

Community-Building Circles

Purpose: Use this tool to plan community-building circles for middle and high school classrooms. Circles can be used to build a sense of belonging and trusting relationships, strengthen communication skills and support equity of voice, or as a way to introduce academic content, access students' background knowledge, and collectively set goals for learning. Consider leading circles at the beginning of a semester, after a break from school, to begin or end a unit, during advisory periods or extracurricular club meetings, or to process current events.

This tool includes:

- [Planning considerations](#)
- [Set up checklist](#)
- [Circle Process](#)
- [Planning template](#)
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Planning considerations:

- **Understand your students' needs:** Consider what you know about adolescent development and the needs of your students. Do they have any particular social, emotional, cognitive, learning or language needs? What events in school or in their community are impacting them?
- **Purpose/Goals of Circle:** What would you like to achieve with this circle? Build community in your classroom, strengthen students' SEL skills, process events and ideas connected to their lives, address a classroom issue, or deepen academic learning? Keep the purpose in mind when planning activities and questions for your circle.
- **Consistency:** Building circles into your schedule on a consistent basis will increase the power of the circle by building on the trust and skills that are developed each time students participate. Consider holding circles weekly, bi-weekly or at least monthly. Depending on the context, they may take as little as 15 minutes or up to an entire class period.
- **Location:** Circles work best when the physical space has an open feeling with no barriers between participants. How can you rearrange your classroom to create space for your circles? If your classroom or the furniture does not support this, consider another semi-private, comfortable place in the building where you can go for your circles.
- **Facilitation:** Start by facilitating circles to model the process. Over time, transfer responsibilities (e.g., gathering supplies, preparing prompts, or taking over facilitation) to students and coach them as they take on leadership and develop their skills.

Set up checklist:

Prepare the following materials before holding the circle. Consider the cultural implications for these objects and materials. For example, rotating talking pieces and centerpieces provide an opportunity to learn about students' culture and traditions.

- **Signal** - used to announce the official opening and closing of the circle. Examples: chime, singing bowl, or rain stick.
- **Talking Piece** - meaningful object that is easily passed from one student to another to signal who is talking. Some classes make or adopt a talking piece and use it for every circle. Examples: objects found in nature (e.g., feathers, pine cone, driftwood, stones, seashells), a soft or squishy ball, animal figures, or another sensory object.
- **Centerpiece** - something placed in the center of the circle to provide a place to focus, a sense of warmth and calm, or a sense of connection. Examples: a colorful piece of fabric or small rug with a few small items such as flowers, feathers, LED candles, a bowl of smooth stones, a plant, or a piece of art that all students have contributed to.
- **Norms Poster** - a poster of the norms, shared agreements, or charter that has been co-created by the class, to be referenced at the beginning of each circle. Put this in a spot where students can see them.
- **Activity Materials** - any printed activities, questions, poems, paper, pens and markers.

- **Seating** - Move chairs into a circle so that everyone can see one another and so that no tables or desks are between students or in the middle of the circle. Note: [some circle formats](#) (e.g., “fish bowl”, spiral, wheelhouse) use different seating arrangements.

CIRCLE PROCESS	
Setting the Tone (2-5 min)	
Opening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Welcome everyone to the circle. ● Set a positive tone for students to transition and be present for the circle process. ● Use a ritual to establish that this is a distinct space with a different dynamic (e.g., poems, quotes, guided meditation or breathing exercise, music, or another signal)
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduce the purpose of the circle and the circle process for those new to the circle: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The circle keeper will ask a question that everyone will have the opportunity to answer ○ The talking piece will go around in the circle to the left or right (not across) ○ Everyone has a chance to speak, yet can pass at any time ○ Only the person with talking piece speaks; everyone else listens ○ Everyone should speak to the center of the circle, not toward the circle keeper or another individual
Circle Norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide an opportunity to develop, review, add or revisit norms for how to “be” in circle. Sample norms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Respect the talking piece; one person speaks at a time ○ Speak and listen from your heart ○ Give your focus and empathy to the person who is sharing ○ Remain in the circle ○ What is said in the circle stays in the circle
Doing ‘the Work’ of the Circle (15-30 min)	
Check-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invite participants to express how they are feeling (physically, mentally, or emotionally) at the moment so that students can support, be aware and engage sensitively. If it’s helpful, share a range of words or pictures students can choose from to express how they are feeling.
Discussion Rounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allow students to speak from a personal perspective about the issue or reason they were brought into the circle (e.g., community building, celebration, general check in, current event, lesson) ● Begin with “low risk” questions (for building trust and connectedness) and gradually move to deeper questions (for building intimacy and authenticity)
Check Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Invite participants to express how they are feeling at the moment as the circle is about to end.
Ending the Circle (2-3 minutes)	
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledge what took place during the circle with a hopeful, thoughtful message that promotes a sense of belonging. ● Prepare participants to transition to their next class/end of day. ● Use a ritual (e.g., poems, quotes, guided meditation or breathing exercise, music, signal) to formally close the circle

