



## Learning Circle Course Creation Guide

This guide was incorporated into the P2PU Knowledge Base - [check there for the latest version](#).

This guide is designed to help subject experts create online courses for **learning circles**: free, facilitated study groups for people who want to learn together. Guided by the principles of peer learning, learning circles offer much of the structure and community of formal education without the barriers to access.

By creating a course for learning circles, you are sharing your expertise with the world. Along the way, you'll also:

- **Learn new skills:** Creating a course is a great way to practice and refine a number of skills, including learning design and web development.
- **Join our community:** Course creators are invited to join our community and stay up to date on how their course is being used around the world.
- **Contribute to an OER ecosystem:** By developing an open educational resource, you're contributing to an equitable process of knowledge sharing.

### HOW P2PU CAN HELP

We are available to support you with any (or all) of the steps in this process, including learning design, technology selection, and web hosting. If you'd like to talk about collaborating, please reach out to [thepeople@p2pu.org](mailto:thepeople@p2pu.org)!

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## Understand Learning Circles

P2PU champions learning circles because they are an equalizer. Traditional higher education programs can reinforce inequality by creating barriers to access to the people who stand to benefit the most. Online education, while wide-reaching and often free, is still inaccessible to many people and can be intimidating, lonely, or ineffective once you've gained access. Learning circles are designed to help people find a supportive environment to learn about a topic they care about, while developing relationships with members of their community along the way.

Since starting the program in 2015, we've found that learning circles:

- Lead to retention rates 10x higher than online courses alone
- Increase people's agency as self-guided learners
- Increase people's ability to set and achieve their own learning goals
- Invigorate community-based learning in libraries and education centers
- Create viable alternatives to formal education
- Support digital inclusion for people new to online learning

## How they work

A learning circle typically has a facilitator to guide the group (who needn't be an expert in the subject), a guiding source of knowledge (often a free online course or other accessible learning resource), a group of learners who meet regularly, and a dedicated meeting room (usually at a public space such as a library, or community center; but recently online).

Learning circles meet regularly, often 90 minutes/week for 6-8 weeks. Though the schedule is flexible based on a group's needs, this seems to be a sweet spot that offers enough time and space to build a productive group culture without being alienating due to the time commitment.

Despite variations in practice, there are five traits that every learning circle should have:

- **Free:** No cost to attend or access the learning materials
- **Recurring:** Multiple meetings allow for building relationships between learners and reinforcing knowledge over time
- **Structured:** Follows a reliable weekly process (typically a check-in, reading/watching, activities, and reflection)
- **Facilitated:** Gently guided but not taught—with a little practice and training, anyone should be able to facilitate!
- **Collaborative:** Scheduled discussions and activities that engage the entire group

## Learning circle structure

Learning circle meetings typically follow a 4-part structure—intro, learning, activity, reflection—that creates ample space for empowering individual learning goals, building group relationships, and supporting the facilitator. This can be a helpful baseline for organizing knowledge into a learner-friendly format.

### Check-In

Starting and finishing each meeting as a group is a core component of learning circles. A consistent **check-in** time warms up group conversation and is a reliable way to build community with icebreakers, recap previous sessions, and set expectations for the meeting.

### Read & Watch

**Read & Watch** refers to the time spent with the learning content and is where most of the expert knowledge lives. This can take many forms, from an article or a textbook chapter, to a playlist of videos, to a hybrid format of interactive content. Once you've outlined the major sections of your course, you'll probably first want to

start populating this section: what information do you want to express in this module and what content medium (reading, video, etc.) is going to best express it?

## Do/Make/Say/Think

While Read & Watch can sometimes be passive, **Do/Make/Say/Think** is its active counterpart. (These can also be interspersed throughout a meeting.) D/M/S/T refers to a hands-on group project or discussion to solidify what people have just read or watched. Sometimes these activities come easily (e.g. if the topic is public speaking, learners can take turns sharing short monologues), and sometimes they require some creativity to effectively reinforce the goals of the module.

## Reflection

A planned closing space helps the group collectively consider what was covered during the meeting and provide feedback to guide their experience moving forward. As a baseline, we often recommend using a Plus/Delta: each participant shares a **plus** (something that went well) and a **delta** (something they'd like to change for the next meeting). These contributions can seed a brief conversation about ways to improve the next meeting.

