
Proactive Circles

As schools and youth-serving organizations in urban, suburban and rural areas face increasing behavioral problems, interest in restorative practices in general and in circles specifically has grown. Restorative practices help deal with misbehavior, as well as the most serious problems, including violence, bullying and crime. Traditional punitive discipline does not achieve positive changes in student behavior and fails to address the breakdown of basic decorum. Using proactive circles before problems even occur, however, will begin the process of improving school climate and achieving the kind of durable solutions that schools need.

Why Circles?

A special-education teacher explains how circles help with classroom management by building positive relationships between students:

I find that the more respect and knowledge the students have for one another, the smoother and better functioning my class becomes. In one class I have students who are part-time mixed with students who are full-time special-education students. With this rather large and diverse

group I find that a circle and group work helps unite this class.

A lesson that has gone well with this particular class uses the restorative circle and involves reading the local newspaper together. Each student has a newspaper, and after reading an article of his or her choosing (silently or out loud, depending on their reading level), each student “reports out” on the article. The other students are required to listen and not interrupt. When the “reporter” is finished, they will ask if anyone has any questions. The reporter is the facilitator of this activity. As the teacher, I rarely have to shut down a conversation, because each student generally wants their turn to “report out.” However, I do use a timer if it is needed, allotting a specific amount of time for the task, so each student feels the activity has been fair. During this activity I also use an object [talking piece] to show which student has the floor. I have dragons, dinosaurs, cars and various other things to use.

My students are quite comfortable with each other at this time, and there is very little shyness with the “reporting out.” Most of the students in my classes take reading class throughout high school, so I might be teaching the same kids for three years. I need for my students to show me what they know. My students also like being able to show their classmates what they know. This is a strategy that seems to work all the way around.

Circles, by their very structure, convey certain important ideas and values without the need for discussion:

- › *Equality* — Everyone in the circle has equal seating.
- › *Safety and trust* — You can see everyone in a circle, so nothing is hidden.
- › *Responsibility* — Everyone has a chance to play a role in the outcome of the circle.

- › *Facilitation* — The circle reminds the leader to facilitate rather than lecture.
- › *Ownership* — Collectively, the participants feel the circle is theirs.
- › *Connections* — These are built as everyone listens to everyone else's responses.

In the circle everyone can look one another in the eye. Students get equal time and attention, and they learn to trust each other and feel safe.

Because students cannot hide in the circle, everyone must participate. There are a remarkable number of students in schools who make it through entire school days without speaking at all in class. These students fly completely under the radar. Circles ensure that everyone is more engaged and that students can't hide out all day long.

When students don't know what to say in response to a circle question, teachers encourage them to enlist fellow students to help them think of answers, which further builds connections and a mutually supportive atmosphere.

Eventually, students begin to help facilitate their own circles, which builds confidence and a sense of responsibility. They take risks, both academically and personally, and talk about feelings, ideas, what they read, themselves and others. Students both give and listen to feedback.

In circles, students, teachers, disciplinarians, administration, staff and parents express themselves in ways they rarely do otherwise. The perspectives, facts and stories shared in the circle cultivate empathy and influence behavior.

Using circles first and foremost to establish strong, supportive relationships among students has a significant academic impact in the long run. Some teachers fear they are being asked to become therapists, because they know that circles have been used in therapeutic settings and because circles are a forum for the free

expression of affect. But as great teachers know, teaching is much more than conveying facts and information alone. There is a significant interpersonal dimension to teaching.

A basic premise of restorative practices is that the increasingly inappropriate behavior in schools is a direct consequence of the overall loss of connectedness in our society. By fostering inclusion, community, accountability, responsibility, support, nurturing and cooperation, circles restore these qualities to a community or classroom and facilitate the development of character. As a consequence of fostering relationships and a sense of belonging, academic performance also flourishes.

Getting Started with Circles

When using circles proactively, there is a need to balance two factors: helping students get to know each other better and delivering course content. To the first end, icebreaker questions like “How was your weekend?” or “Where would you go if you had the resources to go anywhere?” are useful. At the same time, circles can be used to deliver and process course content. Relevant circle questions and activities can be designed and structured for any course.

