Essential Elements for Constructing the Circle

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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 a greater understanding of one another's perspective.

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

Seating all participants in a circle – Geometry matters! It is very important to seat everyone in a circle. This seating arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and to 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'. Sitting in 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, and/or 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 the 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. Participants are free to speak or pass when the talking piece comes to them. 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 aligning participants with their core selves.

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 invite participants to share personal stories relevant to the theme raised.

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.

Keeper's role – The role of the facilitator(s) or keeper(s) of the Circle is to assist the participants in creating a safe space where each can speak and listen from the heart. The keeper—and sometimes there are two—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.

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 Circle keeper attempts to hold an attitude of compassion and caring for every member of the Circle, regardless of behavior.

Circle dialog – 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 are in a Circle, the richer the dialog and the greater the opportunity for new insights will be. 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.

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Further reading on the Circle process and its uses

On the Circle process

Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community by Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge, ISBN 0-9721886-0-6, paperback, 271 pages, index; eBook ISBN: 978-1-937141-01-1. The foundational book on the Circle process.

Building a Home for the Heart: Using Metaphors in Value-Centered Circles by Pat Thalhuber, B.V.M., and Susan Thompson, foreword by Kay Pranis, illustrated by Loretta Draths, ISBN 978-0-9721886-3-0, paperback, 224 pages, index; eBook ISBN: 978-1-937141-04-2. Young people enjoy using metaphors to talk about values.

Using the Circle process in schools and with youth

Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis. ISBN 9781937141196, spiral bound, 456 pages; eBook ISBN 9781937141202. Co-published with the Institute for Restorative Initiatives (IRIS). This is LJP's bestseller to schools.

Heart of Hope Resource Guide: A Guide for Using Peacemaking Circles to Develop Emotional Literacy, Promote Healing, and Build Healthy Relationships by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis. ISBN 978-0-615-37988-3, spiral bound, 352 pages; eBook ISBN 978-1-937141-14-1. Co-published with the Institute for Restorative Initiatives (IRIS). Great for SEL programs and school counselors.

Circle in the Square: Building Community and Repairing Harm in School by Nancy Riestenberg, ISBN 978-0-9721886-7-8, paperback, 192 pages, index; eBook ISBN: 978-1-937141-08-0. Excellent for giving adults an overview of the restorative practices and Circle approach in schools.

Peacemaking Circles and Urban Youth: Bringing Justice Home by Carolyn Boyes-Watson, ISBN 978-0-9721886-4-7, paperback, 296 pages, index; eBook ISBN: 978-1-937141-05-9. Great for working with struggling youth.

Indigenous Community: Rekindling the Teachings of the Seventh Fire by Greg Cajete, ISBN 978-1-1937141-17-2, paperback, approx. 220 pages, index; eBook ISBN: 978-1-937141-18-9. A wonderful book on Native community-based education philosophy and methods.



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