PLANNING TEMPLATE	
Purpose/Goals of Circle:	Date and Time:
Materials:	Set up:
Opening	<i>What ritual will I use to open the circle?</i>
Introduction	<i>What is the topic of today's circle? What talking piece am I using and why? Who is new to the circle and needs to be introduced?</i>
Circle Norms	<i>What activity will I do to create norms? Or, what question will I ask to ensure that everyone is in agreement with using existing norms in today's circle?</i>
Check-in	<i>What question will I ask to check in with how students are feeling, and what considerations (i.e. current external events or environmental factors) might influence the question I ask?</i>
Discussion Rounds	<i>How many rounds do I plan to facilitate, and what questions will I ask? (Prepare more questions than you have time for and adjust according to the needs and mood of the group. Know your students well and thoughtfully ask questions that cause no harm. Keep in mind that circle participants have the right to pass.)</i>
Check Out	<i>What question will I ask to check in with how students are feeling? How will I summarize what took place in today's circle and immediate "next steps" based on anything that arose during the circle?</i>
Closing	<i>What ritual will I use to close the circle, and how will I prepare students to transition out of the circle?</i>

SAMPLE CIRCLE SCRIPTS

Sample scripts for four different topics are included in this table. Some of the script can remain consistent from circle to circle, as structure and familiarity is part of what builds student comfort and participation over time. Different text for four circle topics is highlighted in green, blue, purple, or gray below.

TOPIC A: Building Community in Our Classroom - Supports group cohesion, connection, and a sense of belonging within the classroom community.

TOPIC B: Getting to Know Each Other - Promotes self-reflection to increase students’ self and social awareness and understanding of each other’s similarities and differences.

TOPIC C: Supporting Each Other - Allows students to have a voice in what respect means to them and develop a shared set of expectations for what respect and mutual support looks like in the classroom. This circle will also allow students to talk openly with their teacher about what they need from the teacher to feel respected and supported.

TOPIC D: Academic Integration – Launches a new academic topic by accessing prior knowledge, sparking curiosity, and getting student input on how they want to learn.

Opening	<p><i>WELCOME!</i></p> <p>Start with an affirmation, movement exercise, group building activity, visualization, or meditation. <i>Ex: Let’s start with a “mindful moment.” When I hit the chime: Pause, breathe and listen to the sound.</i></p> <p>Or, read a short poem or quote and express appreciation or introduce a theme that will be discussed.</p>
Introduction	<p><i>We are in the circle today to get to know one another better, speak honestly and respectfully to one another, get support when we need it, make decisions together, and build a closer community.</i></p> <p><i>For those new to the circle, this is our talking piece. (Show them the talking piece they will be using and explain its meaning to you or the class). Only the person who is holding the talking piece may speak. Everyone else in the circle actively listens when someone else is talking. When we speak, we speak into the center of the circle, adding our voice and wisdom to the voices and wisdom of the group. After someone has had their say, they pass the talking piece to the person next to them until it makes its way around the circle. Every person has the opportunity to speak and the right to pass. It is always okay to pass; those who pass are still part of the circle and participating even if they choose not to speak.</i></p> <p><i>Today we’ll move clockwise through the circle. On some of the questions today, I will answer first, and on others, I will go last.</i></p>
Circle Norms	<p><i>Circles work best when we follow our circle norms for how to “be” during the circle discussion. The more we use them, the more we will come to understand and appreciate how they support the time we spend together in the circle. Can I have a volunteer read these? (Have someone read them out loud)</i></p> <p>Select from the follow-up questions below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Are there any other norms anyone would like to add? Show me a “fists to five” if you agree with this adding this norm.</i> ● <i>What is one norm that you would like to focus on today? Take a moment to share this with your elbow partner.</i> ● <i>Show me a “thumbs up” if you are all in agreement with these guidelines.</i>

Check-in

Select one of the following questions to start the circle:

- *Name one word describing how you are feeling this morning/afternoon.*
- *How are you doing since we were last here at school?*
- *What's one memorable thing that happened over the weekend?*
- *Using your hand, from 1-5, where is your energy right now (1 low – 5 high)?*
- *On a scale of 1-10, 1 being low and 10 being high, rate your day so far.*
- *Please share one thing that you are excited to do later today/this week.*

The topic of our discussion rounds today is to help us to...

come up with a common understanding of “community” and discuss ways we want to treat each other to make our classroom a place where everyone feels they belong. **(Topic A)**

increase our understanding of ourselves, to get to know each other in new ways, and to appreciate the unique people we have in our classroom. **(Topic B)**

create a common understanding of respect and mutual support, and discuss how we all will respect and support each other **(Topic C).**

get ready to start a new unit on _____ **(Topic D).**

I will start by answering the first question, and then we will go clockwise around the circle. For some of the questions, I may ask you to limit your remarks to [one word, one sentence, or a few sentences.] But otherwise, say what you need to say and also be aware of “air time” to make sure everyone in the circle has time to respond. You can also choose to pass on any question.”

