

The learning circle experience: Findings from the P2PU participant survey

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ABSTRACT

P2PU learning circles are free study groups organized for people to take online classes together and in-person. Participants gather in public spaces, like public libraries and community centers to work through a massive open online course (MOOC) with guidance from a facilitator. This report summarizes a selection of data gathered from P2PU's online learner survey to help inform P2PU's work promoting learning circles in libraries and building a community of skilled facilitators. The learner survey was completed by 144 individuals in the United States, Canada and Kenya who signed up for a learning circle using P2PU's website. The results show that at least three-quarters of respondents were able to achieve the goals they set out to achieve in the learning circles and that the public library played an important role in learners' success. Findings highlight the importance of social and emotional support, group discussion, and facilitator interpersonal skills in non-formal peer learning environments.

KEYWORDS

learning circles, peer learning, MOOCS, public libraries, non-formal learning

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Introduction

Overview

This report summarizes a selection of data gathered from P2PU's online learner survey to help inform P2PU's work promoting learning circles in libraries and building a community of skilled facilitators. The questions examined include:

- Did learners achieve their goals?
- What contributed to learners' success?
- What challenges did learners face?
- What surprised learners?
- What tips do learners have for future facilitators and participants?
- What role does the public library play in learners' success?

Background

Learning circles are free study groups for people who want to take online classes together and in-person. Participants gather in public spaces, like public libraries and community centers, typically meeting once a week for 6-8 weeks, to work through a massive open online course (MOOC). A facilitator guides the process by selecting an online course, becoming proficient in the courseware, and applying his or her skills to facilitate peer learning.

P2PU promotes its learning circles in numerous ways: from creating open source resources for individuals organizing learning circles in their own neighborhoods, to supporting an online community of facilitators and providing training workshops. P2PU's work over the last two years has spawned 319 learning circles conducted across 89 cities in the United States, Canada, and Kenya.¹ Over 220 courses have been offered, ranging from resume writing to web design to public speaking.

This report has been prepared by the Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA), a research center at the University of Washington Information School that explores the design, use, and effects of information and communication technologies in communities facing social and economic challenges. TASCHA's interest in this subject stems from its prior work on MOOCs, the value of interactive social spaces for peer learning, and the role of public libraries as community connectors.

The Survey Sample

The learner survey was completed by 144 respondents between May 22, 2017 and January 13, 2018. Respondents represented learning circle participants at several libraries, including the Chicago Public Library, Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, Pierce County Library, Boston Public Library, Wichita Public

¹ For more information, see <https://www.p2pu.org/>

Library, Detroit Public Library, and Salt Lake City Public Library, and well as the Kenya National Library Service. It's estimated that two-thirds of respondents resided in the United States, with the rest based in Kenya. About one-third of respondents did not indicate which library they had visited.

All individuals who signed up for a learning circle using P2PU's website during the period referenced above were invited to participate in the online survey. Invitations were sent by email after the activity concluded. As such, respondents consisted of a mix of individuals who had completed a learning circle, who had attended only some of the sessions, and who had signed up to join a learning circle but never attended.

"Which best describes you?"	# respondents	% respondents
I completed the learning circle	99	69%
I attended a few sessions	36	25%
I signed up for a learning circle, but never attended	9	6%
Total	144	100%

Notes:

The findings that follow are based on qualitative analysis. Nearly all of the numerical figures provided in this report are approximations.

Most of the survey questions analyzed for this report were answered by approximately 130 respondents or less, as individuals who never attended a learning circle were directed to skip many of the questions, and no respondent was required to answer every question. The number of respondents who replied to each question is provided.

Additionally, the number of respondents and number of responses for each question is not equal. When a participant's response contained multiple elements (e.g., a success factor described as "hard work and a helpful facilitator"), those elements were handled as separate responses so that both elements could be adequately represented among the analytic themes presented.

Findings

Did learners achieve their goals?

