

Teaching and Learning in Circle

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To truly listen is to risk being changed forever.
- Sakej Henderson

Let's begin with an exercise:

Why do you teach?

What would transpire in your ideal classroom?

Imagine your favorite unit:

Why do you teach it?

Why is it part of your curriculum?

Are you glad to be asked these questions? Are they challenging? Have you been asked them before? Could you see these questions as the basis of a faculty meeting? What about a department meeting? Why or why not?

Now imagine a faculty meeting where these questions are asked. The Principal, Vice-Principal, or Dean of Faculty is at the front of the room – with an overhead projector. S/he is poised to write your responses on a transparency. Are you still glad to be asked these questions? Are they still challenging? Are you one of those who calls out responses immediately? Do you "hang back"? Start to wish you were somewhere else?

Fantasize that you are somewhere else?

C.S. Lewis writes that the best way to ensure that there will be no good conversation is to say – "Now! Let's have a real good talk." [1]

Is there a better way to have this conversation? If the questions are good why does the context make us uncomfortable? I believe that there is a better way – to speak, to listen, to teach and to learn - Circles. This "better way" could be a reality for us and for the students we teach.

The Circle Process - Introduction

Whatever your cultural or ethnic background your ancestors probably sat in circle. Many of the stories that we call sacred, many of the laws we have were originally told or made in circle.

It is very difficult to define Circle, as it is a process. It is a process where every individual truly becomes a better teacher and learner. One of the best explanations I have seen comes from Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge who see Circle as the creation of a safe space that :

"encourage(s) people to seek ways of moving beyond differences in a 'good way' to build better relationships. It is not that all Circles draw out only the good in people, but Circles do profoundly encourage and enable people to take the 'high road', to share with others in a 'good way.' ... "Thus, more emphasis must be given to improving the game, not winning the game and solving problems not head to head, but side by side. Circles create the spaces for disagreement without being disagreeable." [2]

There are many kinds of circles, Talking Circles, Healing Circles (or circles of understanding), Sentencing Circles, Planning Circles, Women's Circles – virtually any kind of gathering where there is to be conversation or discussion can be held "in Circle".

During the time that we are "in Circle" we agree to be our best selves – during this time together we put aside any differences that we had when we walked in the door and we mark this space and this time as sacred.

We use a "talking piece" to control the flow of information in the circle
And we agree to certain guidelines. These guidelines typically include:

- Speaking from the heart
- Intending no malice
- Honoring silence
- Respecting Confidentiality
- Practicing mindfulness

Each community will want to add its own guidelines and should revisit the guidelines frequently. These guidelines should be endorsed by and have input from the entire learning community.

Remember that everything in the circle is an invitation – when you have the talking piece you are invited to speak, but you may pass. When you do not have the talking piece you are invited to listen.

Circles in Formal Education: The Need for a Paradigm Shift

"He drew a circle to keep me out,
A thing of scorn, a thing to flout
But love I had the wit to win
We drew a circle that took him in."
- Edwin Markham

I was sitting in a community circle at ROCA a couple of months ago. One of the women in the circle, who runs a day care center and does prison volunteer work, said "I spend half my time with kids and the rest in prison."

When the talking piece came around to me I asked her what she saw as the difference.

I recalled my five-year old daughter Michaela and her lament at the end of April vacation – "tomorrow I go back to prison". I gave her the standard talk about how much freedom she had compared to someone in prison and how she would never really want to go to prison. She responded that she doesn't really want to go to school – even though she is very successful there socially and academically.

I also recalled the last day of school this year. My wife and I waited in front of the school to mark the transition – and to get a look at report cards. Our nine year old Zoe, came bounding out of the building, bolted past us fell to the ground and kissed it yelling "free at last, free at last." Her report card was outstanding and noted that she is "thoroughly invested in school." What gives rise to these feelings? How can children love learning and hate school?

One answer that resonates with me is provided by Peter Senge et. al. In their groundbreaking book *Schools That Learn*, They note that:

Most of the rapid learning of very young children is tied to purpose and vision. Children learn to

ride a bike because they want to play with their friends who have bikes....They learn new skills because they want them. The same is true for adults...Lifelong learning, then, is the fundamental means by which people engage with life and create their desired futures...

