Allies for Education
ENCOURAGING CONVERSATIONS ACROSS OUR ROLES IN P12 SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Volume 3, Issue 1
2020

Connecting in Isolation: Utilizing Community Circles to Build Relationships in Online Learning

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Introduction

Community is an essential part of the human experience. We are social creatures who require connection. The health of our bodies and of our societies depend upon deep and meaningful relationships. Jay Dostal emphasizes that there are foundational supports needed before academic learning is addressed (*Figure 1*); in many cases, school tops the pyramid (Blanchard, 2020), which essentially flips the hierarchy. Given these extraordinary times, people are seeking connection across isolation, and teachers are seeking innovative ways to build relationships with and among students as they face distance learning. Community Circle is one method to address this need.

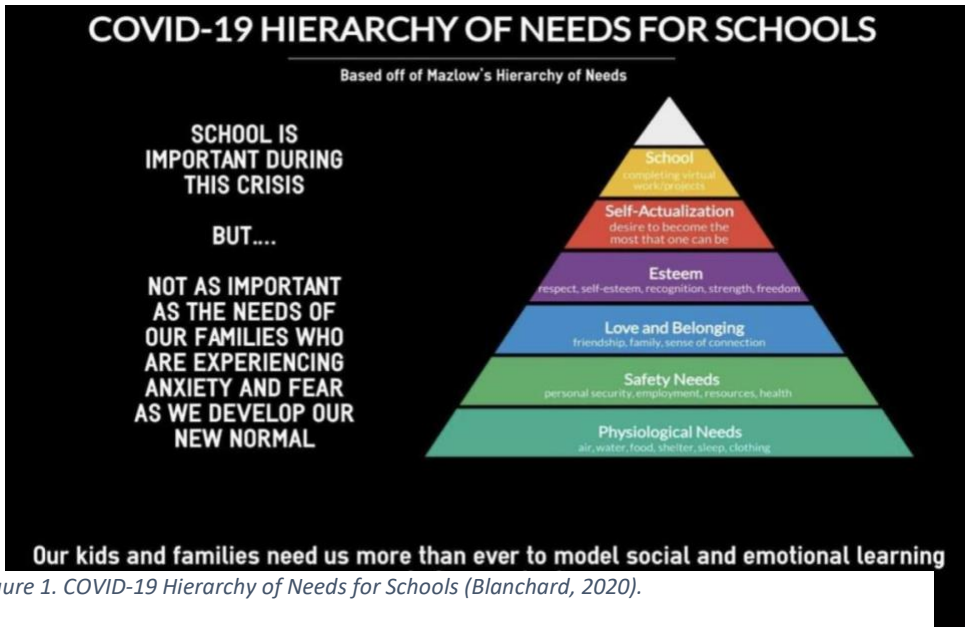

Figure 1. COVID-19 Hierarchy of Needs for Schools (Blanchard, 2020).

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The purpose of Circle is to create community and connectedness among people. Whether this occurs in a classroom, or is part of a restorative justice initiative, Circle has a place for growth and healing, and over time, with sustained effort, participants co-create caring spaces in which deep learning is possible. Both are important for the whole child; both are important for the whole adult. Creating vibrant and self-determining communities can begin with building Circles of trust and acceptance. As distance learning becomes a reality, as does the overwhelming stress and trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, Circle can help all of us learn to speak and listen from the heart. Additionally, Circle is a way to focus energy on the connections between academic life and our lived experiences. We endeavor to lay out the method of teaching and building community with Circle, along with key changes to adapt it to the online class setting, as needed.

Traditionally, education in the United States tends to treat academic content and lived experiences as separate. The eventual outcome is that one learns to be objective because content is to be studied, and then regurgitated during testing. However, learning is far more than testing, and as our schooling continues, these fissures can develop into unbridgeable gaps, and our intellectual growth is separated from our social and emotional learning (SEL). Other cultures and societies often privilege the knowledge of communities, community building, and the environments that communities occupy as part of growing up and belonging. It is this sense of belonging that helps us to make sense of who we are, and our place in society and the world. We do not have to accept feeling divorced from our communities when schools do not address fractures that result when children from different cultural backgrounds share the same learning spaces. Normalizing one culture over a diversity of others upholds White supremacy and does not teach children to value all cultures, or to see how solutions to conflict may be arrived at in different ways. By extension, this hegemonic view extends into communities and exacerbates the divisions that can exist there.

Schools are notorious for conservatizing spaces where many students' race, ethnic background, immigration status, gender identity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and religion are implicitly ignored or, worse, denied. Asking students to leave their identities at the door is unacceptable. Circle offers a counter-hegemonic practice, welcoming the lived experiences and identities of all students. Circle is a way to dismantle what Freire calls the banking model (2000), and what Sir Ken Robinson (2009) refers to as the factory model of education, in that Circle acknowledges the cultural strengths of all students and prioritizes students' stories (lived experiences). With this outcome in mind, Circle can also create opportunities for examining implicit bias and privilege in all our lives. Circle can be an antiracist practice where the students' or participants' lived experiences are centered.

The learning that occurs in Circle can affect the dismantling of one-way communication of content in a traditional classroom. Circle is multidirectional and relies on the presence and the contributions of each of its members. As students relate stories from their own lives, their cultures and backgrounds are brought into the Circle, and those narratives and lessons become part of the shared knowledge of that Circle. All participants hold the potential to be teachers and learners. The stories shared in Circle are not random; they are precious additions to the curriculum. These stories reveal students' inner processes and speak to where students are developmentally. Learning expresses a more revelatory dimension and becomes more clearly visible.

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As Liz Kleinrock writes, "Your north star is always centering your most marginalized and under resourced students" (2020). Centering students' lived experiences counters the traditional hegemonic space of the classroom community and moves us towards decolonizing those spaces. However, simply organizing a Circle does not mean that teachers themselves are sensitive to their own need to be decolonizers, counter-hegemonists, or anti-racists. The dominant culture of the United States fosters and extends its own dominance through its institutions, of which a predominant one is the classroom. Becoming antiracist is the work of a lifetime, and Circle is not simply a performance, or proof against the need to work for greater change. However, Circle is a start because it centers all members' lived experiences. What we experience in Circle affects how we perceive and interact with the environment outside of it. The hope is that participants begin to experience the world differently. When students' experiences and perspectives, are centered, white educators, in particular, have the privilege to truly get to know their students. Then they can begin the process of debiasing themselves and their curricula.