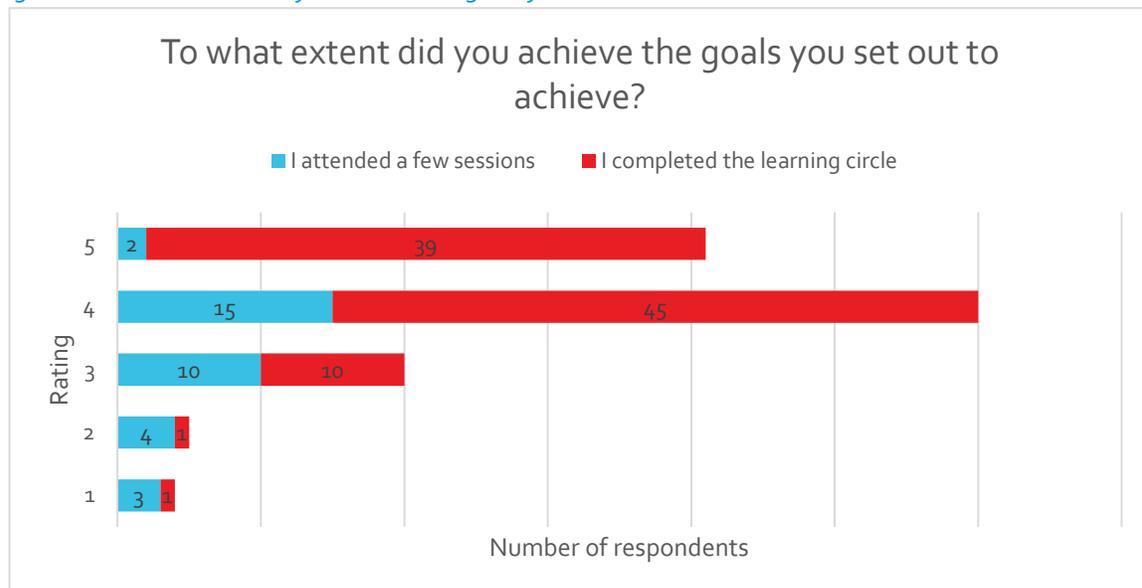
In the survey, respondents were asked, "To what extent did you achieve the goals you set out to achieve?" (The nature of their personal goals was not specified.) [n=130]

Goal attainment was predominantly positive amongst respondents. When asked, on a scale of 1 to 5 ("not at all" to "completely") the extent to which they had achieved their personal goals, three-quarters rated their personal goal attainment at "4" or "5."

Rating	Responses
5 (completely)	32%
4	46%
3	15%
2	4%
1 (not at all)	3%

Personal goal attainment was stronger among those who completed the learning circle than those who did not. Virtually everyone who completed the learning circle rated goal satisfaction at 3 or above. Ratings of high goal attainment ("4" or "5") were much more common amongst completers than non-completers (87% vs 50%). Ratings of low goal attainment ("1" or "2") were considerably higher among non-completers (2% vs 21%).

Figure 1: To what extent did you achieve the goals you set out to achieve?



The variation in levels of goal attainment among those who did not complete the learning circle may be worth further examination. If learners' personal goals focused on learning circle attendance while others focused on learning circle completion, we would expect to see non-completers with attendance goals report mid-level ratings, while those with completion goals would report low ratings. However, it is also possible that learners' personal goals were based on desired outcomes related to knowledge or skills, and decisions on whether or not to complete the learning circles were influenced by the extent to which respondents believed the learning circles supported learners' progress toward their goals. Given that half of non-completers rated their goal attainment at a "4" or "5," it is possible many left because they were satisfied with what they learned in only a few sessions.

What contributed to learners' success?

Learners attributed their successes to both internal and external factors [n=130]. Roughly one-third of respondents credited themselves for their success, citing a personal drive to succeed. The remaining comments from respondents were fairly equally divided into three success factors themes: the facilitator, social support from peers, and the exchange of ideas during group discussion. Only a small proportion of people (less than ten percent) attributed their success to their interest in the MOOC's subject matter.

Respondents often attributed their success to their own efforts and personal desire to succeed. Some example responses include:

"Dedication and discipline"

"I was persistent and hardworking"

"Attending my classes and also being attentive."

