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Discussing Difficult Topics—Drawing on Circles (and the Philosophy of Circles)

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Discussing Difficult Topics—Drawing on Circles (and the Philosophy of Circles)

Abstract

One key concern of Mellon faculty is how to facilitate discussions on difficult topics, such as racism and other forms of oppression. The Circles training in fall semester 2016 was one initiative Mellon funds have sponsored to provide faculty with tools to address this concern. Circle work was already a part of our campuses. Circles of Understanding hosted by International and Intercultural Student Services and courses in mediation and restorative justice taught through Communication and Peace Studies are two examples. The fall training sought to build on this foundation (as well as to respond to faculty interest in circles). Our project comes out of this ongoing conversation and seeks further inroads to transformative practices. The portion of our project included here defines what Circles are and shares two perspectives about the use of Circles as a means of practicing inclusive discussion with students, particularly about more fraught or challenging subject matters.

Our project aims specifically to reflect on ways in which Circles, and the philosophy of Circles, might provide new approaches to learning, as well as to restorative work in our campus community. Accordingly, our introduction addresses the question: what are Circles and how do they work? The subsequent contributions from Julie Lynch, Brandyn Woodard, and Jessica Harkins begin to explore how circles can relate to inclusivity in the classroom and in our community.

Keywords

Circles, inclusion/inclusivity, class discussion, class participation, mindful listening

Introductory Comments

What are “Circles?”

Kay Pranis, seminal author on “Circle Work,” describes them as follows: “The Circle is a simple structured process of communication that helps participants reconnect with a joyous appreciation of themselves and others. It is designed to create a safe space for all voices and to encourage each participant to step in the direction of their best selves. Circles are relevant for all age groups. While the language may vary to be developmentally appropriate, holding certain conversations in Circle is equally beneficial for all members of the school community, from the youngest to the eldest. We believe the practice of Circles is helpful for building and maintaining healthy community in which all members feel connected and respected”.¹

In practice, a “Circle” mirrors its namesake. Participants sit together in a circle to discuss a chosen topic or issue of concern. It is often recommended to avoid having a table or other “barrier” between participants, though tables are sometimes used (i.e., the structure is flexible, but should be thoughtful and intentional based on the nature of the work). In a traditional Circle, the facilitator or circle-keeper will mark the Circle as a sacred space, or safe place. Using mats, candles, flowers, or traditional objects as a center piece can help to create that space. Opening and closing the Circle with a reading, a quotation, or a statement helps to distinguish Circle as a different time and space from the rest of the day. Normally guidelines will be established by the members of the Circle to establish how members want their Circle to be, i.e., respectful, listening, honest. A talking piece can be used to pass around the Circle. Only the person holding the talking piece speaks. This practice helps others to listen. Participants can pass the talking piece at any time without speaking.²

The facilitator poses questions for the group and eventually closes the Circle. The roles of all participants are to listen even when it is uncomfortable, to understand rather than to dispute, and to share as honestly as they feel able.

Rather than to settle a dispute, a primary function of Circles is to engage empathetic responses through listening to, and gaining a better understanding of, the experiences of others while feeling that one also has been heard.

Types of Circles

There are many types of Circles. To list a few, from Kay Pranis' *The Little Book of Circles*:

- Talking Circles: In a Talking Circle participants explore an issue or topic from all different perspectives. Talking Circles do not attempt to reach consensus on the topic. The goal is to allow all voices to be heard respectfully and offer participants diverse perspectives to stimulate their reflections.
- Circles of Understanding: A Circle of Understanding is a Talking Circle focused on understanding some aspect of a conflict or difficult situation. Generally, this is not a decision-making Circle. Its purpose is to develop a more complete picture of the context or reason for a particular event or behavior.
- Sentencing Circle: A Sentencing Circle is a community-directed process in partnership with the criminal justice system. It involves all those affected by an offense in deciding an appropriate sentencing plan that addresses the concerns of all participants. This type of Circle brings together the person who has been harmed, the person who caused the harm, family and friends of each, other community members, justice system representatives, and other resource professionals. The discussion explores several questions. What was the harm? Who was harmed? What was the impact of the harm? How can the harm be repaired? Preparation for a Sentencing Circle may involve a Healing Circle for the person harmed and a Circle of Understanding for the one who committed the harm.
- Support Circles: A Support Circle brings together key people to support

a person through a particular difficulty or major change in life. This is also not necessarily a decision-making Circle, but may help develop plans or agreements.