## Establish Goals & Outcomes

Before drafting content, first identify the audience whom you are trying to serve and outline appropriate learning goals for the course. A few questions to ponder:

1. **Who are you creating this course for?** You should have an understanding of who you are creating this course for, and why. A helpful way to articulate this is to think about the minimal set of qualifications you have for a participant. Are there certain skills (language fluency, digital literacy, access to materials) that will define who can access your course? Is it relevant only for people in a particular country or region?
2. **What expectations will participants bring to this course?** People will show up to a learning circle with their own expectations about the subject

matter. Understanding the outcomes that participants will be hoping for as well as the preconceptions that they may bring to the learning circle will help you scope out a goal that is both rewarding and also appropriate given the format and time allotted.

- 3. How will you know if participants have succeeded?** Considering how to frame participant success is a helpful guide for organizing learning content and creating valuable activities. Assessment guides for facilitators and learners can also be baked into a course, though their relevance can vary by the topic.
- Is there a particular way that you expect participants to demonstrate mastery of this topic?
  - If your goal is to help people begin exploring a topic, what do you hope they come away with?
  - Can participation in the learning circle inform the evolution of your course materials?

## Develop Course Content

Once you've established the goals for a course, outline 2–3 learning goals for each individual meeting and begin arranging course materials into the learning circle framework. When scoping out the learning materials, keep in mind the 6-8 week length of learning circle: we tend to think about the learning content as being more than a workshop, but less than a semester's worth of work.

### Course intro

Your course should have a landing page, which outlines basic expectations for the course. In addition to the title, here are a few things you could include:

- Who you are and why you created the course
- Major learning objectives for the course
- Expected pacing for working through the material
- Any needed prerequisites or expectations for participants

- Supplemental resources to help a facilitator prepare

## Principles for learning design

Building on the four-part meeting structure outlined earlier, there are some principles for learning design that we think work well for learning circles.

- **Project-based > theoretical:** Learning circles work well when participants are working towards a shared goal. Frame your learning circle more towards “Learn to Write Fiction” than “Composition 101”; more towards “Build a website” than “Intro to HTML/CSS”.
- **Personal > “objective”:** You are human! Be clear about your expertise, perspective, and motivation in creating this course. Own your expertise, and don’t try and hide behind the cloak of objectivity.
- **Group discussion > user interaction:** Rely on the relationships formed in the learning circle rather than overbuilding interactivity into the course. Personal exploration comes through discussion questions, not quizzes.
- **Clear > complicated:** Don’t use jargon or complex language when something simple will do. We like to run copy through the [Hemingway App](#) and target a Grade 8-10 reading level.
- **Quality > quantity:** Where possible, provide a variety of forms of engagement. We like to mix up text, videos, downloadable handouts/exercises, and linking out to interactive tools and resources.
- **Further exploration > homework:** Ideally, learners can have a successful learning circle experience without doing any homework outside of the meetings. That being said, your course doesn’t need to be an end-all-be-all: feel free to include opportunities for further work.
- **Self/peer evaluation > exams:** Think about assessment as an opportunity for personal and group reflection, rather than a test that needs to be passed.
- **Transparency > hierarchy:** Generally, a facilitator shouldn’t need a separate facilitation guide in order to run a learning circle. When thinking about the voice that you use, imagine a group working through the materials together, rather than a teacher imparting knowledge to a classroom.

- **Connected > silo:** Don't feel like you need to present yourself as the single authority on the subject: Helping people find what they're looking for is more important than increasing course retention.
- **Open > Closed:** We license course materials with a [Creative Commons BY-SA](#) license, which means that anybody can reuse or remix our content so long as they attribute us (BY) and share their derivative work with the same license (SA=Share Alike).

#### LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING CIRCLES

We've embodied the following principles in [learning about learning circles](#), our online course for learning circle facilitators. Reach out if you'd like help establishing course goals, developing supplemental learning material, or converting your knowledge into effective and engaging activities.

## Finding additional content

We encourage course creators to consider broadening the perspectives in their materials by referencing or including external content, as long as it can be done appropriately and will full credit to the original sources. Some practices for identifying usable external content:

- **Quotes and Ideas:** Standard citations rules apply when creating online courses. The [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#) is an exceptional resource for making sure you're citing things accurately.
- **News Articles:** Linking directly to news articles is a great way to bring in outside opinions and connect your course to current events. Consider using the Internet Archive's [Wayback Machine](#) or [Perma.cc](#) to prevent link rot, and be mindful about not linking to articles with paywalls.
- **Images and Icons:** Reuse images and icons from [Flickr](#), [Unsplash](#), [The Noun Project](#), [unDraw](#), [Google Image advanced search](#), etc. Each site has clear attribution requirements: generally, this means that you need to cite the author/artist and link back to the original work in your course.