"Passion, hard work, and commitment"

"I have the goal to continue to learn in retirement."

The facilitators credited with supporting learner achievement were described as being friendly, accommodating, helpful, knowledgeable, and committed. E.g.:

"Library host was very friendly and accommodating"

"Well-informed, intelligent, professional staff"

"Our learning leaders were very patient and helped me a lot!"

"Enthusiastic leader"

"Being able to share and receive feedback under the guidance of an engaged instructor-leader was a blessing!"

"Most of all Joe and the instructor made it easy and fun and very clear"

Frequently respondents spoke about how much they valued and benefited from receiving social and emotional support from other learning circle participants. Peers helped to encourage, motivate, and uplift each other. E.g.:

"Knowing that others face similar experiences, it's not just me"

"A lovely group of women in my circle"

"Having meetings with classmates kept me meeting expectations"

"The people around me helped me to gain new skills during the learning circles"

"Lessons & the warmth of the other participants"

Another critical factor for success was how peers exchanged ideas and information during learning circle discussions and group work. E.g.:

"The peer interaction. Being able to practice aloud and exchange knowledge with peers."

"The interactivensess of the attendees, learning from each other."

"Being able to have discussions with others who are in the same course as me."

"Freely interacting with people with diverse ideas"

"Teamwork"

The remaining responses focused more on how the course content resonated with respondents' interests. E.g.:

"Having passion to the topic"

"The course materials offered by the lecturer"

"A deep interest in programming languages"

"The psyche to learn new course related to my career field"

"The information in the course, especially how to organize the information I want to get across in my speech"

What challenges did learners face?

Respondents disclosed a wide range of challenges [n=128]. The challenges mentioned most frequently centered on time: time conflicts, time management, and travel time (with the associated issues of distance and cost). Otherwise, respondents described hurdles that had to be overcome in their learning circles, especially issues related to participants' unique learning needs, participation styles, and the demanding coursework required to complete the MOOC. In Kenya, the equipment (or lack of equipment)

used for the course also presented challenges. However, a sizeable number of respondents indicated that they faced no challenges (approximately one-fifth of respondents).

Time conflicts were frequently mentioned by respondents who had only attended a few sessions of a learning circle: over a third of non-completers indicated time was an issue. Non-completers were, proportionately, about five times more likely to struggle with the timing, duration, travel distance, or time prioritization of the learning circles than those respondents who completed the circles.

"My work schedule changed abruptly after I started attending"

"Waking up at dawn"

"Being too busy"

"Having to make time for the lessons on a busy workday"

"45-minute drive"

"Did not have enough gas to go to the last meeting"

Several respondents mentioned that their specific learning needs or styles did not meld well with the learning circle approach. E.g.,

From two that did not complete the sessions:

"I am not comfortable simply sitting quietly in a room full of people each independently doing their own thing on their laptops. Thus, I simply continued on my own"

"Learning disability-realize I need more traditional class model. I excel in that environment historically"

From two that did complete. E.g.,

"ADD/ADHD"

"Learning the course on my own at topics to be covered on the next lesson"

Also, more than a dozen respondents said various aspects of participation during the learning circle was the biggest challenge, whether due to their own self-consciousness with participating, meandering conversations, or insufficient time for meaningful interactions. The amount of time spent on active discussion between learners appears to have varied widely across learning circles.

"Some people had trouble staying on point"

"Compulsory discussion triggered by group leader"

"Reading work aloud"

"Interacting with new individuals"

"Course pace was too rapid for real effectiveness, not enough interaction or creation of bonds with other learners"

"Struggle with non-cooperative team members"

Others struggled to get all of the MOOC coursework done, due either to the quantity of work required or the difficulty of the material.

