

## Learning Circle workshop summary

This interactive workshop was co-facilitated by KMRFs Marsha Dawkins and Angus Ramsay with assistance from Fiona Cowdell. We began with Marsha presenting a brief overview of the evolution of Learning Circles, its underpinning theoretical approach, and the four interrelated phases of a 'learning circle' meeting:

**Opening phase** - focuses on how did we do this, what emotion does the call evoke?

**Divergent phase** – focuses on how could we do this better?

**Convergent phase** – focuses on how should we do this better?

**Closing phase** – focuses on how will we do this better?

In addition, Marsha talked through some her experiences of how learning circles have worked to achieve more democratic approaches to decision-making.



Participants then experienced a 'test drive' of a Learning Circle meeting to co-produce a research grant application in response to a funding call for the commissioning, delivery, and impact of community rehab services for patients with lower limb amputation. Eight participants took part in this learning circle, facilitated by Marsha, while other participants provided feedback and reflections on the processes they were observing.



We as facilitators were particularly interested to learn how the learning circle approach differed from how participants had approached research in the past and to find out whether this approach might be helpful to them in their future research work.

Working through the exercise, members of our learning circles and the audience seemed highly engaged - raising questions about the process and its implications beyond this exercise.

- We discussed how 'learning circles' differ from traditional focus groups - including the importance of stepping away from existing hierarchies, and recognising that the whole learning circle must agree the purpose, scope, and the nature of the task that is to be addressed.
- We reflected on the types of discussions that could be most helpful, and the value of exploring what people thought and how people felt about the task - and how this may affect their ability to fully engage in co-producing an application.
- There was a lot of interest in practicalities - for instance record-keeping: is it better to record events or take notes? Marsha reported that she takes fieldnotes and shares before next session for discussion and verification. This is to reduce anxiety and promote participants being open and honest in expressing how they actually felt about the project, including negative views.
- People raised several issues about managing group dynamics - how to get clinicians or senior stakeholders to 'give up' power, whether someone's expertise automatically implies which tasks they should be 'volunteering' for, and how to ensure the patient voice is at the heart of discussions. Important supports of this included agreeing processes by which consensus is achieved, suspending power relations - and having a facilitator who can adapt to these complex, shifting dynamics. Volunteering for tasks does not necessarily have to be related to individual experience, as participants may wish to undertake completely new tasks to construct new knowledge and build individual capacity, an outcome of learning circles.

Overall, people seemed enthusiastic about the potential of Learning Circles, and had many questions at the end of the session. The opportunity to engage with their emotions, reflect and learn during the process of coproducing was highly valued. We hope that we can continue the discussion beyond this event!

**Marsha's reflections:**



*"This was the first time I had conducted a learning circle meeting with external observers and it felt slightly experimental. Observers' feedback about my facilitation skills and the importance of these in the learning circle process were really encouraging for me. Conducting the learning circle meetings with two different groups highlighted the benefit of ensuring diversity of roles and background, as this facilitates a wider variety of views and breadth of experiences from which to develop a consensus on ways forward."*