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Learning in Circles: The Power of a Humanizing Dialogic Practice

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Abstract

There is an increasing sense of urgency to reconnect to the basic notion of a humanizing dialogic practice. A practice that prioritizes lived experiences and recognizes students and teacher as active, knowledgeable and insightful participants of the school community. Given the emphasis placed on test scores, assessments and other accountability measures, students and teacher voices are often omitted from the national dialogue on what is working and what needs to change in order to foster caring schools and responsive classrooms. Yet their voices are precisely the ones we need to hear from as any kind of educational reform efforts will directly impact them. Drawing on critical pedagogical theories, this article conceptually explores the power of a humanizing dialogic practice grounded on circle practice. Circle practice is a simple structured process of communication that helps participants re-connect with a joyous appreciation of themselves and others while making meaningful connections to both context and content.

Keywords: dialogue, humanizing practice, critical pedagogy, circles in practice, relationships

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...dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task.
-Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1995, p. 379)

Teaching is a complex process that many consider to be an art (Kubli, 2005). It is an art that some would argue has become increasingly hard to engage in, given the degree to which the discourse of schooling in this era of accountability are dominated by a binary conception of success and achievement where there are two types of schools: performing and those that are underperforming (Murrell, 2006). The emphasis on performativity has emerged as the dominant goalpost in schooling, often at the cost of more critical educational encounters (Hennessey & Mannix McNarmara, 2013).

In most instances, teacher quality and student achievement are devalued and, in many cases, dehumanized, further separating teacher's decision making from the prescribed curriculum and the students themselves (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Brimijoin, 2005 in Burke, Adler, & Linker, 2008). Teachers in urban schools feel this pressure the most particularly given the scant attention to issues of school climate and teacher morale in conversations about accountability. All this is taking place against a backdrop of increasing structural inequality at a time where the focus should be on creating social learning environments among all students, but particularly diverse student populations of children and youth (Murrell, 2002, 2006; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton & Yamauchi, 2000).

The path of least resistance appears to be to conform to the dictates of neo-liberalism and corporate hegemony which has resulted in a narrow and politicized realization of education enforced through surveillance and the imposition of tightly monitored testing of chunks of knowledge transmission (Freire 1993, 1970). Despite this schools still largely remain democratic

places of hope and promise to many who still dare to envision classrooms as spaces of agency, dissent and critique. Democratic societies see public education as the foundation for its highest aspirations; this includes a collective commitment to a vision of a society that affords each individual the opportunity to pursue a meaningful life. For public education to continue serving as the great equalizer in our society, it is essential that success be possible for all children including those from the bottom of the socio-economic scale who seem to face the highest degree of social inclusion.

However, this view of education demands more than a vision. It demands pedagogical interventions organized around the need for a humanizing dialogic practice that allows for the conditions for engaging with students in a meaningful and authentic manner in order to effectively grapple with the contradiction between reality and promise of democratic schooling (Giroux, 2009). This kind of democracy calls for the reconceptualization of current practices that are informed and advanced by a commitment to critical pedagogy to facilitate a move beyond the methods fetish toward a humanizing pedagogy (Bartolomé, 1994).

In this article we put forward circles as a pedagogical practice that offers the potential to dialogically explore and analyze the ominous forces that threaten to shut down schools as democratic spheres (West, 2004). Extending on the “seeds of change” proposed by Boyes-Watson (2005) with her work on “peacemaking circles,” “circle practice is a method for youth development, community organizing, emotional healing, conflict resolution, political dialogue, team building, collaboration, and organizational planning” (Boyes-Watson, 2005 p. 193). Drawing on critical pedagogical theories, we conceptually explore how circle practice can be incorporated into educational spaces as a way of promoting humanizing dialogue that fosters a

sense of community, connectivity, and respect by focusing on the experiences of educators and students to inform, guide and enhance academic content.

