.

More resources:

- [How to promote a learning circle](#)
- [Learning circle flyers](#) & [Learning circle promotional videos](#)

Facilitator Roles

As a facilitator, you’re making learning easier. You’re the dad, the grandma, the big sister, the cheerleader, the doctor, the psychologist, the mender, the builder, the tech geek. That’s a tall order, a big job! At the same time while you’re wearing all those hats, in these online times you have the extra challenge of maybe not seeing a face, maybe not hearing a voice, not being there in person to interpret the body language, or to fiddle with the tech. And you have to recognize that everyone is different, that some people are quiet, some people like to talk, some people are daring, some people are reticent, some people are sassy, some deferential. You have to draw out those who hold back, push back on those who take over, and smooth out the bumps. You’re hosting the party and you want everyone to be comfortable and have a great time. The challenge is to build a group dynamic that facilitates, that makes it easy for everyone to meet their goal. All you really have to do is acknowledge that everyone has experience, everyone has a perspective, everyone has a story, and that means we can learn from anyone. With that philosophy in your pocket, the job gets much easier...

-Jan Docka, Roselle Public Library District, Illinois

Jan’s reflection on facilitation paints a wonderful picture of the vast set of roles and responsibilities that a facilitator takes on. In this section, we’ve outlined what we see as the four primary

responsibilities of a virtual facilitator.

For many people, moving learning circles to a virtual environment adds a new set of responsibilities which can feel like a lot to manage. We isolate them in part to help you prepare, and also to identify roles and responsibilities that you may want to delegate to a co-facilitator or a willing participant.

Convening the Group

Since you can't meet in person, you'll need to do a little extra work to decide where and how to meet virtually. This includes deciding on a form of synchronous communication (e.g. video chat, conference call, shared notes) and deciding whether you want to implement any asynchronous communication (e.g. Whatsapp group, email thread, Slack channel). Review the Pick Your Tools section, and remember you're free to change which tool you're using if it makes it easier for all learners to participate. A few notes to highlight:

- With virtual learning circles, it's particularly important to reach out to everybody before the first meeting and outline what tools you'll be using, how they should connect, and where they should go if they have any questions. Take a look at these [learning circle message examples](#) for inspiration.
- A number of virtual learning circles have utilized breakout rooms. We recommend setting these up in advance so that you have less to manage during the learning circle itself.
- You may also want to send a recap to participants after each meeting. Once you create a learning circle on the P2PU platform, you will be able to send messages to all learning circle participants by email and SMS.

Facilitating Discussion

Typically, each learning circle meeting consists of four components: a check-in, time spent working through an online course, a group activity, and a reflection exercise. We find that the overarching format -- a mix of self-paced reading and group activities, sandwiched between a check-in and reflection activity -- still works well in a virtual space. P2PU has a wealth of knowledge and interest in advancing the facilitation of group discussions. We recommend reviewing our [facilitation responsibilities](#) and [facilitation section](#) in the P2PU forum which includes videos and additional resources.

Providing Technical Support

Online learning circles tend to use three browser tabs at any given time - one for the online course, one for the video chat, and one for a shared notes document. In addition to bandwidth limitations, this workflow can be extremely daunting for individuals who aren't used to working and collaborating online. There are a number of ways that you can help mitigate these issues.

- Invite participants to show up in the online meeting space 15-20 minutes early to

troubleshoot any tech issues that they may be having.

- Ask a colleague to join you for the first thirty minutes to help troubleshoot with individuals. Creating a separate video chat dedicated to tech support can be a great way to offer 1-1 help to somebody who is struggling while allowing the rest of the group to proceed with the learning materials.
- Start the learning circle with an orientation session; make it clear that it's optional but is a good way for folks to learn more about the tools that will be used and the learning circle model before the group digs into the course content the following week.
- Share your screen. Demonstrating what you want participants to do can be a lot easier than trying to explain it. Make sure you are comfortable sharing your screen before the learning circle, and practice sharing your entire screen versus a dedicated window.

Managing Chat

In online meetings, the embedded chat channel can serve as a nice space for backchannel conversation and an essential place for link sharing. It may also be the case that some participants do not have access to a working microphone and are therefore only able to communicate via the chat. Delegating chat management to somebody else can be a great way to involve others in the leadership of the learning circle while not overwhelming you as a facilitator.

Learning Activities

We've gone through and tested a number of learning activities that we think work well for online spaces, considering both the limitations and the possibilities that come from meeting online. They are arranged as check-in, group, and reflection activities, following the format of a learning circle meeting. Keep in mind that many of these activities can be done both in a full-group and a smaller group / breakout room environment.

QUOTE FROM A FACILITATOR:

"It has worked well to structure our circle to be more focused on activities that we can go through together and discuss as a group [rather than giving time for individual activities]. It has been hard to troubleshoot when patrons are doing the activities on their own and may be struggling."

