Using Indigenous Talking Circles in Online Environments

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Talking circles are an accessible way for educators to draw upon and model Indigenous pedagogies. By providing students the opportunity to interact with one another and their instructor, they encourage students to reflect on their peers’ responses and think about their own. Reflective activities enhance students’ sense of interconnectedness and belonging within the course (Park, 2015), while interaction with the course instructor links positively to student satisfaction with the course (Anderson et al., 2013). Online talking circles can reduce the sense of isolation and disconnection experienced in these courses by providing an opportunity for students to share their points of views and be listened to without interruption. The widespread adoption of synchronous online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators to consider new pedagogies that contribute to community in online environments. Talking circles offer a strong contribution.

Indigenous pedagogies offer collective forms of learning and are grounded in relationality (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Wilson, 2008). As a result of the history of appropriation of Indigenous Knowledges, it is important that when facilitating a talking circle, the host makes it clear that they are drawing upon Indigenous Knowledge systems (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Dei, et al., 2000; Little Bear, 2000; Smith, 2012). Educators must be familiar with impacts of colonization, including the Indigenous Residential Schools (IRS) system, which
was an attempt to assimilate Indigenous children into the Canadian population, denying them the use of their traditional language and teachings (Hanson & Daniels, 2015; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Acknowledging and respecting the significance of Indigenous Knowledges is crucial to survivance of Indigenous People and requires educators to challenge and resist the assimilative, colonial, and genocidal processes that have been levelled at Indigenous Nations for centuries (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012). Using talking circles as pedagogy requires educators to learn about, connect with, follow, and respect the protocols, practices and Peoples of the territory they are in. That might involve collaborating with local Elders and Knowledge Keepers or with an institution’s or district’s Indigenous Education advisory team, if one exists.

In Alberta, the Teaching Quality Standard (2018) mandates that teachers develop and apply foundational knowledge about Indigenous Peoples for the benefit of all students (p. 6). Across Canada, provinces and territories have updated kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum to incorporate Indigenous perspectives (Kairos, 2018). We know that educators want to incorporate Indigenous pedagogies into their teaching, but are concerned about making mistakes or engaging in cultural appropriation (Evans et al., 2020; Metcalf-Chanail, 2016). In sharing what we know about using Indigenous talking circles we do so with humility (Toulouse, 2018) and draw upon our own experiences as teacher educators.

It is important that we differentiate between sharing circles and talking circles for classroom practice (Alberta Education, 2005). A ceremonial sharing circle is a “sacred tradition” that requires the presence of an Elder and usually involves sacred objects (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 50). In contrast, talking circles draw upon this tradition, but are less formal and can be used in the classroom. Engaging respectfully in talking circles, however, requires educators to learn appropriate protocols and their significance. We encourage educators to engage in further learning with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and to see the Alberta Education (2005) resource *Our Words, Our Ways*, but we will mention a few basics here. In a face-to-face circle, an object of significance would be passed to signify that the person holding the object has the right to speak: online, we can only explain that protocol. While speaking, the speaker is not interrupted, and the members of the circle do not offer responses. Rather, the turn proceeds to the next person in the circle until we have gone all the way around and everyone has had a turn. It is important for teachers to plan ahead for the time it will take to complete the circle, and to cue students that they need to work collectively to respect class time, so that the circle will not be interrupted.
Additionally, speakers have the right to “pass” without any negative consequences. In this territory, the circle proceeds clockwise, but that protocol differs elsewhere: educators need to learn the traditions from local First Peoples.

In the following sections, we share our individual practices with talking circles online. We also introduce ourselves, in keeping with Indigenous protocols, and to encourage readers to reflect on their own positionality if they take up this practice. Further, we think it is important to emphasize the accessibility of this pedagogy—for those who are willing to work well in relation with Indigenous knowledges.

As a Métis scholar, I (Aubrey Hanson) first began using online talking circles when I was tasked with redesigning a mandatory Indigenous Education course for an online environment. In the redesign, I incorporated online talking circles into all synchronous sessions, to establish a sense of togetherness and connection, to engage students collectively in challenging the learning, and to bring them together to encounter diverse ideas from each other. By bringing my students into a circle, I am able to demonstrate several of my key beliefs about teaching: everyone belongs, we are a community, we bring our unique selves to the circle, and together we make a strong whole. Every voice is important. When participating in the circle, students are called upon to demonstrate humility and discipline as they listen and reflect on what others are saying. In the first session, I introduce the circle as a form of Indigenous pedagogy and outline the protocols. I begin with a land acknowledgement where students reflect upon which traditional territories they are participating from and who they are in relation to Indigenous education. I also introduce students to some of the tensions and cautionary points mentioned above.

