



Classroom Community Building Circles



Heather Clayton is the author of *Making the Standards Come Alive!* and is the principal of Mendon Center Elementary School in Pittsford Central School District, New York. She is also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning: Your Guide to PLCs and More* published by Just ASK.

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"No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship."

Dr. James Comer

The previous issue of *Making the Standards Come Alive!* focused on Classroom Meetings as an important tool for bringing students together. Classroom Community Building Circles, or Peace Circles, are another way to celebrate differences, build relationships, and make connections. They are modeled after the Talking Circle used by the indigenous people of North America, and are intended to create shared values, effective communication, and mutual understanding among participants. When used consistently, they are a powerful tool for developing classroom environments conducive to learning.

Whether you choose Morning Meetings, Closing Meetings, or Community Building Circles, the goal is to create strong classroom communities that lay a foundation for powerful learning.

Benefits of Classroom Community Building Circles

They foster interactions that build community.

How well students can work together is an important part of the success of a school. Through the structured process used in Circles, students learn how to collaborate and work through differences in a productive way.

They promote respect.

In the Circle, every voice is heard and respected. Participants use active listening to carefully attend to what each person has to say.

They create a balance of power.

Every participant in the Circle is an equal; there is no voice more important than another.

They build empathy.

Students in Circles listen to the perspectives of others and grow their capacity to be empathetic. Students feel safe to be vulnerable, and share aspects of their lives in a judgment free setting.



Tenets of Classroom Community Building Circles

Classroom Circles, usually lasting around 30 minutes, focus on relationships by using activities and personal stories as a foundation. The initial way they do this is by allowing students a safe space to have fun and build connections. Later on in the process, circles may focus on academic topics (an academic circle) or restoration of a relationship that may have been damaged in some way (a restorative circle). According to Partners in Restorative Initiatives, “80% of the time Community Building Circles should be used for having fun and relationship building, and 20% for problem solving and decision making.”

One distinct difference between a Morning Meeting and a Classroom Community Building Circle is the use of a talking piece. The talking piece is an object identified by the facilitator that is used to regulate the conversation in the circle. It is passed around the circle in order and only the student who is holding the talking piece may speak. Using a talking piece ensures that all students have an equitable opportunity to speak and share their thinking with others. A student may choose to pass the talking piece and is never required to speak.

In addition to a talking piece, there is a Circle center that includes a centerpiece, where participants can rest their gaze if they are uncomfortable looking at others. The centerpiece should represent something relevant to the topic or purpose of the Circle. For example, a centerpiece could be a colorful piece of fabric, a vase filled with rocks, shells, or flowers, artifacts created by the class, or other objects that have personal meaning for the students. The center of the Circle is the place where all participants’ voices are added, and it is from the center of the Circle where relationships will develop.

Structure of Classroom Circles

Call the Circle to order

Share a sound that lets your students know it is time for the Circle to begin. It may be music, a chime, a bell, or some other agreed upon sound.

Opening

The opening signals that it is time for the Circle to begin, and that students should be present and ready to slow down and be reflective.



The opening could be a simple mindfulness activity, breathing technique, or short reading with the goal of helping your students to block out any distractions.

Guidelines

The facilitator will begin by sharing some general guidelines, then the talking piece will be passed around the circle so that students can add any of their own. When the talking piece comes back to the facilitator, he/she summarizes all of the guidelines the class has generated. These are then read after the opening of every Circle. The goal of the guidelines is to create a safe experience where every student feels comfortable and connected.

Examples of Circle guidelines:

- Only the person holding the talking piece may speak.
- Speak your truth, based on your experiences and perspectives.
- Listen without judgment and be open to new ideas.
- Trust your voice, and know that you will have the words when it is your turn to speak.
- Say just enough so there is room for everyone to speak.
- Keeping Circle discussion confidential.

