

# USING TALKING CIRCLES IN THE CLASSROOM

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Talking circles, also called “peacemaking circles,” come from the traditions of indigenous people of North America, particularly tribes in the Midwest. Circle processes are based upon equality between participants and the principle of sharing power with each other instead of having power over one another.

Circles are characterized by the use of a talking piece, which regulates communication. Both talking and listening are important in the circle because mutual understanding lays the groundwork for deeper, more meaningful discussion. Only participants holding the talking piece can talk. Participants who do not have the talking piece get to listen and reflect on what the person with the talking piece says. The talking piece is a meaningful and symbolic object that the facilitator, also called the “circle keeper,” brings to the circle. The circle keeper often incorporates an explanation of the meaning of the talking piece into the circle activities. (My recommendation is to avoid using talking pieces about one’s pet unless it directly relates to the topic because participants will talk about their pets even if it is irrelevant to the question at hand.) Receiving the talking piece is an invitation to share with the group and helps ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to share at their own pace and in their own way without interruptions. Participants share what they want, can remain silent during their turn, or pass by giving the talking piece to the next person. The talking piece is passed clockwise around the circle with each participant having a turn to share their authentic personal stories and have them respectfully heard and acknowledged without judgment, condemnation, nor advice (unless advice is solicited).

Talking circles can be used for discussion, problem solving, and/or decision making. The basic purpose of a talking circle is to create a safe, non-judgmental place where each participant has the opportunity to contribute to the discussion of difficult and/or important issues. The intent is to provide a safe place for connection and dialogue, meaning that all participants are open to being influenced by what happens during the process and do not enter the process hoping to persuade others or expecting a specific outcome. This can be hard for teachers to come to terms with when they are used to directing class, lecturing, or being the sole content expert. Respecting the talking piece helps teachers give the floor to the students. It also equalizes opportunities to contribute among students.

I have found that talking circles are more successful when the participants have trust with each other. Taking time to share stories, build relationships, explore values, and create guidelines for participation helps everyone feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe in the circle and creates a foundation for courageous acts of sharing. Courageous acts of sharing often involve potentially stigmatizing information and can range from problems that are interfering with school work to not understanding the material to an unpopular point of view to identifying racism in the classroom to traumatizing personal experiences to just being willing to share at all. From using talking circles I have learned that, when students are encouraged to be full human beings in the classroom instead of just students, courageous acts of sharing often profoundly impact the roots of the classroom community and can deepen the trust that makes all kind of wonderful things possible.

Values and guidelines for behavior in the talking circle are important. In my experience, students participate more fully in talking circles when they see the connection between the practices of the circle and values such as equality, dignity, and understanding. The talking circle is based on the assumption that we all have wisdom to share and can learn from one another. Part of the circle keeper’s role is to be fully transparent about the circle’s purposes, processes and activities. The circle keeper asks questions, creates activities, and models the quality and length of answers that will help the circle serve its purposes of connection, exploration, and problem-solving without coercion or hidden agendas. When circles are

