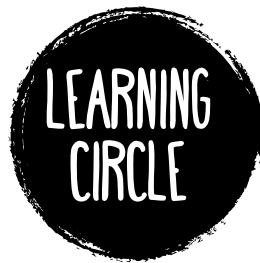# ROUND PEGS IN SQUARE HOLES?
SQUARE PEGS IN ROUND HOLES?
APPLYING DESIGN METHODS TO THE LEARNING CIRCLE

LEARNING CIRCLE

Andrea Swanson and Naomi Fraser

Pain points & Segmentation

Our pain point

Our initial pain point: *Too many adults don't take advantage of learning opportunities.* The user group is Adult learners who are workers in a social service environment.

Too many participants of the Learning Circle have dropped out - despite lots of interventions and offers of support. Of the 31 initial Learning Circlers, 22 remained at the end. For a segment of these 'drop-outs', the work felt too amorphous (not bounded) and therefore not doable.

We focussed on the segment *The Lost without Pain*: Learning circle participants who struggled to name a pain point, and who like clear maps. This is a segment who needs to see where they are going and what the outcome will be to engage.

How did we get to know our users?

We had ethnographic conversations with fellow learning Circle Participants in which we used a timeline template and with stickers to see how the circle fits in participants' work and lives.
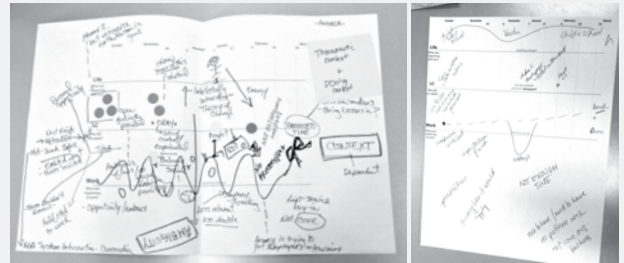
Meet Jenny, who is 'Lost without Pain'

Jenny joined the Learning Circle with some excitement. She had heard about InWithForward's work and was looking forward to connecting with other Toronto based, interesting folks. The first couple of sessions reinforced Jenny's interest, but she was cautious early on. It was hard to see a project related to her work.

Then the Learning Circle shifted from more theoretical work to a project focus, the holiday's hit and work became more hectic. Jenny didn't finish the ethnography and didn't find a pain point. Jenny and her partners missed different weeks and by the time they landed on a pain point they were behind.

Jenny and her partner decided to focus on adults that don't take advantage of training opportunities offered to them at work. This pain point was okay but not compelling. They both continued attending the Learning Circles but were feeling disconnected.

Then, Jenny shifted her pain point from the adult learning experience in general to adult learning experience in the Learning Circle. Now the project became bounded and doable. Jenny and her partner interviewed 6 LC participants who had disconnected or were no longer participating. They analyzed the data and wrote this story.

Ideas & prototyping

Three ideas
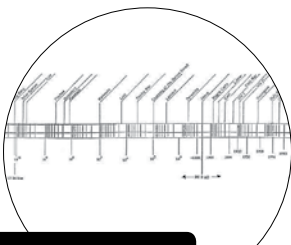
Learner Map

A literal map of the learning circle journey, provided at the start. Add more check-in moments along the way, and ways to compare expectations and realities.

Immersion days

Deep research dives & Design sprints built into the learning circle cycle to allow for higher intensity working sessions, rather than just 3-hour trainings. Participants would expect to block whole days off for these.

Guide-by-your-side
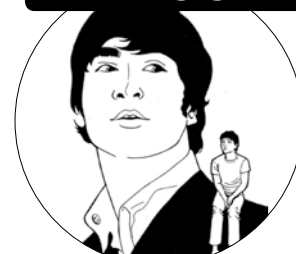
Create a new role within the Learning Circle, and stage the experience. Guides might be the Early Adopters who could walk alongside others finding it more of an ill-fit.

Prototyping questions

What if the learning circle was not designed around teaching a methodology, but around addressing a named set of pain points?

How might we segment the Learning Circlers upfront - those who have a pain point they want to solve, and those who do not, and differentiate the experience accordingly?

How might the application process for Learning Circle be tweaked to better understand participants' motivations and barriers for learning? How might we better understand five constructs of learning: (1) context, (2) commitment, (3) contribution, (4) critical mass, and (5) compatibility?

What's next?

Tensions we couldn't resolve...

We're left wondering whether it's possible to achieve the same learning outcomes for different participant segments. Can people who need a map versus a compass get to the same place? Perhaps it is OK when people drop out?

We also haven't yet reached the end. There's much more to probe and understand. How did the people who finished the learning circle do it? What about the facilitators experience?

We would like to do some ethnographic conversations with the facilitators, and use some of the Idea Generation tools (i.e Diamonds in the Rough Game) over a drink (new setting!) to re-imagine things. How can we prototype now that the Learning Circle is over?

What are we taking away ourselves?

Segmenting is powerful. The Learning Circle taught segmentation, but did not practice it internally. Some learners need a map, others need a compass.

Try a different data source. Talking to people and mapping their experiences can give fresh clues.

Put on a different thinking cap. Test out abductive versus deductive thinking.