The format of Circle is designed to be non-hierarchical and originates with many First Peoples' expressions of community (Brown & Di Lallo, 2020). The value of storytelling and listening closely to each other within a community, consensus-building, decision making, and knowledge building are shared experiences that help communities to cohere. These practices have been adapted to classroom and group settings; trained educators bring Circle into their classrooms. In particular, we acknowledge the work of Joe Provisor, who provides a strong foundation in the use of Circle, and upon whose work we are building (Circle Ways, 2020). Acknowledging that these practices originated with Indigenous People, it must also be emphasized that when we employ Circle, we do so on unceded Indigenous lands (Chalmers, 2019; Christensen, 2016), and as such, begin with decentering Whiteness from the moment Circle begins.

In the classroom, the community Circle is a versatile practice that can be utilized for a variety of purposes. Primarily Circles are used to create and build community, support academic learning, restore relationships after harm is done, and promote student inquiry; their uses are only bound by the imagination of the participants. Given the unique circumstances caused by the global pandemic, and the need for remote or distance learning, teachers are reimagining how they will begin the year and build community with their students. Strategies for building relationships that they have employed in the classroom will have to be adapted, and teachers will need to find alternative ways of getting to know their students. This paper focuses primarily on Community Building Circles. A follow-up paper on integrating academics and Circles will be written later.

One note about Community Building Circles that the authors feel is important to point out is that these Community Building Circles are designed to foster relationships and teach Social and Emotional competencies. SEL is a discipline in its own right, and students need opportunities to practice these competencies. Community Building Circles are not to be used in a "Sneaky Pete" sort of way in the service of academic content. We have seen some teachers use SEL to let students get out their emotions, so they are ready to do the real work. It is the authors' stance that SEL and community building is real work, and in the process of being in Circle, students learn and acquire skills that transfer to their lives. Especially at this time of global pandemic, it is important to "lead with love, not lessons," as Wendi Pillars points out in Larry Ferlazzo's blog in *EdWeek* (*Figure 2*).

As we begin to consider implementing Circle, it is important to note that the process of creating community using the Circle format is one that must be done in a careful and considered manner. The format of a Circle is important to guide participants toward a state in which they are willing to open up

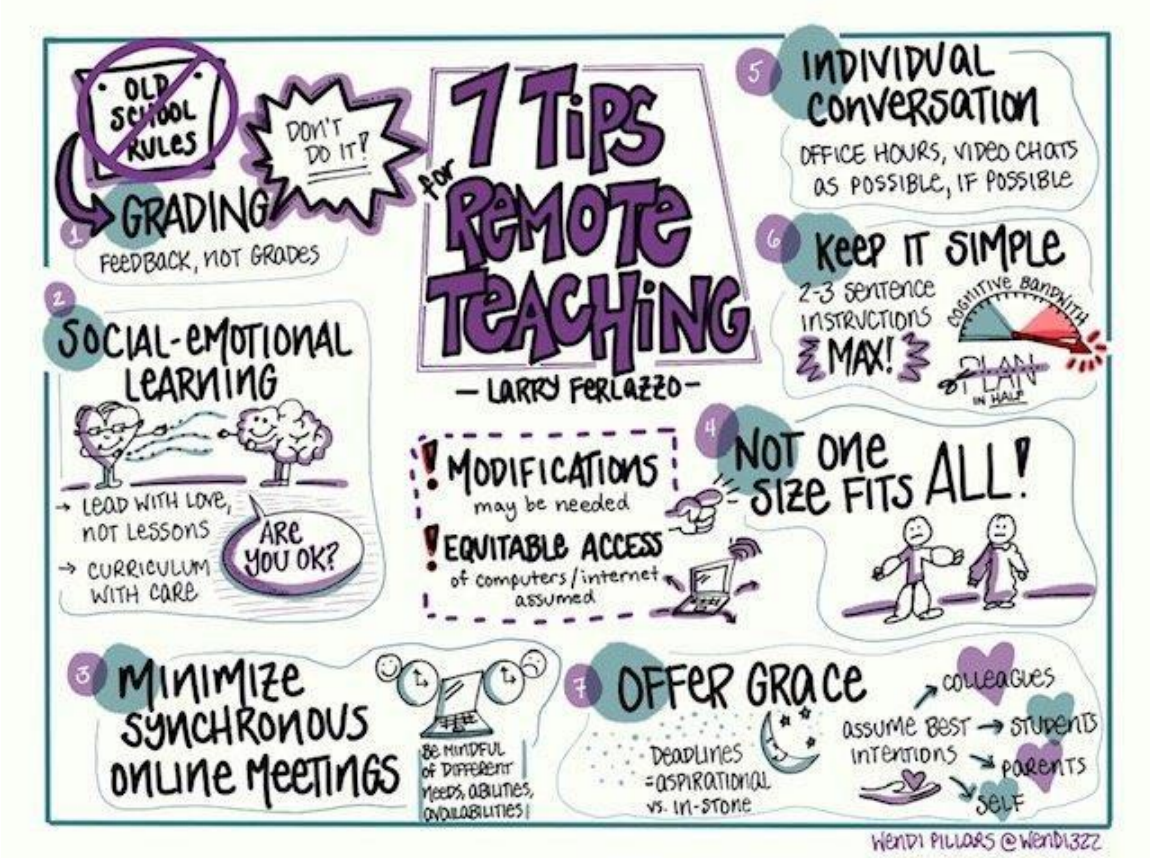

Figure 2. 7 Tips for Remote Teaching (Ferlazzo, 2020).

and share their experience and insights with the group, as well as be prepared to listen receptively to others. It is recommended to use a Circle Planning Template (see Appendix A) to ensure that all segments of the process are included. We always use this template to plan Circle, and we find that planning Circle with a colleague is most effective. We have found this to be true because there is so much to consider when planning Circle: the timeframe and purpose of the Circle, the students' interests, and the quality of questions. Multiple perspectives remind us that we do not all bring the same experiences to this work. Having another person's eyes on the Circle can offer a check and balance on the questions and process. This is especially true if the planning process is informed by diverse perspectives.

Potential pitfalls, such as questions that may offend or cause harm, are more likely to be avoided when teachers work together to consider their students' interests, strengths, needs, and challenges. Collaboration also builds community among practitioners and yields better Circle outcomes. The template is both your dribble (gets the group where it needs to go) and your backboard (prevents the

session from leaving the safe place of the Circle). It provides a scaffold for teachers that supports their creation of Circle. We trust this process.