"The homework assignments were incredibly long"

"It was hard to find the hours required to do the readings and watch the videos each week, even though I'm retired. However, I was determined, and I managed to keep up. I wanted to be able to discuss the lessons in the learning circle, so I had to finish them"

"Learning HTML and CSS requires paying close attention to very minute details"

"The video for the course was advanced and very hard to keep up with"

"Learning keyboarding; sometimes the video instructions assumed I knew certain basic knowledge"

Finally, the most inhibiting factor for roughly one sixth of respondents was related to technical problems in the library. In particular, the internet was sometimes frustratingly slow and computers were not always available, and these challenges were concentrated among the libraries in Kenya.

What surprised learners?

Most of the 121 respondents who answered this question did not report any surprises. However, of the 40% who did, positive surprises outnumbered negative surprises by five to one.

Of the negative surprises, nearly half were due to misunderstanding what a learning circle experience would consist of. These respondents indicated they expected a traditional classroom experience, not a learning environment centered on using online resources. The few other negative responses came from individuals who were dissatisfied with some element of their learning circle experience: the MOOC was too work-intensive or not challenging enough, and group dynamics were disappointing due to either poor facilitation or the passivity of other participants.

In contrast, learners reported many pleasant surprises about their learning circle experience. Around a quarter of those reporting surprises mentioned that they enjoyed the sessions much more than expected: that MOOC course material was easier to learn as a group and quicker to complete than anticipated. Nearly a quarter of responses showed surprise at specific pieces of information they had picked up on, including two individuals who picked up new skills unexpectedly (i.e., keyboarding and public speaking).

Several other learners noted being surprised by how much they liked spending time with the other participants. Respondents welcomed their peers' kindness, openness, friendship, diversity of perspectives, and mutual respect. Additionally, two respondents were able to challenge age-based biases: one was surprised to learn that youth are interested in science fiction, and the other that older people have a desire to keep learning.

Finally, by means of participating in a learning circle, a half-dozen respondents reported they discovered new educational opportunities, specifically the number and variety of free MOOCs and classes available to them.

What tips do learners have for future facilitators and participants?

When asked, “What is a tip you’d give to new facilitators?” [n=119], the respondents’ recommendations centered around six themes: be professional; get to know your learners; be responsive; “have soft hands on the reigns;” show your enthusiasm; and revamp logistics.

When asked, “What is a tip you’d give to future learning circle participants?” [n=122], the respondents’ recommendations focused on five themes: expect to work hard; practice good habits; actively participate; bring a positive attitude; and stay true to your own path.

Summaries of their responses follow. (Quotations are notated with quotation marks.)

Tips for learning circle facilitators

1. *Be professional.* Learners are frustrated by facilitators who are habitually late or ill-prepared. [10%]
2. *Get to know your learners.* Learn more about the participants in the learning circle, including what they want to accomplish. Doing so will create a more welcoming space for class discussion and instruction. [Over 10%]
3. *Be responsive.* As you get to know the learners, it will become easier for you to respond to their needs. Encourage them, help them, slow down when needed, and exercise patience. Recognize that the learning material will be challenging for some, so that you can be there for those who struggle most. [Over 10%]
4. *“Have soft hands on the reigns.”* Some learners recommended facilitators do more to set up ground rules, provide structure, and control participants. An equal number wanted facilitators to encourage more conversation and participation among learners. [Over 10% total] However, from the perspective of one respondent, facilitators should generally endeavor to strike a balance between controlling and letting loose the learning circle:

“Try to lead without being the main focus, have soft hands on the reigns, be flexible in following the material from the peer-to-peer site. Do what makes it work for your group.”
5. *Show your enthusiasm.* Although some respondents said it would help if facilitators were more knowledgeable about the subject of the MOOC, more said they would like to facilitators to be more adventurous, passionate, dynamic, and flexible. [Approximately 10%]
6. *Revamp the logistics.* A dozen or so respondents relayed tips to help improve on learning circle logistics. Suggestions related to the size and composition of sessions, the session schedule, the need to market the learning circles better, and the need to have a space that is fully equipped with computers and internet access. [Approximately 10%]