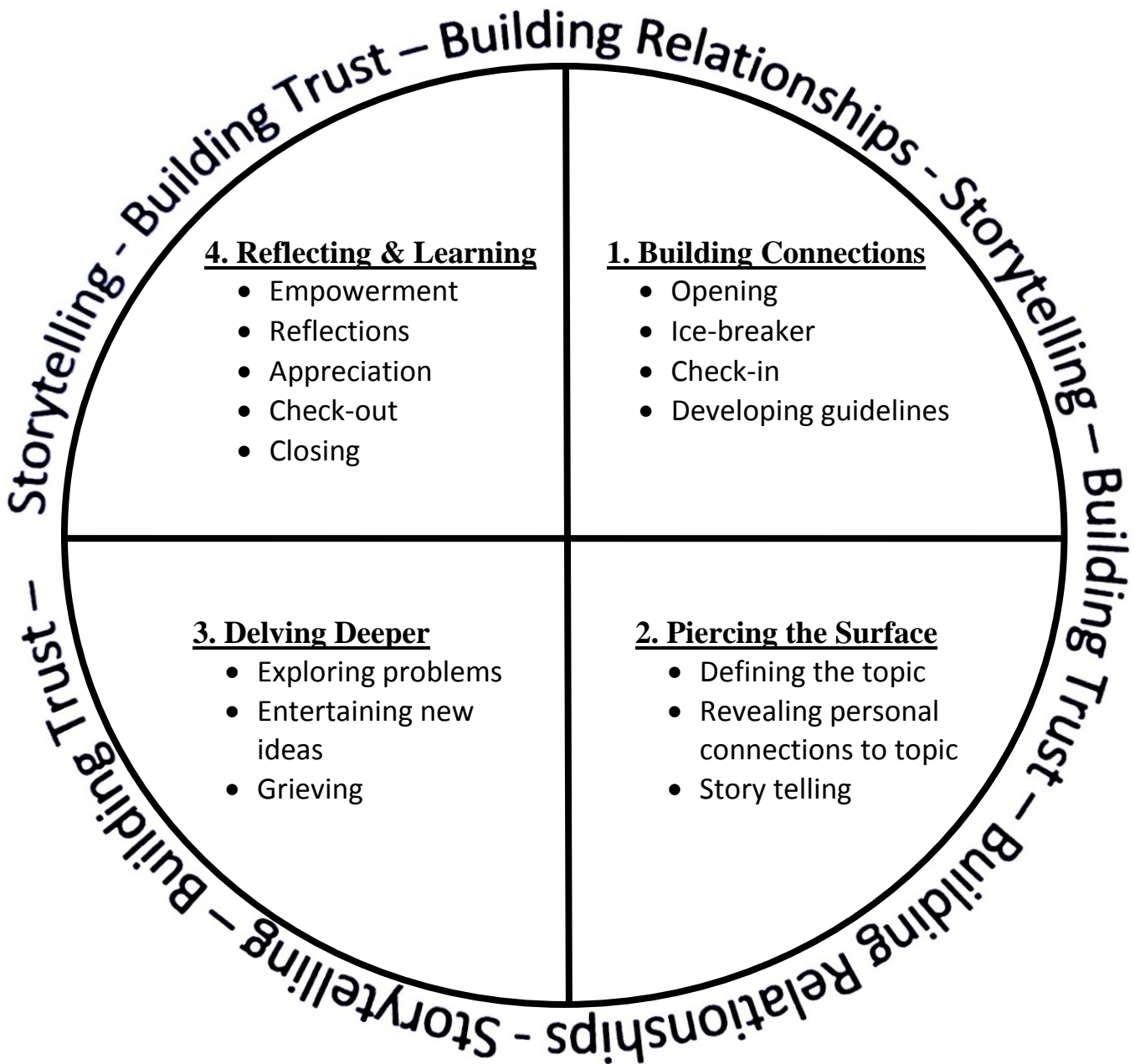
successful, participants are willing to follow communication and behavioral guidelines in ways that support these values, beliefs, and activities because they trust the circle keeper and the other participants. I have learned that, especially in new circles, the circle keeper's willingness to be open, vulnerable, and transparent enhances the quality of the circle. When I develop my questions I think about the kind of stories or ideas I would like to share to help participants understand my perspective and what kind of ideas and experiences I would like to learn from the other participants, and then I create questions and activities that will facilitate the opportunity to share those stories and ideas. I also remain open to what happens in the circle and adapt to the flow instead of pushing to fulfill my intentions. Mindfulness of the group's contributions, interests, experiences, and desires helps me keep the circle dynamic and well.

One of the guidelines I like to propose in talking circles I facilitate is that we recognize *people* engage in talking circles; roles, titles, and institutions do not. I ask participants to talk from their own point of view, sometimes known as "I statements" because I have seen sweeping generalizations and global statements like "Students want. . ." or "People don't realize. . ." or "We think. . ." alienate other participants, prevent connection to the one speaking, and reinforce stereotypes and myths. Talking circles are about dignity and respect given and received by all in a "power with" process instead of a "power over" one. Talking from one's own point of view, especially by teachers who are used to talking as "the authority," reinforces power sharing and helps create the safety needed for everyone to share what they know (or don't know).

Symbolism, ceremonies, and rituals, are important elements of talking circles because they facilitate shared meaning making and help support the intention to create a safe space for human connection. The circle keeper helps guide the circle, preparing for the circle and keeping integrity with the process. If participants talk out of turn, have side conversations, or otherwise disregard the guidelines, the circle keeper should gently remind them of the guidelines and help them get on track or make new guidelines they are willing to follow. The circle keeper also prepares for the circle, choosing the focus of the circle, choosing materials for the opening and closing, ensuring the joint creation of guidelines for the circle, developing questions and activities to prompt the circle participants, and modeling the quality and length of responses desired. The circle keeper also summarizes the discussion, draws connections between experiences, points out divergent ideas, expresses appreciation for those who have shared particularly relevant or meaningful contributions, and adapts questions and activities to fulfill the circle's purposes while honoring the contributions of its participants.

