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Working with Tensions: Enacting Relational Ethics through Situated Moves in Learning-Circle Co-Research

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Learning circles are an approach to collaborative adult learning. This article explores how learning circles can be adapted as a co-research method attentive to power and care when addressing cross-organizational challenges in elderly care recruitment and retention. We introduce tension zones and a logic of care as sensitizing lines guiding our analysis of ethnographic material on enacting learning circles as co-research. We analyse three empirically-derived 'situated moves' by researcher-facilitators: mattering (negotiating what becomes a shared concern), weaving (relating voices, interests and differences across organizational positions), and pacing (tuning rhythm and tempo to resist premature closure and sustain participation). Rather than seeking early alignment, we show how inquiry was kept open through tinkering with agendas, formats and tempo. We suggest that these situated moves offer a way of naming and navigating ethical work by working from within tensions to support knowledge co-production on more balanced terms across organisational divides.

Keywords: Learning circles; Co-research; Relational ethics; Tension zones, Logic of care; Situated moves

Introduction

Collaborative research (co-research) is increasingly promoted through university strategies, policy agendas, and funding requirements, and the methodological repertoire for doing research "with" practitioners continues to grow (Russ et al., 2024; Wegener & Thomassen, 2024). Yet accounts from inside the doing of co-research remain relatively scarce, leaving much of the relational, political and ethical work of joint inquiry under-analysed (Phillips et al., 2021). In this paper, we examine learning circles as a co-research method, based on our research and development work with the approach.

Learning circles are part of a Nordic tradition for collaborative learning intended to engage practitioners in joint inquiry and the creation of new knowledge, and are recieving increased empirical and theretical attention (Aakjær & Wegener, 2023; Avby et al., 2025). However, when learning circles are mobilised as co-research, we still know too little about how power and care are negotiated in and around the circles. We conceive of co-research as a practice of dissolving binary categories of knowledge as either theoretical or experiential, and of reassessing value as a matter of either academic or societal impact (Wegener & Thomassen, 2024). The aspiration of co-research is to legitimize and produce various forms of knowing and to engage participants in mutual learning across differences. When succeeding, co-research can contribute to both academic theorizing and practical solutions and social change (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017; Groot et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2013). So, how do we 'walk the talk' when learning circles are applied as a co-research method? Ideals of inclusion and equality do not erase tensions and ethical dilemmas arising from the role of power in any knowledge-creating process (e.g. Foucault 1980). Phillips et al. (2021) recognize the inevitable play of power in collaborative research and stress the need to work reflexively with a *relational ethics* in co-research – one that anticipates the role of power and builds on mutual learning and care among participants. In the literature on learning circles, limited attention has been given to how such power tensions and dilemmas are navigated, and to the role of care in addressing them. Given these shortcomings, our aim is to develop a critical and reflexive awareness of how knowledge, power and care are co-created and negotiated in learning circles. We explore these dynamics in ethnographic material from our learning circle co-research, guided by the following analytical questions:

1. How did tension zones surface in the learning circle ?
2. How did a logic of care shape how these tensions were handled?
3. What situated moves toward a relational ethics can be traced from the analysis?

Our inquiry grows out of a qualitative research and development project in the field of elderly care on how to organise for more attractive and inclusive work communities and career paths in response to persistent recruitment challenges. In the project, learning circles were applied as a co-research method to foster mutual learning among participants and to co-create scientific knowledge between practitioners as co-researchers and researcher-facilitators engaged in joint inquiry. Because the development of learning circles was embedded in the project's research design, it provides a rich context for examining how knowledge and power relations unfold in co-research. Our work in organizing, facilitating and observing the circles has prompted us to explore how we strive to navigate the power tensions inherent in the method, and how we might address ethical concerns in ways that nurture mutual learning and care throughout the research process. We use the concepts of *tension zones* – our own term for attending to situated, power-infused tensions in learning circle co-research – and *a logic of care* (Mol, 2018) as interrelated sensitizing lines to orient our analysis of how power and care are negotiated. Building on these lines, we develop the notion of *situated moves* to capture the context-bound facilitation work through which researcher-facilitators navigate ethical concerns when expectations, interests, and organisational demands collide. The analysis traces how relational ethics is enacted through such moves – small adjustments in focus, framing, and tempo that shape what (and who) comes to matter in the joint inquiry.