The idea of running circles, when they are new and unfamiliar, can trigger fear and resistance in children and adults. The trick is to get over the initial hurdle. Introduce circles when things are going well. Design an activity to familiarize students with the idea of circles, build the confidence of the facilitator and the participants and enhance relationships.

This testimonial from a high school business teacher illustrates how he overcame his own initial jitters about using circles and how, through the natural development of a circle discussion, a single circle met the dual needs of getting students to know each other and advancing the curricular agenda:

As a new teacher the thought of using a “circle” seemed both intriguing and intimidating. Our building principal

not only voiced his support of the program, but also cleared the way for all new teachers to receive training in the use of restorative practices.

After the three-day training session and with guidance from our principal, it was made clear that the “circle” was to be used as a learning instrument and not just a touchy-feely, get-to-know-you time filler. I made the commitment to use the methods learned in as many venues as possible. Being new, I thought, “It doesn’t hurt to see what works.” Furthermore, I was told that most students at the high school were versed in the process and actually enjoyed its use in class. I was pleased to find this was the case.

Personally, restorative practices has become a great tool, for not only increasing student ownership in the classroom, but also for effectively administering curriculum. Students instinctively “circle up” and follow the rules. I have used the circle to give direct instruction, summarize lessons, solicit student feedback and discuss various topics. By its nature, the circle allows each student to be part of the group and have direct input. No one hides in the circle.

Recently, I used the circle to discuss consumer credit rights in my Personal Finance class. I began with the standard probe question and led the group in the direction I had hoped to go. Most students had given an answer as to their interpretation of the rights of credit card users. As we made our way around the circle, I could see the concern on several students’ faces as they processed the information. Within a few seconds hands began to go up requesting another chance to speak. The patience of two students was wearing thin. They needed to know.

Being savvy users of the circle, one of them “piggy-backed” another student’s answer by offering some input and posing a question to the student. She was soliciting feedback with a question of her own. Immediately after

the question was asked, two additional students looked at each other and nodded as if to say, “That’s what I want to know!” Without my help, our circle had taken on a very personal tone. Not only was the material being processed, but students were using the circle to find answers. The overriding concern of the students was the difficulty their parents were experiencing from overuse of credit cards, and students earnestly wanted to know what rights and remedies were available to help.

That circle led to one of the most interactive and thoughtful classes I’ve experienced. Students knew the purpose. They knew the rules. And ultimately, they knew how to experience positive personal growth through the process. All I did was lead the horse to the water, and the horse took a big gulp.

When a teacher conducts their first circle, they may be nervous. Students unfamiliar with the circle process may also find it intimidating. When you start with something that feels safe and is not too difficult, you increase the chances of having a successful experience.

Whatever topic you choose, be sure to present clear guidelines and goals for the circles. Explain what circles are about; they are a way for students to get to know one another and a chance for people to support each other personally and academically. Explain that people are expected to participate and take the circle seriously. People must not tease or laugh at one another. The circle is a place where people need to feel safe to share their ideas. If someone doesn’t know what to say, they may ask for suggestions.

Also articulate the purpose of the specific circle. “What is one of your favorite [fill in the blank]?” is a good icebreaker question. (This is preferable to “My favorite ...” because sometimes people take this too literally and get stymied thinking of their *absolute* favorite, whereas coming up with “*one* of my favorite things” is

often easier to answer.) Other possibilities include asking students to talk about hobbies, interests and goals. They may also talk about a quality that makes a person a good friend or a good student. A simple feelings check can be a quick and easy icebreaker, too. The answer may be a word or a short sentence.

If you want to make your circle more appropriate to the academic subject at hand, think in terms of what is being taught in your class. In a geography class the question may be, “Where is the farthest place you’ve traveled or one of your favorite places?” In an English class, “What is one of your favorite books or authors?” In science, “Have you ever done an experiment? What was it?” In physical education, “How often do you exercise, or what sports and physical games do you like to play?” Many of these things are questions teachers already ask students to answer in written form or with a partner. It is easy to transfer these ideas to the circle format:

A math teacher wondered how he could ever do content circles in math class. Then it dawned on him that he could use a circle to share “exit ticket” content, an activity that students had to complete before they left class each day. On the exit ticket, students recorded what they had learned, along with their struggles and needs from the teacher.