Some topics that talking circles can be used to explore include specific content-related topics, asking participants what they have learned regarding the topic, what they would like to learn and why, what they struggle with learning, what some of the barriers are to their learning, what their reactions are to a particular article or video, etc. Talking circles can explore classroom tensions, resistance to reading or studying or practicing, effective study habits, application of course concepts and skills outside of the classroom, how students interpret or have accomplished different learning objectives, how students have overcome a learning challenge, what education or the course means to the students, or even student dreams for their career or success in life. Talking circles can also be used to make decisions regarding class policies and procedures, materials to cover, learning goals, the course calendar, grading rubrics and evaluation. I find talking circles to be very versatile. Of course, the number of students and the amount of time available for a talking circle can constrain one's options, but imagination, creativity, and great questions can overcome a lot.

# The Circle Process



## Planning a Talking Circle

Before the circle, arrange seating so that it's in a circle with no tables or desks between participants. Have name tags, refreshments, and any needed activity materials. Have a space to write the values and guidelines and project any visual aids where everyone can see them. Be sure you have your talking piece. You may also put objects of meaning (like textbooks, tools, artwork, etc.) in the center of the talking circle, as a symbolic representation of your shared experiences and knowledge.

A key element to successful talking circles is to be sure to build safety and trust through telling stories that enable participants to learn about each other and the topic(s) deeply. The circle keeper's role is to prep the circle materials, keep the integrity of the process during the circle, and to trust in the processes to do the work and lead the participants on a journey that has its own outcome. It's okay to adapt the processes to situational needs, keeping in mind that circles are about building relationships and trust through sharing experiences. I have included a diagram of the circle processes as I use them. If you think of the wheel as a clock face, each segment represents a quarter of the time allotted for the circle. Circles vary in length depending on the level and quality of disclosure and the number of participants and the complexity of the topics or issues to be discussed. The circle keeper guides discussion and starts each new pass of the talking piece. If the talking circle time is short (an hour to 90 minutes) or there are more than 15 people, I have found it best to limit the questions asked but to try to ensure they are thought-provoking in nature. When I hold talking circles repeatedly with the same group of students and a community develops and the students are familiar with the circle processes, I spend less time on building connections and developing guidelines, although I still include those aspects in the talking circle. Often, I use our previous guidelines and ask what changes or comments participants would like to make. Once that is done, I always ask for everyone to affirm their acceptance and agreement to follow the guidelines. I also will use questions that define the topic or get to surface ideas or stories related to the topic as ice-breakers. This condenses the beginning of the talking circle and provides a little extra time for the "bigger" questions.

I have divided my talking circles into four parts:

1. Building Connections
2. Piercing the Surface
3. Delving Deeper
4. Reflecting and Learning

In "Building Connections" I provide an opening to start the circle. Openings are a ritualistic part of talking circles and have been part of every one I've been in. I usually choose an anecdote, quote, poem, or video relevant to the purpose or topic of the talking circle. The opening sets the tone for the circle and segues into the special space that is the talking circle. Then I reveal the talking piece and its meaning. I also do some sort of ice-breaker to start the process of establishing connections to one another and mentally and emotionally focusing on the discussion. For example, in a talking circle about confidence and courage, participants were asked to put a picture of an animal on their nametag before the talking circle began. After the opening, we identified where our current confidence and courage was on a scale of 1-10. In the next round I asked them to consider the animal on their nametag as their personal "animal guide." Then I asked participants to introduce themselves to the group and to ask their animal guide for help in fully participating in the talking circle *in the animal's language*. I went first and modeled the activity. Then after we did our round, I asked everyone to identify where their courage and confidence

level was now and to explain any changes. Inevitably, someone talked about how they felt in the group after quacking like a duck or mooing like a cow in front of everyone and I used that to move into developing guidelines that create the safest environment possible in the circle. Sometimes, I will use a check-in with students to see how they are feeling about life or school at the moment or if there is something on their minds that might interfere with their ability to participate in the talking circle. I have found this lightens any burdens they may be carrying and allows them to focus on the here-and-now of the talking circle. Sometimes, based on what they share, I may change the order or focus of the questions I planned to ask or even go in a whole different direction to start. This part of the circle is important to help establish the group's cohesion.

“Piercing the Surface” is the part of the circle where I begin to facilitate a stronger connection to the topic by asking students to define it or talk about the topic in some way. I want the participants to personally connect to the topic. In my speech course, I like to put a learning outcome on the overhead and ask students to explain in their own words what they think the learning outcome is about and how they might know they accomplished it. Then I usually ask them to share a story related to the learning outcome. For example, one of the learning outcomes is about overcoming stage fright, and I ask them to “Tell about a time when you spoke the truth even though your voice shook.” As the circle keeper, I focus on the depth and vulnerability participants provide in their stories, trying to discern how much trust exists between the participants and their readiness to go even deeper into the topic.