In Section 2, we present the main aspects of how to prepare for Circle, including how to design the physical space, how to prepare for holding Circle in virtual spaces, how to lay the groundwork with participants, and how to set guidelines for the practice. We will also address how to use Circles to build community in different classroom settings, particularly for the beginning of the year and considering constraints of distance learning on relationship building.

In Section 3, we review each part of the Community Circle template (Appendix A), providing a description and purpose of each part of Circle as well as examples, tips and cautions to consider while planning, and how to adapt the Circle for online environments as needed.

Section 2: Preparing for Circle

Set-up

When preparing for Circle face-to-face, it is important to create the appropriate physical space. Circle is non-hierarchical; everyone, including the teacher, will sit in a Circle, either on the floor or in chairs. It is crucial that all members can see, and be seen, by all participants, creating a space wherein the potential for deep connections remain optimal. If the classroom space is inadequate, find an alternate learning environment like an empty classroom. Another option, especially if Circle is done regularly, is to teach students to rearrange the class to create the space. In the center of the Circle, the teacher will place various objects, including a small bowl filled with water, with stones or shells placed around it, and objects to serve as talking sticks (stuffed animals, etc). The bowl and stones/shells are used for dedications, while the other objects serve as talking sticks. *Figure 3* shows such a layout, with furniture placed appropriately, and several options for talking sticks in the center of the Circle. Having a center point of a Circle gives students a place to rest their eyes and focus their attention. Circle begins as a conscious act of the group; some teachers like to use a gong or a rainstick to start the Circle, but it is not necessary. Just like with teaching, each teacher will personalize the Circle with their own style.

Figure 3. Optimal layout for Circle, showing several "talking stick" objects, dedication bowl with water and stones in the center. Photo curtesy of D. Lomax

While speaking is a significant aspect of sharing experiences and insights, silence is also a valuable addition to Circle. Each person may choose to speak or be quiet. There may be occasions when a student is not able to speak to a topic or is unable to speak due to personal experiences, or shyness. The goal of Circle is to build a community of trust, but we cannot assume that trust is already there; we want to give students the option to respond or not respond to particular questions. Having said that, as we build relationships with students, we may notice that some students never speak and their voices and lived experiences are missing from the Circle. We have sometimes, after many Circles in which they have not spoken, reached out to students to ask them why they are not speaking and encouraged them to share their stories, or even participate in a speed round. Ultimately, the decision is theirs and we need to respect their personal, socio-developmental journey in finding their voice.

In an ordinary classroom, certain voices can dominate, including the teacher's. To remedy this in Circle, students are seated in a circle, and a talking stick is passed person to person around the Circle to indicate who is able to speak. Lamm (2020) provides a brief history of the talking stick, and identifies five main reasons to use it:

- Everyone has an opportunity to speak.
  This gives every person an opportunity to share as each person must touch and pass the talking stick whether they speak or not. Whoever is holding the talking stick has the right to talk; all others need to remain silent.
- The process encourages everyone to listen more carefully.
  It is essential to explain that those who are not speaking have a role to play as well, that of active listeners. Explaining to the students how to be an active listener and to focus truly on each person's response rather than planning their own is important.
- When everyone has a turn, it reduces competition for time and attention.
  Each student has an opportunity to be seen and heard.
- It builds trust and safety in the community.
  This is a way to ensure that Circle remains non-hierarchical.
- Respect for the ideas and contributions of others is the process.
  This is how our stories get told, and it is also how stories are affirmed.

The talking stick is only passed clockwise which honors the indigenous roots of this practice, so a student may not request the talking stick in order to speak out of turn. Typically, we have used a variety of meaningful objects that we use as talking sticks: rocks from a special place, charms that were given as gifts, beautiful feathers or sticks from nature, or stuffed animals from our kids' youth; really any objects can be used especially if they have significance to you or to the class. One consideration is to have a variety of sensory textures and densities. Educators, particularly in secondary, have noticed that many 6-12 classrooms do not offer students access to soft things. Objects like stuffed animals can be difficult to clean, yet soft textures can be of comfort to students.

In K-12 students have enjoyed having multiple talking sticks to choose from the center of the Circle, but you certainly could hold a Circle with just one designated talking stick. In a face-to-face Circle, we allow

students, who share in a particular round, the option to go to the center of the Circle and swap out talking sticks. If changing the talking stick becomes too much of a distraction, it does not have to be part of Circle. However, in our experience, allowing students to move to the center of the Circle and be "seen" offers them an opportunity to get attention from the group beyond verbal participation and provides an opportunity for movement for all students.

While this set-up and seating arrangement may seem time-consuming, unnecessary or distracting, altering the environment is a visual signal that a different type of learning will happen where everyone's voice matters and all voices are equally valued. It is a way to match the physical environment to the mental shift that must occur for Circle to happen.

How to move Community Circles into virtual spaces

As some of us are forced by the pandemic and health concerns to conduct classes virtually, educators face many challenges, particularly the difficulty of building relationships at the start of a new year when we are only able to connect online. Our students are likewise adapting to continuing their education in a less than optimal setting to build community with their peers or connect with their instructor on top of having to learn without the usual collaboration and in-person feedback from body language, tone and vocalizations.

Reading the room online is a very different challenge from face-to-face encounters. As many studies have shown (Brown, 2020; Loeb, 2020; Stommel, 2020; Wood et al, 2017) feeling supported and connected to the course, teacher and other students is a major predictor for student success and retention. It takes a while to feel competent in facilitating Circle; be patient. Facilitators grow in confidence as they practice initiating and orchestrating the experience so all attendees feel included. The intention of Circle is to build trust in the community, as well as pave the way for connections over the curricular content and making it meaningful in a holistic way.

Moving Circle to a virtual setting requires alterations to the setting, but not the structure of Circle. The template of Circle remains constant, as does the goal of creating a space for all participants to engage in Circle safely and productively. Circles can be planned or impromptu to serve the needs of the community. When creating virtual Circles, practitioners are not afforded the same, often comforting, control over the physical space. Though this may be difficult, embracing this lack of control and trusting the participants to help each other create and hold a safe space for Circle virtually will help to strengthen the emerging community that you are trying to nurture. In fact, the priority is not to exert outward control, but to help foster in all participants the practice of creating calm and safe spaces within ourselves and our Circle learning community.