Rounds

Each round begins with a question posed by the facilitator. Once the talking pieces has made its way around the Circle and back to the facilitator, he/she summarizes some of the things that were shared. When sharing ideas from the participants, there should be no judgment or interpretation. The facilitator decides on how many rounds should happen in one meeting, usually between one and three.

The facilitator has the option to add a connection round based on the readiness of the students. In a connection round, the talking piece is passed again and each student shares if they connected with a specific peer's thinking and why.

When choosing questions for each round, there are some important considerations. The questions used should be relevant and have meaning for the participants of the Circle. The subjects chosen for questions should be non-controversial and lend themselves to storytelling and making connections. Questions should be open-ended and invite discovery, not promote one right answer. Finally, questions should



allow for a broad range of answers while inviting smiles and happiness. Classroom Community Building Circles give us the opportunity to ask questions that shape how students see and experience one another.

Examples of questions that build community:

- What is a memory you have of spending time in nature?
- What is your dream vacation? Why?
- What are you the most proud of?
- Who inspires you? Why?
- Describe a time you have done something outside of your comfort zone. How did it feel?
- If you could have one super power, what would it be? Why?

Examples of closure questions that invite reflection:

- What is something new you learned about a classmate during our discussion?
- What surprised you in our Circle today?

Closing

The closing confirms that the Circle is ending and shows gratitude for the participation of the group. It may be as simple as a breathing exercise, a special reading, or a fun activity.

Tips for Conducting Meaningful Classroom Community Building Circles

Create a safe space

Invite students to an open space in the classroom where they can comfortably sit in a circle, seated at the same height, facing one another. If there are co-facilitators, they should sit across the circle from one another.

Establish and reinforce guidelines

The guidelines help to create a safe space where participants can take risks and be vulnerable. When the members of the Circle have been actively involved in creating the guidelines, there will be increased engagement and a shared commitment for the success of the Circle. If a guideline is broken, the facilitator should refrain from using the talking piece and ask the whole group to reflect on the guidelines and how they feel they are doing. This may be a time for group members to make any necessary revisions to guidelines.



Participate in the Circle

The power of the Community Building Circle comes from the participation of everyone in the classroom, including the adults.

Facilitate with care

Each Circle has a facilitator whose role it is to maintain equity among participants, establish a respectful tone, co-create and enforce guidelines, summarize common themes, and addresses concerns in a supportive way.

Trust the process

If a participant does not want to sit with the circle, give him/her permission to sit outside of the circle and join when he/she feels comfortable. Chances are the student is listening and engaging in his/her own way and will enter the circle when ready.

Focus on fun

The purpose of a Community Building Circle is to build relationships in a non-stressful and engaging environment. Therefore, use activities that are designed to make students relax and smile. This will build motivation for the practice and increase student investment.

Protect time

Dedicate a consistent time to hold Circles and build it into your schedule. Students count on this time and the Circle will lose its effectiveness if pushed aside for other things.

Be consistent

In order to reap the benefits of Circles, they need to be held consistently. Additionally, each Circle should include an opening, rounds, and a closing.

Classroom Community Building Circles are invaluable in building a respectful community of learners in the classroom. The skills taught are far reaching and impactful in all parts of a student's day. In addition, Classroom Circles promote a school culture that is welcoming, inclusive, and genuine.



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Resources and References

www.livingjusticepress.org/vertical/sites/%7B4A259EDB-E3E8-47CD-8728-0553C080A1B0%7D/uploads/SevenCoreAssumptions.pdf

This pdf contains the Seven Core Assumptions for community circles in the classroom.

www.healthiersf.org/RestorativePractices/Resources/documents/RP%20Curriculum%20and%20Scripts%20and%20PowePoints/Classroom%20Curriculum/Teaching%20Restorative%20Practices%20in%20the%20Classroom%207%20lesson%20Curriculum.pdf

“Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles” is a resource that includes strategies and tools for Classroom Community Building Circles as well as other varieties of Circle formats.

Boyes-Watson, Carolyn and Kay Pranis. *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*. St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2015.

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