The Need for Humanizing Dialogic Practices in Schools

We believe the outcry over failing schools masks much more important underlying questions. Howard Gardner suggests we need to reflect deeply on the minds or intelligences we are seeking to cultivate within our educational institutions (2011). The reality is that if situations cannot be created that enable young people to deal with the feeling of being manipulated by outside forces, there will be far too little sense of agency among them (Greene, 2009). It goes without saying that the unremitting focus on standards, rubrics and measurement has led to the deeper issue of schooling to go unattended (Eisner, 2004). As a society can we continue on this path? If not, how do we move forward? “Teaching possibilities” abound, but they require us responding to the media sustained talk of standards and attending to the multiple patterns of being and knowing, as well as the recognition of cultural differences, and a responsiveness to voices never listed to before (Greene, 2009, pg. 138).

We already know that schools are not necessary places of hope for many in spite of the democratic goals of schooling. In real-life practice, life experiences are too often ignored, dismissed, and even devalued. These constant inhumane dialogic encounters lead students to infer that their experiences and worldview do not contribute in a meaningful way to academic literacies. This contributes to a silencing effect and creates a void which may lead students to seek other ways of being heard, and attended to (Burke, Adler, & Linker, 2008). All human beings have a need to be heard, affirmed and understood. Thus to do something different in the classroom is not a matter of science but a question of values, priorities, and acknowledgment.

The educator's gaze needs to extend beyond "spaces of enclosure" which confine us and limits our understanding of what constitutes knowledge (Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel 1996, p. 166).

Only by listening and engaging in authentic dialogue with our students will we really understand their views from multiple locations and spaces. Gee (2004) proposes creating spaces which are capable of bridging the barriers of age, race, socioeconomic status and educational level, and we would also add epistemological orientation. The notion of space as argued by Foucault also impacts the construction of identities: thus space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power, and identity is relationally constructed through and in place and space (Edwards & Usher, 2000 in Hills & Mills, 2013).

The practices prioritized in classroom spaces matter and have a long lasting impact in and outside school. It can no longer be "business as usual" (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Davis, 1995; Grant & Koskela, 1986; Parker & Hood, 1995; Weiner, 1990 in Sleeter, 2001). The stakes are too high. Bartolmé (2007) posits that:

It is important to acknowledge that issues of academic underachievement, high "drop-out" rates, suspensions, and expulsion rates cannot be addressed in primarily methodological and technical terms dislodged from the material, social, and ideological conditions that have shaped and sustain failure rates (p. 256).

Complete dismissal of the socio-cultural, economic and political context of schooling only compounds the issues, just like over emphasizing purely academic goals at the expense of social ones strike many as backward leaning and inhumane (Nieto, 1996; Greene, 2009). This is especially the case for students of color who do not achieve the academic success in school that they should. "For all students to experience academic success, their learning must be relevant to their lives and experiences (Lopez, 2011, p. 78). A humanizing dialogic practice that elicits emotions, imagination, and fosters critical inquiry can have a profound effect on helping students

make connections to daily lives in order to attend to the larger societal issues impacting all (Macrine, 2009).

Most educators realize that only when we collectively envisage a better social order do we find the present one in many ways unendurable, and hence attempt to stir it ourselves to repair it (Greene, 2009). Attempts to stir and repair can be conceptualized as educators purposefully cultivating spaces where there is an intentionality of bridging students' personal knowledge of complex experiences to the social, political, and economic demands of the curriculum (Giroux, 2001). The focus on relationship building, dialogic practice, and instilling a sense of belonging may not only lead to increased academic success, but may also decrease behavior issues overall (Ullucci, 2009).

Theorizing Humanizing Dialogic Practice

Freire, (1993, 1970) notes that taking risks is an essential characteristic of our existing being and that education ultimately entails taking risks (Farahmandpur & McLaren, 2009). He illustrated how critical literacy can be employed as a means of raising critical consciousness whereby students explore, deconstruct and construct knowledge through dialogue about issues relevant to their lives and social worlds (Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy as a practice entails the recognition of critical literacies as embodiment and critical engagement (Hill, 2009 Janks, 2002; Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Perry & Medina, 2011; Wohlgend & Lewis, 2010 in Lewis & Tierney, 2013), thus challenging dominant framings of youth as disengaged and failing in school.

Critical literacy enables students to make meaning of their learning, raise their critical thinking skills, and read and critique in a reflective manner (Lopez, 2011). The dialogic approach

is described by Freire (1970) as, “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 17). Educators who enact humanizing pedagogy engage in praxis, reflection, and action upon the world in order to transform it and to help their students become part of such transformation (del Carmen Salazar, 2008).

