

CIRCLES

Quick Reference Guide

All of the Circles below can be used with any age group

Why Circles?

Circles need to be conducted deliberately and thoughtfully with the following goals in mind:

- Equality: Everyone *literally* has equal seating
- Safety & Trust: you can *see everyone* in a circle
 - Vulnerability: everyone can see everyone else!
- Responsibility: Everyone plays a role (even to pass)
- Reminds *you* to facilitate: Rather than lecture
- Builds connections: Everyone hears everyone else
- Ownership: Feels shared among all participants
- Inclusive: Each and every member belongs/has a place
 - Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Status, Circumstances, Culture, etc.

The shape of the circle is important and leaders should model appropriate participation. Giving clear directions increase the likelihood of success. Circles help people explore issues on a deeper level, problem solve and allow people to learn about one another and build relationships (culturally, racially, ethnically, perspectives, likes/dislikes, interests, etc.). Circles:

- Can be related to course content or interpersonal matters
- Help people take responsibility
- Allow quiet voices to be heard
- Intentionally give everyone the opportunity to be a member of the community
 - Not just those “favored” individuals who are usually chosen or volunteer to participate
- Allow quiet voices to be heard
- Allow leaders to emerge

When people say, “I don’t know,” or “Can I pass?” make sure you have responses ready to these statements.

- “I’ll come back to you”
- “You may pass”

Circles are NOT “Special Events.” Circles are a *way of doing business*, of accomplishing the things we need to get done in the classroom whether that’s getting to know one another, becoming culturally and racially aware, discussing an academic topic, problem solving, conflict resolution or responding to behavior/relational issues. Just like lecture, video and small group discussions, circles are just another possible delivery made for educators.

When first introducing circles, explain the reasoning, if necessary. Make sure that participants understand why you are putting them in a circle. This may be new or different for them and initially uncomfortable because of the vulnerability of being seen by everyone; adults may well need more explanation than students! Understanding your rationale will help put them at ease. Be upbeat and positive about the circle and remember that *any resistance you may encounter is probably from participants' fear and discomfort rather than a desire to be defiant. **View resistance as fear.***

Secrets to Success in running Circles and helpful things to keep in mind.

- Clear topic and goal: Clarity better allows participants to respond accordingly
- Set a positive tone: Circles are worthwhile and fun!
 - If you are not excited and in favor of running circles, don't do it!
 - Your affect, positive or negative, will impact the success of circles
- Keep the focus: Gently refocus participants when they stray from the topic by repeating the topic or question at hand
 - If necessary, remind participants that the only person talking is the one with the talking piece
- Get some allies (if necessary and is a concern of yours): Frequently, it is helpful to pull a few participants aside beforehand to get their support and commitment to participate appropriately

Talking Pieces

Talking pieces can be used to provide clarity about who talks and who listens. They can be anything that will be safely passed or thrown around the circle. Sometimes the talking piece is the “main event,” such as a beach or soccer ball with questions/prompts on it that can be responded to. It is not required to use talking pieces, but it often provides additional and needed structure to a conversation/circle. With younger children, a talking piece could be a “pointer” or a “Mickey Mouse Hand” that could be used to let children know whose turn it is.

- Whoever has the “talking piece” in their hand is the only one who is allowed to speak
 - There are lots of ways to “agree” with silent hand motions with no talking!
- Using a talking piece is another way to reinforce the fact that one person talks at a time and that the person holding it should have the group's full attention
- A talking piece can help give fidgety individuals something tactile to do while speaking
- The object can be something mundane like a water bottle or a box of pencils
- Talking pieces can be something meaningful or symbolic for the group
- The group could decide upon a talking piece
- The group could have a basket/box of talking pieces and whoever is leading the circle could choose which one to use

Types of Circles

Sequential Circles

Sequential Circles are those that pass the talking piece around the circle from one person to another. Participation is anticipated or expected, but not always required. In any sequential circle, individuals may ALWAYS have the option of passing.

- Easiest and most controlled to run
- A specific question is posed
- Conducted in order
 - Ask for a volunteer to begin to give others an opportunity to think and no one is surprised and maximizes safety
 - Volunteer passes the talking piece, if there is one, right or left and it continues around the circle