Traditions and signals that Circle is about to begin are still needed but our control of the space is not. One effective method to create the visual cues of a Circle online is the use of a slide with participants' names surrounding a central image. The use of the slide is three-fold: it sets the spatial relationship of participants or the Circle, creates a visual signpost for your Circle practice, and gives a place to show the question being asked in that round.

The simplicity of this visual solution also helps to mitigate several logistical and equity issues. Using one image in a slide is useful, as many online meeting tools do not display the same arrangement of

participants on each screen, which leads to confusion in the flow of Circle. For example, Zoom™ changes the order of participants if they turn on their camera. It also serves as a way for everyone to learn each others' names and creates a place for each participant even if they cannot or do not wish to use their video or audio feed. It may be tempting to require participants to use their video or audio feeds during sessions, but if part of the Circle process is to build trust and community that can be

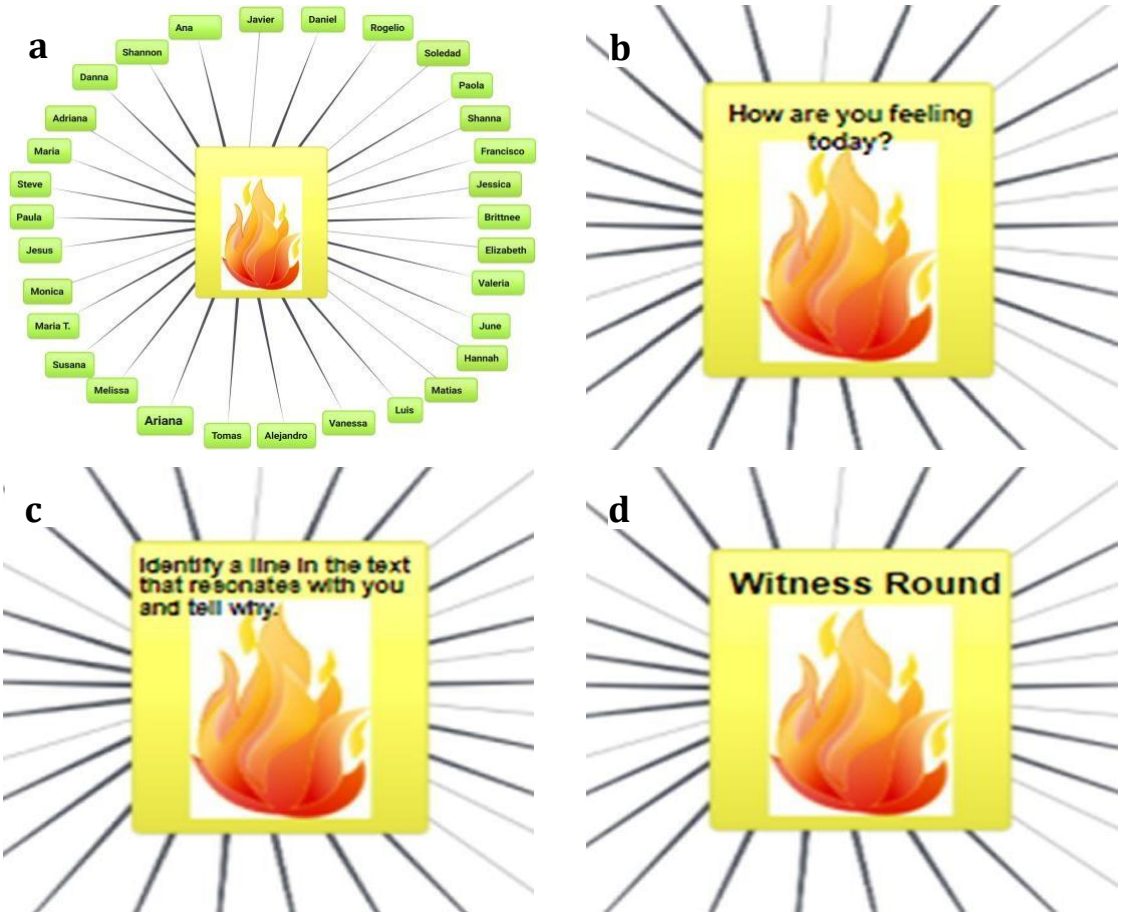

Figure 4a. Participants names prearranged using a mind-mapping tool; b. Speed Round opening question; c. Single question per slide keeps participants in the moment; d. Witness Round acknowledges the stories that were shared.

uncomfortable for some students and lead to alienation or disengagement. Students may not want to disclose aspects of their lives that a video or audio feed may force them to share. Again, Circle is nonhierarchical. By this we mean that each student is the expert of their own experiences and they themselves make decisions about how much of their story they are ready or willing to share.

In *Figure 4a* (created using Bubbl.us), the image of a campfire was selected because it harkens back to the communal activity of sitting around a fire, and invokes the indigenous roots of Circle practice among indigenous peoples. Additionally, the fire could come to represent passion, learning or spirit. Other images that evoke a sense of community or unity could also be used, but starting each Circle with the

same image creates a visual cue that prompts participants to be present, just like when we meet in person.

The authors have not typically removed participants who are absent, but hold their spot in the Circle. When it would be their turn, if they are not present, the turn passes to the next person. This is generally a quick process as it becomes clear who is absent during a speed round, holds space for all participants, and saves disruption of changing the Circle if someone joins later.

The final structural aspect of the Circle slide is to give a visual reminder of the question being asked in that round (*Figure 4b*). To help follow the agreements of being present, speaking from the heart, and deeply listening to the current speaker, it is recommended that only the question for that round be displayed. Listing all questions at once can distract participants, and prompt anticipation as to where the Circle is headed rather than participate in deep listening and community building. A copied slide deck also allows for back-up questions to be available, or the option to change the questions quickly to be adaptive to the needs of the Circle.

To begin Circle, speed rounds are often used to check in and refamiliarize students with the process of Circle. These are generally low-stakes questions. However, a seemingly innocuous question like, "How are you feeling today?" can have a heavy cognitive load for some students. Generally, however, these speed rounds are simple and easy for students to answer. Visuals, such as a feelings list, and sentence starters, especially for our Emergent Bilingual students, can be helpful for students even in these speed rounds.

In the subsequent rounds, the questions probe a bit deeper into students' experiences. The question in *Figure 4c* asks students to identify a line in the text and then tell the story of why it speaks to them. Often these questions are at higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and require students to analyze or compare and contrast another person's experience with their own.

