

## **Pedagogy of Circles: Teaching Restorative Justice to Social Work Students**

by Daniel Rhodes

After my meditation beads return to me, I sit holding them silently for a few minutes to let the shared stories sink in for everyone. I then request that the students prepare for the closing ceremony—our moment of mindfulness—inviting the mindfulness bell as we sit silently. These are senior social work students in the final year of their studies. Being at a public, mid-sized Southern university, these students are steeped in what Freire calls the “banking” model of education.<sup>1</sup> The first day of class is to be detailed and ordered: here is the syllabus...these are the readings...these are the assignments...this is the grading scale...this is the rubric upon which you will be evaluated...this is the attendance policy...etc. Anything else creates an ambiguity that makes students uncomfortable. Education is “suffering from narration sickness.”<sup>2</sup> For students, “the teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students.”<sup>3</sup> As I ring the mindfulness bell for the closing ceremony, the sound resonating and fading, I reflect on the Peace Circle and the student’s reactions.

Using the Circle process to teach restorative justice helps transform the anti-dialogical narrative that students have been institutionalized in up to this point. The Circle is distinct in asking questions such as:

- How can we move towards healing?

---

<sup>1</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing. 1970. p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

- What can be done to repair the immediate harm and to prevent further harm?
- What wounds and circumstances – past and present – prevent us from having healthy relationships, both with ourselves and with others?
- What steps can we take to understand these wounds and to aid healing?<sup>4</sup>

These are questions that social workers should be addressing in communities. Social work students must have restorative justice concepts integrated into the curriculum from the very beginning, and therefore “it is in the interest of social work to take a leadership position in advancing restorative justice principles and restorative processes.”<sup>5</sup> Having social work students engage in a Circle process fuses these ideas together: the dialogical engagement with each other and the community, the integration of the Social Work Code of Ethics, and the working towards healing within communities through restorative justice. As Mark Umbreit and Marilyn Armour best explain it, “Peacemaking circles are based on the process of dialogue, relationship building, and the communication of moral values in order to promote accountability, healing, and compassion through community participation in resolving conflicts.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Radical Acts: Transforming the Classroom**

I came to the classroom early that day to prepare for our Circle. This is an arduous process since classrooms are replete with obstacles that discourage educators from engaging in

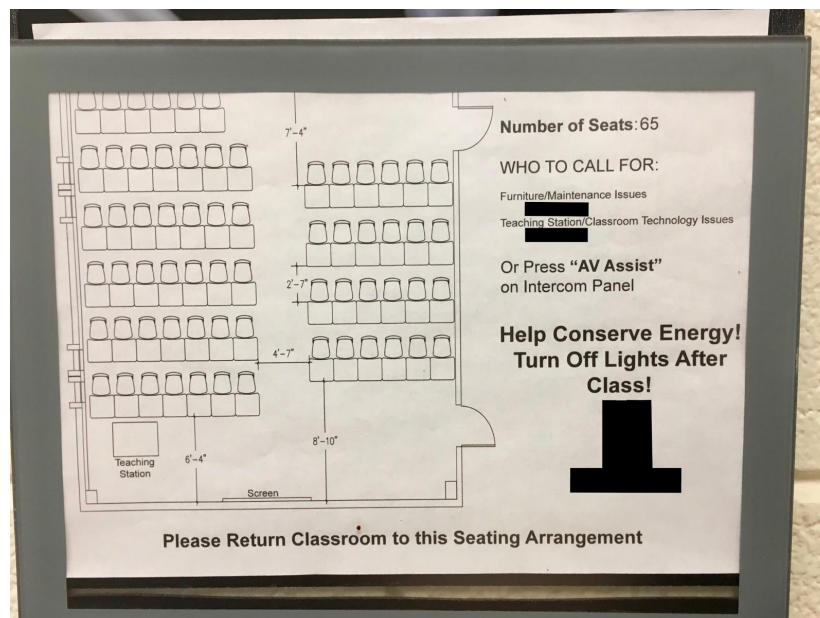
---

<sup>4</sup> Pranis, K., Stuart, B., & Wedge, M. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. 2003. p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Beck, E., Introduction. In E. Beck, N. P. Kropf, & P. B. Leonard (Eds.), *Social Work and Restorative Justice* (pp. 3 – 14). New York, NY: Oxford Press. 2011. p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Umbreit, M., & Armour, M. P. *Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing. 2011. p. 86.

anything except the banking model of education. Official placards are in every classroom with diagrams of how the classrooms are to be arranged in precise detail. Desks are heavy, bulky and cumbersome to move. It takes me twenty minutes before students arrive for moving, placing and stacking desks around the edges of the room, then arranging the chairs in a circle.