- Community-Building Circles: The purpose of a Community-Building Circle is to create bonds and build relationships among a group of people who have a shared interest. Community-Building Circles support effective collective action and mutual responsibility.³
- Conflict Circle: This Circle brings together disputing parties to resolve their differences. Resolution takes place through a consensus agreement.⁴

Speaking in broad terms, “Circles” are communal events that bring individuals together and provide a structured, safe place for sharing one’s perspective and learning about how an event has affected others. In this sense, Circle work serves relational repair within a community, and it appears in many contexts. It can be used to address tensions within a workplace, to promote understanding between different groups within a community, and to create a safe environment to discuss differing views about any number of events, issues, or concerns.⁵ And so Circle work branches in many directions, ranging from the restorative justice work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa to mediation in the junior high schools of the St. Cloud area. (Many recent studies show that restorative work with caring adults is beneficial to youth who have experienced trauma or other early childhood adversity.⁶) In our current educational system, Circles commonly take place outside of the classroom as a community building or restorative practice. Yet Circles also have been adapted to work *within* the classroom as an inclusive, perspective-shifting discussion model, and significant literature and studies detail how Circles can be incorporated effectively into K-12 as well as college and university curricula.⁷

How do Circles connect to inclusivity and to the Mellon grant?

The goals of Circle Work vary, but some of its fundamental principles can be adapted in the classroom to promote inclusivity. Central goals of using Circles

in a pedagogical context include: creating a safe community in the classroom for open and honest discussion; designing a classroom to be inclusive and address everyone's needs and interests (to value everyone and to increase the value gained); balancing the power dynamics in the classroom; modeling for students ways to approach difficult and/or uncomfortable topics, such as race, gender, and class issues; and establishing ground rules for inclusive discussion that makes room for differences in perspective.

In short, many of the reasons some faculty having been considering Circles are precisely the reasons we are calling ourselves to consider inclusive pedagogy. Hopefully exploring the practice of Circles can shed insights into some practical methods for reaching these goals in the classroom. Beyond the classroom, we hope that this conversation sparks discourse about the potential for Circle Work in our wider community. Circles offer a powerful, alternative model for addressing disagreements, while participating in Circles instills transformative awareness, practice, and skills for our students to take into the world.

Defining Circles

Julie Lynch

Many courses that include class discussions have the potential to help students to prepare for discussions about challenging subjects. Further, in-class discussion frequently offers students the opportunity to see the similarities and differences in the perspectives of their classmates. The process of class discussion also enhances students' critical thinking skills. However, even when students are thoughtful and critical in their approach, the challenge remains for students to listen to many student voices while arriving at a new understanding. Conflicting views potentially divide the classroom and can intimidate students and so reduce their willingness to participate in the future. An additional challenge for class discussion can be that more vocal students may establish a pattern for who has speaking power in the classroom.

I have found that incorporating the Circle process (which includes instructing students in how to do Circle work) meaningfully addresses these complex challenges. In both my first-year seminar (FYS) and Listening Basics courses, the Circle process provides a basis for discussion and ensures a gentle process of equal contribution to achieve greater understanding of a text or issue. In fact, Circle processes provide a safe space to have difficult conversations. This is important considering the fact that our student population is increasingly diverse. The Circle process compliments the desire to be open-minded and to understand and include all individuals. The Healing Circle symbolizes the cycle of life and its perpetual motion; all humans are interrelated. Masks of ego are dropped as students mindfully articulate responses to carefully constructed questions provided by the instructors on challenging materials, thus getting more in touch with the true self and practicing listening from a space of compassion. A “talking piece” is passed either clockwise or counterclockwise to allow each member to equally have the opportunity to communicate thoughts, pass, or simply hold the Talking Piece in the power of silence. The Talking Piece also determines who speaks and when, which regulates the dialogue. Each question and completion of the circle deepens the thought process and strengthens a sense of connection. Sharing values and respect bring the “best self” forward in a transformative manner.

