

Balance in the Process



COLLECTIVE ACTION

COMMUNITY BUILDING

CONNECTIONS

HEALING



Stages:

1. Determining Suitability
2. Preparation
3. Gathering all parties in Circle
4. Follow-up

GUIDELINES

TALKING PIECE

CIRCLE KEEPING

CONSENSUS

CEREMONY

STORYTELLING

SHARED
VALUES

INDIGENOUS
TEACHINGS

Essential Elements of Constructing the Circle

The Circle is a structured dialog process that nurtures connections and empathy while honoring the uniqueness of each participant. The Circle can hold pain, joy, despair, hope, anger, love, fear and paradox. In the Circle each person has the opportunity to speak his/her truth but cannot assume the truth for anyone else. The Circle welcomes difficult emotions and difficult realities while maintaining a sense of positive possibilities. The Circle is deeply rooted in an understanding of profound interconnectedness as the nature of the universe.

The Circle Keeper uses the following elements to design the Circle and to create the space for all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another and to seek resolution of their conflict or greater understanding of one another's perspective.

- **Seating of all participants in a circle (preferably without any tables)**
- **Opening ceremony**
- **Centerpiece**
- **Values/guidelines**
- **Talking piece**
- **Guiding questions**
- **Closing ceremony**

Seating of all participants in a circle – Geometry matters! It is very important to seat everyone in a circle. That seating arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and be accountable to one another face to face. It also creates a sense of focus on a common concern without creating a sense of ‘sides’. A Circle emphasizes equality and connectedness. Removing tables is sometimes uncomfortable for people, but is important in creating a space apart from our usual way of discussing difficult issues. It increases accountability because all body language is obvious to everyone.

Opening ceremony – Circles use openings and closings to mark the Circle as a sacred space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting or group. The clear marking of the beginning and end of the Circle is very important because the Circle invites participants to drop the ordinary masks and protections they may wear that create distance from their core self and the core self of others. Openings help participants to center themselves, bring themselves into full presence in the space, recognize interconnectedness, release unrelated distractions and be mindful of the values of the core self.

Centerpiece – Circles use a centerpiece to create a focal point that supports speaking from the heart and listening from the heart. The centerpiece usually sits on the floor in the center of the open space inside the circle of chairs. Typically there is a cloth or mat as the base. The centerpiece may include items representing the values of the core self, the foundational principles of the process, a shared vision of the group. Centerpieces often emphasize inclusion by incorporating symbols of individual Circle members as well as cultures represented in the Circle.

Guidelines – Participants in a Circle play a major role in designing their own space by creating the guidelines for their discussion. The guidelines articulate the agreements among participants about how they will conduct themselves in the Circle dialog. The guidelines are intended to describe the behaviors that the participants feel will make the space safe for them to speak their truth. Guidelines are not rigid constraints but supportive reminders of the behavioral expectations of everyone in the

Circle. They are not imposed on the participants but rather are adopted by consensus of the Circle.

Talking piece – Circles use a talking piece to regulate the dialog of the participants. The talking piece is passed from person to person around the rim of the Circle. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. It allows the holder to speak without interruption and allows the listeners to focus on listening and not be distracted by thinking about a response to the speaker. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, thoughtful reflection, and an unhurried pace. The talking piece is a powerful equalizer. It allows every participant an equal opportunity to speak and carries an implicit assumption that every participant has something important to offer the group. As it passes physically from hand to hand, the talking piece weaves a connecting thread among the members of the Circle. The talking piece reduces the control of the keeper and consequently shares control of the process with all participants. Where possible the talking piece represents something important to the group. The more meaning the talking piece has (consistent with the values of Circle), the more powerful it is for engendering respect for the process and alignment with the core self.

Guiding questions – Circles use prompting questions or themes at the beginning of rounds to stimulate conversation about the main interest of the Circle. Every member of the Circle has an opportunity to respond to the prompting question or theme of each round. Careful design of the questions is important to facilitate a discussion that goes beyond surface responses. Questions are often designed to elicit the sharing of personal stories by the participants.

Closing ceremony - Closings acknowledge the efforts of the Circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future, and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives. Openings and closings are designed to fit the nature of the particular group and provide opportunities for cultural responsiveness.

The role of the facilitator or keeper of the Circle is to assist the participants in creating a safe space where each can speak and listen from the heart. The keeper helps the Circle create the space and then monitors the quality of the space. The keeper is not an enforcer of Circle guidelines but the guardian of them. Every member of the Circle bears responsibility for the quality of the dialog. If the dialog becomes disrespectful the keeper invites the Circle to discuss what is happening and how to move toward a more respectful interaction.

