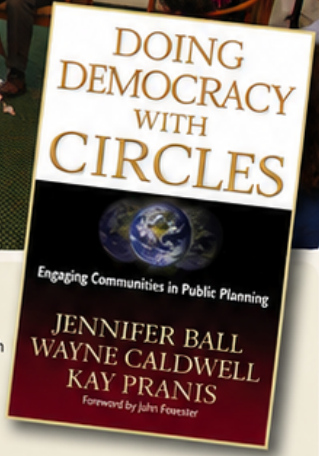


Doing Democracy with Circles

Engaging Communities in Public Planning

A PARTNERSHIP PROJECT: UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH & OMAFRA



WHAT WAS THE PROJECT?

This project translated the research and experience from solving water quality issues along Lake Huron into practical training for public sector professionals. The work resulted in the award-winning book *Doing Democracy with Circles: Engaging Communities in Public Planning* (Living Justice Press, 2010) and a series of hands-on workshops that introduced the Circle process as a tool for meaningful public engagement.

WHY IT MATTERED

Public planning often involves conflict, mistrust and unequal participation. The Circle process creates a structured, safe and supportive environment that enables people to listen deeply, speak honestly and work together to address complex issues and build stronger communities.

THE CIRCLE PROCESS

A time-tested approach to inclusive dialogue and collective decision-making.



Grounded in respect and equal voice, the Circle process helps participants move from building relationships to addressing issues and developing action plans that serve the whole community.

HOW THE PROCESS WORKS



CORE PRINCIPLES

- Equal voice and equal worth
- Deep listening
- Respectful dialogue
- Safety and confidentiality
- Shared responsibility
- Consensus and collective action
- Learning and transformation

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

- Increased capacity to engage the public in meaningful ways
- Improved conflict resolution and problem solving
- Stronger relationships and community connections
- Practical facilitation skills and tools for everyday use
- Action-oriented plans rooted in shared values

WHO PARTICIPATED?

Planners, rural development practitioners, public health officials, municipal staff, NGO leaders, Indigenous representatives, academics and community members from across Ontario and beyond.



WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

- Experiential learning in Circle
- Talking piece and ceremony
- Values and agreements
- Storytelling and deep listening
- Issue exploration
- Consensus decision-making
- Action planning
- Reflection and follow-up



“Circles can build communities, provide support, generate mutual understanding, strengthen relationships, and create spaces for healing and transformation.”

– Wayne Caldwell, from workshop materials

LEGACY

The workshops were delivered between 2010 and 2012 across Ontario. The book continues to be widely used by planners and communities as a foundational guide to collaborative engagement. Dr. Jennifer Ball continues to offer training and build on this work, supporting communities to engage in respectful dialogue and create better futures together.

A STRONG PARTNERSHIP

This project was funded through the OMAFRA/U of G Partnership's Knowledge Translation and Transfer (KTT) program, supporting research that informs practice and builds healthier rural communities.