The article is structured as follows: we first review literature on learning circles and participatory research, with particular attention to power and care, before introducing the concepts *tension zones* and *a logic of care* as interrelated sensitizing lines in our conceptual framework. We then outline the context and methods. Next, we analyse three situated moves (mattering, weaving, and pacing) that emerge when these sensitizing lines are applied on the learning circle facilitation. We conclude with reflections on developing a relational ethics of learning circles.

Learning circles as co-research: Knowing, power and ethics

Learning circles are defined as an organizational method that fosters learning processes by drawing on the expertise and practical knowledge of organizational members (practitioners) and a facilitator (researcher or consultant) (Mikkelsen, Marquard & Brandi, 2023). As a framework for co-creation, learning circles facilitate collaborative learning across professions, workplaces, and forms of expertise (Aakjær & Wegener, 2022; Lahdenperä, 2014). Literature on learning in 'circles' traces back to 19th-century democratic study circles in Scandinavia, and the circle is often described as a family of participatory, practice-based learning approaches (Lahdenperä & Marquard, 2019). Central features are high participation, reliance on participants' experience-based knowledge, and shared formation of learning content, although circle formats vary in how predefined the focus is (Avby et al., 2025; Aakjær & Wegener, 2023). This also distributes responsibility for learning, inclusion, and a common focus across participants (Bjerkaker, 2014; Hiebert, 1996). Recent studies from Denmark and Sweden (Marquard et al., 2023) highlight how learning circles can serve as a foundation for developing innovation ability and collaborative capacity. Despite their presence, key questions on the practice of learning circles as a co-research method remain under-theorised: how power shapes what counts as knowing; how asymmetries arise when practitioners and researchers co-research; and how learning circles can be enacted as caring, inclusive and equal spaces while addressing the connection between power and knowledge.

Co-creating knowing in learning circles

Learning-circle research highlights their potential for continuous development, collaboration, and linking practice and scientific knowledge (Avby et al., 2025; Marquard et al., 2023; Nilsen, P., Nordström (Avby) G. & Ellström, P.-E., 2012). Yet how do these qualities come about in practice? The key theoretical underpinnings of learning circles are situated, practice-based learning theories that emphasize practices of social interaction (collaboration) and inquiry into shared problems as the basic trigger of learning and knowing. While these account for the collaborative learning dynamics of learning circles, they tell little about the play of power tensions in such collaborative endeavours. For example, of how knowing is co-created and managed among practitioners and researchers having unequal roles and positions? To advance learning circles as a *caring* participatory

research method, we believe that further clarification and theorizing on these matters is an important starting point. We do so by turning towards more recent practice-based theories of knowing and learning as they underline the role of power in learning relations and call attention to the many (sometimes competing) ways of knowing in co-research.

Within practice-based traditions, knowing is understood as situated, relational, and socio-material – co-produced in everyday practices that give rise to multiple ways of knowing and being (cognitive, bodily, affective, aesthetic) (Cunliffe, 2022; Gherardi, 2016). From a Foucauldian perspective, power is integral to this co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities: some ways of knowing become dominating while others are marginalised (Phillips et al., 2021). Learning is integral to knowing: through learning – shaped by both collaboration and contestation – people expand some ways of knowing while other ways of knowing are marginalized. As practices intersect, they generate tensions and discontinuities as well as negotiated meanings (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Applied to learning circles as co-research, this theoretical lens directs attention to the play of power in co-produced knowing and offers a starting point for developing a more critical, reflexive awareness of tensions and ethical concerns in co-research relations.