Each Circle begins with an opening ceremony. Usually, a poem or a short reading is used to give a moment of silence to reflect and focus. The centerpiece of the Circle contains sacred pieces to honor the sacred process: a piece of leather represents the animals or a piece of quilting represents the pieces (individuals) as related to a whole (culture); Sage or Sweetgrass represent the earth; a candle (artificial) represents Air and Fire; and Water represents cleansing. Any other items can be used as a Talking Piece (birch, stones, packets of seeds). All items should be representative of all participants and meaningful in some way. Students may wish to contribute. The centerpiece provides a central focus. Some students prefer to look into the center rather than at people as they share. The instructor (facilitator or keeper) begins with a few carefully constructed questions and requests that

a member to the right or the left choose a Talking Piece to pass it around the Circle. The next question is directed to the member seated on the other side and the Talking Piece is passed in the other direction. Once the guided questions are completed, the Circle of Understanding ends with a closing ceremony (usually another reading). Students are invited to choose readings for the opening and closing ceremony. The point of the closing ceremony is to remind all of the interconnectedness of self and others in a fully present moment.

Heart of Hope: A Guide for Using Peacemaking Circles to Develop Emotional Literacy, Promote Healing & Build Healthy Relationships (34) provides the following suggestions to take students into deeper insights:

- Encourage participants to speak from their own lived experiences
- Invite participants to share stories from their lives
- Focus on feelings and impacts rather than on facts
- Help participants transition from discussing difficult or painful events to discussing what can be done now to make things better

Kay Pranis, writer and trainer on Peacemaking Circles and restorative justice, emphasizes the following guidelines in any Circle Process:

- Respect the Talking Piece
- Speak from your heart
- Listen with your heart
- Speak with respect
- Listen with respect
- Remain in the Circle
- Honor confidentiality

These guidelines can be downloaded from LivingJusticePress.com and can be brought up online or posted in classrooms.

Students in two FYS sections practiced Circles of Understanding each week. A variety of literature was provided to move students from a focus on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (informed by Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*) to a focus outside of self by listening with compassion. The literature included: poems from Kimberly Blaeser's *Apprenticed to Justice* and her live readings performed one evening at the Literary Arts Institute; multiple perspectives from *Race in Minnesota: A Good Time for the Truth* (Shin); *Citizen* (Rankine); and various recent major and local newspaper articles and podcasts. The literature served as a pivotal experience to open up possible research paper topics. While students were at first hesitant with the Circles of Understanding process, they spoke of preferring the opportunity to contribute at each class session. They did verbalize that not every part of the centerpiece was necessary. I now provide only a small quilt and one Talking Piece for each class for efficiency. If conversation returns to shallow or ego-based response, it is time to bring back the more sacred pieces.

As a facilitator of in-class Circles, I have been pleased to observe many positive impacts. Students in these courses clearly developed an increased ability to hear different points of view, specifically to listen to others with greater comfort, and with greater awareness of our shared goal (in discussion) to reach a better understanding. We also worked, throughout the semester, on *mindful* listening while others were speaking, which meant resisting the impulse to form our own thoughts and responses while another was speaking. Instead, we learned to listen with patience, which in turns gave greater power to each person as he/she spoke in turn. Circles helped students to listen mindfully, and they contributed positively to the equality of speaking in the classroom both during and outside of time in Circle. Finally, students in these courses communicated more authentically in class discussions over the course of the semester. More frequent use of this option and the opportunity to continue its use in a second semester could deepen the insights as students mature with critical thinking and compassionate listening. Ideally, I also will see better focused writing for the research papers since the topic choice derived from the truth of experience. Moreover, students may learn to practice more genuine communication and mindful listening as they interact with others outside of the classroom.