Circle practice is in deep alignment with humanizing practices that include valuing individuals, their background knowledge, their culture, diverse perspectives and different life experiences (Macedo and Bartolomé, 2000). The structure of learning circles reflects an egalitarian worldview where no one observes at a circle: everyone present is part of the circle and thus all voices are valued. “One of the hidden lessons of the circle is the experience of shared leadership ... for every challenge; some person is uniquely situated to provide the inspiration and wisdom needed for that moment.” Circles promote:

- Trust and respect;
- Equal communication;
- Support;
- Emotional healing;
- Creativity and problem solving, and;
- Unity and a sense of shared purpose. (Boyes-Watson, 2005 p. 200).

Learning in Circle

In further exploring circle practice, we suggest that when grounded on critical pedagogical theories, participation in circles can help classrooms to function as vigorous public spheres, as active public forums of broad deliberation. This is partly because discourse is a material force in the social construction of the self and society (Macrine, 2009). The values implicit in the circles can shape us into people who question the way things are and begin to dialectically explore other possibilities.

Heart of Hope: A guide for using peacemaking circles to develop emotional literacy, promote healing, and build healthy relationships (Heart of Hope), (Boyes-Watson & Pranis ,2010) provides a robust discussion of the structure of circles and includes 50 step-by-step model circles which educator can modify to their situated context. One of the goals of circle practice is to engage youth in a relational journey of self-awareness that allows them to become aware of their own emotions as well as the emotions of others. This is crucial learning given that is emotional awareness is “widely recognized to be a critical interpersonal skill for a successful life both personally and professionally” (p. 8). Unlike curriculum guides, Heart of Hope does not attend to specific academic content or skill building. Instead, it focus on the fostering emotional literacy.

Circle practice 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 space for all voices and to encourage each participant to step in the direction of their best self. There is no single way to integrate circles within the school community: each educator/community should incorporate circles in its own way to meet its own unique needs. This is based on the notion that ultimately, educators/community-members are the best judges of what makes sense for their classroom and school community. Thus circles can be incorporated in discussing academic content, in developing shared agreements on classroom comportment, for check-ins and check-outs (particularly before and after a long-extended break), classroom problem-posing/solving, student advisory sessions, staff and team meetings, community meetings, IPE meetings and to facilitate dialogue among students/parents/educators.

Even though circles can be combined with other processes, circle practice has unique characteristics that distinguish it from other dialogue processes. That is, the commitment to

building relationships before discussing core issues. This is very intentional and important. This means deliberately delaying discussing sensitive issues until the group has done some work on building relationships. Figure 1 demonstrates the emphasis placed on the principles of the medicine wheel, which teaches about the interconnectedness of life and the principle that all life is composed of cyclical patterns (Pranis, Stuart, & Wedge, 2003 in Boyes-Watson, 2005).



Figure 1. Four Relational Aspects of Circles

For a myriad of reasons that range from institutional constraints, lack of support and training, to a reluctance to engage in emotional literacies; a common question that arises is: how can circle be put to practice? Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2010), use the analogy of a set of recipes to illustrate that educators need to recognize that it is possible to substitute one ingredient for another as to encourage creativity in adapting specific activities to meet the individual(s)/school/community needs. At the same time they caution that not all elements are expendable. Just as oven temperature and cooking time are critical to the success of any recipe, they are clear about what is important not to change.

Then what does a circle look like? According to Boyes-Watson & Pranis, (2010), the following elements help educators design a circle. Together, these elements help foster a space