But when children enter schools, the system often presents them with new purposes unrelated to their own desires and aspirations – to please teachers, to get good marks on assignments, to receive rewards and honors and to be ranked high"[3]

This disconnect comes, Senge posits, from an outmoded paradigm. Schools are still cast in a mid-nineteenth century modeled on the assembly line – uniform speed, uniform product, uniform outcomes. These outcomes are broken into smaller parts (academic disciplines) so that the individual workers only impact on the part of the product – diploma – for which they are "responsible." [4]

What is needed is a paradigm shift:

"Paradigm shift is a word meant to convey the changing of the way we view of the world: the turning or shifting of our perceptions, our overall concept of reality. It is not so much a matter of a change in the content of our world, as it is shift in our understanding. It is not so much a change of pitch on a musical scale, as a change in tone. It is not so much a change in shape, as a change in how the shapes fit together. It is not the fact that the images in a picture change, but that the color of the entire picture changes. It is how the facts fall into a new place for us. A paradigm shift is the turning of the wheel in a kaleidoscope, where the same shapes produce an entirely new picture.[5]

Senge et al. Maintain that schools in this paradigm would share certain qualities:

- Learner centered rather than teacher centered learning
- Encouraging variety, not homogeneity – embracing multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles: and
- Understanding a world of interdependency and change rather than memorizing facts and striving for right answers.[6]

These ideas don't only impact me as a parent. This fall I will begin my 22nd year as a teacher. For fifteen years I have also worked with young people committed to the Department of Youth Services in Massachusetts. These are youth who have been adjudicated delinquent by the Commonwealth and are to receive treatment until (at least) their eighteenth birthday. I always considered myself to be very successful at both of my jobs. Then I was introduced to Circles.

For the past year and a half I have taught all of my classes in a circle format. I have taught in a high school environment at Mount St. Joseph Academy in Brighton, Massachusetts. MSJA is an all women's Catholic High School with an enrollment of about 300 that draws from Boston and some 20 surrounding urban and suburban communities. The Academy promotes the development of the whole person by instilling spiritual values, inspiring love of learning, sharing knowledge, and practicing skills. Mount Saint Joseph Academy encourages young women to assume leadership in fostering reconciliation and community in family, neighborhood, Church, country and world. [7]

Despite what its name may connote, the Mount is an urban school, with all of the challenges and opportunities that the label implies. It is a school that celebrates its diversity – of culture, learning styles and experiences.

For the last three years I have also taught in the Juvenile Justice Concentration at Cambridge College. Cambridge College offers a unique learning environment. Working adults bring their experience in the "real

world" and build on it an academic environment. The model for teaching and for learning is refreshing and creative. Both learner and teacher need to be innovative and responsive to meet the challenges and opportunities offered by such an environment [8].

The combination of these two experiences has given me a base of learners ranging in age from sixteen to sixty, from diverse cultures and with myriad learning styles. Circle has made teaching and learning a profound and shared experience. Circle brings both teacher and learner to new levels of responsibility, inquiry and community.

Elements of a Classroom Circle

A classroom circle includes the following elements. They are adapted from a 1998 Document from the Minnesota Department of Corrections "Peacemaking Circles: Introduction."

- A. The students are the center - not the teacher. All are teachers - all are learners. From the beginning it is clear. Everyone has something to offer. There is true equality of opportunity in a circle. There is no back row, no alphabetical order, no strategic placement. Responsibility is shared.
- B. The individual is valued within the context of the group. In Circle the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts. All of the participants bear responsibility for and to the Circle.
- C. Circles encourage storytelling. People (and institutions) are moved more by stories than by data [9]. For many years when students have come back to visit, or written to me, it is the stories that we told in class that they remember. Circles encourage storytelling. Most of us, if given the opportunity, love to tell stories. In circle people are in visual contact at all times, they are focused on the speaker without the distraction of desks, books, pens and paper, etc. Stories naturally flow in this environment. The stories build connection among the learners – setting up a self-reinforcing loop.
- D. The Center. Traditionally the center of the circle marks the space as sacred. What is put in the center of the circle should have meaning for the class. One may use a rug, a mat, a throw, a scarf. In the Day Reporting Center we had the participants spend time painting and drawing symbols of themselves on a four- foot square of duck cloth. For today's presentation I asked my daughters to create the mat for the center. In the center of our classroom circle we have books with thoughts for the opening and closing, examples of student projects or other work, flowers, and a jar in which students can contribute thoughts, quotes, etc. on slips of paper. We also have a Tibetan Singing Bowl, which a student rings to open class – marking the time as separate from the rest of the day.
- E. The Talking Piece. Is essential to any circle process. It may be a feather, a stick or anything that has particular meaning for a community. The talking piece is passed to facilitate and share speaking time. The talking piece always moves clockwise – in the direction of the sun. No one speaks without the talking piece. When one has the talking piece she may speak, or pass it without speaking. Everything in the circle is an invitation and silence deserves respect. The talking piece goes around and around until all have had their say.