The play of power in learning-circle co-research

Learning circles are often presented as an approach to the democratization of knowledge production (e.g. Lahdenperä, 2014; Avby et al., 2025). Yet, power is always at play in a research process, notwithstanding the democratic, collaborative, dialogic ideals. As Phillips et al. stresses, research relations are '*riddled with tensions arising from the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the "relational becoming" of knowledges and subjectivities'* (Phillips et al., 2022, p. 4). Accordingly, they argue that the buzzwords "collaboration" and "co-creation/co-production" may falsely suggest equitable and symmetrical power relations, thereby romanticizing collaborative research as straightforward processes of inclusion (Phillips et al., 2022, p. 2). This makes it difficult to take notice of, and critically attend to, tensions arising from the inexorable play of power in the practices of such discourse. Consequently, Philips et al. propose a distinctive critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics in "collaborative, democratic and

transformative" research that works with relational ethics by analysing the tensions in the "with" in "research *with*, not *on*, people" and the "co" in "co-creating knowledge":

> This critical, reflexive analysis homes in on the processes of co-creating knowledge and establishing collaborative research relations through the tensional, power-infused co-constitution of knowledge and subjectivities. It attends to the performativity of the terms themselves in the relational becoming of the collaborative project and project "we" (Phillips et al, 2022, p. 5).

We draw on, and aim to contribute to, this body of critical, reflexive work by introducing a set of sensitizing concepts that direct attention to the role of power in learning circles and inform their enactment as caring collaborative research practices. Sensitizing concepts offer 'a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances [and] suggest directions along which to look.' (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Below, we suggest 'tension zones' and 'a logic of care' as sensitizing concepts for thinking about (and looking for) future ways of working with relational ethics in learning circles. Inspired by Cunliffe (2022), we treat them as resources and lines of attention that sensitise us to how power and care are actively lived, felt, and given empirical meaning in co-research. In this way, we introduce them to sharpen our sensitivity as they pay heed to the inherent yoke between power and knowledge not only within learning circles – but also in our ways of employing them *with care* as researchers and circles facilitators.

Conceptual Framework

Tension zones: Mapping power in learning-circle co-research

We believe that an initial outline of the potential tensions in learning circles can contribute to the development of a relational ethics of learning circles. An ethics that does not neglect the 'role of power' and attends to the potential contradictory tensions and power biases among participants – as well as to the wider organizational context and networks of power relations of which they are part. Our term 'tension zones' aims to direct attentiveness to these matters. Building on this critical, reflexive understanding of power in collaborative research, we use it as a sensitizing line of attention that helps us notice where tensions and power dynamics may become empirically traceable in learning-circle co-research. As

an analytical gaze it helps us map and explicate zones of tensions – for example between co-researchers and academic researchers, between co-researchers themselves due to differences in positions and interests or between co-researchers and their wider organizational contexts. In this sense, tension zones are an analytical lens through which we look, while the specific tensions and situated power dynamics that emerge through the analysis are what we look at. This analytical gaze asks which knowledges are privileged and who benefits from co-research. Human–non-human relations are another tension zone, as materialities embed power that privileges some knowledges and marginalises others (Gherardi, 2015; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). We bracket this here to focus on participant power dynamics across organisational divides and contexts.

By using 'tension zones' as a sensitizing resource for considering relations of power beyond the present analysis, we seek to cultivate a more careful awareness of how we, as researchers, engage in research 'with' rather than 'on' practitioners. In our project, our objective was to promote joint qualitative inquiry, emphasizing collaboration rather than studying the field's practices from a distance. In doing so, we have sought to use learning circles to support the co-creation of practically valuable knowledge and the joint production of scientific knowledge among researchers and practitioner co-researchers. Power and care are deeply interconnected within this framework. Yet 'tension zones' mainly direct attention to the lived and felt experiences of the play of power in co-research, while features of care are less addressed. While the concept of tension zones attunes us to these asymmetries and situated plays of power in co-research, it offers only limited sensitivity to the relational and affective dimensions of how such power dynamics are experienced, navigated, and responded to in practice. Therefore, we propose Annemarie Mol's logic of care (Mol, 2008) as a second sensitizing concept.