Circles of Understanding

Brandyn Woodard

The involvement of Intercultural and International Student Services (IISS) with Circles was facilitated by Professor Ron Pagnucco introducing me, Director of IISS, to Danielle Taylor, Circle Trainer (with M.A. in Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding and a Concentration in Restorative Justice), who had facilitated the Circles a few years prior. In discussing IISS's vision for the CSB/SJU campus community, it was very clear that Circles would be a way to engage students in deeper conversations and challenge them to modify their thoughts, behaviors, and interactions as appropriate. In collaboration with Danielle, we offered a Circle-keeping mini-training session for more than 30 students at our first gathering. Subsequent mini-trainings have added to that number, and we currently have more than 25 students still on campus who are willing and able to assist.

Since working with Danielle, we have held the following Circles of Understanding: Race, Gender, Sexual Assault, Religion and LGBTQ folks, and BLM (Black Lives Matter) vs. ALM (All Lives Matter). The Circles on race, gender, and BLM vs. ALM were the best attended, with most of the feedback from students in completed evaluations coming from the BLM vs. ALM Circle.

Some (unedited and anonymous) quotes from students about their experience sitting in Circle with one another for BLM vs. ALM are:

- “Please have more of these events. I was happy to sit in a room full of diverse people to discuss a topic that is really touchy.”
- “I learned that when I’m open minded and willing to listen, I really do learn a lot from other people.”
- “Majority of the time White Privilege is simply ignorance but that

doesn't mean all White people are bad. Assuming that makes us bad. People are afraid to speak the truth, and feel afraid to be honest when it comes to racial tensions. Our group did a great job of creating a safe place where people can feel like they can be vulnerable and learn from one another."

- "Thank you for doing this. Though my group did not have enough time to come up with resolutions to this conflict, I met and made several new friends who I wouldn't have had the courage to talk to outside of the circle. This circle has empowered me to promote change on campus through the relationships that were created last night."

- "I loved the format of this program and the message for it! I learned in more ways than I could've imagined, from what others said and what I even thought. I loved feeling more connected to CSB/SJU students and having the opportunity to learn and understand their views on major social justice issues. Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to learn and grow! :)"

In reflecting on the experience of having Circles on our campuses, several thoughts come to mind. First is that Circles provide our community with an opportunity to sit with and be fully present to and with each other in ways that are not common on campus. Students (generally) allow themselves to be away from their electronic devices and thoughts about what is next and can slow down to listen deeply. Students have developed the skills and the strength necessary to listen to others' truths, especially when shared in an emotional or visceral way that is not part of our common communication at CSB/SJU. For the future, there is hope that Circles could be part of orientation, judicial procedures, and the residence life curriculum at our institutions.

Circles are just another method of engaging with students and can be a source of healing and deepening of relationships in our community.

Two Experiences with Circles: Home and Overseas

Jessica Harkins

Home

I first learned about Circles from the director of the St. Cloud Conflict Resolution Center (CRC) (full disclosure: she happens to be my mother). As I heard more and more about her work in area middle schools, I kept making connections back to many of my own experiences in the classroom and began to wonder how the philosophy of Circles could be incorporated to the benefit of students at the college or university level.

What drew me to Circles was the opportunity to learn more ways to include all members of my classes in discussions, especially of difficult or sensitive subject matters, such as race relations or gender relations. I wanted to find more tools to help students approach these conversations in a way that would promote a growth experience rather than only discomfort or re-trenchment in pre-established ideas (including my own).

What I had reservations about was using class time for a therapy session and/or potentially soliciting subject matter from students I was not trained or prepared to handle in an effective pedagogical manner.

As a result, I decided to incorporate Circles for the first time in my FYS course on Social Justice by inviting outside experts to present about the use of Circles in the St. Cloud area and to lead our class through a “sample” Circle so the students could experience what a Circle is like. (The subject matter of my first-year seminar is “social justice”: a broad theme which allows us to study of multiple genres, write across the disciplines, and to practice inclusivity in our in-class discussions as we talk about dynamics of inclusion and marginalization in our wider communities.) In the fall semester, we look at three international social justice issues, the first one being Apartheid in South Africa. As part of this unit, we view the

documentary film *Long Night's Journey into Day*, which follows five of the cases brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Our post-film discussion includes a comparative timeline of slavery in the United States and Apartheid in South Africa, and one of the questions focuses on how racism in the US is similar and different from racism in South Africa. Building on the response to this question, the next one asks: "Would a TRC be effective in the United States? Why or why not? What groups might want to have such a commission in the States?"