When holding the talking piece one speaks "from the heart", with respect for others, briefly enough so that everyone will have time to speak. One doesn't "dump and run. [10] She doesn't drop a conversational bomb and walk out of the group.

Beginnings

In August of 1990, after spending some months on the Chelsea Revere Peacemaking Planning Committee I

was invited to participate in a four day Basic Circle Training at ROCA Inc. Trainers were Harold Gatensby, First Nations Leader from the Yukon, Judge Barry Stuart, Chief Justice of the Yukon Territorial Court, Don Johnson, Assistant District Attorney from Minnesota, and Gwen Chandler-Rhivers, Community leader in circles from Minnesota. Along with Molly Baldwin, Saroem Phong and Anisha Chablani from ROCA, they have been my mentors in Circle. For four days, thirty people - learned about circles and the possibilities they hold for bringing people together "in a good way." [11]

At the end of the four days I was absolutely convinced that Circles was the way to go – and had no idea how to go there. I continued my work on the Peacemaking Planning Committee, and we began to incorporate Circles into our group processes at the DYS Day Reporting Center. We began a weekly talking Circle and I began to facilitate the Anger Management group in Circle. We observed a marked change in the tenor of the groups. Anger Management had often compelled me to work on my own anger issues – I came out of the group more frustrated and angry than the young people were when they came in. The use of the talking piece and the values made for a much healthier process. In October of that year I participated in a "keeper's training" with Kay Pranis. After this experience I felt empowered to think about doing a Circle in a formal classroom.

In late October, while examining the grief process in a Death and Dying Class at Mount Saint Joseph Academy , I introduced the concept of circles to the class and suggested a Talking Circle. The class was amenable to anything outside the norm, so we tried it. It worked very well. We decided that once every eight class days we would go to the library and have class in a circle format. It continued to work well.

In November and December I began to think about facilitating one of my classes for an entire semester in circle format. In the Senior program we have a semester course in Life Transitions, and I had the idea of facilitating the honors section in Circle. The day that second semester began I decided that it wouldn't be fair to the other senior class to do one in circle and one at desks. The second day I decided that it wouldn't be fair to my two junior classes to leave them out. By the middle of the semester I began a campaign to have the desks removed from my classroom.

In the fall of 2001 I began doing my classes at Cambridge College in Circle. Students coming to the "Violence in America" course found a Circle set up and me ready for opening and "check in." Initial responses ranged from apprehension to wholehearted embrace. The adult learners were a little more reticent at first. One asked me if this was somehow related to a cult. By the end of the first day the support for the process was unanimous and unqualified. Many of the learners at Cambridge College had stopped out of the learning process for one reason or another. Cambridge College puts a special and unique emphasis on experience. Students at the College bring a lifetime of learned experience into the classroom. This called out to be shared in a Circle format. I have continued to use Circle in all of my courses at Cambridge College. Several of the students have begun to incorporate Circles into their workplaces. It was particularly gratifying to see the concentration bulleting board devoted to the Circle process this past spring.

At this writing I have taught eight high school and five college courses in Circle. They have all been successes.

Benefits of Teaching and Learning in Circle

Deep learning impacts the mind, the body, the emotions and the spirit. It involves introduction, trust-building and preparation, exploration of issues, and moving towards action. Deep learning moves a person, through creative tension toward harmony and balance. Deep learning moves people from debate to shared vision. The learner's focus shifts from positions to interests.