Historically classrooms are arranged in this way for specific reasons, so that, “Teachers and students have few opportunities to be in the liberatory classrooms.”<sup>7</sup> Classes are designed to maximize space so that students are situated in cramped settings that restrict movement or interaction with each other; they are to remain static and to maintain their attention directly ahead. Students are to be passive recipients, “and since people ‘receive’ the world as passive

<sup>7</sup> Shore, I., & Freire, P. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming*. 1987. p. 17.

entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Education is to be hegemonic, and thus transforming the physical classroom is itself a radical act.



Students are institutionalized in this form of education early in their lives. Jonathan Kozol discusses this in his work, *The Shame of the Nation*, where schools in the United States have adopted the “Taylorism” model of education.<sup>9</sup> Taylorism is based on the philosophy of Frederick Taylor and his “primitive utilitarianism” which was used to manage factory workers in the early 1900s and thereafter replicated in the classroom.<sup>10</sup> With Taylorism, students are objects to regulate and control, with the structure of the classroom helping to facilitate this management model of education.

By breaking from this tradition of classroom management, I literally transform the classroom, disrupting the rows and columns and creating a circle, thus invoking Baldwin’s ideas:

---

<sup>8</sup> Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing. 1970. p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Kozol, J. *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press. 2005. p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

A circle is not just a meeting with the chairs rearranged. A circle is a way of doing things differently than we have become accustomed to. The circle is a return to our original form of community as well as a leap forward to create a new form of community.<sup>11</sup>

In the middle of the Circle I position a sacred item, the *Circle of Friends*, which is a small stone statue of human figures holding hands and encircling a lit candle. As Zimmerman and Coyle note, “Lighting a candle in the center before beginning invariably evokes a sense of ceremony, because fire has been the center of tribal and community circles throughout the world since ancient times.”<sup>12</sup> Natural light floods the room with blinds open and the fluorescent overhead lights turned off. Students were perplexed when they filter into the first day of the traditional classroom, all designed for the “bureaucratizing of the mind,”<sup>13</sup> only to see the desks stacked up in the corners and the chairs arranged into a circle. They position themselves, reluctant to sit close to me since I am the professor. Late arrivals have no other choice. I am, after all, the authority figure they want to avoid. Students fidget and squirm, unsure about what the next three hours will entail, whispering to each other and looking at their cellphones as I sit quietly and they settle in.

### **My Approach (Methodology): Engaged Pedagogy**

Before I begin this process with students, I am mindful to balance my role as a Circle facilitator and educator. In the classroom, I am an educator and mentor to future social workers,

---

<sup>11</sup> Baldwin, C. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. 1994. p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. *The Way of Council (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Wilton Manors, FL: Bramble Books. 2009. p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 1998. p. 102.

but also an authority figure. I want to educate students in this process and I encourage them to engage in it authentically. This will only work if students feel that this is “less about power-over and more about power-with.”<sup>14</sup> This requires preparation on my part; “attending to our own personal growth, through self-examination, self-reflection, and inner questioning is essential to Circle work.”<sup>15</sup> My role as an educator, a social worker, and a Circle facilitator all come together in my educational philosophy. This is what bell hooks calls “Engaged Pedagogy.”<sup>16</sup>

For hooks, by synthesizing the works of educator Paulo Freire, and Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Engaged Pedagogy” is a learning process that “comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students.”<sup>17</sup> It will not do for me to have social work students be passive recipients of information in the classroom, only to expect them turn around and engage with those in the community in dialogue. Students should understand that “the active nature of students’ participation in the learning process must be stressed.”<sup>18</sup> I must be vigilant in understanding my position as an authority figure while simultaneously encouraging students to engage in authentic dialogue. “The great potential of council is its power to draw out the wisdom each person brings to the circle – and that, after all, is what education is all about.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Pranis, K., Stuart, B., & Wedge, M. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. 2003. p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> hooks, b. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge Press. 1994. p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Giroux, H. *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers. 2001. p. 202.

<sup>19</sup> Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. *The Way of Council (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Wilton Manors, FL: Bramble Books. 2009. p. 179.