A logic of care: Tinkering and attentiveness in co-research

The logic of care (Mol, 2008) offers a practice-based and situated understanding of care that is attuned to complexity, uncertainty, and relationality. Care is relational and always entangled with power; these relations shape how care is enacted (Tronto, 1993). This sensitizing concept resonates with learning circles as sites of co-research, because such sites can become contexts for the co-production of both practical and scientific knowledge

based on mutual learning and care (cf. Phillips et al., 2022). Yet, while co-production is central, so too are the imbalances and asymmetries embedded in research relationships.

Mol presents the logic of care as a critique of the dominant logic of choice, which assumes that individuals act autonomously by selecting between predefined options, based on clear preferences and information. This logic permeates many policy and research settings, shaping ideals of transparency, accountability, and empowerment. However, as Mol argues, such ideals often obscure the relational, messy, and ongoing nature of real-world care – and, we add, of caring co-research. Where the logic of choice emphasises clarity, autonomy, and control, the logic of care foregrounds tinkering, attentiveness, and mutual adjustment (Mol, 2008; Mol et al., 2010; Pichelstorfer, 2019). The logic of care softens our analytical gaze, reminding us that co-research is always a situated, unfolding, and relational practice. It frames co-research not as a series of discrete choices, but as a shared process of figuring out what matters, without clear endpoints or predefined solutions. Beyond this analytical purpose, it attunes us to find ways in co-research that value practices that sustain people in their evolving (organisational) lives. It involves staying with what is going on – making space for what is present and what is emerging. This includes being attentive to shifts – in energy, in themes, in words – and then modifying and adapting to accommodate what matters.

At the heart of this orientation lies tinkering, not as technical improvisation, but as a care-full mode of practical reasoning and attuning to what matters. Mol (2008) uses the term to grasp the small, intuitive, hands-on adjustments that are fundamental to her logic of care. As Pichelstorfer (2019) notes, tinkering is not a sign of failure or indecision, but a form of situated ethics that reflects the moral weight of complexity: doing "good" is not about applying fixed principles, but about staying with the trouble of what is good enough, here, now, with others.

In analysing our work with learning circles, we recognize this form of tinkering in the many small adjustments made along the way, by us as facilitators, and by participants. For instance, when a participant rephrases a colleague's point to create space for reflection, or when we adapt and change course mid-session to accommodate an emergent matter of concern, we are not simply managing time or content, we are enacting care. This is closely connected to Mol's emphasis on shared responsibility, a central feature of learning circles (reflecting their democratic origin). What is pivotal here is how

it is practiced. Together, these elements outline a mode of doing co-research that is humble, relational and caring. Care, in this sense, is not a backdrop to research, but a condition for dialogue, reflection, and participation. It demands attentiveness to difference, vulnerability, and shifting relations. It requires a gaze that is soft enough to notice what is emerging (fragile, partial, maybe not yet fully spoken) and responsive enough to act without dominating. This stands in productive contrast to the sharp gaze we direct through tension zones, which help us interrogate how power circulates, what knowledge is privileged, and who may be left out. Where one concept sharpens, the other softens. Together, they form a complementary ethical optic.

A dual ethical gaze on power and care

For us, the logic of care opens a space for thinking differently about what it means to act responsibly as researchers in collaborative, practice-near contexts. It challenges us to engage with the affective, moral (and material) dimensions of being part of the field. By holding tension zones and the logic of care together, we seek to articulate an ethics that is both critically reflexive and practically grounded – one that recognises the presence of power while also affirming the relational, situated, and ongoing nature of care in co-research. This dual gaze invites attentiveness to the concrete ways power and care is negotiated, withheld, or enabled in practice – and encourages us to ask: what does it take to cultivate learning circles that are not only collaborative, but also ethically responsive and caring to the situations and people involved? Calling on our own research studies, next we analyse empirical examples of how we have begun to explore and enact learning circles as a caring, co-research method. We identified three types of situated moves and offer these as provisional propositions towards developing a relational ethics of learning circles in practice.

Empirical context and data

We draw on our engagement in a three-year qualitative research project aimed at generating practice-based knowledge about cross-organizational efforts to create more inclusive work communities and career pathways into elderly care, particularly for adults with interrupted educational or work trajectories. The project unfolds in two geographically and institutionally distinct municipal settings in Denmark. In each setting,

a two-year program of cross-organizational learning circles has been employed as a method for shared reflection, dialogue, and development – involving participants from three organizational domains: municipal elderly care services, vocational education in social and health care, and municipal employment services. In this article, we focus on one of the two learning circles, where the first and second author were directly involved as researchers through facilitation, observation, and data generation.