During a weekly circle, the teacher invited students to share what they had written on their tickets. The teacher found that he was able to assess how the students were learning much more quickly. Students began to connect with other students who shared their strengths and weaknesses in math. Once the routine was established, the teacher also began to add fun community-building go-arounds.

A sentence starter, especially for younger students, can be a big help: “I like it when my friend ...” “The best thing about today was

...” “My best memory from the last year was when ...” In a language class, this type of sentence starter can also be used to teach proper use of newly learned sentence structures.

As you get to know your students and they get to know one another, questions may become more personal or more challenging. But it is important to make students comfortable with the circle process first.

A principal at a charter school introduced the concept of circles to her staff with the question, “Talk about something embarrassing that has happened to you.” People felt uncomfortable and some blurted out outrageous things they wouldn’t normally talk about with acquaintances they did not know well. She learned the hard way that you need to begin with something safe and easy and let people gain confidence by sharing more personal information by degrees.

This is one of the good reasons to try to make circles relevant to the academic subject of the class being taught. Many students will feel more comfortable speaking up at first when a topic seems objective rather than personal.

But whatever the choice of your first circle, articulate the guidelines and be judicious about what questions you ask. Above all, remember to be clear about what you are doing and why. An IIRP trainer warns:

I’ve heard this a number of times: “I asked students to come up with something and it didn’t work.” Ultimately, teachers in that situation are killing time, and they’re not buying into the reason for doing circles. That’s evident in the way they present it. There’s no attitude from the teacher that what they’re doing is worthwhile. The tone isn’t there; there’s no structure. If there’s just a vague idea and overly general instructions, kids don’t know what to say and it becomes a platform for them to act silly.

By avoiding these pitfalls, you will find the circle easier to facilitate, and there is a greater chance it will be a positive experience.

Types of Circles

When planning a circle, there are three main types to consider:

- › Sequential go-arounds
- › Non-sequential circles
- › Fishbowls

The *sequential go-around* has been the one discussed most so far in this book. This is a circle in which a question or discussion point is raised and students answer in turn, proceeding around the circle in either a clockwise or counterclockwise direction. A volunteer may offer to go first, answer the question and choose the direction to proceed (to the volunteer's left or right). The teacher may be the first to answer the question and choose the direction. Or a teacher may ask a certain student to begin. This may be a trusted student who is sure to set a good example for the class. A teacher may also prep one or more students privately to fill them in on what they are looking for and call on those students first. If a talking piece is used, it should be passed from person to person to signify whose turn it is to speak. (See page 36 for more about talking pieces.)

Believe it or not, deciding which way to go around the circle can be a sticky problem. The best thing to do is establish the direction of the circle before the first person speaks. This eliminates what one circle facilitator dubs the “50-50 syndrome.” Even though the two people on either side of the first person to speak have a 50-50 chance of going next, they always look shocked when the person tells them they are going to have to speak. So, before answering, if the person tells them they are next, they and the rest of the people on that side of the circle have a moment to organize their thoughts.

Sequential go-around circles can be used for check-ins and check-outs, “getting-to-know-you” activities or as part of an

academic lesson. The length of response may vary. A quick check-in could be run in a few minutes with each student saying just a few words. The circle may be stretched out, too, with students being given more time for complex responses. Often the first person to go will set the tone and model the expected length of response. This is why it can be a good idea for teachers to model the types of responses they are looking for. Issuing clear instructions includes being explicit about the amount of time you want to spend conducting a circle.

If a student asks to pass or asks for more time, either skip the student or gently ask them to participate. Forcing students to speak when they are unwilling is usually counterproductive.

On the other hand, set a positive tone by establishing an expectation of participation from the beginning and offering positive encouragement to students who are reluctant to speak. This reluctance usually results from fear and shyness rather than a desire to disrupt the circle process. Patiently waiting silently for a student to speak may be all the encouragement they need. Prompting can help. Another technique is to let a student ask a friend or other classmate to help them think of something to say. If one or more students do pass on their turn, make a point of remembering to return to those students before the circle is closed to give them a chance to speak.