Many students would argue that something like the TRC would not work in the United States because "Americans wouldn't go for it." We would naturally discuss this at length, but in the first few years of my teaching, I had assumed that there was not anything like the TRC in the United States. But as I learned more about Circles, I understood two things: first that the TRC was using restorative justice (at an exponentially advanced level); and two, that restorative justice work was happening right here in St. Cloud, through Circle Work in area schools designed to restore and repair damage to relationships following altercations. While the magnitude of the harm was not comparable to Apartheid, these harms were being addressed through the philosophy of restorative rather than retributive justice—with very real and positive effects. So, that year, when students told me once again that they did not think that anything like the TRC could ever work in the U.S., I was able to say that actually we had some examples of this approach taking place in our community—and that we would have visitors involved in this activity coming to our class.

In this way, it was possible to link the Circle activity directly to the documentary and its presentation of restorative justice. We turned our attention to the question: how is it happening here? I invited the CRC director and a senior CSB student (who had undergone mediation training and was active in Circles at CSB/SJU and in area schools) to provide information about their work before leading the class in a sample Circle. It appeared that the connection made sense for the students, who expressed interest in trying Circles for themselves. Hannah Hout, the student visitor, led the class through a sample Circle, using a talking piece and setting clear

rules for the time. She had prepared three questions, to engage students in the present moment, invite reflection about gender dynamics they may have encountered so far on our campuses, and then closed with a question about how everyone was feeling. The students all shared strongly positive responses: “feeling great,” “great way to start their day,” and “just really, really happy and connected.”

It worked very well to have an adult talking about the work being done in the community paired with a student from CSB describing her involvement, giving examples of how each of us could be more inclusive and leading us through a Circle that placed everyone on equal footing. What it modeled for me was the transition from lecture to discussion in a manner that truly changed the dynamic between professor and student: in Circle, the students shifted from passive learners to equal discussants whose words held equal value. I noticed that this activity generally increased reflective thought as students puzzled through what they wanted to contribute (and of course they also could reflectively decide to pass on any given question—though most did not). Later during the semester, I would occasionally do a brief Circle—just to have us go around and say how we were doing (in a few words) or how we felt about a reading. It became a kind of touchstone for us to go back to over the course of the fall semester.

In spring semester, the philosophy of Circles became more important as we hit some difficulty discussing race relations in the U.S. One student expressed a lot of anger in class about a Black Lives Matter protest, causing other students to shut down and disengage from the discussion. I did not want to use a Circle to do repair work in the class because it felt too much like mediation, and also because I was not trained. Instead I met with the student outside of class, explained that his voice and perspective were important to me (I invited him to write a short essay articulating and exploring his feelings about the protest), and drew his attention to the effects his outbursts were having on peers. The conversation seemed to go well. For class, I designed a modified Circle, where we sat together and I gave them cards with phrases like, “share a passage you found interesting,” “ask a question for the group,” “ask a question for a specific peer,” and so forth. Each had a hand of three

cards to “play” during discussion. This seemed to help get us out of the charged negative space and into a more engaged how-do-I-negotiate-these-nutty-rules space, and back into textual discussion.

But the Circle that we did early on felt like it had established a norm—a kind of ideal center for us to go back to when we got off track, and that sensibility stayed with the class for the year. It helped me to communicate my ideal discussion and for them to take ownership of it. In the future, I would do a second Circle in the spring semester, so that they could talk even more about a dynamic they had encountered on campus that related to a text read in class and/or to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. While it would feel like too much for me to do proper Circles on an ongoing basis, holding even the one Circle created a sense of safety and connection. Talking in that space seemed to help clarify when we came back to normal classroom space and what we were really doing in the classroom: listening, thinking, developing our understanding.