Over a period of 24 months, 18 learning-circle meetings (each approximately four hours long) were conducted, each involving around 8-10 participants from the three organizations mentioned above. Circle meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These recordings, alongside interviews, preparatory materials, and visual or written summaries from the meetings, form the core empirical material for this article. The broader project combines two mutually informing tracks: learning circles as structured spaces of collaborative inquiry, and ethnographic inquiry as a means of co-creating and gathering context-sensitive knowledge. Ethnographic data include documents, 20 interviews, and organisation-specific and participant-produced materials (e.g., photos, emails, agendas, slides, visual notes, drawings, posters, and charts). This material is used both to inform the learning circles and to be informed by them – allowing for a dynamic interplay where insights from practice generate new questions and learning-circle reflections feed into ongoing ethnographic analysis.

Beyond the learning-circle meetings, we conducted two listening workshops in the research group. Drawing on Pallesen et al.'s (2025) notion of resonant listening, we approached the recordings not only to grasp meaning but to remain open to ambiguities, multiplicities, and silences. Two fellow researchers who had not participated in this track joined us in listening to selected excerpts where power tensions were at play. Our listening was informed by Nancy's (2007) distinction between hearing and listening, and by Taptiklis' (2008) attention to multiple "openings" in the encounter[1]. We compared what became audible across excerpts and perspectives and used these discussions to refine our analytic questions and guide attention in the material.

[1] According to Nancy (2007), hearing is oriented toward grasping meaning, while listening involves staying open to resonance, ambiguity and what is not yet fully said. Listening therefore helps us notice what may otherwise be missed when we move too quickly to interpretation. Drawing on Taptiklis (2008), we understand "openings" as moments in the encounter that invite further attention or response, whether through what is said, how it is said, what remains unspoken, or the atmosphere of the exchange (e.g. cadence, pauses, hesitations or implicit yearnings).

In the analysis, we use empirically grounded composite vignettes: short analytic narratives of micro-situations from circle meetings and related follow-up work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). Our analysis is iterative and abductive, moving between episodes, artefacts, and evolving conceptualisations of situated moves towards a relational ethics of learning circles. Following Bloom-Christen and Grunow (2024), we use vignettes to zoom in on paradigmatic episodes and their analytical significance. The vignettes are organised around three recurrent situated moves that emerged abductively during the analytical process and are crafted to render the power dynamics at stake in learning-circle co-research.

Analysis

The analysis proceeds through composite vignettes that zoom in on micro-situations where tensions surface and facilitation involves ethical attunement.

Situated Moves: Tinkering with care in tension zones

In analysing the empirical material and discussing our ethical considerations, we draw on tension zones and a logic of care as sensitizing lines. Across the material, we have come to see three recurrent patterns in facilitation work which we term 'situated moves': *mattering*, *weaving*, and *pacing*. Each vignette is organised around (and traces) one of these recurrent moves. We analyse the situated moves as context-bound gestures and attempts (try-outs), each addressing a particular constellation of tensions and possibilities, such as those between voices, work rhythms, expectations, and goals.

In the three vignettes that follows, we elaborate these situated moves. We use the term *mattering* to point to how certain concerns come to count as shared objects of inquiry and thereby orient the work (cf. Schatzki, 2001); *weaving* to name how voices, interests and differences across organisational positions are brought into relation in ways that can reshape the inquiry; and *pacing* to capture how rhythm and tempo are negotiated (slowing down, pausing, and working against pressures for premature closure) to sustain participation and keep inquiry open. These moves are not fixed steps but situated propositions, reflecting our attempts to sense and respond ethically when experience, expectations, interests and values meet and sometimes collide.

Situated moves of mattering

This vignette traces situated moves of mattering across episodes in which participants/co-researchers, and we as researchers-facilitators, negotiate what can come to count as a legitimate shared concern in the learning circle work, and how such negotiations orient the inquiry while navigating competing demands, expectations, and implicit hierarchies of relevance.