Teaching and learning in Circle does all of this. It is student-centered education that calls out critical thinking

skills and higher thought processes. Students use a talking piece that moves around the circle in a clockwise direction. The student who has the talking piece is invited to speak, the students who don't have the talking piece are invited to listen.

Confidentiality holds in the circle. This is part of circle tradition, but is very important to adolescents. What is said in the circle stays in the circle. This has been breached only twice in the past two years, and there were repercussions. On a positive note, I knew that the Circle process had "arrived" when the principal at the Mount held a student accountable for "violating the circle."

Four Parts of the Classroom Circle

Although there is an undeniable magic to the Circle Process – good Circles don't just happen. Just rearranging the chairs into a Circle and passing a talking piece isn't a circle process – it is a classroom management tool. There also is no magic formula – unless it is "prepare...prepare... prepare."

Circles have to be carefully prepared. A teacher can't just come to school in the morning without a plan and substitute a circle. Circles should be logged in a planbook so they can be modified and refined in future sessions.

In my training for Circles one of the major underlying concepts that helped me understand how to prepare a Circle was the teachings of the medicine wheel. The Medicine Wheel and its teachings are explained very well in *The Sacred Tree* by the [Four Winds Development Project](#). I am grateful to Carolyn Edsel of the [Suffolk University Center for Restorative Justice](#) for the following summary:

"In learning about Circles, four is a sacred number, corresponding to the seasons of the year, stages of human life, cardinal directions, races of people, and elements of nature. The Medicine Wheel, found among most Native American and First Nations people, teaches the relationships between the four parts, how they hold each other in balance around a sacred fire, each following in sequence, and each comprising an essential part of natural existence.

The Medicine Wheel, is not only four, but a cycle of fours. Within the four ages of human life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood and senescence), we live the cycle of annual and personal growth over and over with each year, relationship, and phase of learning. Each time we participate in a circle, we go through the four phases of ritual opening/introductions, check in and sharing, discussing issues, and summary /closing. At the same time that circle is part of a series of circles, which has its own, longer relational phases of introduction, building trust, arriving at issues, and deciding on action. [12]

In keeping with this teaching there are four phases or parts of the classroom circle: Opening/Check-In, Presentation of the Issue, Sharing/Discussion of the Issue, Closing.

A. Opening/Check In

It is important to always open and close a circle in a good way. This is true of any class. There should be a clear opening and closing. To open a classroom circle, one of the students rings the singing bowl. Another student then does a brief "daily reading." Responsibility for these opening activities rotates among the students. It is voluntary (everything in the circle is an invitation). Students sign up a couple of weeks in advance. Opening is a ritual, and ritual is very important to people. While adolescents may seem to reject ritual on its face, what they are really rejecting is empty ritual. On a couple of occasions when I had to use a "substitute" talking piece students have commented. If a new person starts to pass the talking piece in the

wrong direction the outcry is immediate. The ritual of the circle, especially the opening, builds community and provides continuity. Opening and closing every day bridges one class session to the next. The opening ritual separates this process from the rest of the day. It provides familiarity and reinforces trust among the participants.

After the reading the students "check in". The talking piece is passed once around the circle and each participant is invited to share how she is feeling at this particular moment. Check in is an integral piece of the process. There may be a temptation to skip it in the interest of time, or to only have check in on Fridays. I believe that this would be a mistake. Any class time "lost" is more than made up for in community building and student investment in class. I have found that students themselves regulate check –in time, and if people are taking too long or rambling there is a peer pressure to bring it in line the next day. On the other hand a student may have a genuine need to share something or look for support from peers or teachers – left alone this can result in a distracted student, classroom tension, or even negative attention seeking. Check in eliminates almost all of this. If class-time is sufficient, or you are just looking for variety in the check in – give the students two minutes to draw their check in – then go around the circle and have them share their drawings. As they share they put their drawings in the center – contributing to building the space.

Following check in the teacher would make any announcements, clarify questions on assignments or technical issues, in short – take care of business.

B. Presentation of the Issue

This phase of the circle is the "exploration phase." It may include:

- Exploration of reading
- Presentation of Project
- Input from teacher (notes)
- group activity:
- Mapping

The talking piece may be suspended during this phase of the circle – as very often one or two people will be the providers of the bulk of the information of the presentation of the problem.