- **Open Educational Resources:** A number of platforms and individuals license their materials for free reuse, which often means that you choose between linking out to the original source and re-publishing their content directly on your site. We've [outlined many platforms](#) that utilize Creative Commons (or equivalent) licenses; be sure to familiarize yourself with the [various types](#) of CC licenses before republishing anything.

When in doubt, reach out! You might be surprised how responsive people are when you're trying to share their work with new audiences.

## Publish Your Course

Once you've drafted your course content, it's time to get it online. There are a number of considerations to make when choosing where to host your course:

- Are there platforms that you're already familiar with?
- What types of media and interactivity do you want to include?
- How do you plan to maintain the course long-term?
- What technical skills do you have? What do you want to practice?

## Course-in-a-Box

[Course-in-a-Box](#) is P2PU's tool for building and publishing online courses, built on the premise that you don't need to spend money to produce a course that can stay around for a long time. While no prior coding experience is required to use Course-in-a-Box, it still provides great exposure to some of the building blocks of web development including HTML, CSS, Markdown, and Git. It's free to use and 100% open source ([see GitHub repository](#)), so you can adapt it to suit your needs however you choose.

*Examples:*

- [Making and Learning](#) (Pittsburgh Children's Museum)
- [Learning about Learning Circles](#) (P2PU)

## COURSE IN A BOX

[We've put together a tutorial](#) (using Course-in-a-Box!) to help you get started making your course. You can hire us if you'd like help adapting Course-in-a-Box to your needs.

## Not Course-in-a-Box

### Browser-based word processors

If Course-in-a-Box seems like a heavy lift, it may be sufficient to keep your course materials in a browser-based word document. This is especially popular if your “course” is more of a facilitation guide designed to complement an existing learning resource. You can draft the materials in whatever tool you're comfortable with, including Google Docs, Dropbox Paper, or P2PU's hosted version of [Etherpad](#).

*Examples:*

- [1619 Project](#) (*Ulonda at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library*)
- [21-Day Racial Equity and Social Justice Challenge](#) (*same as above*)

### Ready-to-use website builders

[Wordpress.com](#) remains the world's most popular website builder, as it strikes a good balance between ease of use, customizability, and cost. There are plenty of [Wordpress alternatives](#), including Drupal, Joomla, Squarespace and Wix, though beware: as customizability and ease of use increase, so does cost.

*Examples:*

- [Learn to Write Fiction](#) (*Jordan at Boston Public Library*)
- [How to Talk About Race](#) (*Amrita and Denise at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library*)

### Static site generators & hosting solution

The most flexibility for minimal/no cost will come by combining an [open source, static site generator](#) (e.g. Jekyll, Hugo, Eleventy) with a hosting solution (e.g. Github Pages, Netlify): this is the approach that we used to build [Course-in-a-Box](#). While

highly customizable, this option requires either a technical background or a lot of motivation and patience.

## Other directions

There are plenty of other formats for hosting content on the web, some of which are explicitly designed for open educational resources. Popular options include:

- Open textbook (e.g. [Libretext](#), [Pressbooks](#), [EdTechBooks](#))
- Interactive online course (e.g. [H5P](#))
- Discussion forum (e.g. [Discourse](#))
- Blog (e.g. [Ghost](#), [Medium](#), [Wordpress.org](#))
- Wiki (e.g. [Wikiversity](#))
- Learning management system (e.g. [Moodle](#), [Open edX](#))

### TECHNICAL SETUP AND WEB HOSTING

Making decisions on how to create and present your course can be difficult. We can help you choose the right tool, manage the technical workflow, get things online, and maintain them for you.

## Finish and Share

Once your course is complete, [create a free P2PU account](#) and add your course to [P2PU's course database](#). In the future, we'll add email notifications to let you know when a facilitator is using your course—in the meantime, let us know at [thepeople@p2pu.org](mailto:thepeople@p2pu.org) when you've added a course, and we'll give you a heads up when it's being used.

If you'd like to try your hand at facilitating your course, check out our [learning about learning circles course](#)!