The final round in Circle is often a witness round. In this round, students simply say, "I heard someone say …" and they repeat what resonated with them (*Figure 4d*). Students do not comment on why what someone else said resonated with them. Simply students repeat what they heard and in this way show that they were listening and they bear witness to others' experiences.

Preparing Participants for Circle

The first time that you implement Circle, we encourage you to use slides such as the Guidelines and the Zones of Comfort (School Reform Initiative, 2017) as shown in *Figure 5*.

Before participating in their first Circle, students are introduced to the indigenous origins of Circle and the meaning of the talking piece. They also learn the guidelines. Finally, they have the opportunities to define the zones of comfort. The Comfort Zone is in the center of the three concentric circles. In this space we feel relaxed and at ease. When we are doing something that is easy for us, we often find ourselves in the Comfort Zone. The second circle is called the Risk Zone, also called the Learning Zone. In this space, we often have to stretch to engage with new learning. Finally, the third zone is called the Danger Zone. This zone represents challenge that may be beyond a student's capacity. In this place, no learning is possible, and harm may be done. For example, if a student who is ready to learn multi-digit

multiplication only practices single digit addition, they are in their comfort zone. It is easy, but they are not learning much. When they follow a lesson and try a new skill, they are in their Risk Zone. They may make mistakes, but new learning is happening. If we gave this student a calculus problem, they would be in the Danger Zone. No learning would happen, and the student would likely end up frustrated with the experience and their learning attitude may shut down altogether. When students hear this example,

Figure 5. Example of slides to introduce participants to the guidelines and purpose of Circle

they are often able to transfer this concept to their participation in Circle. If they only share superficial experiences, they remain in their Comfort Zone. When they take a risk and open up on a topic, they can learn about themselves and others. When they share parts of their story that they may not have been ready to share, they might be in their Danger Zone. This framework helps students realize their agency in their own Social and Emotional Development, and Circle provides an excellent opportunity for students to practice SEL competencies.

Guidelines

Like in all academic activities, students need to know the expectations for their participation and behavior so they are successful. The teacher will explain that the lesson will proceed differently with the incorporation of a Circle. The teacher will then review the following guidelines with students. (In our experience, it is helpful to have these guidelines displayed on a slide or a poster, but it is not required and may be unnecessary if Circle is a regular part of the class.)

Centuries ago, Indigenous groups in the Northeastern part of the United States were at war with each other. A great leader, Deganawidah, known as the Great Peacemaker, encouraged the warring tribes to lay down their weapons. He buried the weapons and planted a tree on top of them. In order to make peace, the members of the various tribes, who later became the Iroquois Confederacy, had to listen to each other carefully. In order to do this, they used a talking stick.

It is worth pointing out here, that Circle is not a dialogue. Students are sharing their stories as openly and honestly as they are able. Oftentimes, when someone is sharing, other students may agree with them or want to support them. In order to show their silent assent or support, students can wave “jazz fingers” by raising their hands and wiggling their fingers to the person. This is a way to actively listen and communicate with the speaker without interrupting them. They can also use snaps, touch their hearts,

or any other form of expression agreed upon by the group, that maintains the focus on the speaker while signaling agreement or empathy.

Face-to-Face	**Online**
● Speak if you want to speak. ● "Pass" if you don't want to speak that round.	● Speak if you want to speak. ● "Pass" if you don't want to speak that round.
● Speak only when you have the talking stick	● Speak only when it's your turn ○ Each person can have their own talking stick and "pass" it by showing it to the camera ○ The speaker will say "I pass to the next speaker" ○ The speaker will type "I pass to the next speaker" in the text box
● Silence when someone else is sharing	● Silence when someone else is sharing, including the chat box ● Possibly the host can set chat to only go to everyone i.e. no private chat. That is not controlling but protecting the space. Note: Chat option may be set chat so messages go only to the Host.
● You can exchange the talking stick/toy if you share that round	● All participants can collect their own talking stick that means something to them. They can "pass" their stick to the next speaker using video or post an icon, like the raise hand in Zoom, if not using video. ● Participants may simply say the name of the person who follows them in the circle so that the talking turn is passed to the them.
● "Jazz" fingers if you agree with what someone else says	● "Jazz" fingers if you agree with what someone else says (or icons in chat)

Section 3: The How To's of Circle

In this section, we will explain each section of the Community Circle template and provide examples of activities, questions, and tips for adaptation to the virtual setting.

Agreements

Part of the purpose of Circle is to build students' capacity for agency. As a result, we begin with agreements. Students, of course, must agree to each. Agreements cannot be mandated; they must be agreed upon and revisited to see if they still function well in guiding the group. The following are proposed agreements. So far, in our experience, students have agreed to the 5 statements as accepted principles for appropriate student engagement in the practice. If a student were to disagree with any of the agreements, a discussion as to why would then take place.

Prior to opening Circle, set the stage by reading the agreements with students. These are statements that the group needs to agree to in order to have respectful, honest dialogue.

- Listen from the heart. *(Practice suspending judgement.)*
- Speak from the heart. *(Practice suspending judgement.)*
- Speak spontaneously. *(Practice sharing in the moment.)*
- "Keep it lean." *(Say just enough.)*
- Confidentiality

The first agreement returns to that idea of active listening, where we take someone's experience and the way they share it for what it is without questions or judgements. We practice listening from the heart and suspending judgement to listen to understand how someone sees the world instead of listening to judge how they see the world. This is important to build trust as students can expect to be heard without being judged for their lived experience. The ability to listen while withholding judgement is an important skill in interpersonal communication, both personally and professionally, and rarely do we have a chance to practice this.

The second agreement, speak from the heart, encourages students to share what they really feel or have experienced, without packaging an "answer" that they think the teacher or their peers would want to hear. Learning to speak honestly of one's experiences is a lifelong skill that helps students develop self-awareness and identity, as well as suspending judgement of themselves. The goal is to get it real, not get it right. It is an active practice of naming their feelings and discerning what to share and what not to share.

The third agreement, to speak spontaneously, can prevent students from planning their response the entire time rather than listening actively. It is important to value what is shared in Circle, and not be distracted by preparing a response to what is said. Speaking spontaneously is likewise a skill that students can practice in Circle, learning to trust their own words, and their ability to express themselves authentically.

The fourth agreement, keep it lean, encourages students to share their story without taking up the whole time for Circle. This can be challenging for certain students, and it can be helpful to talk to students individually after a Circle if they have monopolized the sharing at the expense of others' time. Of course, participation in Circle is a work in progress and it may take some students longer to learn how to listen more, just as it may take other students longer to speak out. One non-threatening way to remind students of this, is to say "be aware of airtime" to remind students to self-monitor. We have found having some phrases ready for common issues helps the community understand the expectations

and saves the teacher the emotional labor of having to think on the spot. In order not to put one student on the spot, you might say this at the end of a round.