Circles are never about persuasion. They are a process of exploring meaning from each perspective in the Circle. From that exploration we may find common ground or we may understand more clearly why another person sees something differently. The more diverse the perspectives in a Circle the richer the dialog and the opportunity for new insights. The keeper does not control this process but helps the Circle work through uncomfortable moments by maintaining the use of the talking piece going in order around the Circle and by engaging the Circle in reflection on its own process when needed.

The Circle keeper is a participant and can speak in turn in the Circle. Sometimes the keeper speaks first in a round to model the kind of response being invited or to model the sharing of personal stories. At other times the keeper speaks last in a round to reduce the risk of the keeper influencing the dialog inappropriately. The keeper or facilitator of the Circle may on rare occasions, such as calling a break, speak without the talking piece but only for process reasons, never to comment on content.

The Circle keeper attempts to hold an attitude of compassion and caring for every member of the Circle regardless of behavior. The Circle keeper's respectful relationship with every participant is essential to the creation of a safe space.

Circles are used for teaching/learning, building relationships, exploring different perspectives on a topic, developing social-emotion literacy, healing from loss or trauma, coordinating teamwork or collective action, engaging dialog on very difficult issues and resolving conflict.

Participating in a Circle

The Circle is an intentional space designed to help us bring our best self into a dialog process that aims to give voice to every participant, reveal connections and differences and engage participants in all their dimensions – emotional, physical, mental and spiritual. The Circle structure slows down our usual pace of dialog to ensure that it is both respectful and reflective.

As a participant you are invited to:

- speak from the heart
- listen from the heart
- hold confidential any personal information shared
- respect the importance of everyone having an opportunity to speak by not speaking too long

A talking piece will be used to manage the dialog so that each participant will have a chance to speak and be able to speak with no fear of interruption. The talking piece is passed from person to person around the Circle. Only the person holding the talking piece has the floor to speak. All others work to listen deeply. You may pass the talking piece without speaking. There is never an obligation to speak. You may hold the talking piece for a moment of silence before passing. The keeper or facilitator of the Circle may occasionally speak without the talking piece but only for process reasons, never to comment on content.

The slower pace of Circle allows us to be more in touch with our inner thoughts and feelings and gives us time to express those more fully than we normally can. When you have the talking piece you are invited to notice what is most meaningful to you in the Circle dialog and speak to that. In a Circle we share what things look like or feel like to us, not to persuade, but to offer our unique perspective to the topic or the situation.

Circles are designed to be respectful but not to suppress difficult emotions or differences. The Circle seeks the deep truth held by the participants even when that is very uncomfortable. Every participant has responsibility for supporting and nurturing an atmosphere of respect when the dialog is difficult or tense. Leadership is a shared responsibility in Circle.

Talking Circle Outline

Welcome

Mindfulness Moment

Opening Ceremony

Introduce the talking piece – how it works and what meaning it has (if any).

Explain center

Round: Introductions or Check-in

Round: Generating Values for the Circle

Round: 1) Generating Guidelines for the circle *or* 2) offer basic guidelines and ask if these guidelines are okay with the Circle

Round: Guiding question #1 on the topic or intention of the Circle

Round: 1) Follow-up to question #1 *or* 2) question #2 related to the topic or intention of the Circle

Round: 1) Follow-up to earlier question *or* 2) another question related to the topic or intention of the Circle

Round: Closing thoughts about the Circle

Closing Ceremony

Thank everyone for being part of the Circle

Circle Planning Form

Basic Talking Circle

Goal: What is my purpose in holding this circle?

Participants: Who will be invited to this Circle?

Center: Will I have a Center in this Circle – if so, what will be in the Center?

Opening: How will I open this circle? A poem, quote, movement, breathing, story . . . ?

Talking piece: What object will I use as a talking piece and why?

Introductions/check-in: What question will I ask to start building connection in the Circle?

Values: What question will I ask to establish a values foundation for the Circle?

Guidelines: Will I offer basic guidelines or have the Circle generate the guidelines?

Round one on the purpose of the Circle: What question will I use to start the discussion of the purpose/topic of this Circle?

Round two on the purpose of the Circle: What further question might be helpful to continue exploring the purpose/topic of the Circle?

Round three (if time allows): What question might draw reflection on what has come up in round one and two?

Check out: How are people feeling about this Circle?

Closing: How will I close this circle? Movement, reading, breathing, stretch, . . . ?

Materials: What materials do I need to bring to conduct this Circle?