I tried using just the idea of Circles the following fall, with a new class. Instead of having anyone come in, I thought I would have us do some sharing in a circle now and then to touch base. But it did not work nearly as well as having an experienced person come in to lead a true Circle. Even just the one time of doing it “for real” made a significant difference. When I tried to do one without that guidance, one student did not hear or understand the guidelines and began to speak for a long time in an unfocused manner, which caused tensions to work through inside and outside of class. In the future, if I am going to use them as a point of reference and discussion model, I will plan on one or two guided Circles (depending on class content) led by an experienced person and linked to class content, i.e., I will make sure that the students have read about restorative justice, mediation, alternative dispute settlement or another related discourse beforehand for a frame of reference. I acknowledge this is also personal preference: I find that I teach from a place of greater strength when I engage students in a “participating in the art” activity (as opposed to feeling that I am mediating a dispute).

Overseas

My experience using Circles overseas broke both of my own rules: do not wing it, and do not try to mediate the class (i.e., no group therapy). In some ways, deep down, I did not break these rules, but on the surface they were blown out of the water. Basically, I used a Circle in an emergency situation and it worked well. But I am thinking about having someone work with my students on Circles before taking my next group abroad (in addition to bystander-awareness training) because my sense is that such a pre-trip experience could enhance the effectiveness of an onsite Circle.

So, when I used a Circle overseas, the students had not had the experience of a trained mediator leading them through a Circle, and I **did** use it to address and to repair harms perpetrated by members of the group. This was not planned from the outset, but the circumstances were unexpected and demanding. In a nutshell, our group was struggling with a few significant issues: a group of friends (from before the trip) and the others on the trip were generally not mixing well. This tension was exacerbated by members of the friend group engaging in behaviors such as excessive drinking, unwanted sexual conduct, and damaging property. Following a particularly egregious incident, the Dean of Students expelled two students from the program. On the day of their expulsion, most of the students were understandably upset and some reported further stress caused by the hostile environment in the dormitories. The Co-Director and I intervened. He stayed with the two students who had been expelled to guide them through their departure from the campus, and I took the rest of the group to meet elsewhere while that transition took place.

This was probably not a typical situation: I would not expect it to happen again. But on that afternoon, I did notice a few things that stand out to me as useful. The first was something I once had been told about conflict: we assume the worst about each other in those moments. And we do not get anywhere arguing about our values—they probably are not in conflict anyway. As I took the group to a nearby church (it was a saint's day and this

particular church houses the relics of St. Augustine), I took advantage of the external stairs and empty courtyard to address the students, many of whom were visibly upset. (The students were strongly divided between those who were friends with the two expelled students and those who were angry that the expelled students had not been sent home earlier.) I asked how many of them valued “loyalty” and several raised their hands. I then asked how many valued “fairness” and several others rose their hands. I said something along the lines of these both being solid and reasonable values; that I understood that everyone was feeling upset; that our group dynamic mattered; and that we would sit down all together and talk as a group before the end of the day.

This brief address did not cure everything, but I sincerely noticed a drop in the tension level. Arms were no longer crossed, and they began talking to each other again. My best guess is that especially those who were friends with the departing students felt as though they were being characterized as “bad guys” for standing up for their friends, while the others felt exasperated by the effect the behavior of a few was having on their experience abroad. So recognizing that each person held reasonable, laudable values seemed to help everyone feel revalidated or represented more fairly.

Later that day, after much needed *cappucini* and *brioche*, we returned to the campus and found our classroom where we could talk in privacy. I told them we were doing a Circle, and laid out all the ground rules I could remember. I did not have a talking piece, or a poem or song to recite at the beginning, mostly because I forgot about those things entirely. I think having them would have been better, but this was the by-the-seat-of-my-pants Circle. I remember writing down three questions because I wanted to keep it as short and focused as I could. The questions were something like: “What has been hard for you about the program so far?” “What would you like to see change?” “What could we do to promote that change?”

The group responded well. They spoke at length and appeared to take it seriously and in good faith. Some individuals were able to voice frustrations and fears that were hard for others to hear. Some asked follow-up questions that I allowed because they seemed genuine and constructive. Not everyone participated as openly as one might hope, but it provided a fair

and open opportunity for everyone to share what was on his or her mind. There are so many things I would change if I could go back and redo that program, but, as imperfect as it doubtless was, the Circle saved the proverbial and the literal day. By the third question, the group began speaking to each other out of turn, so I pulled us back once or twice to the Circle, and then let it go as the students were planning to spend the evening all together as a group. I closed simply by thanking them and saying something about the Circle being closed now and have a good evening.