Tips for learning circle participants

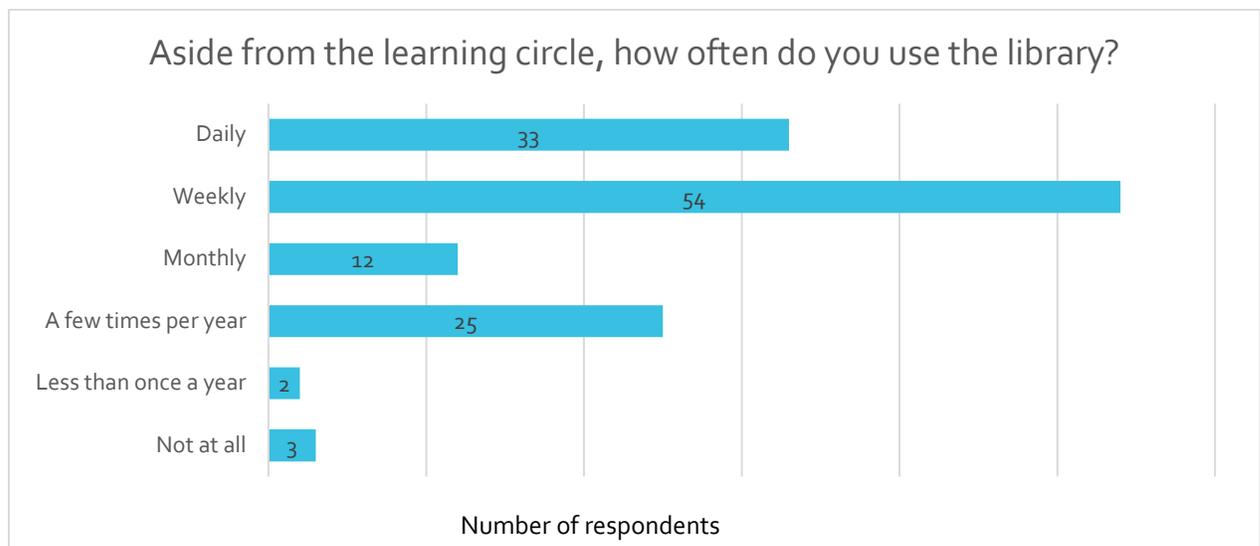
1. *Expect to work hard.* Completing the learning circle will require a good deal of effort. You will need to show your commitment and determination. [Nearly 30%.]
2. *Practice good habits.* If you want to do well, attend all of the learning circle sessions, pay attention during every session, complete some of the work from home, review your notes to prepare for sessions, and do the coursework as scheduled, not allowing yourself to fall behind. [Around 20%.]
3. *Actively participate.* Participation is very important to your success, so ask questions, share what you know, engage with others, and value teamwork. [Around 10%.]
4. *Bring a positive attitude.* A positive, cooperative attitude will be very conducive to learning in this environment and will allow you to learn from and with other participants. [5%]
5. *Stay true to your path.* Although you will be doing group work, focus on learning the information and skills you want to develop, and work at your own pace when you need to. Pursue a subject that you will find fun, very interesting, or that you are passionate about. [10%]

What role does the public library play in learners' success?

The library appears to play a very beneficial role in the learning experience for learning circle participants.