An open agenda?

A pivotal element of the learning circle model is that the content of the circle – *what* the circle is about (the topic), *how* it matters, and *why* – is ideally decided by its participants. A meeting agenda was a pivotal element in this regard. Before the circle could "work on" anything, participants – and we as researcher-facilitators – had to negotiate what would count as a legitimate shared matter of concern, and what would be left in the background. In this sense, the agenda should be open to influence from the participants' own experiences, questions, and concerns. In this case, this openness unfolded within a predefined project frame: the purpose of generating knowledge on how career paths and work communities in elderly care can become more inclusive for adults with interrupted educational or work histories. Participants were invited or appointed by their respective organizations or superiors and were aware of this framing.

From the outset, differences surfaced in what counted as urgent or meaningful and in imagined routes toward change. The framing introduced several tension zones: although participants could co-shape the agenda, the overarching purpose was already set. One tension concerned quality and efficiency in elderly care versus ambitions to include newcomers with interrupted trajectories. Another concerned voluntariness – whether participation reflected interest or managerial expectations. Such tensions influenced how matters were continuously negotiated.

Follwing this analytical gaze, we see how competing priorities across the three involved organizations intersected with the project's aim of promoting inclusive recruitment practices. What counts as quality and efficiency, and how they are balanced, varies depending on whether one works in elderly care, vocational training, or employment services. As one participant put it: *"We need more trainees in elderly care, but we must shield practice environments where employees are already overburdened and drained of resources to take in newcomers"* (team leader in elderly care). Another

stated: *"Students don't learn by sitting in the classroom…they need access and assistance to practice"* (VET-teacher). A third pointed out how the success criteria of the three organizations often clash and fail to support one another (team leader). Together, these voices bring into focus that "what matters" is not given but negotiated under cross-pressures of organisational logics, success criteria, and resource constraints.

These conversations brought underlying tensions between organizational roles and priorities to the surface – tensions that might have affected the process in subtle manners if the agenda had been treated as fixed or non-negotiable. Rather than trying to resolve these tensions, we chose to stay with them. Using a logic of care as a sensitizing gaze in the following, we see the situated move of tinkering with the process to negotiate the matters at stake – adjusting agendas, slowing down when needed, shifting formats to make room for disagreement and for participants to bring in concerns that did not always align neatly with the project's aims.

From open agenda to temporary anchoring

In the first meeting we opened with a question: "What do we want to start a conversation about and explore together?" In pairs, participants shared everyday experiences guided by prompts such as: *What puzzles me? What enables or limits access to workplace communities? What would I like to discuss with others in the circle?* The room was lively with talk but also punctuated by shifts in tone – moments where differences in roles, priorities, and organisational logics became audible. Together, we next identified four recurring themes for further inquiry: *1) improving transitions and coordination, 2) making the profession more visible and valued, 3) exploring new recruitment pathways, and 4) getting closer to the person behind the newcomer.* No single theme was equally important to everyone. Choosing "new recruitment opportunities" as the focus for the next meeting was less a consensus than a temporary anchoring – a practical step that maintained space to return to other themes. It was a facilitator-led decision: an exercise of our authority to create direction while trying to remain responsive to multiple interests. This moment captures a delicate balance that recurred throughout the process between moving the inquiry forward and holding open what mattered to different participants.

Turning to our second analytical gaze, resisting an early lock-in can be read as a situated move of mattering within a logic of care. Instead of settting the agenda to push

the project ahead, tinkering and settling for a light structure – a thematic summary – while leaving openings for re-entry and further negotiation can be seen as a situated move less informed by a logic of choice (emphasising clarity, autonomy, and control). But holding space for the logic of care, foregrounding attentiveness, and mutual adjustment. Staying with the trouble of what is good enough, here, now. Learning circles rarely begin with alignment; they begin in complexity. Facilitation work, then, involves holding open a space where differences are not smoothed away but become part of the shared terrain. Such moments, and the small adjustments they call for, are part of how we have tried to grow a *relational ethics* in the practice of learning circles – working from within the tensions, rather than in spite of them.