One of the benefits of the sequential go-around is that it gives everyone a chance to speak and an opportunity for all voices to be heard. This can be particularly beneficial to quiet or shy students who may be less inclined to offer their own opinions, thoughts and feelings without being prompted. In the context of the circle, these students frequently begin to play a leadership role that would not emerge otherwise. As students become familiar with the circle process and as trust and mutual respect are established, students sometimes look to these quiet but perceptive students for insight when they recognize a need for their special points of view.

Applications of the sequential go-around are limitless. It is

a great format for students to give feedback to one another. Here again is an example of a high school teacher merging academic and personal goals. In this two-part circle students explored their personality traits with a look to what careers might best suit them:

The first step in the circle was to have each student personally explain one of their strengths. After that was completed, they were to compliment the person to their right and identify one of their strengths as seen from a second person's perspective.

Students were then guided into a personality/temperament test online, which they completed. Oddly enough, I had three students come to me and say that the perspective of their classmates was more in line with the test than their own perception. That simple circle led to additional discussions about how we perceive ourselves as well as those around us.

This type of question is a meatier alternative to simpler “get-to-know-you” questions, like “What pet do you have or want?” or “How do you spend your free time?” Other examples include: “What is one thing the person to your left is good at?” or “Talk about something someone did in class this week that helped you and that you appreciated.” Student-to-student feedback questions build relationships in a class, help reinforce positive behavior that contributes to learning and teach students constructive ways of communicating with one another.

A teacher may also anticipate problems and nip them in the bud using the sequential go-around. Typical questions include: “What is one thing you can do today to ensure a successful class?” “How have you supported or what could you do to support a fellow student who is struggling to stay focused?” and “What can I as your teacher do to help make the science experiment run more smoothly this week?” More generally, teachers may simply ask students to state any concerns they

have about an activity, homework assignment, test or class.

Non-sequential circles are more freely structured than sequential go-arounds. Conversation proceeds from one person to another in no fixed order. This type of circle allows a discussion to evolve organically and can be used effectively for problem solving as well.

Students only speak when they have something to say. How each speaker is determined is the defining feature of the non-sequential circle, which may be highly structured, loosely structured or unstructured.

Ground rules should be established at the beginning so everyone understands the format. A talking piece may be used in a non-sequential way to help keep order. Students may be required to raise their hands when they want to speak so the teacher or a student facilitator can then recognize one person at a time. In some groups, students may be allowed to call out or chime in at an appropriate moment without being formally recognized to speak.

The format will vary depending on the activity. If, for example, the class is brainstorming ideas for a skit or some other project, students may be permitted to call out their responses while someone writes everything down on a board. A teacher may also ask in a casual way, “Does anyone want to share their reaction to the activity we just did?” or “Would anyone like to bring up difficulties or challenges they had with the homework?” and wait for responses.

The amount of structure also depends on the maturity level of the students in a given group. Are they able to have a civil discussion with few rules or do they need stricter guidelines? The teacher must use their own judgment to decide which format will work best.

The major disadvantage of the non-sequential circle is that, unlike in the sequential go-around, not everyone is guaranteed a chance to speak. Non-sequential circles require more careful facilitation to ensure that all voices have a chance to be heard and that no one person or group of people dominates.

In some situations, you may trust that those who do not speak up are still benefiting from listening to the discussion. In other

cases, the teacher might want to hear from everyone. One solution is simply to ask who has not spoken and explain that you would like to hear from everyone. You might also ask why some people have not spoken, which could be illuminating.

Alternatively, if not everyone has participated, a concluding sequential go-around may be conducted. Ask, for example, “What is one thing you learned, realized or were surprised by about this discussion?” This way everyone gets a chance to speak and put some closure to the activity.

Fishbowls are an effective way to use circles with a larger number of participants. The fishbowl allows participants in the inner circle to be active participants, while those in the outer circle act as observers (see Figure 5). Fishbowls can be structured entirely for the observers’ benefit so that they can observe a specific process or certain interactions. They can also be set up for the participants’ benefit, allowing observers to share their feedback at the end of the activity. The fishbowl may also comprise a combination of these two structures:

A high school teacher of a human sexuality class used a series of fishbowl exercises that allowed the observers in the outer circle to get a peek into the world of the participants on the inside. First he ran a fishbowl with the girls in the inner circle and the boys in the outer circle. The boys wrote down questions they wanted the girls to answer. The teacher drew them out of a hat, discarding or rewording any that weren’t appropriate. The girls talked only to each other, responding to the boys’ questions while the boys silently looked on.

