

Talking Circles: A Pathway to Trust and Reflection

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I have found the use of a “talking circle” to be a valuable tool for strengthening relationships, defining a problem and developing direction. When well facilitated, a talking circle is a place for telling our stories and bringing clarity to our concerns: a place for nurturing.

In my practice, I have used a talking circle with school staff, with students in classrooms and in small groups, with bus drivers, with our local counsellors’ group and extensively in training others in restorative justice. A talking circle is a group of individuals working together in an intentional way to address a concern or task brought to the circle.

The use of a talking circle is different from the adversarial way (with which we are all too familiar) of resolving conflict or solving problems. The practice within a talking circle is

to place the topic, problem or concern—and not a person—at the centre of the circle as the object of reflection. To accomplish and support this task, a talking circle may take different forms: it may use a talking piece, incorporate a conversational mode (a free-flow conversation) or use silence.

Often, an individual’s initial experience in a talking circle is one of surprise. In a talking circle, one has to shift to a slower pace; dialogue requires a slowing-down of one’s thought processes. This “slowing-down” within a talking circle provides participants a number of benefits. Participants find that they have direct and equal opportunity to participate, are able to participate voluntarily, practise respect, act on personal values and design their own resolutions.

These outcomes of a talking circle sound a lot like the four criteria of

respect, personal regard, competence and personal integrity that researchers Bryk and Schneider identify as necessary for an environment of trust to develop and flourish. They have demonstrated that “relational trust” is the single most important aspect for making changes within schools and improving academic levels with students. This research is important, even though for people who work intimately with other people it may seem self-evident. Their research reinforces the importance of a relational- and experiential-based learning environment.

I suggest that nurturing our practice involves two key qualities already present in our work with others: *relational trust* and *reflective opportunities*. It calls for more than working by ourselves in isolation. It is within the context of a relationship that we are involved in listening to and working with others’ vulnerable stories. Our stories require the same opportunities as our clients: connection with others.

The path to trust is built through our day-to-day work with others. It is through our interactions with members of our learning community that it is strengthened—or weakened. Through our actions, we demonstrate our willingness to be connected with others and with ourselves, and for trust to be strengthened. Bryk and Schneider suggest that “relational trust” is relationship-based, and that members of the group understand their roles within the group. Members, according to them, are also aware of the expectations about their own, and other members’, obligations.

Trust helps create the "space" for us to make productive use of reflection. Our stories, once told, need time for viewing—time for us to make meaning and direct our lives. Research on reflection indicates that "reflective educators" tend to be collaborative. Collaborative individuals are able to be both assertive and cooperative, qualities that build healthy relationships and support "relational trust."

Considering that in our work as counsellors we are always working with and caring for others, it is amazing how isolated we can find ourselves. Our practice is not just a series of techniques and interventions that we use in isolation with clients to produce results. It is our use of these skills held within the relationships we create and in the larger social context of our learning communities that establishes both the meaning and the outcomes of our work. Finding pathways out of this experience of isolation is an avenue that will help nurture our practice. The use of a well-developed "talking circle" is an excellent path.




Energy begets energy. Trusting relationships bring an opening for reflection; opportunities for shared reflection strengthen our connections. Together, relational trust and reflective opportunities strengthen us as individuals, increase our ability to be with others and open us to the larger purposes of our lives. Together, they cultivate an environment wherein our practice may flourish.

References

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