

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Indigenous Pedagogy Talking Circles Protocol

Excerpt from *Contemporary Issues*

Teacher Resource

Government of Alberta ■





TALKING CIRCLES PROTOCOL

Excerpt from *Contemporary Issues Teacher Resource*

TALKING CIRCLES PROTOCOL

Talking circles are organized discussions used most often when a topic has no right or wrong answer. The purpose is to share ideas and points of view but not to reach decisions or consensus. In a talking circle, everyone has a chance to express their points of view.

The *Aboriginal Perspectives* textbook incorporates talking circles into classroom instruction. Talking Circle activities are designed for group discussion. They make use of Aboriginal traditions of discussion and consensus-building processes.

To keep the discussion welcoming to everyone participating, it is useful to follow a talking circle protocol. Develop an appropriate protocol for conducting talking circles within your class. Different First Nations have different protocols. Attempt to discover the protocol used by local First Nations communities. Your class may wish to define its own rules.

Whatever protocol you use, remember that the goal is to make everyone feel that they are valued and respected part of the circle. It may be helpful to post the protocol in the classroom where everyone can see it.

Many First Nations and Inuit groups traditionally used talking circles to build consensus. A consensus is a collectively held opinion. To reach consensus, the group as a whole must agree on a position. Despite the name, traditionally talking circles were not formalized like they are today. This type of discussion process could occur anywhere at any time. The participants did not always form a circle.

Talking circles allow time for each participant to speak. They slowed down the pace of discussion and created an atmosphere of respect. Each person had a chance to think about what they wanted to say as well as to listen carefully to others. This open-ended process allowed emotional and spiritual ideas to enter the discussion. Talking circles are still used in some traditional First Nations and Inuit communities today. In many current Aboriginal political organizations, consensus-based decision making remains the standard approach to conflict resolution.

Talking Circles in the Classroom

Ensure that vocal people do not dominate the discussion. An atmosphere of patient, nonjudgmental listening usually helps shy students speak out. It is often more effective to hold talking circles in small groups of four to six students.

Probe beyond neat and tidy answers. Encourage students to express what they really think, not simply say what they think others want to hear. Ask questions such as "What else do you think about that?" Be careful not to let students reveal hurtful or embarrassing information about themselves. Anticipate dangerous territory and guide the discussion around it.

Traditionally, sometimes people passed an object from one to another as they took turns speaking. Only the person holding the object was allowed to speak. In talking circle discussions in your classroom, you may find it useful to establish a way to indicate who has the floor. Incorporate a standard object to be passed from student to student, or develop a standard order, such as having students take turns speaking moving in a clockwise direction around the circle.

Talking circles may require facilitators to ensure guidelines are followed. The facilitator acknowledges participants for their contributions and may clarify comments with non-judgmental language. If necessary, the facilitator may recall the circle to the topic or to protocol. This is a challenging role that takes practice. Initially, you may wish to use someone experienced in this area; request an Elder to assist you in facilitating a talking circle in your classroom.

Guidelines for Talking Circles Protocol

- All comments should address the issue or topic at hand.
- Avoid making positive or negative remarks about other people's comments.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Everyone else listens without judging.
- Everyone has equal opportunity to participate. No one person should be allowed to dominate the discussion.
- Participants who are not speaking should listen without judging.
- Everyone must feel invited to participate.
- Comments should address the topic of discussion, not comments made by another participant.
- Silence is an acceptable response. No one should feel pressured to participate. There should be no negative consequences for not speaking.
- Everyone is allowed time to think about answers.
- Avoid comments that put down others or yourself, such as "I'm probably wrong but..."
- Attempt to end the discussion on a positive, thoughtful note

Rubric: Talking Circle Participation

Name: _____

Date: _____

		STUDENT'S LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT			
		4 Excellent	3 Proficient	2 Meets grade-level expectations	1 Needs improvement to meet grade-level expectations
Comment		<input type="checkbox"/> participates by listening thoughtfully, contributing to ideas, and building on and linking to the contribution of others	<input type="checkbox"/> Participates by listening thoughtfully and contributing ideas	<input type="checkbox"/> Participates by listening thoughtfully	<input type="checkbox"/> Does not participate Plan for improvement:
	LEVEL OF INDEPENDENCE				
	<input type="checkbox"/> works independently <input type="checkbox"/> works with minimal assistance	<input type="checkbox"/> works with some assistance <input type="checkbox"/> requires constant supervision and assistance			