

A Dynamic Peacemaking Method Restorative Circles

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Abstract

Circle processes have been used as a structured dialoguing tool to address community conflict in many of the world's indigenous cultures for centuries. In the 1990s institutions of higher education began incorporating these practices into their work. Circle processes engage student development goals by building ethical leadership, interpersonal competence, and cognitive complexity. They create a safe space to reflectively think, express opinions, and experience interdependence and human connection. This rich environment can be used for a wide variety of purposes in higher education including community-building, addressing conflict, supporting understanding, healing, reintegration, and celebration.

In a partnership between Student Affairs and the School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego, we have recently

begun implementing circle processes to mobilize students, faculty, and staff to address complicated social issues and community conflicts, including student behavior, hate crimes, and other relevant social topics. Our goal is to embed the use of circle processes within already existing programs, curriculum, and services. We are able to cultivate a deeper dialogue that enables learning and transformation by creating a process in which community members are able to speak their truth in a safe space.

This experientially-based session will allow participants to gain facilitation skills by engaging in an actual circle process that is aimed at the conference theme of "mobilizing the next generation for social reform." There will also be USD undergraduates who have participated in and facilitated circle processes to share their experience. We hope to provide a space that allows participants to simultaneously engage in the theme of the conference and learn about a strategy that they can integrate into their daily work. We will provide a paper that examines the use of circle processes in higher education, with case studies and an assessment of the impact of circle processes at USD.

We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

As an ASHOKA Changemaker University¹, the University of San Diego is constantly striving to incorporate innovative experiential learning opportunities for students. Restorative circle processes have helped provide inspiration and motivation for students to engage in deeper learning about their experiences. Circle processes are designed to promote student leadership, moral reasoning, interpersonal competence, cognitive complexity, reflection, and effective communication. Circles are flexible in responding to the many issues students face in our university community.

Circle Framework

The Circle framework has two main components. The outer framework consists of the physical elements where participants sit in a circle of chairs with no table in the middle, which provides a

¹ <http://ashokau.org/>

safe space to voice comments and concerns. The facilitator maintains the structure of the circle through ground rules, the talking piece, opening and closing ceremonies or prayers, and circle questions. The talking piece is a symbol of significance to the facilitator. As the talking piece moves around the circle the person holding the piece has the floor to speak, and everyone else agrees to listen and remain silent. The inner framework includes less tangible elements. Any facilitator training or deeper study of circle processes should provide an understanding of these elements. They are listed below with suggestions for further reading.

1. Circles create a *sacred space* (see Pranis, 2005)
2. Working to name moments of *synchronicity and connectedness* (see Jaworski, 2011)
3. Understanding that humans, to some degree, share *core values* (see Pranis, 2005)
4. Participants are invited to *hold paradox and tensions* (see Bohm, 1996)
5. Circles reveal both *light and shadow* (see Ellinor & Gerard, 1998)

6. A new narrative emerges reflecting a *collective wisdom* (see

Baldwin & Linnea, 2010)

The outer framework provides a safe space for the inner framework to flourish and cultivate healing and depth for its participants.

Transformative Questions

The above briefly named framework and elements work together to create the context for potential impact and transformation. However, it is the questions that are presented to the group that activate this potential. Circle facilitators spend a lot of time designing and revising the specific questions that are asked in the circle. Good questions engage participants both intellectually and emotionally by concentrating on storytelling about lived experiences. Often times circles begin with questions of “who are we now” and “where are we coming from” and progress towards questions of “who are we becoming” and “how do we move forward.”

Case Studies

Circle Processes can be used in many contexts: To promote understanding, provide a space for reflection, build community,

address conflict, support those who have been harmed, reintegrate offenders, cultivate healing, celebrate a success, and others (Pranis, 2005). Below are case studies of circles used at the University of San Diego that represent a range of possible purposes.

Addressing Harm and Reintegration into Community

A circle brought seventeen community members together to address an incident on campus involving three freshman males who were hospitalized for alcohol poisoning. Residents living in the hall who took care of the intoxicated students requested to come together to address the harm and impact on community. The circle was helpful in addressing a specific harm as well as a larger cultural issue of alcohol consumption in the residence halls.

Creating Dialogue and Understanding

A Circle Process was used during Hate Crimes Awareness Week. The whole campus community was invited to attend this opportunity to develop a deeper awareness of a social and cultural issue plaguing society and our campus. One student reflected, "The stories told made me aware of intolerance in my life. We have causes we support and the circle helps us question if we are fully living in congruence with those causes."

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Understanding and Reflection in the Classroom

Thirty students in a graduate level leadership course facilitated a circle process to better understand both the experience and practice of power and love in leadership. Students came to the circle having read theoretical conceptions of the material and found the circle to be an opportunity to make deeper personal meaning of the concepts.

Future Directions

The University of San Diego is now completing its pilot year of a comprehensive restorative justice program in which circle processes are a critical component. Although these processes seem to have been initially beneficial, there is a need to collect more empirical data about the impact these processes are having on participants. The Division of Student Affairs is currently working with faculty in the School of Peace Studies and School of Leadership and Education Sciences to this end and plan to report this data in the future.

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