In retrospect, the decisions that seemed to have a positive effect during this experience include the following: articulating shared and different values to help dispel tension (values are not being contested); assuring the students that they would be heard; using a short and focused set of questions that allowed the students to get at what they want to talk about (i.e., the Circle was for them); praying for the right questions to ask and the composure to listen.

This was my crash course in Circles. I plan to educate myself further in order to use them in more of my classes as an intentional discussion model I can provide for all students (and for my own continued growth). It is also maybe not a bad model to have up one's sleeve, although I hope to never need it again in so tight a spot.

Concluding Remarks

We would like to see more members of our faculty, staff, and student body engage in Circle Work in the next couple of years, and to seek opportunities to exchange ideas about how this work can benefit our communities within and outside of the classroom. We hope our efforts to date (what we have written here) will allow those of us who are at the margins of this work to get a better sense of what it entails and hopefully build some momentum around further developing Circle Work at CSB/SJU.

Notes

1. Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis, *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* (Living Justice Press, 2015), 3. The reflective teacher may find connections as well to the philosophy behind circles. As Pranis elaborates: “To belong, one has to be seen. To be significant, one has to contribute. In its profound simplicity and deep complexity, the Circle process provides the means for everyone to belong and to be significant under any circumstance: as a student learning a world language; as a member of the classroom reviewing for a test; as a teacher, sharing his highs and lows; as a principal, sharing her favorite desert; as a member of a team, learning winning and losing; as a kid who caused harm, helping to fix things; as a youth who has been hurt, helping others to fix things; or as a parent working with the school to support the education of all children. The Circle, for a while, flattens the hierarchy between cliques and cliques, between adults and students, and between the book-learned educator and the experience-learned parent. Everyone has a place.” (xvii).
2. The description of the Circle process is informed by discussion with Ona Lawrence, Director of the St. Cloud Conflict Resolution Center.
3. This is the type of Circle used by the St. Cloud Conflict Resolution Center in St. Cloud Area schools. See www.crcminnesota.org/satellite-offices/mediation-st-cloud-mn/.
4. These kinds of circles are all taken from Kay Pranis, *Little Book of Circle Process* (Good Books, 2005).
5. See for instance the main webpage for *Living Justice Press*:

http://www.livingjusticepress.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B51F9C610-C097-446A-8C60-05E8B4599FE7%7D.

6. The ACES Study examines adverse effects of childhood trauma and restorative measures (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acesstudy/>). Another recent study by Michael Rodriguez through the University of Minnesota further supports these findings. It notes in particular that youth have an inherent capacity for positive development that is enabled and enhanced through multiple meaningful relationships, contexts, and environments, and where community is a critical delivery system, and youth are major actors in their own development. (Rodriguez's study was on most of the Minnesota Schools. He published reports on each area and one on the Sum of all Schools.) See "Exploring Developmental Skills, Supports and Challenges" by Michael C. Rodriguez, Campbell Leadership Chair in Education & Human Development, University of Minnesota, Feb. 21, 2017. Study posted at: <http://www.edmeasurement.net/MAG/Rodriguez2013MSSv2.pdf>. Further, regarding the importance of "Community Building" (sometimes called Sharing Circles), studies show that social emotional skills are the most important skills we can teach young people. In *Little Book of Circle Process*, Pranis discusses positive effects of Sharing Circles on affected youth (*ibid.*). The seminal work on this topic is: Boyes-Watson and Pranis *Circle Forward* (*ibid.*). Additionally, numerous studies discuss the how-to and efficacy of using Circles in classrooms. See, for instance, the following.

Other Resources

Using Talking Circles in the Classroom:
<https://www.heartland.edu/documents/idc/talkingCircleClassroom.pdf>

Teaching and Learning in a Circle: International Institute
for Restorative Justice:

http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/mn02_lewis.pdf

“Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles”:

<http://www.centerforrestorativeprocess.com/teaching-restorative-practices-with-classroom-circles.html>

“My First Class as a Circle” (short description of using circles
in a gender class):

<http://peerspirit.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/PeerSpirit-Apr2000.pdf>

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