Non-Sequential Circles

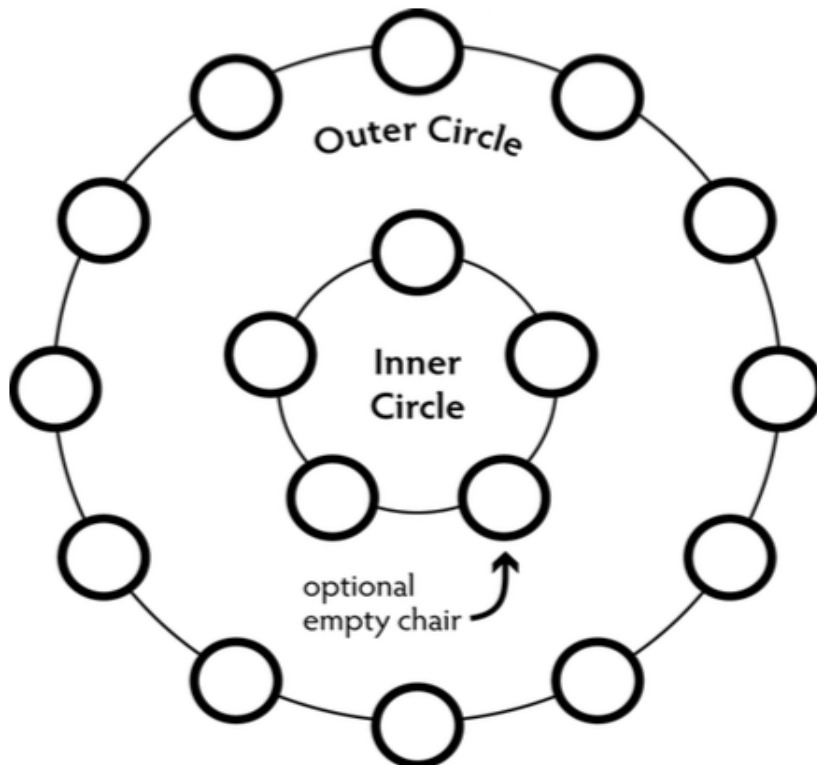
Non-sequential circles are those where individuals “ask” for the talking piece and may never do so; only individuals who want to speak will do so. These are circles where the talking piece is “thrown” to individuals who request it. Non-sequential circles allow for more freedom. Frequently there will be far fewer participants speaking than in a sequential circle. Non-sequential circles usually involve a more general question such as: “Does anyone want to share their reaction to the activity we just did?” or “Who needs help today to finish their project?” or “Does anyone have any questions or reflections on the homework you are turning in today?”

Non-sequential circles can be very proscribed/structured or more loosely structured. In this way there is no order to who speaks and participation is voluntary, but you could require everyone to have a turn. If you so required, in a seated circle, participants could have their hands on their knees until they have had a turn and then fold their hands to give others a sign that they have had a turn. In a standing circle, participants could have their hands at their sides until they have had a turn and then fold them behind their backs after they have had a turn.

Non-sequential circles can also be unstructured. Typically, these circles are more like a “group” that a counselor or social worker might lead. They tend to be activities that allow the participants to self-identify the topics they would like to discuss, although the facilitator may set parameters at the outset. These circles require the facilitator to be highly aware of the “feel” of the discussion so they can intervene when appropriate. In this unstructured circle, there is no order and participation is entirely voluntary.

Fish Bowl Circles

These are circles that can be used when the entire group is very large and/or it makes sense to have a smaller group engaged in discussion while others observe. An “empty chair” can be used to allow for engagement from everyone, not just those in the inner circle. A fish bowl is a circle configured with anywhere from 5/8 – 10/12 chairs (plus one for the empty chair). Other participants arrange themselves around this inner circle of chairs to listen/observe what is being discussed in the inner circle.



Concentric Circles

These are circles that allow for multiple conversations to occur at once. The group counts off by two's and the inner circle faces the outer circle (partners), and a question is posed where all can share at once in pairs. Inner (and/or) outer circle members can move to the right or left to find a new partner and have the same or different conversation. These circles can be around get-to-know you topics, academic topics, problem solving, brainstorming, etc.

EXAMPLES:

- Exit ticket
- What is your best subject? What is the subject you struggle with most?
- What is a question you still have from the work we just did?

- Share something with your partner that you wish your teacher knows about how you learn best
 - Tell your partner a strategy you use to avoid procrastination
 - Share with your partner where you could be now if you weren't here!
 - Tell your partner about something that really bothers you
- Others?

Circle Purposes

Educator/Adult Circles

Circles are not just to be used with students. Circles are valuable to use with adults and are just as powerful.

EXAMPLES:

- Faculty or Department Meetings
- Data Teams
- PPTs
- Others?

Academic Circles

These are circles that are used for subject matter instruction. All subjects and grade levels can use circles (e.g., Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, The Arts, Social Skills, Science, etc.).

EXAMPLES:

- Predicting what will happen in a story, science experiment or current event, etc.
- Reading passages from texts/plays/poetry together
- Practicing vocabulary, verb conjugations, rhyming words, math facts, etc.
- Reviewing for tests
- Introducing a topic, unit or assignment
- Exploring/discussing characters in literature, current/historical events, science projects, etc.
- Sharing projects, writing, strategies, theories, etc.
- Others?

Get to Know You Circles/Check-In Circles

These are circles that help individuals get to know one another; they can be seen as "check-in" circles where they are used when a group gathers together (e.g., beginning of a class, a meeting, a team practice, etc.). These circles are usually conducted sequentially and they are a tool to foster accountability on the part of the participants. These circles can be related to course content or interpersonal/relationship matters.

These circles are a way to acknowledge any agreements and/or goals that the members of the class/team/group have made together. These circles can be a way to reiterate any group norms that have been reached collaboratively.