C. Sharing/Discussion in Circle

The third phase of the Circle is the transformative piece. We leave this phase changed somehow. The more we practice the more we grow as learners. Classically, discussion has meant debate. The louder the class – the more vocal the debate – the more I felt that I was reaching the students. They had to be touched deeply to feel so passionately. Passion, though, is transitory – when we teach about love we teach that passion ebbs and flows – but that love flows on – so it is with love of learning.

In Circle we strive for an inquiry/advocacy balance. When taking the position of advocate one is expected to:

- Say how you arrived at your view.
- Encourage others to explore your view.
- Encourage others to provide different views
- Actively inquire into other's views

When Inquiring into other's views one is expected to:

- State assumptions as assumptions
- State the data on which your assumptions are based

- Don't ask questions if you're not interested in the response - no traps, no attempts at politeness

An Inquiry/Advocacy approach to discussion limits debate, encourages the development of shared vision, increases one's willingness to be "wrong", and encourages intellectual risk taking. There is no immediate victory for the most glib student, or the loudest, or the cleverest. Instead of a "yes...but" discussion the inquiry/advocacy approach in circle leads the learners into a "yes...and" mode. There is a possibility for genuine consensus, not just a wearing down of opponent and possibly the teacher. [13]

Key to a successful circle is asking the right questions. Questions should invite storytelling and sharing. We tell the story of a young Sir Percival, on his quest for the Holy Grail comes to a castle and seeks shelter for the night. The Lord of the Castle is called The Fisher King. He is very hospitable. He also suffers a grievous wound in the groin – that keeps him from standing. Young Percival wishes to know about the wound – but believes that it would be impertinent to ask. During dinner Percival has a vision of a magnificent cup being borne through the hall. He is astounded at its beauty and wonders at its power, but again, considers it impertinent for one of his youth to make inquiries. He leaves the next day, and continues his life long quest for the Grail. Only after many years does he summon the courage to ask his questions on another visit to the Fisher King. He immediately realizes that the Cup is the Grail and the Grail heals the Fisher King's wounds.

It (Circle) is a great and innovative tool for learning and solving problems. It allows everyone to have an equal opportunity to have a voice and opinion equal to everyone else in the Circle. It also does something else, sometimes overlooked that may even be considered more important. It makes people become listeners. Many times people miss out on learning something because they don't listen, and they're too busy thinking about what they're going to say next. Since everyone is supposed to contribute something original, everyone must listen to the others to ensure an original answer. (Student evaluation June 2002)

D. Closing.

As noted above, it is important to close the circle in a good way. This means allowing a few minutes at the end of class for closing and checking out. Checking out can be brief. If time is an issue, you can ask for a one word checkout – "one word to describe how you are feeling right now." A pass only takes a minute or two in this way and it is fun for the group as student's attempt to come up with words that someone didn't already use.

Following check-out there should be a brief reading/prayer – provided by one of the students.

The Importance of Balance

A primary teaching of the medicine wheel is balance. Every system needs to be in balance to function well. This is true in nature, in health, in human relationships and in systems. It also holds that teaching in a circle does not require elimination of all of a teacher's previous good practices:

... a paradigm shift does not negate what has gone before. Usually when we obtain more up-to-date information, our first tendency is to toss away what has been taught before, but a paradigm shift does not mean that we throw the baby out with the bathwater...

Previous knowledge can be saved and used, but as physicist Thomas Kuhn points out, its domain of application becomes more restricted. [14]

A description of my physical classroom can demonstrate the importance of balance between old and new, innovation and "tried and true":

In the center of my classroom is a rug. On the rug are a vase with flowers, a Tibetan "singing bowl", books and a jar containing scraps of paper with ideas contributed by the students. The chairs in the classroom are

arranged in a circle around the center. The pestle from the singing bowl serves as the "talking piece" and discussion flows clockwise.

Outside the circle, on the perimeters of the classroom are eight "workstations". These have computers connected to the internet. Students work collaboratively at various times throughout the course. Also outside the circle is a "media station." When we need to present information – we suspend the talking piece and provide a PowerPoint presentation. We have a Smart Board and a projection system. These presentations are then saved in outline form and uploaded to the course web site. This web site also contains assignments, discussion boards, an abundance of enrichment readings, photographs and video from the class.