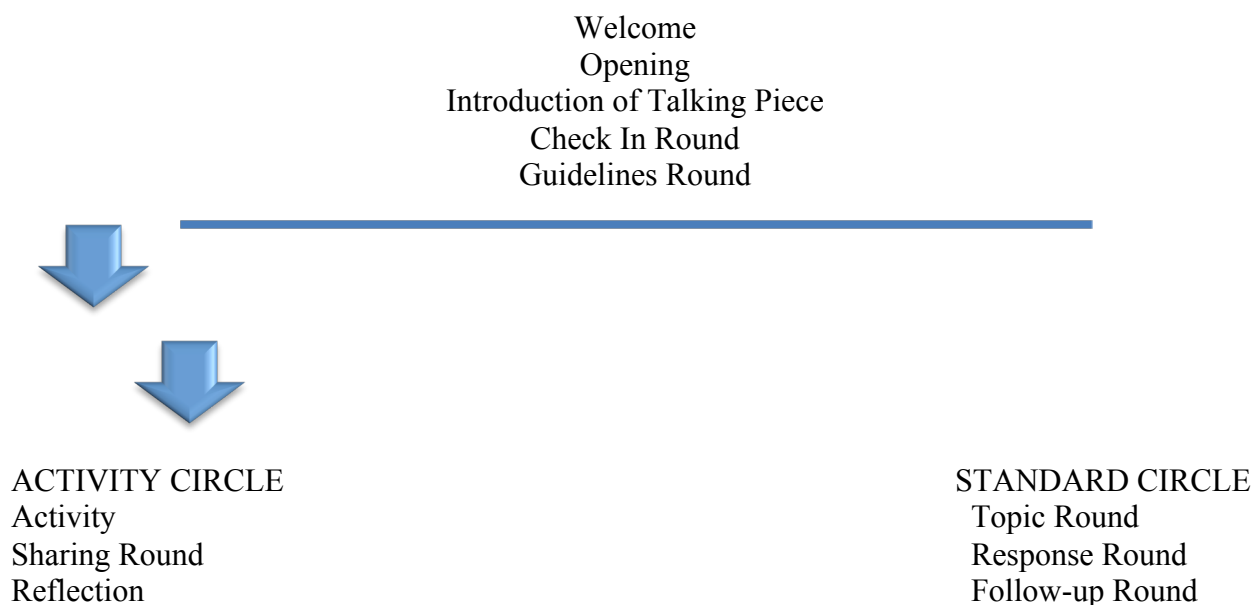
for all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another on an equal basis and to seek a deeper understanding of themselves and others:

- Participants sit in a circle, preferably with no furniture in the middle;
- Centerpiece, which creates a central focus for participants;
- An opening ceremony that marks the beginning of the special space of the circle;
- An object, called a talking piece, that is passed from person to person to regulate the flow of dialogue (*who speaks/when/who is heard*);
- Guiding questions (*these can be exploratory in nature, a poem/text that can be critically explored, can be connected to content*);
- A closing ceremony that marks the end of the special space of the circle (p. 31).

The circle template is follows a lesson plan outline:

- Purpose (*what is the reason for the circle?*)
- Materials needed
- Opening (*how do you plan to open the circle?*)
- Introduction of the talking piece (*can be an item of great significance to educator/students or students can work on their personalized talking pieces*)
- Introduction (*if meeting for the first time or such are needed or check-in round*)
- Values and Guidelines (*these can be a fluid document*)
- Exploration of main topic/activity of the circle
- Check-out round (*thoughts about the circle*)
- Closing (*crucial to mark the end of the intentional circle*) (pp. 48-49).

Figure 2 provides a conceptual model of the general flow of circles.



Check-out Round Closing

Figure 2. General Flow of Circles

The use of circles provides support for individual learning and growth at the same time they contribute to the development of a healthy positive classroom/school community for all. While circles are neither a panacea nor a silver bullet, we strongly believe that an integrated circle practice within any school community will help to develop relationships that support and foster learning and nurture healthy emotional and social development for both children and adults.

When used in connection to academic content, the practice can facilitate consciousness that takes shape and is co-created by an organized group in the process of social intercourse (Voloshinov, 1986). From a critical standpoint, youth need to go beyond the word and learn to read the world (Freire, 1993, 1970; Freire & Macedo 1987). Circle as a critical literacy practice can apprentice students as members of social practice wherein people not only read texts, but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about texts, and socially interact over them in meaningful and creative ways (Gee, 2008). Students should be able to understand why they see the world as they do while understanding the impact of prior knowledge on their newly constructed knowledge (Doering, 2006, p. 199). Circle practice can facilitate this knowledge co-construction. As Mills nicely puts it:

Education, especially literacy, involves travel both real and virtual: it is what enables people, communities, and even whole nations, to relocate and participate voluntarily in the wider world, beyond the nursery, the kitchen, the locality. The mobility that education offers makes it possible to seek new horizons, explore different landscapes not to ignore or forget the local but connect it to the global (Mills, 2010 in Hills & Mills, 2013).