## History of Council and Peace Circle Structure

With students settled in the classroom, I welcome everyone. Pointing out that the classroom is arranged differently, I inform them that we will be breaking the traditional first day of class where a teacher just disseminates information. Instead, we will be engaging in a Peace Circle. I explain to them the overall physical structure of the Circle. As Pranis notes,

Participants sit in a circle of chairs with no table. Sometimes objects that have meaning to the group are placed in the center as a focal point to remind participants of shared values and common ground. The physical format of the Circle symbolizes shared leadership, equality, connection, and inclusion. It also promotes focus, accountability, and participation from all.<sup>20</sup>

I request that they put all items and cell phones away; I want everyone to be fully present and mindful for this process. We then go around the Circle with each of us introducing ourselves and saying something unique about who we are. I begin with myself, reflecting on who I am to provide an example for students and to let them know that I am not only facilitating this process, but engaging in it with them. This lets them know that I want it to be authentic. “Authenticity and a focus on *personal revelation* rather than philosophical reflection helps everyone stay attentive and honors the circle further by showing a willingness to take risks.”<sup>21</sup> By me disclosing aspects of myself, I am also taking risks and thus requesting students do the same. “How can I motivate students unless they act with me? Inventing a course in-progress with students is both exciting and anxiety-producing.”<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Pranis, K. *The Little Book of Circle Process*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books Publishers. 2005. p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Zimmerman, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Shore, I., & Freire, P. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming*. 1987. p. 7.

After introductions, I briefly explain to the students what the Circle process is, reviewing its historical roots in Indigenous or First Nations peoples, as well as religious and secular practices, and that “the Indigenous origins of the Circle process are the source of key teachings that are foundational to the process.”<sup>23</sup> I also want students to understand why the classroom has been physically changed. As Baldwin notes,

When we come into a room and rearrange the seating, it causes us to rearrange our expectations also. Creating the space for council in a way indigenous peoples have come together since time immemorial. Moving our bodies from rows to circles, and our self-interests from the center to the edge, enable each of us to reclaim our innate knowledge of circle and carry it forward consciously.<sup>24</sup>

I also discuss the terms used to describe this process, noting that “the term ‘sentencing circle’ gave way to the more inclusive term of ‘peacemaking Circles,’ reflecting the larger aim to bring peace by building communities.”<sup>25</sup> Even though I am calling this a Peace Circle, I am following the Community-Building Circle model that Kay Pranis expands on. “The purpose of a Community-Building Circle is to create bonds and build relationships among a group of people who have a shared interest. Community-Building Circles support effective collective and mutual responsibility.”<sup>26</sup> Social work is a community engagement project, yet social work students are not guided on how to engage each other in community; beginning a class with a

---

<sup>23</sup> Boyes-Weston, C., & Pranis, K. *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. 2015. p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Baldwin, C. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. 1994. p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> Pranis, K., Stuart, B., & Wedge, M. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. 2003. p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Pranis, K. *The Little Book of Circle Process*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books Publishers. 2005. p. 16.



Community-Building Circle is an essential step towards this engagement. Through the Circle process, I am establishing community building in class, countering the antidialogical and hegemonic educational process that has been imposed upon them, and restoring students to their inquisitive educational nature. This process also helps social work students to develop ways to address harms within communities. For this reason, it is important for me to name it a Peace Circle for students.

### **Restorative Justice**

I explain to students that the Circle process is also a way to introduce them to restorative justice, a concept most social work students have never heard of despite the fact that they will be engaging in restorative practices in the community. As social work students, they will be leaving our program to engage communities with disadvantaged populations which have historically been oppressed. Social workers are to adhere to a Code of Ethics from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) that expects them to engage in the values of human rights and social justice. “As a social reform movement, restorative justice is social justice in action.”<sup>27</sup> Students cannot ethically impose the very antidialogical, hegemonic structure of the classroom onto the community. As Paulo Freire notes,

Internalizing paternal authority through the rigid relationship structure emphasized by the school, these young people tend when they become professionals (because of the very fear of freedom instilled by these relationships) to repeat the rigid patterns in which they

---

<sup>27</sup> Umbreit, M., & Armour, M. P. (2011). *Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing. 2011. p. 43.

were miseducated. This phenomenon, in addition to their class position, perhaps explains why so many professionals adhere to antidiological action.<sup>28</sup>

This “antidiological action” that social workers engage in with the community reinforces the negative stereotypes of social workers, especially the “disconcerting myth about social work practice is that we are a profession of ‘baby snatchers’ who take children away from their families.”<sup>29</sup> As social workers, we are to be restorative justice practitioners who address issues of harm in the community, not reinforce or impose it.