Two walls of the classroom have chalkboards – these have been covered over with student work. Two walls have bookcases. There are hundreds of books that the students may use at any time.

The "message" of this classroom arrangement is reflective of my philosophy of learning – I do not teach – I provide tools and a safe atmosphere for learning. Students gather and process information outside of the circle. Then they share that learning in the circle in an environment in which power is shared. Their ideas are tested and refined. Their questions are reworked. From this free exchange comes knowledge.

Keeping the technology outside the circle reminds us that the information that is passed is data – it is not the same thing as knowledge. Presenting information and learning something are entirely different processes. The mantra of "prepare...prepare...prepare" is not only for the teacher, but the learner as well. She is called to bring her informed thought to the Circle. Early on I tell my students that opinions are like pinky toes – almost everyone has them – and most are worthless.

As an educator I recognize that the paradigm for teaching and learning has changed dramatically and forever. The amount of information available to us and to our students is staggering in its size, complexity and accessibility.

We must, as teachers and learners, deal not so much with the acquisition of information and knowledge, as with their effective communication. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot we have the answers, it's the questions that we need. Asking the right question has never been more important. According to Richard Lanham, the electronic media "show us how to use our communicative skills self-consciously in an environment in which we do not seek to possess the truth, but to create it collectively." [15] This is also true of Circle.

The use of the circle process helps ensure that collective creation through the empowerment of the individual as she works in community.

The modern workplace does not depend on the acquisition of a skill, or preparation for a trade, but the application of many skills to what will probably be multiple careers. The common denominator is communication.

My classroom represents balance- between ancient methodology and the newest technology. I do not believe that either one would be as effective without the other. Out of this balance comes a unique learning environment.

Beyond the Classroom: Circles and Peacemaking in the School Community

In its January 2002 Newsletter, Catholic School Management identifies four "characteristics of a non-violent Christian Community." They are:

Respect: for ourselves, for others and for our relationship to all of creation.

Understanding: active listening for the sake of learning, of hearing another point of view.

Acceptance: recognizing and acknowledging the differences...among human beings.

Peacemaking and Creative Problem Solving: Confronting oppression in all its forms (including name-calling, teasing, insulting, disrespectful behavior, etc. as passive forms of violence) and doing it in a grace-full way.

Circles foster all of these values. At Mount Saint Joseph Academy we have begun to use the Circle Process in other aspects of School Life:

In May of 2002 a significant part of the "rising senior" retreat was done in Circle. The day began and ended in full circle as the class explored their personal gifts and the gifts they offered the school community. In smaller circles they explored two of the "Four Agreements."

We have also begun to use the Circle process for conflict resolution. In the 2001/2002 academic year four seniors went through the training at ROCA and facilitated seven Circles of Understanding to attempt to help students resolve interpersonal difficulty.

The following is a quote from one of these four seniors.

I had the privilege of being trained in conducting a circle last October so I can say a little about running them too. This process isn't just a seating arrangement. It is a difficult task to undertake because it takes such an immense amount of effort and time to come to a conclusion by following the rules of the circle. It also requires a specific type of person to run them. They need to be incredibly patient and infinitely wise. They need to be open to new ideas, free of all prejudice, and extremely understanding. I tried to run some circles and found it frustrating and draining at times because the participants kept reverting back to negative behaviors that they have acquired. Speaking out of turn and harshly toward the other people in the group were common mistakes, but when they listened and took turns they were empowered to resolve their misunderstandings.

Hypothetically, if the world were to be run using this process, crime rates would fall dramatically and there would be elimination of war. It is a powerful tool and should be utilized. (Student evaluation, June 2002)

In a "healing circle" or "circle of understanding" disputants move toward reconciliation, empowered by active listening, from advocacy to inquiry. In every one of the Circles the participants have reported satisfaction and, surprise at how well it has worked. This doesn't mean that all of the Circles brought about a resolution of the issues that caused the harm – but at least the participants felt that they got to speak and that they were listened to.

I taught forty juniors last semester. At the end of the semester I presented the opportunity to attend four days of Circle Training at ROCA. Those who completed the training would be the core team for conflict resolution for next year. Twenty-seven of the forty applied for the training. Three were chosen and completed the training in July. We hope to get several more of them into trainings during the school year.

