

Circle Dialogue and Circle Keeping

Sitting in a circle is a fundamentally different experience than sitting in rows, or meeting across a desk. When we are in rows there is generally someone standing in front, commanding attention.

Clearly this is the person who is in charge, who has the answers, and to whom the group is accountable. When we are meeting with someone who faces us from behind a desk, we also know instinctively that the authority and power belongs with that person. These arrangements have their appropriate functions and restorative practices are intended to complement rather than replace them completely. They can be effective. However, their effectiveness may have unintended consequences. One of these is the implied lesson that the responsibility for the functioning of the community is on the shoulders of the person who holds authority.

When we sit in a circle we experience a stronger sense of community. Every person in the circle shares responsibility for its functioning. Circle culture is more “yes-and” than “either-or.” Yes, there is a leader, and each person takes the lead in turn, each time it is their turn to speak. Yes, some guidelines are given and the group makes its own agreements. Decisions are made, but by consensus of the whole group, and sometimes this means decisions come slowly or take unexpected forms.

Thus, one of the main purposes of circle dialogue is building community. Another purpose is supporting the kinds of honest, authentic dialogue that is necessary to effectively respond to challenging behavior and circumstances. These two intentions for circles take shape as two different types of circle: *community building* and *responsive*. A premise that runs throughout this manual is that *responsive circles* (for responding to misbehavior and harm) work best in classrooms where a foundation has been developed through *community building circles*.

Community Building (Proactive) and Response to Harms: Two Circle Themes

Circles generally have two types of business to address. The first is *community building*: establishing contact with the people, having the time and opportunity to fully show up, to experience being seen and heard. The second is *responding to harm*, which means having sometimes difficult dialogues in which harms are discussed and pathways toward making things right are agreed upon.

- **Community Building Circles** are about giving students opportunity to get to know each other and establish positive connections, including agreements about how they ought to treat each other. Every circle includes community building activities in the beginning. Some circles focus exclusively on this task by building and deepening connections among students. Connection can be invited in several dimensions besides the interpersonal. There is connecting to physical sensation, for example. Before passing the talking piece you can invite students to sit quietly with their eyes closed and tune in to what their bodies are feeling. The same goes for emotions, and for what thoughts or concerns might be present. The aim here is to support students in whatever process they are feeling; to give permission to “come as you are.” This in turn can support the authenticity of the dialogue when the circle moves into taking care of business (content) such as discussing conflicts or other class issues.
- **Responsive Circles** use specific high-quality questions to explore challenging circumstances and move toward making things right. Choosing questions that are “real” for the students is essential to eliciting *content that matters*. When the content matters, the circle will be energized and focused. The Restorative Questions included in this manual articulate the real, actual questions that exist when there is conflict or when someone has harmed someone else. Students readily become engaged with these questions because the content of the circle is truly relevant to their lives; it matters.