Finally, the last agreement is confidentiality. We remind the students that what is shared is not to be spread to other people. The issue of confidentiality teaches students that others' narratives are not the property of the listeners. However, we usually caution students that they want to be thoughtful if sharing something that could be hurtful to them with the whole class. Additionally, teachers need to remind students that they are a mandated reporter and explain that if they did learn of something bad happening to a student, they would be responsible to get them help.

Opening the Circle

Circle can be opened with a variety of actions: using a rain stick, a gong or having everyone clap at once. The purpose of opening the Circle is to formally begin the process and also to mark the transition from preparing ourselves for Circle with a review of guidelines and agreements to actually begin the process.

Dedications

We all come to our work with things that weigh on our mind, including people who are important to us. To honor that, we set aside the beginning of Circle for dedications. Participants can "bring someone into Circle" who is on their mind by going to the center of the Circle and placing one of the pebbles or shells into the bowl. For example, students might say "I am thinking of my Grandpa because he is sick," or "I want to dedicate this Circle to my mom because she is a single mom and always takes care of me." This is an option, and not every student needs to participate. Usually, the teacher can model this, but then leave a period of silence for students to choose whether to dedicate the Circle to someone.

When practicing Circle, each educator can modify the process so that they feel comfortable. Context is everything, and educators will need to create Circles that fit their teaching style and pedagogical philosophy. In our district, a colleague who practices Circle regularly, shared that she is not comfortable with starting with dedications. She prefers a "bare bones" Circle approach. No elaborate center, no dedications; she opens Circle, asks questions, and closes Circle. As with any lesson, you will need to develop a practice that aligns with your style.

Speed Rounds

Speed rounds are a short way to warm up the process by asking questions that would have immediate and brief answers that do not require any in-depth responses. An example of a question might be: How are you feeling today (in one word)? (We usually provide a feelings chart for students - see Appendix E). Additional questions would start the students thinking about the topic, whether it is success, friendship, love etc. For example, "Who or what comes to mind when you hear the word _____?" Speed rounds are a low-stakes, non-threatening, opportunity for participants to listen to each other, and to introduce their own voices to Circle, especially when participants are new to the practice. The talking stick is used throughout the Circle to ensure fairness in airtime. For each round, the teacher introduces the question, then the talking stick is passed around the Circle giving students a chance to respond. When the talking stick returns to the teacher, they introduce the next question and the talking stick travels around again.

Games can also be a low stakes activity to introduce Circle and familiarize students with the process and skills necessary to participate fully. Games that encourage participants to create a gesture along with their words is a particularly useful practice for Emergent Bilinguals. For younger children, but not exclusively, movement and drawing can be included in to a Circle. Students can "pass" dance moves or draw to a prompt on a paper plate, then on a signal, everyone can pass around the plates till it gets back to the artist. Please see the Appendix C for Introductory Circle Games. Again, this depends on the group and how familiar students are with Circle.

Text

When planning Circle, the teacher may choose a "text" to focus the Circle on. The text may be an actual article, photograph, video, etc., or the topic may refer directly to the participants' lives. It is important to be clear about the purpose of the circle in order to plan accordingly. For 'getting to know you' circles, the authors have found both types of circles helpful.

If a text is chosen, the "text" needs to be short enough to process in about 5-10 minutes. Teachers could choose something completely new to students, a text that builds on what is being learned in class, or even an excerpt of a larger text the class has already read. Choosing high interest and culturally sustaining texts helps ensure engagement.

After speed rounds, the teacher will introduce the text. Students can be provided a copy of the text to read silently, or the teacher can read the text aloud. We recommend passing out the text at this point in Circle so that students are not reading it ahead of time and can focus on each part of the process. Usually, the teacher passes a stack of texts to either side of the Circle and students pass them around and take one.

When conducting online Circles, the teacher may put a link to the text in chat, create a slide with the text, or read the text aloud. Offering multiple modalities in which students can engage with the text, for example displaying the text on a slide while it is being read, supports all students including those who are English Learners or have special needs. In some cases, students can be given the text ahead of time, but this usually occurs in Circles that support academics.

Questions About the Text

Once students have "read the text", the next series of questions will ask them to connect their understanding of the text to their own experiences and beliefs. There are typically three questions about the text: identifying something in the text, compare/contrast and going deeper.

The first question will ask students to identify a part of the text that resonates with them. This can be a word, phrase or sentence. If using a video or image, teachers can ask students to point to a part that touched them and say why (color, music etc). Teachers can use sentence starters to help students explain their choices:

> *The part that stood out to me was when the author said _____ because _____.* or:
>
> *I chose the quote _____ because _____.*

This provides an opportunity for students to step into the discussion by referencing the text directly.

The next question asks students to tell their story about why that word or phrase resonates with them. They compare and contrast the text to something they already know in their own experience. Again, using sentence starters helps the students step into the process of sharing:

> *I can connect this text to _____ because _____. or:*
>
> *This reminds me of _____ because_____. or:*
>
> *This connects to _____because _____.*

The idea behind this question is for students not to be able to just regurgitate what the text is saying, but to be able to understand it through the lens of their unique experience. We often remind the students that there is no right answer and that every person reads a text differently because of what they know and understand from their experience. And it is this very diversity of experiences that contributes to widening perspectives through Circle.

The last question asks students to go deeper by thinking about how to apply what they learned from the text or each other. This question asks students to either imagine, evaluate or apply the text. For example, if you are discussing success at the beginning of the school year, we can ask students "What would success look like for you this year?" Students can create a new idea with this question that is based on the topic, but extends beyond.

It is helpful for teachers to use Costa's levels of questioning to help write the questions. We have found it helpful to reference Appendix D when writing a Circle. The first question (identify something in the text) will use one of the verbs in level 1 - gathering, the second question (compare/contrast) will use a verb from level 2 - processing, while the final and most difficult question (going deeper) will use level 3 - applying verbs. By using this progression of questions, students are being tasked to think about more and more difficult questions; if students are able to articulate their thoughts verbally, they are much more able to translate that higher-level thinking into writing later on. Their contributions, both in sharing and listening, help them master the speaking and listening skills required for 21st century learning.