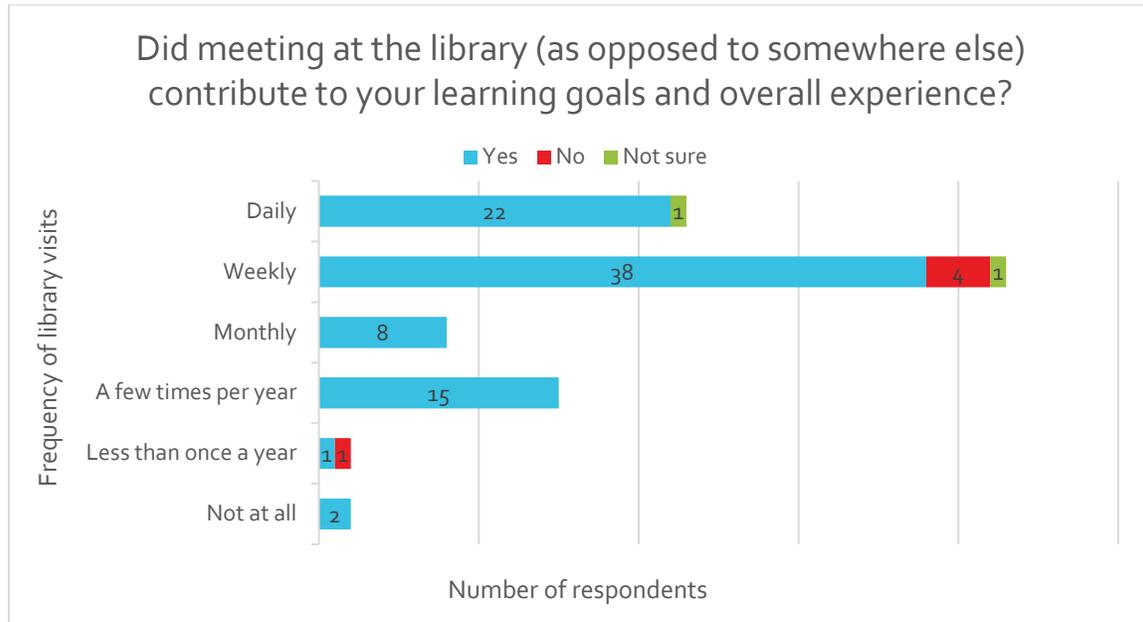
First of all, most respondents [n=129] reported they were already regular users of the library where the sessions were held, with two-thirds of respondents visiting the library on a daily or weekly basis. Although this indicates that the learning circles were most effectively marketed at and attractive to regular library patrons, nearly one-quarter of respondents visited the library no more than a few times a year.

Figure 2 Aside from the learning circle, how often do you use the library?



Second, the vast majority of learning circle participants believed that meeting at the library, as opposed to somewhere else, positively contributed to their experience (93%, n=94), regardless of their frequency of use.

Figure 3 Did meeting at the library (as opposed to somewhere else) contribute to your learning goals and overall experience?



Why did learners perceive the library to be an effective place for hosting learning circles? Over half of respondents referred to favorable characteristics of the library: an environment that is conducive to learning, studying, and working; a space that is comfortable, welcoming, and safe; or a location that is easy to access. Others pointed to social aspects of the library that were beneficial: as a place to meet people with shared interests and goals, and be exposed to diversity.

Another three dozen respondents reported that the libraries' resources were valuable to their experience. Namely, library materials, like books, were used to support course work in direct and complementary ways. Similarly, the libraries' public computers, laptops, and internet access were useful for several respondents, whether to make progress on their course or for other purposes.

Conclusion

Data collected from P2PU's learner post-survey revealed that most respondents were able to achieve the goals they set out to achieve in their learning circles and that the public library played an important role in learners' success.

Learners expended a great deal of effort to succeed in their learning circles. Respondents insisted that others should know how much hard work and dedication is needed to complete MOOC coursework, even when working in a group setting, so that individuals who persevere can be the source of their own success.

The most enthusiastic learners appeared to be the ones who genuinely connected with, felt supported by, and learned from their peers. Peers provided social and emotional support that would have been largely absent for learners who completed MOOCs at home. It follows that learners who work as a group or in teams can build greater personal resilience and follow-through.

Facilitators' soft skills appear to be one of the most important factors in the success of learning circles, much more so than any specific knowledge about the topic being learned. This underscores how librarians do not need to be subject matter experts, but they do need to have strong interpersonal skills.

Learners have clearly benefited from the conversations they have had with one another. The survey responses suggest learners need ample opportunities to discuss MOOC material, preferably through a combination of group work and full group conversations. Facilitators' ability to shape and guide a group discussion is immensely important in this context. It is also critical that facilitators create an atmosphere where participation is encouraged but not forced, finding the right balance between providing structure and flexibility, to allow for the occurrence of meaningful exchanges, both planned and serendipitous.