



## Learning Community

by Mary Kolb, PRH Educator, Bellevue, WA

**Note:** The term “learning community” is used in higher education to refer to cross-disciplinary and integrated learning curricula. This article expands the term to encompass life-giving groups that provide mutual support in the process of learning.

I used to think that learning in groups was nothing more than a cost-effective and time-efficient way to teach more than one student. My experience of schooling had certainly been of this “assembly line” model. It wasn’t until I facilitated groups of my own that I discovered that creating an environment of safety and respect encouraged members to share their questions and experiences – and they gained more from this interchange with one another than they would have from only me.

Something magical and infectious happens when a group gathers to learn in an environment of respect. It is much more than pooling all the insights and wisdom of the collective. The experience of finding ourselves “not alone” in our struggles, doubts, or confusion dissolves our defenses and opens us to the gifts and wisdom of other group members. We vicariously discover new possibilities when someone models attitudes or behaviors that had previously seemed unattainable for them. When other group members encourage us to succeed – we often surprise ourselves!

Recently, I have noticed many groups where members intentionally support and learn from one another. Some examples include Toastmasters clubs, twelve-step groups, book discussion clubs, spiritual study circles, men’s or women’s groups, parenting or couples groups, gardening or hiking groups, and so on.

In my 15 years in PRH Education, I have seen scores of groups successfully nurture learning; and some of them continue to meet for years and even decades. PRH Education’s emphasis on self-discovery and use of a

structured sharing process naturally help participants maintain clear boundaries and learn from each other-- while taking responsibility for their own growth.

When a group gathers on a regular basis-- as in a monthly PRH growth group or in an annual PRH workshop--trust and relationship have the opportunity to develop progressively. Then, the learning group becomes truly a “learning community”. The key elements of community develop: a sense of membership or belonging; opportunity to help out and affect the group; fulfilled needs for self-expression and information; and an emotional connection. (See the work of psychologists McMillan and Chavis, 1986.)

Over time, as group members feel a growing sense of safety in the process of learning with and through each other, a surprising interdependence can develop. As trust and relationship grows, appreciation for each one’s particular gifts and strengths develops, too. In this climate of appreciation and recognition, individuals feel less pressure to be or do everything; members come to recognize and rely on each other’s unique gifts in a way that allows each member maximum opportunity for growth.



*Dave Stangland (center), enjoying his group.*

My experience with PRH learning communities has shown me that in a group, I have as many teachers as there are members. The mystery of our interdependence is both liberating and humbling. I am empowered to be my authentic, human self just as much by learning to trust my vulnerability and accept support for my fears and pain, as I am by sharing my gifts, values, bonds, and spirituality. I am grateful to experience this mystery: that the gifts and vulnerability of each person in community interweave to create something stronger, wiser and more beautiful than the sum of its members. ❖

## The HOV Lane of Growth

by Ja Kim, Vancouver, BC

Why do I call PRH workshops “the HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lane of growth”? Each time I complete a PRH workshop’s “itinerary” of reflective questions, I experience deep healing and unanticipated shifts in my understanding of myself. I often don’t know the other people in the circle, to whom I may reveal some of my innermost experiences. I share because there is an intentionality among those in the workshops that is absent from other, more social interactions. This intention – theirs and mine-- may be the glue that makes my insights and learning “stick”.

In PRH workshops, when I listen to the sharing of others, I feel alertness like an electrical charge. This occurs when I hear someone articulate something that is true for me, that I have never expressed. It’s as if my unexpressed reality is an undertow of dormant genes swimming beneath my awareness. The other’s articulation awakens my sleeping DNA. Once these strands stir, the elements of my unexpressed truth seem to organize themselves on the border of my conscious awareness. Delicate strings of thought precipitate out of the thick fluid, arranging themselves into a gathering momentum, resulting in a feeling of something “on the tip of my tongue”.

Sometimes as I listen, I resonate with a “me-too!” in my heart and mind, accompanied by a clarity that is shocking and joyous. Other times I have a fleeting, momentary sense of holding sand in my hands. I can almost understand something, but it is slippery, and then it’s gone. The process by which these insights and understandings become dense enough to be tangible seems to have its own rhythm and timing. Some things I hear came home to my conscious understanding years after I first heard them.

It is as if these dancing threads of inklings wink in and out of existence, gradually taking on form over time. Is it that they support intuitions I already have, or do they give birth to new ones? All I know is that it seems that others’ shared experiences support my discoveries so that I can live more of the essence of my true self. I look forward to observing more pieces falling into place in the puzzle that is me and my life.



*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”*

Margaret Mead



## Curious Together

by Paula Evitts,  
PRH Educator in  
Great Falls, MT  
as told to Mary Kolb

“*Shhhhhh!*” is not the only thing you’ll hear at the Great Falls Public Library. Paula Evitts, a local PRH Educator, has been leading a series of lunch-hour book discussion groups in the library each spring for the past four years. Paula selects books that challenge participants to change the way they understand themselves.

Paula’s groups, ranging from four to twelve members, have taken on texts like Eckhart Tolle’s The Power of Now and A New Earth, Gregg Braden’s The Divine Matrix, and Byron Katie’s Loving What Is. Group members interact with the texts over four weekly meetings by listening to a segment on CD or DVD, then reflecting and sharing. Paula’s reflection questions might include, “What was awakened in me as I listened?” or “How does this piece apply in my ordinary daily life?”

*“When I hear someone else’s original thought and experience, it stretches me. There’s always newness,”* Paula states. *“We learn from each other.”* As a result, each person raises awareness of their own consciousness; they are no longer just existing.

Paula’s recipe for nurturing awareness in these book groups starts with choosing stimulating material. She then stirs it gently through guided self-reflection, and lets the “yeast” of shared reflection expand the understanding and awareness of each participant. Paula observes that sharing and listening in a group makes the learning go farther. As one participant commented afterward, *“I never thought about it that way!”*



### Written Reflection

- Do I belong to one or more learning communities? I list them.
- Which of my qualities, gifts, and values do I share with others in these communities?
- What sensations emerge in me as I explore this theme? I listen to my sensations in my usual way.
- What have I discovered or confirmed about myself?