Then the teacher flipped it around and the girls wrote questions that the boys answered as if they were in the locker room talking to each other. The class ended with one big circle where people gave feedback about how everyone had treated each other during the exercises.

The students kept asking to do this activity again, and the teacher decided to use the fishbowl for other topics as the year went on.

A common variation of the fishbowl leaves one chair empty in the inner circle. Only those on the inner circle are permitted to speak, so this allows those in the outer circle to leave their seats and sit in the empty chair to make a brief comment and contribute to the discussion. They then return to their original seats, leaving the empty chair available to anyone else who wishes to participate. Interestingly, the empty chair helps keep the focus in a large group, because even if members of the outer circle do not use the empty chair, the fact that they could if they wanted helps them pay more attention to the activity.

The principal of a small alternative high school describes how a fishbowl was used to create a meaningful ritual for a student who graduated mid-year:

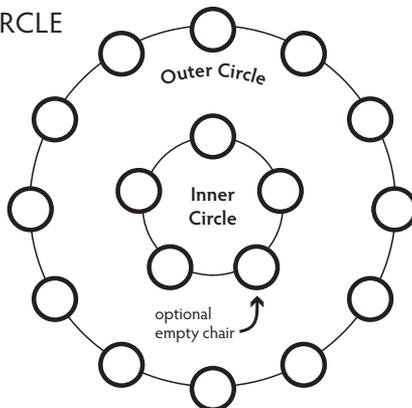
The best circle story I have is our circle for graduation. We had a student who was a January graduate. It is hard to do a formal ceremony for one student, so we decided to do a circle format. We invited everyone who was significant for this student, including his parents, family members, probation officer, caseworker and students who were close to him. Those people all sat in a center circle with the rest of our school community “fishbowling” that inner circle. We presented the diploma, and each person in the inner circle gave the student feedback about how proud they were and what they hoped for his future. We had an empty chair so that other members of the community could come in and give him feedback. This was the most heartfelt, emotional graduation that I have ever been a part of. We all talk about how we wish we could do that for every graduate.

Fishbowls may also be used for a technique called “restorative problem solving.” Here a person offers to present a problem for consideration and selects a group of friends and trusted participants to sit in the inner circle, leaving one seat empty. The person spends a few minutes describing the problem. A feedback period follows, during which people in the inner circle and anyone from the outer circle who would like to occupy the empty chair tell the person what they think about the problem and offer thoughts and ideas.

The person receiving feedback must not respond to the suggestions until the end. A crucial rule of brainstorming, which was developed in the 1950s by Madison Avenue executive Alex Osborn, requires people to refrain from criticizing suggestions during the brainstorming process. This ensures that everyone feels comfortable contributing ideas. Though researchers have cast doubt on whether brainstorming is really more productive than other techniques for solving problems, brainstorming continues to be recognized for its strength as a team-building activity. When people comment on each other’s suggestions and say things like, “I tried that” or “I don’t think that will work,” people begin to clam up. Allowing people to generate a creative flow of ideas without judgment makes for a more inclusive environment. Even silly suggestions are acceptable and can make the process more fun.

FISHBOWL CIRCLE

Figure 5



The person listening, while asked not to comment, may choose to write down what is said or appoint someone else as scribe. At the very end the person may say one or two things they will try, again without editorial comment. This process may be used in the classroom or in the staff room.

A creative, proactive use of restorative problem solving would be exploring the issues involved in completing a big project or term paper. One student, who is concerned about the assignment, could be asked to volunteer to present their fears and concerns about the project and ask for help. Trusted classmates could form the inner circle, with an empty seat left for those remaining in the outer circle to contribute if they have something to say. The feedback and assistance offered would be of use to the class as a whole, since all the students may confront similar problems associated with the assignment.