As we move the Circle process out of one classroom and into other aspects of school life we begin to impact the entire system – moving toward shared vision and the development of a complete learning community.

Student Comments

You exercise your critical thinking skills. You learn to articulate beliefs and ideas in ways other people can see your point of view. Also, by hearing from everyone in the class, you get ideas to expand on your thoughts. (Student Evaluation, June 2002)

Also highlight that The Circle helps to build self-esteem and confidence. A shy speaker has the opportunity to speak because when that person has the talking piece, they are important and their opinion matters. In an "ordinary" classroom setting, a shy person is often overlooked, and this quality is only increased. The circle method begins to change this person into a more vocal contributor in social settings. (Student Evaluation, June 2002)

It also provides the opportunity to gain character and maturity. Someone who would ordinarily talk all the time without heartfelt reflection about their words would be considered immature, and not a very valuable contributor to the discussion. Talk is more important than thought for that person. In the Circle process, however, this person becomes an active listener. Hopefully the person realizes the value of this skill and will begin to cultivate it. This person can begin to become a more mature person. In an ordinary classroom the possibility of this transformation would not be available. With these transformations, these students become better learners, so the whole class is enriched. There are more opinions, which are thought out before they are blindly spoken. (Student evaluation June 2002)

There is something about the circle process that is magical. I don't think there is a word powerful enough to describe it. It's almost hard to comprehend how something so simple can be so beneficial and influential. I think what makes the Circle process so effective and special is sharing and support. In a regular learning atmosphere there is no communication of knowledge. You open a textbook, you take the notes, you study, and you take a test. You learn facts, but not knowledge. When you are in a Circle though the learning process goes beyond this traditional cycle of teaching and learning. People share their own experiences, feelings and thoughts. When you learn from others you don't forget what you gain from them. This is knowledge. (Student evaluation, June 2002)

It is a form of therapy. It is a time to calm down, remove yourself from the issues of your life and focus on the topic at hand, whether that is problem resolution or a new chapter in the textbook. Everyone can open up, be honest and trusting, because nothing leaves the circle. It is a comfortable atmosphere, so those who would not usually contribute in the conventional classroom atmosphere, do so. I am one who normally contributes in a conventional classroom set up, but there is a definite advantage for people like me too. Since everyone is asked to contribute all of the time, I contribute all of the time so I am forced to think about and form an opinion, or the beginnings of one, about topics I otherwise would have avoided. Sometimes I surprise myself with what I had to contribute or what I already thought or knew. (student evaluation, June 2002)

Conclusion

Circles can profoundly impact the way we teach and learn. Circles are not a panacea. The Circle format will not replace a solid curriculum, judicious choice of reading material and thorough preparation on the part of teachers and students. It can, and does – take a very good learning experience and make it better. After twenty-one years I think I am starting to "get it".

The fact that everyone is so close that they can cry in front of twenty people and so attached that at the end of only one school year we can share our hopes and congratulations towards each member of the group is a tremendous accomplishment. There wouldn't have been enough time in the whole day to finish our last checkout today. There were so many emotions felt this year that we could have shared them forever. The

learning experience that was introduced by practicing circles has made an indelible impression among all of us. We will never forget this way of communicating... (student evaluation, June 2002)

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11 Draft Book on Peace Making Circles. Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, Mark Wedge. February 2002. (unpublished)

1 Senge, Peter et. al. Schools That Learn. Doubleday 2000.p.22

iv for a more complete assessment see "Schools that Learn pp. 30-58,

v Rhea Miller, Cloudhand Clenched Fist, p.29

vi Schools that Learn p.55

vii *from the MSJA website)*

viii *(from the Cambridge College Website*

ix Minnesota Department of Corrections

x *ibid.*

xi *(from the ROCA website).*

xii . Edsel, Draft: ROCA Circle Work November 1999-June 2001

xiii For a more complete discussion of inquiry/advocacy see The Fifth Discipline by Peter Senge. (pp.195-198)

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Endnotes

[1] Lewis, A Grief Observed. P.

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- [3] Senge, Peter et. al. *Schools That Learn*. Doubleday 2000.p.22
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- [5] Rhea Miller, *Cloudhand Clenched Fist*, p.29
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- [7] from the MSJA website
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- [15] Lanham, Richard.