Question creation is a key aspect of Circle. For more on question creation, see Section Three.

Witness Round

The purpose of the witness round is for the class to coalesce the Circle by bringing together all of the things the class heard and saw throughout the Circle. Typically, we ask all students to participate in this round, because they are able to honor the people who shared and demonstrate their understanding of what they heard their peers state. Students are asked:

> *What's one thing you heard here today that stayed with you?*

Again, teachers can provide a sentence frame to help students get started:

> *One thing that I heard today is _____.*

This helps develop their listening skills and restating what other students have said. It also allows each student to report back on what most resonated with them and for students whose comments are mentioned to feel recognized and heard. This is the final time that the talking stick will travel around the Circle.

Closing the Circle

Just as it was important to open the Circle to establish a separate space for this type of sharing, closing the Circle acknowledges that we have been in a separate space listening and learning from one another, but are now transitioning back into class. Circle can be closed in a variety of ways, but usually we have participants send a clap around the Circle. Each person extends their hands to their neighbor; their right hand will rest on top of their neighbor to the right's left hand, while their left hand will go under their neighbor to the left's right hand. Then, the teacher will move their right hand to "clap" their neighbor to the left's hand and that person will pass it on around the Circle.

Debrief the Process

After Circle is completed (with a clap, or other closing gesture), there is a need to examine how the process was carried out. This helps students learn what went well in Circle and how they can improve in subsequent Circles. It is also a time for the teacher to point out any concerns that came up in the Circle, but primarily led by students/participants. The teacher can ask questions like: "How well did we keep our agreements?" or "What did we do well in Circle and what can we improve on next time?" The students do not all need to respond and can volunteer responses in the format of a normal classroom rather than passing the talking stick.

It is made clear that this is not a form of judgment but rather an apprehension of process to improve it. As with all human interactions, matters can always use improvement to ensure that all feel safe, and are aware of what is happening, and also underscore that there is room for everyone in Circle.

Harvesting Round: Applying What is Learned in Circle

One thing to consider in planning the Circle is what the next steps after the Circle will be. This will change based on the type of Circle and text used. The goal is for what students learned in Circle by listening and speaking from the heart to be translated into "head" or academic work. For example, if students are sharing a personal story in preparation for writing a narrative, the "harvesting" might include some prewriting questions and a lesson on how to plan out a narrative. If a poem was the focus text, the harvesting round may move to analyzing it through elements of literature, still keeping what was learned in Circle in mind. For example, we might ask, "Now that you have heard the lived experiences of the people in the Circle in response to this poem, what can we say about this poem?"

Note on Harvesting: Joe Provisor (Circle Ways, 2020) cautions teachers to avoid "teaching content" during this part of Circle. We are connecting the text to our lives. This practice is more about the heart than the head. Joe tells this story of when he was first teaching. Joe was excited to begin a poetry unit

with the middle schoolers in his class. When he told the students they were going to learn about poetry, the students groaned. He felt so surprised and disappointed. A lover of poetry himself, Joe wondered where this response came from. He maintains that the traditional approach to teaching poetry takes the joy out of the form.

Conclusion

Circle is a counter-hegemonic practice for building community that puts students' stories at the center of the learning experience. Teachers need a variety of strategies to build community online with students who are in isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Circles provide a model for fostering relationships, practicing Social and Emotional Learning competencies, and building a classroom community in both face-to-face and virtual settings. We strongly encourage the practice of Circle as a way to build community and de-bias the curriculum.

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Appendix A: Community Circle Template*

Agreements:

Listen from the heart. (Practice suspending judgement.) Speak from the heart. (Practice suspending judgement.) Speak spontaneously.

"Keep it lean." (Say just enough.)

Confidentiality

1. Open Circle - Clap together./Rainstick./Other
2. Dedications - Who is on your mind? Is there someone locally globally/from your past, present, or future that you would like to bring into the Circle?
3. Speed Round #1 - Simple question. How are you feeling today?
4. Speed Round #2 - Name one word about _____
5. Going Deeper - Identify something in the text.
6. Going Deeper - Compare and contrast. (text to self, text to text, text to world)
7. Going deeper - Imagine, evaluate, apply.
8. Witness Round: What's one thing you heard here today that stayed with you?
9. Close Council: Cross handshake.

Debrief: How was this process for you? How well did we keep our agreements?

Harvesting activities outside of Circle.

*For a variety of pre-made circles, please refer to Boyes-Watson, C., & Pranis, K. (2015).

Appendix B: Getting to Know You Community Circle Example

Agreements:

Listen from the heart. (Practice suspending judgement.) Speak

from the heart. (Practice suspending judgement.) Speak

spontaneously.

"Keep it lean." (Say just enough.)

Confidentiality

1. Open Circle - Clap together. /Rain stick. /Other
2. Dedications - Who is on your mind? Is there someone locally globally/from your past, present, or future that you would like to bring into the Circle?
3. Speed Round #1 - Simple question. How are you feeling today?
4. Speed Round #2 - Name one word about online learning.
5. Going Deeper - How did March 13, 2020 (stay at home orders) affect your life?
6. Going Deeper - Imagine, evaluate, apply. What is one thing that you would like to be true once this pandemic is over?
7. Witness Round: What's one thing you heard here today that stayed with you?
8. Close Council: Group hug.

Debrief: How was this process for you? How well did we keep our agreements?

Harvesting activities outside of Circle.

Appendix C: Samples of Games for Ice-breakers and Openers

Group Juggle (adapted from http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/group_juggle.pdf)

Purpose To provide a playful opportunity to learn each other's names and build community

Process

1. As the facilitator, explain that you want to create a pattern of tossing the ball as a team by calling out a person's name and then pretending to throw an object to her/him. It is important to remind participants that they must remember the person whom they choose to throw the imaginary object because the pattern will remain the same. The facilitator begins the process and times the rounds.

2. After the person whom the facilitator has called on by name pretends to receive the object, she/he thanks the thrower by name, then throws it to someone else in the group until everyone has thrown and received the ball only once.

3. Ask the group to remember the pattern and try the pattern again to make sure that they know to whom they throw and from whom they receive the ball.

4. After the object is passed through the group the time is noted. Usually the first round is substantially longer than the subsequent rounds.

5. After 2 or 3 rounds, ask the group to set their own goal of what they believe they can accomplish and then invite them to try again. (Ex. Can we toss to everyone in under a minute?)