Topic A: Building Community in our Classroom: (Thoughtfully Select 3-5 questions from the list below keeping in mind that students can choose to pass.)

- Think about a community that you feel you are part of. It could be a sport or club, a faith-based organization, an online group, or something else – What makes that group feel like a community?
- Have you ever had a class that felt like a community? If so, what was it like? If not, what gets in the way?
- What is something about this class community you appreciate?
- What is one idea that can make us a stronger group?
- What’s something each individual can do to contribute to a sense of community?
- Think about a time when you could truly be yourself and be accepted. Where were you, who were you with, and how did you feel? What is it about that place, person, or group that makes you feel that way?
- Now think about a time when you felt left out. Where were you, who were you with, and how did you feel? What is it about that place, person, or group that makes you feel that way?
- What kinds of activities should I make space for to support our class community?

Sample Activity: Pass out markers and squares of paper, air dry clay, or smooth stones. Invite participants to create a small piece of art (or write a word on the paper or stone) to show what comes to mind for them when they think about the ideal class community. Ask each participant to tell the group about their art/word, then put it in the middle of the circle, adding each time to a growing piece of collective art (a patchwork paper quilt, a sculpture, a bowl of stones). Use this as a centerpiece for future circles.

Topic B: Getting to Know Each Other (Select 3-5 questions from the list below)

- Share one fact that most people do not know about you.
- How would your best friend describe you?
- What’s something that you love to do that we might not know about you?
- What is one thing you learned today about yourself or someone else that you didn’t know before this circle?
- Share something about your cultural background, for example this could be the meaning behind your name, a religious practice or family tradition, a place of importance to your family, other languages you speak, or a traditional meal that you enjoy.
- Share a happy childhood memory.

Check Out	<p>Do a check out round asking one of the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Share one word about how you are feeling right now.</i> ● <i>What's one thing you appreciated about our circle today?</i> ● <i>Say two words about your experience in the circle today.</i> ● <i>What is something that you came with that you would like to leave behind?</i> ● <i>What can you take away that is useful to you?</i> ● <i>How will the insights from today help you in the next week?</i> ● <i>What is something you heard about today that you want to learn more about, or try yourself?</i>
Closing	<p>End with an affirmation, movement exercise, group building activity, visualization, or meditation. For example, ask everyone to take three deep breaths together or read a short poem or quote. End with an expression of gratitude to all present for their participation.</p>

Additional Resources

NEW TO CIRCLES? Check out the following:

[Edutopia: Using Circle Practice in the Classroom](#) provides an overview on circles and describes how circle discussions foster community and intimacy in a classroom and can serve academic, social and emotional purposes.

[Community, Circles and Collaboration : The First 10 Days](#). IIRP recommends this guide, created for Armadale Public School in Markham, Ontario, for how circles can be used as teaching strategies and for implementing class routines and building community.

Want help with circle facilitation?

[Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community](#) is a resource guide designed to help students and educators incorporate circle practice into the everyday life of the school community. This guide offers comprehensive step-by-step instructions for how to plan, facilitate, and implement the circle and provides over one hundred specific lesson plans and ideas for applying circles to various contexts.

[Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles](#), San Francisco Unified School District - This manual supports the teaching of restorative practices and skills in your classroom and contains step-by-step instructions and lesson overviews for circles that build community and teach restorative concepts and skills.

Want to be formally trained in circles?

[International Institute for Restorative Practices](#) offers training on circles as well as on a wide range of professional development opportunities for educators.

Check with your district or partner organization for other opportunities!

References:

- [Start off the Year with Restorative Practices](#) is from the International Institute for Restorative Practices website, 2020.
- [Circle Planning Prep Sheet](#) is from Oakland Unified School District - Families, Schools, and Community Partnerships.
- [Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles](#), © Amos Clifford, Center for Restorative Process Developed for San Francisco Unified School District.
- Lieber, Tissiere, Bialek, Mehle. Engaged Classrooms: The Art and Craft of Reaching and Teaching All Learners, 2019.

- [CPS Restorative Practice Toolkit, Chapter 5](#), Chicago Public Schools.
- Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis, [Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community](#), Living Justice Press, 2014