– Zamira, St. Paul ([See case study](#))

Check-in Activities

Short, Open-Ended Question

A concise yet open-ended question is a great way to open a learning circle. We strive to find

Media Share-Out

Being online presents the opportunity to share media with one another. This can also be a great, low-stakes way to help participants become more comfortable using shared notes documents and copying media from the internet. A few examples include:

- Paste an image of your favorite childhood cereal in a shared notes document
- Search for a .gif that matches your mood
- Share your favorite pandemic meme

Word Cloud

World clouds can be a nice way to generate quick and anonymous feedback on specific questions. We like to use [Answer Garden](#) for this, as there is no login required and results are displayed in real time.



Word cloud showing responses to "How do you want participants to feel in a learning circle?" [click image to enlarge or download](#)

Group Activities

Breakout Rooms

Creating spaces for smaller group discussion is vital in learning circles with more than 8 people (and it can be very nice in smaller groups too). Setting up breakout rooms beforehand can take a lot of the stress off of facilitating in the moment. We like using Jitsi for breakout rooms because it is so easy to create and link participants to new video chat rooms.

- See [Sébastien's case study](#) for a great example of breakout rooms in practice

Beach Ball

Beach ball is a nice way to get everybody involved in a discussion while removing the facilitator as the mediator of every interaction. Start by presenting a prompt or question to the group and ask somebody to answer. When they've finished, they can pass the question onto somebody else by calling out their name.

- More on [MIT OpenCourseware](#)

Digital Collage

Ask people to create a collage that represents an issue, question, or challenge using a collaborative slidedeck like [Google Slides](#). We find that giving people 10 minutes to assemble their collage and another 10 minutes to talk about them works well. If you have a larger group, you can ask people to write something about their collage in the speaker notes; this way people can review each other's work without everybody needing to speak.



Google Slides collages made in response to the question: "What does an online facilitator look like?" click image to view slides

Fishbowl

The fishbowl format allows a large group to listen to different opinions while taking the pressure to speak off of the rest of the group. To do this online, simply nominate a small group of people (4 works well) to respond to a question. If somebody wants to join the discussion circle, they can raise their hand to join and kick somebody who has already spoken out of the discussion circle.

- See [Using the fishbowl facilitation format](#)

Take a break

Sometimes it can be nice to spend some virtual time together away from the course material. We've done a number of different things to fill anywhere from 5-30 minutes, including listening to a guided meditation, watching a music video, having a dance party, sharing recipes, stretching, and playing online games like [Pictionary](#) and [Codenames](#).

Reflection Activities

Plus/Delta

A quick easy reflection activity is asking everybody one thing that went well that day ("plus") and one thing to change for the next week ("delta").

- Read more about the [plus/delta wrap up activity](#)

One word response



Example of written word responses via [Valentina Ruffoni/CMX Connect](#)

A quick way to end a meeting while still getting feedback from everyone is to ask participants to say, type, or write one word that represents how they are feeling or their plans for the week. (Such as "How would you describe our time together?")

Open Question

In groups of 10 or less, you can also ask a specific question as a wrap up. Our general rule of thumb is to not ask anything that you're not genuinely interested in hearing the answer to. Good questions here might include "what's something that surprised you this week?" or "what is one thing we can do differently next week to make our virtual meeting space more hospitable?"

Evaluation & Reflection

Once your learning circle wraps up, what comes next? Here are some common paths forward:

Run another learning circle. Every foray into facilitation informs the next. Consider running the learning circle again and experimenting with new techniques. Or try a new topic altogether!

Improve the course. We automatically generate a forum thread for every course added to the P2PU library where facilitators can share their feedback and ideas. ([Example!](#)) These discussions appear on the course pages and inform future facilitators on how to best bring that material to their community.

Write about your experience. Many people are forging their own paths through this unfamiliar territory, and a very common request is for more case studies and insights from experienced facilitators. Your stories are welcome and encouraged in our [community forum](#).

Join a community call or working group. P2PU hosts monthly community calls and occasional working groups that bring facilitators together to discuss ideas and offer support. Want to get involved? Email nico@p2pu.org!

MORE ON THE BLOG:

[How we evaluate our work](#)

Automatic Insight Surveys

At the end of every learning circle, learners and facilitators automatically receive an email with a survey asking them to reflect upon the goal they first set, feedback about the learning circle (what worked well vs. what could be improved), and what their next steps will be. The survey responses are used to generate a "learning circle insights" summary ([example](#)) that is shared with the facilitator, team organizers, and learners as well as on the public facilitator dashboard for others to learn from.

If you have other insights you're after, consider distributing your own survey. Sébastien in Boston collected brief but informative responses via a simplified plus/delta survey ([see it here](#)) that he sent to his participants to get short, weekly feedback and also gather interest for new learning circles.

Certificates & Accreditation

P2PU does not issue any kind of accreditation or formal education certificates. Some courses offer various types of endorsement though learners often have to pay the course provider for a copy.