To make the circle work, I share a visual diagram with students’ names arranged to create a virtual circle of chairs. We talk about how this experience is not the same as being in a room together and looking each other in the eyes. On their turn, students unmute their mic, turn on their camera, and respond to the question of the day. Sometimes in the first circle, students are not sure how to participate, or are uncomfortable, and some sharing is done at a surface level—I find repeating the circle pedagogy to be helpful as student participation becomes more meaningful each time. When all goes well, students speak from the heart, often telling stories from their lives and experiences and learning in ways they did not expect. By the time the circle has concluded, students have engaged in a rich discussion and have shared their different perspectives. After the circle, I reflect back on what I heard and connect it to their learning. It
can take time for the circle to work, but by engaging in “circle as pedagogy” (Graveline, 1998, p. 138) I bring an Indigenous sensibility to the online space.

As a settler, I (Patricia Danyluk) first began using online talking circles when teaching a mandatory Indigenous Education course and have since used them in all of my online courses. I follow the pattern that Aubrey had set out, introducing the circle as Indigenous pedagogy and sharing with students the differences between ceremonial and talking circles (Graveline, 1998). I remind my students of the importance of the circle to Indigenous Peoples and explain that by engaging in the talking circle we are drawing on Indigenous Knowledge systems (Toulouse, 2018; Tanaka, 2016). In using circles in this way, I noticed an immediate shift in the quality of our class discussions. When each member of the class is able to reflect upon the question and share, students quickly overcome their reluctance to speak. As I teach undergraduate students from across Alberta and graduate students from across Canada, it is important to create a sense of community in my online classroom. As students share their locations, experiences and learning, we begin to develop that sense of community with our first talking circle.

The first talking circle also acts as a form of diagnostic assessment as I begin to develop an understanding for each student’s level of comfort with the course content. This knowledge provides me with the opportunity to adjust my teaching accordingly. Over the past year, I have used talking circles as a wellness check-in by asking student to share one thing they are doing to stay healthy or one good thing that happened in the last week. The opportunity to remind one another that we are not alone has become increasingly important as we each struggle to cope with the sense of isolation the pandemic has created.

As the course progresses, I use online talking circles to connect with course content by asking a question about a specific reading or concept in the course. This acts as a type of formative assessment by identifying issues students are struggling with and provides students with the opportunity to learn from one another. After the circle, I clarify misconceptions and other students will often offer suggestions. For example, in one of my courses, students are tasked with co-designing a service-learning project with a community partner. During the talking circle, students share who they are partnered with and the nature of their project. After the circle, we engage in a problem-solving discussion to assist those students who are having difficulty finding a partner organization. It is often during these discussions that connections with partner organizations are shared, solutions are generated, or students decide to collaborate on a project.
I have also used online talking circles to bring the class together at the end of a course by asking them to share their greatest learning or something they will take forward with them. This ends the course on a positive note and acts as an informal review of the learning that has occurred. Through experience, I have learned that although taking circles are great for creating a sense of community, within the course they can take up a lot of class time and it is important not to overuse them. Sometimes other modes are better suited to the day's learning activities. I combine talking circles with other interactive activities such as group discussions in breakout rooms. When conveying essential understandings or providing instructions on how to complete an assignment, I provide direct instruction. In this way, a variety of teaching strategies are drawn upon and talking circles are used when we are building community and collaborative understandings.

Online education during the COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators to consider how face-to-face learning can be transferred to the online environment without losing the relational nature of class discussions. Talking circles offer an alternative to lecture-based courses and, by engaging in Indigenous oral traditions, allow students to connect in a time of social distancing. Talking circles combat the loneliness and sense of isolation many of us are experiencing while at the same time deepen learning through reflection and listening. In sharing what we know about Indigenous talking circles in online environments, we hope that educators will take the opportunity to learn more by connecting with Elders, Knowledge Keepers or other advisors in Indigenous education.


Hanson, A., Daniels, D. L., & Šlezic, L. (2015). If these walls could talk: The physical traces of residential schools. The Walrus, 12(7), 24-33. https://thewalrus.ca/if-these-walls-could-talk/


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