Situated moves of weaving

By *weaving* we refer to the situated work of bringing different organisational logics, experiences and concerns into relation, enabling participants to re-situate their own positions in light of others and, in doing so, to re-frame the problem and possible inquiry onwards.

An introductory letter weaving together themes and concerns

To support cross-professional dialogue and attentiveness to the interdependency across tasks and interests, we crafted an introductory letter titled *This is what we heard you talk about.* Based on pre-circle interviews, the letter merged key themes and concerns, from across the three organizational contexts into a "woven thread" of shared issues across participants' diverse professional realities. It was not a neutral summary, but a tentative gesture: reflecting back what had been shared while also stitching together a collective invitation to inquiry. The intention was to initiate a conversation and to set the tone for the circle's open inquiry processes. Drawing on Shaw's view (2002) of conversation as a space for navigating complexity, we sought to create openings that did not avoid tension but invited attention and reflection across organizational roles. In this sense, the letter offered a soft structure for the first circle meeting – framing difference as something to stay with, rather than smooth over, and encouraging cross-organizational dialogue and exploration.

Weaving in the circle: repositioning "the job centre" through a case

Throughout the process, we used interviews as a way of weaving in voices and experiences that were not in the room. In the circle, these interviews encountered participants' knowledge and organisational logics, opening space to attend to tensions and power-laden positionings.

In a meeting, participants reflected on an interview about a merit student, "Sally", who had attempted to transition to a higher educational level. Her progress had been excellent and her motivation strong, yet private financial barriers forced her to withdraw. A municipal mentor described how colleagues had searched for solutions but were unable to find the support needed. When the case was discussed, an employment team leader wondered why the job centre had not been involved, pointing to compensatory options that might have helped Sally continue. As the employment team leader put it: *"So very few people think of the job centre as a supportive part… They think we are really only out to take people's lives and punish them."* A consultant from elderly care affirmatively responded: *"They see it as something negative, don't they?"* In this exchange, a tension zone emerges around student's interrupted transition, while also making visible a familiar positioning that extends the single incident: employment services are cast as a "pariah" and absent from the imagined routes to support. At the same time, the conversation began to weave organisational perspectives into relation, opening a shift in how actors were positioned (employment service as a relevant actor in pre-vocational programmes into elderly care), how the problem was framed (a situation of multiple, co-occuring challenges incl. rising gasoline prices, domestic circumstances, geographically dispersed offers of education) and where possible ways forward were sought at later points in the process. This episode is a context-bound try-out in weaving: a situated move attempting to hold difference with care and open space for participants to re-situate their positions in light of others. It also makes visible how power shapes which organisations are recognised as legitimate partners – and which are kept at a distance. Similar dynamics recurred across meetings as we wove competing priorities into dialogue – for example, protecting scarce resources for day-to-day care versus securing internship access for pre-vocational students.

Situated moves of pacing

Pacing is our term for the situated work of negotiating the inquiry's rhythm – when to move on, when to pause, and what needs more time. In learning circle co-research, such calibrations can open up (or close down) space for multiple voices, uncertainties, and differences to be explored. In the following empirical excerpt *tension zones* emerged between varying institutional logics and temporalities, prompting a response shaped by *a logic of care*. This vignette traces one recurrent pacing move: slowing down when forward momentum meets a call to reframe.

Circling back: When reflection asks for more time

Across our material, this pacing move recurs when a push toward action meets a call to slow down and reframe. In the episode below, participants proposed a concrete idea for action, while others asked for more time to reflect and reframe the problem. As different organisational perspectives surfaced, a tension emerged between acting quickly or staying with inquiry to reflect more deeply. Learning circles often require navigating this space: between the urge to move forward and the need to pause, rethink, and reatune. Rather than pushing ahead, we slowed down, creating space to revisit what mattered.