Using Circle in the Classroom: Create an outline for a circle to teach

Suggestion: Introducing a new unit of study

The subject I am teaching is:

The unit I am starting is:

Circle outline

My opening will be (a quote? A picture? A story?). (*Example: for a unit on poetry, Langston Hughes A dream deferred or play a 3 minute song.*)

My first question: (*Example: what word comes to your mind when I say 'poetry?'*)

My second question: (*Example: Have you ever written a rap or song or rhyme or poem or made a greeting card? Tell us about it.*)

My third question: (*Example: Why do you think people write poetry?*)

Final round: (*Example: Does anyone have anything else to say about poetry?*)

My closing will be: (*Example: recite a pop song or rap.*)

Restorative School Practices

Following are *suggestions* for daily, weekly and monthly restorative practices that a school building or youth program could consider implementing as a means of creating a positive school climate that builds relationships and the skills of empathy. These suggestions come from Cordelia Anderson, The International Institute on Restorative Practices, *Circle in the Square* and *The Mind Up Curriculum*.

Classroom practices:

All-school 20 minute circles:

- Circle on Monday morning, check-in;
- Circle on Friday, check-out;
- Circle on Wednesday, after lunch, check-up or student-led, student topics;

All teachers:

- Once a week send around the TP to share or teach or check-in;
- Once a class period, ask an empathy question;
- Once a class period, use an 'I' statement;
- Once a month conduct SEAD: Stop Everything and Dialogue. See SEAD and Circle Tools.

All-school practice

By the middle of September, all students will have:

- Learned the circle process: talking piece, center piece, and going in order;
- Opening, closing, topics;
- Shared their values in the classroom;
- Developed their classroom common agreement.

Students and staff will have voted on 5-10 School-wide values.

1. Each classroom puts their values on poster paper;
2. Values are posted in the lunch room on Value Day or listed on-line or on paper;
3. Every student and staff votes on 3-5 values using 3-5 dots; voting is done during the lunch period or online or some other method of including everyone;
- 4 A Wordle is made of all value words; the top 3-5 become the school-wide values and posters are made for them through SEAD. See SEAD and Circle Tools.
5. The same process is done for school-wide common agreements.

School Student support staff and administrators teach to each social studies class about the restorative questions and making amends.

Restorative questions are posted around the school.

Administrators, when addressing harm, will

- Assess the readiness of all parties in using a restorative response;
- Use the restorative questions in face to face meetings, if appropriate;
- Involve teachers in face to face meetings;
- Provide teachers with appropriate information on the agreements;
- Keep track of data: office referrals (as a means of assessing implementation and support to teachers for circle practice), restorative meetings, agreements kept, and evaluation of process.

The faculty and staff will:

- Use the TP at least once in staff meetings;
- Include the Restorative Practices report as an agenda item in staff meetings;
- Identify and provide coaches as needed;
- Use the Circle process in IEP meetings;
- Use the Circle as needed in team meetings.

Continuum of restorative re-directs and mindful responses

Thinking and Breathing for Adults

Count backwards from 5 before speaking.

Take 5: count backwards from 5 and think of one thing you appreciate about the student before speaking.

Breathe in 4 counts, hold 10 counts, and exhale 8 counts before speaking.

Ask the question to yourself, 'What might have happened to this student that he or she acts this way?' before intervening.

Affirm to yourself, 'This behavior is not about me,' before speaking.

Speaking:

Start with an affirmation.

Start with a positive.

Start with an 'I' statement.

Start with "I want to help everyone to be safe here. I want you to feel safe."

Start with "I want to talk to you but first I need to see how you and I are feeling."

Start with "Let us breathe first and then talk."

Other responses to irritating behaviors:

"I am feeling restlessness in the class. I think we need a brain break! Let's do a little stretching."
See Energizing Brain Breaks.

"I am having a hard time concentrating. I need a break. Let's stop and breathe--standing on one leg!" See Yoga Calm.

"We need to listen more closely to each other. Circle up and let's make rain."

"We need a break. Joke time!" (Use a book of jokes or vet the joke at the beginning of the day)

Restorative Chats:

"I see that.....I am concerned that.....I am wondering if....I will check back with you later to see how things are going."

Restorative Questions: "What happened, what were you thinking, what were you feeling, what you have thought since, etc."

Classroom Circles

"I feel distracted from the lesson right now. I need to check in with you all about our classroom values. I will send the TP around. What value do you need to remember to help you focus on the lesson? I will start. I need to focus on....."

Or, "What common agreement do you think is important right now to continue learning?"

Or, "Let's check in. If you were a kind of weather, what would you be? (Or) If you were an animal what would you be? What is one thing you can do now to help each other focus on the lesson at hand? Let's make a list. What is one thing from this list that you can commit to doing for the rest of the day? Is there anything else anyone wants to say?"

Office Referral

"I am unable to take the time to sort this out with you right now. I want everyone to be safe, so we can all learn. I want you to go to the office to get some help. I will check back with Mr. Philips and with you to see if we can find a time to talk about what just happened and repair the harm."

For more information, contact Nancy Riestenberg, School Climate Specialist, 651-582-8433.