EXAMPLES:

- What is your favorite_____?
- Cake.... or Pie? (Or any binary choice)
- If you could be any animal, what would that be?
- If you had a day of invisibility, what would you do with it?
- Where would you go on vacation if money were not an issue?
- If you could have a meal with anyone, who would you dine with?
- What is something that you are very proud of?
- What is one word that describes how you are feeling today?
- Others?

Problem Solving Circles

These are circles that are implemented when the group, large or small, has a problem that is in need of solution. The problems are generally “relational” in nature.

EXAMPLES:

- When children are not playing well at recess/on the bus/lunch or other settings
- When everyone is talking when others/teacher is talking
- When individual’s private property is not being treated appropriately
- When cell phones are being used when they should not be used
- When a member of the community is in need of some kind of help and everyone needs to figure out how to be of assistance
- Exploring a “problem of practice” for adults such as approaching a family who is not being cooperative or dealing with a group of children who are not being appropriate when a substitute is there, etc.
- When there is theft in school or destruction of school property such as bulletin boards, etc.
- Others?

Serious Situation Circles

These are circles that are convened when a serious situation arises with the group. In general, serious situations just arise, they cannot be planned for, or at least there may not be very much lead-time between the serious incident and the circle. With serious situations, it is usually a good idea to encourage people to speak only about their personal feelings and not how others *should* feel. People have a range of reactions to emotionally powerful events, and often experience or become aware of their feelings, in different ways and at different times. Also, it’s okay *not* to feel particularly affected emotionally at the time of the circle. The circle is an opportunity to share *your own*

emotions, not to judge the reactions of others in the circle...this requires thoughtful facilitation. Such circles are not 'therapy sessions,' and if teachers feel out of their comfort zones with facilitating such discussions, they can invited into the circle a trained professional and/or refer those affected to the appropriate professional(s) or other adults.

EXAMPLES:

- When a member of the community (or someone close to them) is hurt or dies
- When there is a loss of a big game or competition
- When someone explodes in class and harms others or property
- When a member of the community has to leave unexpectedly
- When there is a community/state/national tragedy (e.g. 9-11, Sandy Hook, etc.)
- A current event issue, such as immigration/deportation that affects members of the community
- Inappropriate racial/sexual language used offensively on school or bathroom walls, or online/social media, etc.
- Others?

Game Circles

These are circles that are used to play games. The games could be physical or verbal or any combination of these. Game circles DO have legitimate reasons for use (e.g., team/community building, learning names, team work, focus, multi-tasking, etc.). Getting ideas for circle games is as easy as googling it! Games are just another way to use the circle format! There are many games you can play in this way – recreation gooks, your imagination and on and on. When playing games, especially those that are physical, be mindful of inclusion issues, any physical/emotional limitations of students and that competition is kept within fun and reasonable boundaries.

EXAMPLES:

- Duck-Duck-Goose
- Group Juggling
- "Who Stole the Cookie From the Cookie Jar"
- Making a "machine" and adding movements and/or sounds
- Musical Chairs
- The Farmer in the Dell
- Here we go around the Mulberry Bush
- Others?

Appreciation/Positive Feedback Circles

These circles have the expressed purpose of allowing the participants to share compliments or positive feedback with one another. Individuals will become quite adept at interacting positively with practice. When first introducing this kind of circle, it

is often useful to provide structure and thinking time. In other words, if for example you announce to the group at the beginning of the week that at the end of the week one or more members of the class/team/group will receive compliments from group members. It would be best to mention those specific individual(s) during the announcement to allow class/team/group members to think about what they could say. In the beginning, those members could write down the compliments and put them in a jar for prior review. Or, you could choose a few class members, or ask for volunteers who would provide compliments. It would be a good idea to keep track of who is complimented to ensure that all members of the class/team/group get a chance to receive positive feedback/compliments. Such a circle could be a standing routine for the class/team/group. Even the youngest children are capable of saying nice things about one another. You are always there to provide compliments/positive feedback to any class/team/group members who may be 'harder to like.'

Restorative Justice/REAL Justice Circles

When conflict and/or harm is very severe, it may be necessary to plan and schedule a highly structured and scripted circle. In schools, these are generally implemented when severe matters have occurred. Often, law enforcement has been involved because of criminal activity. These kinds of circles take a great deal of planning and preparation. Restorative questions are asked of each and every individual who will be participating in the restorative justice conference prior to convening the circle. The individuals who typically are involved in the circle would be:

- The perpetrator(s)
- The victim(s)
- Supporters of the perpetrator(s)
- Supporters of the victim(s)

Careful planning and preparation allow for successful restorative justice circles. Members at the conference hear from one another how they have been harmed and how they are feeling. Through this process the perpetrator(s) learn first-hand of the impact their actions have had on those that were harmed. Those in the conference determine collaboratively how the harm will be repaired in a formal agreement that the parties sign and implement. There is a formal seating plan to ensure that the circle is safe for everyone and everyone can see everyone else.

EXAMPLES:

- Theft of property
- Racial/gender harm
- Graffiti
- Plagiarism
- Property destruction
- "Pranks" gone awry
- Physical harm to others
- Others?