A blank P2PU Certificate of Achievement template

A number of facilitators like to give certificates at the end of a learning circle to help connote a sense of achievement and stronger connection between the library/learning center and learner. If you want to recognize and celebrate learners' achievements, you can use or customize our [certificate template](#).

Supporting Limited Access

Access in the COVID era has many faces: access to a quiet space to learn and focus; access to digital devices like computers or smartphones; access to reliable or affordable internet access; access to affordable data usage; access to reading literacy skills; access to (and comfort with) digital literacy skills.

Learning circles were designed with access in mind: by bringing online courses to public spaces, they deliver education, technology, and support to learners who may not have those things at home. Unfortunately, the shift to online solutions means that many resources are unavailable to those who don't have the tools to access them.

Do what you can to identify and respond to your learners' needs in order to create equitable opportunities for education. Many experienced facilitators have had success collecting access information from participants via email, phone calls, or paper sign-up sheets attached to flyers.

Limited Bandwidth Solutions

Though there is no one-size-fits-all solution, a number of alternative models for distanced learning circles have emerged in our community. In these cases, we are striving for a definition of "learning circle" that still includes a facilitator, a topic with specific learning materials, and a group of learners working together.

Phone Conferences + Individual Devices

Barbara from Los Angeles Public Library set up a conference call number with her learning circle. ([See Barbara's case study.](#)) Participants joined a Jitsi room either on their computers or by calling in via phone, and Barbara played the course material out loud. As everyone had either a smartphone or had access to a computer, they were all able to review the online course together as a group on the call.

Phone Conferences + Printed Materials

Kathleen and Abel from Los Angeles Public Library work with adults who don't have consistent access to an internet-connected computer at home. However, many do have access to a smartphone or a shared computer that they could download something from during the week. Given these constraints, they are exploring the possibility of downloading course materials and emailing them to the participants during the week, giving people time to either print the lessons or complete the work beforehand. This way, the learning circle can take place through a conference call, without any additional requirements.

Text-Based Asynchronous Meetings (Email/Slack)

Managing an asynchronous learning circle is challenging but possible. It's also a solution for groups who cannot find a regular time to meet. Group emails are one way to keep a collection of learners together, especially with a clearly-defined agenda and prompts for response.

Group/Solo Text Messaging

In instances where smartphone or data access is limited, running a learning group via WhatsApp or text messaging is an option. Yusuf in Kenya facilitates youth training using this approach and has found it rewarding but challenging: progress can be slow when it depends all participants to respond and explaining technical concepts via text is tricky. He is experimenting with pre-loading phones with learning content and distributing them to learners, though the lending logistics are challenging.

Non-Learning-Circle Solutions

Sometimes there isn't a feasible solution for delivering a learning circle experience to every patron, but that doesn't mean they need to be left behind. Here are some alternative considerations for bringing education to your community.

Reframing Context

The amount of change involved with the shift online can be overwhelming for learners: new spaces, new technologies, new ways of learning. If your community isn't familiar with the concept of learning circles, it might be useful to offer an alternative framing: something like "taking a book group online" introduces a familiar concept and creates a bridge that may help bring intimidated patrons into new spaces.

Learning Within a Family

If you can't regularly communicate or meet with them, consider ways that isolated communities can learn together. For example, [Family Creative Learning](#) is a workshop series that "engages children and their parents to learn together." How can learning experiences be delivered to groups living together?

Printed Mail/Guides

The entirely offline learning circle would be an extension of Kathleen and Abel's plan, above. Rather than emailing course materials, facilitators could send them in the post, and then check-in synchronously during a conference call. The online course model sort of breaks down here -- perhaps it would be better to discuss something more visual that is designed for print (a book, worksheet, or zine).

Lucky from Los Angeles Public Library is considering how to support seniors in her community who cannot or do not want to join group circles that aren't meeting in person. She is considering how to use printed workbooks, zines with recipes or other activities to make sure her

constituents know they're top of mind.

More Resources:

- [Tips for Helping Someone Learn to Use Technology](#)
- [Web Literacy from Mozilla](#)

Open Questions & Extra Resources

Open Questions

We don't know the answers to these questions, though we'd like to! Do you have ideas or experience (or more questions) that you can add?

- How do you contact or deliver materials to patrons outside of the library if you don't have existing contact information for them?

Extra Resources

Here are more resources shared or created by our community that you may find helpful:

[Resources for Conducting an Online Book Group Discussion](#)

Thanks to Jordan for creating and sharing this document that describes the process of running an online book group!

[Online Meeting Resources Toolkit for Facilitators](#)

A substantial community-built list of curated online meeting resources.

[Digital Inclusion Resources](#) & [USA State Gov C-19 Digital Inclusion Responses](#) Selected resources from the USA's National Digital Inclusion Alliance. (Primarily focused on the United States) Thanks to Steph for sharing these!