When in the “Delving Deeper” part of the talking circle, I aim to get at the more difficult to talk about material, like stories about problems, disappointment, stigma, and shortcomings. This part of the talking circle reveals the vulnerabilities of being human and opens up space for growth and change by identifying where that can happen. Participants find connections to each other here as well. This is the time in the talking circle where participants learn about the trials and tribulations of others, develop empathy and understanding, and can even become inspired by the stories they hear. I also like to ask questions in this part of the circle that allow for identifying new strategies for transforming difficulties. For example, when talking about stage fright, I will ask something like, “Tell us about a time when you didn't speak up and wished you would have. What was going on that prevented you from speaking up and what could have led to a different outcome?” This type of query asks participants to identify and analyze a “problem” and then suggest possible solutions. Listeners get to hear as many scenarios and solutions as there are people in the talking circle and this provides for a lot of potential insights and learning. If we read course material about strategies for handling stage fright, I might do another round to ask them to link their strategies to those in the text, if I think that is important and helpful.

The final part of the talking circle provides time for participants to reflect on the ideas and contributions of themselves and the other participants. I ask questions that help the participants identify what they have learned during the circle. Sometimes, I ask participants to express appreciation to another participant for something they contributed that was particularly relevant and meaningful. I might ask the participants to share something they learned from participating in the talking circle, or I might ask them to consider all that was said in the talking circle and give themselves a specific piece of advice for the future based on it. Another option I have used is to share a difference and similarity they have discovered between themselves and others in the group. This segment of the talking circle is key to synthesizing the experience and helping to provide a solid take-away. It is also a time when the circle keeper has a last chance to bring important issues to the surface for discussion. If enough time exists, I like to ask participants what their experience in the circle was like as a check-out activity. Sometimes, check-out activities can relate to ice-breaker activities and bring the talking circle full circle. Finally, a closing is

provided to transition out of the talking circle space and back into other activities. I choose my closings, like my openings, ahead of time and with a focus on the purpose and/or topic of the circle. I try to choose materials I think will be poignant.

When time is limited, the talking circle is not about conflict, and/or the participants are not likely to be especially distrusting of each other, I usually provide the following guidelines on the overhead. I ask the participants to read them, and during the round I ask that they pick one and tell what they think it means. I also ask them to modify, remove, and/or add to the list if they want. We move on once everyone indicates they understand and agree to the guidelines.

### **Talking Circle Guidelines**

1. Respect the talking piece so the person who has it can convey their full message without interruption.
2. When you don't have the talking piece, listen respectfully and reflect upon, consider, and honor the meaning of what others say so you can build on the conversation.
3. You can pass if you need to. Nonverbal communication and silence sometimes say more than words.
4. Mute your cell phone and computer devices so as not to interrupt others.
5. Speak for yourself and from your own experiences and perspectives. Use "I language" and not generic "people think. . ." or sweeping generalizations, like "students want. . ." language.
6. Be courageous, honest, and open with your own stories. Speak your truth from your heart and be open to hearing others' truths.
7. Listen from the heart, allowing what others say to move you. Bear witness but do not provide advice or argue with others.
8. Honor what others say with confidentiality and integrity, sharing only with context and in relevance to your own life and learning, not as gossip.

One of my favorite ways to use a talking circle is to discuss ideas that are from an assigned reading in the course. I like to ask questions that help the students connect those ideas to their own experiences, question their current belief system, consider alternative ways of being in the world, or to critique culture and ideology. In my experience, being an effective circle keeper is often based on asking questions that get the students thinking in new ways by hearing a wide variety of experiences or insights from each other. Sometimes I use reading rubrics, like OnCourse's SPUNKI, to help me devise questions related to course materials. I find coupling these types of questions with talking circle processes yields a much more stimulating discussion and can motivate students to read the material or watch the videos since they know everyone will be asked to share. I also find asking students to write a short response paper based on prompts I provide ahead of time primes them for more insightful contributions, even if the questions I ask during the talking circle are very different from those in the prompts.

Following is a bibliography of materials I have found helpful in my development as a circle keeper and on the last page is a *Talking Circle Prep Sheet* to help walk you through preparing for your own classroom talking circle.

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# TALKING CIRCLE PREP SHEET

**Title/Topic of Circle:**

**Course:**

## Preparation

**Circle keeper:**

**Circle co-keeper:**

**Circle purpose:**

**What must be addressed in the circle?**

**What prep do you need to do ahead of time?**

**Talking piece:**

**Other items to bring:**

**Any materials, activities, videos, or articles you want participants to engage before or during the circle?**

## Circle Details

**Opening:**

**Talking piece:**

**Icebreaker:**

**Check-in question:**

**How to introduce/create guidelines:**

**Surface questions for the talking circle:**

**Deep questions for the talking circle:**

**Reflection and learning questions for the talking circle:**

**Closing question/check-out activity:**

**Closing:**