We believe this is what educators envision as a goal of education. We need to dare to imagine and different way of being with each other and be willing to expect the unexpected (Greene, 2009). A regular and routine use of the circle practice can also be a key infrastructure of a healthy and productive classroom/school community. Because schools are the one universal developmental institution outside of the home, they are one the place where youth are in regular ongoing relationship with adults. The quality of learning and growth that takes place within school depends on healthy relationships between adults and children and among adults and children.

We are encouraged by the work of Nel Noddings (1992) who asks us to think deeply about the role of public schools within our communities. Rather than see schools as businesses designed to manufacture successful workers she urges us to see schools as special places where our youth are cared for everyday. In her view, the most important goal of schools is not academic instruction but the development of youth as healthy, competent and moral people. The first priority of schools is to care for students. For this reason, above all, schools need to be centers of stability, continuity and community. They must be places where “people come together in their freedom to bring a democratic community into being ... spaces of dialogue” (Greene, 2009, p. 397).

Learning how to be “Circle-like” when Outside of Circle

Schools reflect the dominant tendency to focus on problems and “at-risk” youth by emphasizing what is going wrong rather than what is going right, a deficit-based approach rather than an asset-based one (Boyes-Watson, 2005; Pica-Smith & Veloria). As previously stated,

circle practice is not a panacea for the myriad of challenges schools face today. However, we believe that circle practice helps to establish trust and sense of unity which is foundational for communities to thrive. They help individuals be in healthy relationships with one another – not only during circle time, but outside of circle. (Boyes-Watson, 2005). We often refer to this phenomenon as learning to be “circle-like” when outside of circle.

It should not come as a surprise that given the ineffectiveness of get-tough policies, created to ensure safe learning environments, and the drive to meet national and state educational standards, have generated pressure-cooker classrooms with little time for educators to attend to youth’s emotional and social needs. While a meaningful discussion about the effects of this reality is beyond the scope of this work, what we do know is that much of the fall-out has disproportionately affected low-income, students of color. There are significant racial and ethnic disparities in the disciplinary exclusion rate, for example, and exclusionary school discipline is a key component of a system of institutionalized racism that disproportionately places African-American and Latina/o youth at a high risk of justice system involvement (Armour, 2013).

Confronted with this reality, many school-based initiatives are now turning their attention to restorative approaches as an alternative to zero tolerance policies. These are practices that are grounded in the values of respect, taking responsibility, and strengthening relationships (Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). These are all inherent in circle practice. Circles help individuals shift from habits of blame or telling on others what they need to do to a focus on the constructive action each person can take to make the situation better ... a subtle shift with huge effect (Boyes-Watson, 2005). When practiced in the classroom/schools it has the potential to open up possibilities that enable each member of the community to begin learning to be “circle-like.”

Conclusion

In the end, as reflected in the Heart of Hope (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2010), schools are a reflection of our values as a society: the schools we create mirror the society we create for ourselves. Within school the relationships that develop between adults and children mirror the relationships adults have with one another: if adults feel respected, safe and supported, these values will be replicated in their relationships with their students. Attending to the needs of adults and to the relationships among the adults is equally important to attending to relationships with and among the children.

Ultimately the question of how to build a healthy school community opens up to the broader question of the goal of schools. When schools do not take an active role in validating students' complex cultures and experiences, they essentially silence them (Burke, Adler, & Linker, 2008). We believe that circle practice can facilitate learning environment that not only foster the development of critical thinking but contribute to all being heard, supported, and understood. Meaningful change does not occur over night, but in order for students to tackle real-life challenges, they need to be motivated and encouraged to be active participants in their classroom/school community. Critical dialogic engagement entails a commitment to a multiplicity of voices that can help transform, inspire and dare to cultivate spaces that critically explore and respond to what is, what it is not and what it can be.

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