Restorative Practices and Vocational Discernment: Using Circles to Enhance Campus Retreats

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The Challenge:

Each January, a small group of student leaders, faculty, and administrators accompany sophomore students on a weekend long vocational discernment retreat. Through introductory lessons, storytelling, silent reflection, and small group discussions, participants gain greater clarity of their unique purpose and decision-making strategies to live in alignment with their calling. Specifically, students ponder four key questions of vocation: What does it mean to live wholeheartedly? What brings you joy? What are your gifts and talents? What does the world need from you? They also explore three habits of conscious living: attentiveness to both their internal and external worlds, meaning-making through reflection, and action grounded in love.

Small group discussions are guided by seasoned student leaders, well trained in facilitation techniques and group dynamics. While these leaders felt confident redirecting a conversation that has gone astray or eliciting insight from introverted members, they recognized that such dynamics could not be anticipated in advance and sometimes came at the subtle cost of conversation depth. Programmatically, we were also seeking more consistent methods to structure the conversations, enough to achieve our intended outcomes without stifling individual insight or group autonomy. The restorative circle process offered a framework to meet these needs.

Implementation:

Student leaders were provided templates for a series of six community-building circles to be used over the course of the retreat. As part of their training, student leaders participated in and debriefed a discernment circle providing them direct experience with the principles of restorative practices. As a result, five of the seven student leaders opted to use the circle structure in their small groups. The remaining two leaders preferred the facilitation guide consisting of optional discussion questions that had been used by previous retreat leaders for over a decade.

During the retreat, those leaders using the circle method were responsible for designing their centerpieces and providing their own talking pieces. Leaders were given six scripted circle guides to be used throughout the weekend. Each circle script provided opportunities for participants to create connections, clarify their values, share concerns, and collaborate in making meaning of the workshop topics. The real advantage of engaging in six circles over three days was the potential for each circle to build upon and add greater depth to the previous circle. For example, the values identified in the first circle were revisited and clarified in future circles. Also, values became a springboard to later collaboration and commitments participants identified.

One circle used a modified “talking piece circle,” in which participants were invited to bring and share symbols of discernment. This symbol represented a time in their lives in which they were faced with a major decision or time of uncertainty. Participants were then invited to make connections to the stories shared by their peers. The strong foundation of connection already created encouraged the vulnerability...
and support necessary to more fully explore concerns around worth, vocation, service, and love during the remaining circles.

**Outcome:**

Participants and facilitators were asked to provide feedback on their small group interactions. Members of the circle groups expressed navigating group dynamics easily, with each member having responsibility in the overall success of the group. The egalitarian nature of the circle process was specifically highlighted in participant comments, such as “everyone had equal opportunity to talk.” This is in stark contrast to feedback by a facilitator of the non-circle format who indicated some “normal” group dynamic issues around “who speaks first, speaks last, and speaks more often than others.”

Circle participants observed a greater depth of connection than in previous small groups. It was quite common for these individuals to state that they “never had a group that was so honest and open before,” or that they were able to “experience an openness” within themselves that they were never comfortable enough to share in previous groups. In reflecting on her experience, one of the leaders stated that

> Through the circle process, especially the connection rounds, we were able to find commonalities between each of us and build trust as we continued to talk about more-difficult topics and ideas. One student came into the weekend as very soft-spoken and identified as someone that ‘never talks.’ In just three days, she said that during circle she was able to see her worth and find her voice.

Interestingly, the participants that did not experience the circle format still felt positively about the success of their group, but often attributed this to the skill of their facilitator rather than the collective wisdom of the group. This suggests that circles provide an efficacy for the participants and not just the facilitator.

**Future Recommendations:**

Feedback from the facilitators suggest a strong interest in standardizing the circle process for all future small groups. Those who chose not to do so during this pilot year credited this decision to their lack of confidence in keeping the circle. This need may be addressed by extending restorative circle processes beyond the one-day training into weekly meetings. Furthermore, the bonds forged during the retreat may be reinforced and extended throughout the semester by directly inviting participants to offer commitments of support to one another on the final day.

**Questions to Ponder:**

- How can training support student leaders in building competence and confidence in their abilities to facilitate circles?
- How might your circle design support students and facilitators in jointly constructing knowledge, sharing power, and learning cooperatively?
- In already packed workshop agendas, how can circles support existing activities and not be thought of as an additional “thing to do”?

For resources and circle scripts contact Ashley Schantz who serves as the Assistant Director for Class Year & Discernment Programs at Loyola University Maryland. She can be reached at [aschantz@loyola.edu](mailto:aschantz@loyola.edu).