Meeting 3 - Momentum

> *We're in the third meeting of the circle. The energy is high. Two participants are sketching out models and discuss how to make a business case on on-the-job mentors in elderly care. Their idea is to investigate whether and how such a role could help reduce drop-out, improve retention, and support well-being in the workplace. They offer to bring the idea back to the leadership level of their organization and explore the possibility of launching a small pilot project. There's a strong sense of momentum in the room - maybe even relief? Something is happening. Something concrete. A breakthrough?*

A call that slows things down

> *The next day, a participant calls the facilitator. In his view, the conversation moved too quickly from A to B. He argued for more time to explore recruitment pathways from the job centre and to dwell in the differences*

> *between target groups; the reflection part was missing. From this perspective, strengthening the mentor role didn't quite resonate. After follow-up conversations, we decided to pause, set the plan aside and return to the topic of recruitment and dropout at the next meeting.*

This vignette shows how tempo becomes a site of power: whose timeline and criteria for a "good next step" guides the inquiry? Rather than framing the concern as resistance, we read it as a signal and responded by pausing, listening, and adjusting the pace. In this way, care became a practical guide – not only for how to move forward (by proposing tentative closure as described in the first vignette), but for how to stay with what emerged, including when to step back. Pacing thus appears as a ongoing, context-bound situated move: a gesture of relational ethical attunement amid competing logics of time and pace.

Discussion and conclusion

The learning circle as co-research is never power-neutral, even when grounded in democratic and inclusive ideals. Using *tension zones* and a *logic of care* as interrelated sensitizing lines, we have sought to sharpen and soften our analytical gaze on ethics in our co-research practice, attending to how power and care are negotiated in and through collaborative inquiry. As sensitizing lines, they do not prescribe what to see or do. Instead, they help us ask more precise questions about how agendas, relevance, and participation are shaped in the learning circles, and about how researchers and practioners worked *with* rather than *on* one another.

Across the analysis of our empirical material, we identified three recurrent situated moves through which we, as researchers, sought to enact relational ethics in the facilitation of co-research: *mattering*, *weaving*, and *pacing***.** Mattering draws attention to the processes through which matters of concern in the circle is negotiated under cross-pressures of organisational logics, success criteria, and resource constraints. Weaving illuminates moves where voices, interests, and differences are brought into relation in ways that can reposition actors (and organisations) in the inquiry and open alternative routes. Pacing shows how temporality becomes a site of power, as rhythm and tempo are negotiated, shaping what can be attended to, whose urgencies prevail, and when the inquiry is allowed to stay open.

Taken together, the analysis and the identified three moves suggest that a relational ethics is not a fixed code of conduct but an ongoing, situated practice. It is enacted through tinkering with care in tension zones: holding open differences without forcing alignment; treating friction as a resource for inquiry instead of something to be smoothed away; and remaining attentive to how authority, timelines, and organisational positionings influence whose concerns can matter, whose knowledge travels, and when the inquiry is ready to move on. In combination, these moves offer partial and evolving contributions to a living ethics of learning circles, shared to support reflection on how learning circles as co-research can foster relational ethics in complex cross-organisational settings. In this sense, the article provides a vocabulary for the ethical work of learning circle co-research and empirically grounded examples of how it can be practiced. While grounded in learning circles, these moves may also resonate with other forms of co-research, where care and power is at stake.

We also acknowledge the limits of our approach. Our analysis has not examined power in its broader structural dimensions, nor have we systematically addressed the affective or material aspects of encounters in the field, that is, how emotions, moods, and atmospheres circulate within and around learning-circle interactions, or how material arrangements such as spatial layout, physical artefacts, and technological tools shape participation, interaction, and the possibilities for care. Likewise, our focus on facilitation has not explored how tension zones and a logic of care might be mapped and addressed more structurally vis-à-vis the wider organizational and institutional contexts. Future work could extend this mapping and further examine, how the three moves are constrained or enabled by these wider infrastructures or how atmospheres and embodied experiences could inform and deepen a relational ethics of learning circles.

By elaborating how *tension zones* and a *logic of care* can inform the researcher/facilitators situated moves of mattering, weaving, and pacing, we contribute to methodological discussions on developing learning circles as a caring co-research method. Such a method works from within tensions, rather than seeking their resolution, and cultivates conditions where joint inquiry can take root across organizational divides.

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