Processing Questions

- How would you describe your feelings related to the juggle from the beginning, middle, and end?
- How would you describe the group's effectiveness from the beginning, middle, and end?
- What did it take for us to be successful as a group?
- As we work to strengthen our learning community as a staff, what do we need keep in mind? What might we do differently with our students as a result of this experiment?
- What problems were we trying to solve?
- How did we solve the problems we faced?
- Was there any fear of failure minimized by the activity and/or the group?
- How did the establishment of a goal impact on our ability to work together and solve the problem?
- What kinds of reflection, intervention, staff development/remediation, or redirection took place to improve your effectiveness?
- Are there connections between group success in this activity and your work?

Zoom, Zoom, Skirt

Purpose: To playfully opportunity for students to get used to speaking online and taking turns in a circle

Process

1. Teacher displays an online visual circle with students names listed around the circle
2. To begin, the teacher explains that students have the option of saying "Zoom" which passes the
3. Zoom to the next person listed on the circle image in the clockwise direction or they may say "Skirt" which means that the direction is reversed and the turn is passed in the opposite direction
4. Students pass the Zoom and Skirt, until invariably two students say, "Skirt" back and forth at least two times. When this happens, the teacher says, "Traffic jam! Take it ____."
5. The teacher then passes the turn to another student on a different side of the circle.
6. The teacher continues the game until students' interest seems to wane just slightly (usually 5-10 minutes)

Processing Questions

How did you feel in this learning experience?

What were some strategies you used to keep the game going?

Was it more of a risk to you to say "Zoom" or to say "Skirt"?

What are some skills that you used in this game that you can apply to online learning?

Appendix D: Notes on Question Creation and Troubleshooting

While it is tempting to craft a Circle quickly, the creation of good questions lay the foundation for the meaning making done in the Circle. Questions push the Circle community to consider their feelings and personal stories more than their thoughts about a topic. This is a primary way in which Circle differs from Socratic Seminar and other approaches to classroom discussion.

Questions are multifaceted. Questions present opportunities for students to share either a light (positive) or shadow (negative) side of their experiences. For example, "Give a shout out to someone you are grateful for (light/positive) OR apologize to someone you have hurt (shadow/negative)." In this way, the range of emotions expressed is broadened. Traditionally, a relatively narrow band of emotions is available to students in a school setting. How often are students invited to share the totality of their experiences at school? For example, when do we see students express grief or joy at school? If educators say they are dedicated to teaching "the whole child," then we have to hold space for the atlas of human emotions to be expressed at school.

We use Costa's Levels of Questioning when crafting questions. The level of cognitive load increases as we move up Costa's Levels; at Level 1, we begin with questions that are easier to step into, and, as we move on to Levels 2 & 3, the questions increase in difficulty. Typically, we want questions that move student responses from "I feel _____," to "I fear _____" to "I found _____." In this case, what students find about themselves and the world around them requires a higher cognitive load and therefore come at the end of the progression.

Students begin by identifying feelings within themselves, move to a deeper understanding of emotion regarding their interaction with others and the world, and end with discovering something about themselves. This helps students articulate how their emotions are connected to the actions they take; helping them recognize this allows for a deeper self-analysis and creates an opportunity for students to have more agency in their actions.

Additionally, if Circle is used throughout the year, questions can increase in cognitive load through various Circles as students become more skilled in the sharing process and more open and vulnerable as a community. **Similar to spiraling in curriculum, Circles can also have macro and micro spirals built into the question sequence; each individual Circle goes deeper with each question and the sequence of Circles over the course of a year invites students into deeper and deeper reflection.**

As stated within the article, the best way to write a Circle is in collaboration. Circle's intention is to build community, and creating the questions with other teachers is another type of community building and results in better questions and therefore a better Circle. Each teacher brings their own expertise and experiences to bear in writing the questions and those nuances lead to questions that address all students' needs. For example, in writing a chemistry Circle, a science teacher brought up that for some students that are drawn to the sciences might find a standard speed round question such as "How are you feeling today?" to be threatening. Working in collaboration also really allows the teachers to uncover the deeper purpose of the Circle - what is it that the teachers hope the Circle achieves? Without the conversations that arise in developing the Circle together, the Circle might not actually center on the purpose of the Circle.

The next step is to clearly identify the purpose of the Circle. What competency are you working to develop in your students as a group? For example, the goal can be to create a space for people to be vulnerable, with their feelings and with the things they don't know yet.

In writing the questions, we rely on ~~the~~ Costa's Levels of Questioning. While there has been some pushback against the levels as being too rigid, we find that the levels of questions provide structure for Circle, and support both emotional and academic learning. In the taxonomy of building community we start out with identifying ~~our~~ one's feelings and one's self ~~our self~~. The five levels of socio-emotional competencies are: Self-awareness, Self management, Social-awareness, Relationship skills, and Responsible decision making. These competencies support and intertwine with the social justice standards as well, which help students move from understanding their identity and the identities of others to understanding just and unjust systems and actions and finally moving to taking action. Just as we move from the concrete to the more abstract to support student understanding, we also move from the present - how are you feeling now, what is happening now, to expanding to experiences and finally to imagining other possibilities.

Having a framework supports teachers knowing that their questions are building toward student learning. It also helps students if they have a framework: What is gender equality? This concept pairs with the Bechdel test (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLF6sAAMb4s). How do we deal with trauma? This concept pairs with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Similarly, using Costa's levels of questioning also supports students learning how to process and therefore answer different kinds of questions. We prefer Costa's over Bloom's due to its simplicity. We know that writing questions is more cognitively demanding than answering questions, and this framework helps students. Similarly, in writing, students need to be able to ask questions as that leads to revisions and deeper understanding of what they wrote.

In writing the questions, it is important to discuss with each other why we are asking each question.

Good questions bring participants' stories and their connections to the surface rather than having an "answer." There may be academic learning elements (such as what is the theme), but this is not the primary goal of Circle. The goal of harvesting after the Circle is to connect those individual stories and experiences to the academic learning. In writing the questions, teachers also need to trust that the

Circle's format will hold whatever students bring to it and that the teacher will know how to guide and

If Circle isn't working: (behavior or all students passing)

- ratchet down the levels of questioning (return to lower level of questions)
- exchange the question for a question that connects to the students in the room (what is your favorite song)
- if you don't know students - ask a non-threatening question every student can participate in (food etc.) Possible modification: who in your past or present has made it possible for you to be in this place today? Whose shoulders do you stand on?

Appendix E: Bilingual Emoji Emotion Sheet/Feelings Chart