### **Peace Circle Guidelines**

Guidelines for our Peace Circle are posted and I direct our attention to them, enumerating each one as a way to generate dialogue about what they mean. I adopted the four main guidelines from Zimmerman and Coyle’s text, *The Way of Council*: 1) Speaking from the heart; 2) Listening from the heart; 3) Being “lean of expression,” and 4) Spontaneity.<sup>30</sup> I want my students to contemplate each one of these guidelines before beginning the Circle process. We start with, speaking from the heart and reflect on what this means. In my attempt to generate conversation, most sit silently, feeling unsure how to respond. Some answer sheepishly, concerned that they may get the answer ‘wrong’ and will be called out because of it. I am encouraging them to engage in dialogue, not just with me but with each other. I want students to be thoughtful in their

---

<sup>28</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing. 1970. p. 155.

<sup>29</sup> Kropf, N. P. Justice, Restoration, and Social Work. In E. Beck, N. P. Kropf, & P. B. Leonard (Eds.), *Social Work and Restorative Justice* (pp. 15 – 30). New York, NY: Oxford Press. 2011. p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. *The Way of Council (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Wilton Manors, FL: Bramble Books. 2009. p. 28-34.

understanding and responses to these guidelines because, “the correct method lies in dialogue” and not in what student just think I want to hear.<sup>31</sup>

Social work education creates a cognitive dissonance for students. Positioned in a traditional education setting, students are continuously reinforced to be objective. Following the Western scientific model of “technocratic rationality,”<sup>32</sup> education emphasizes a reductionist approach to learning; students are to think in terms of ‘third person’ and eschew ideas tainted by emotions. In social work, we adhere to an ‘objective,’ Western model of education, while simultaneously telling students that they must follow a Code of Ethics that highlights empathy as an essential part of social work. One of the main components of the Code of Ethics in social work is “the importance of human relationships.”

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.<sup>33</sup>

This is exactly Howard Zehr’s point when he notes how “Restorative Justice reminds us of the importance of relationships.”<sup>34</sup> We are expecting social work students to engage in the activity of strengthening relationships and developing empathy and compassion, while reinforcing in the

---

<sup>31</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing. 1970. p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Giroux, H. *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers. 2001. p. xx.

<sup>33</sup> National Association of Social Workers: Code of Ethics. <https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/default.asp>

<sup>34</sup> Zehr, H. *Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for our Times*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press. 1990. p. 246.

classroom that they need to be objective yet passive learners. When I review the first guideline of speaking from the heart, I immediately see the cognitive dissonance and their struggle to process this information. Professors do not ask students what it means to *speak from the heart*, not even social work professors.

Acknowledging and validating each response from the students, I press them to reflect deeper. Once students express their ideas on the first guideline, I then share my perspective of what it means, integrating their responses into mine. You can tell through their answers that they are reinforcing their roles as obedient learners, struggling to get the answer ‘right’. I want them to understand that speaking from the heart means that their voice matters. As Umbreit and Armour note, “Consequently, all participants, regardless of role or status, age, or experience, are of equal importance, with equal voice.”<sup>35</sup> This is where the philosophy of Engaged Pedagogy is important with its emphasis on undoing what traditional education has imposed. It is the restorative nature of Engaged Pedagogy which makes it a restorative practice. With traditional education, speaking from the heart is considered anathema to the process; one is to be objective and unfeeling. In the Circle process, speaking from the heart is essential; “to repress our feelings is to repress ourselves.”<sup>36</sup>

We continue with the guidelines. Students slowly begin to open up but are still hesitant to respond freely, afraid of being chastised if they answer incorrectly. Listening from the heart is a vital component of what it is to be a social worker. To listen from the heart is to demonstrate that “social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.”<sup>37</sup> Inability to listen deeply

---

<sup>35</sup> Umbreit, M., & Armour, M. P. *Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2011. p. 179.

<sup>36</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh. *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2012. p. 148.

<sup>37</sup> National Association of Social Workers: Code of Ethics. <https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/default.asp>

and mindfully means that social workers are inadequate in doing their job effectively and competently, and thereby unable to develop empathy or connect with clients and communities in ways that they should. This is also reflected in the NASW Code of Ethics where “Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.”<sup>38</sup> Listening from the heart also determines how well the Circle process will go. “The success of council is largely determined by the quality of listening in the circle.”<sup>39</sup>

We continue with the third and fourth guidelines, namely being lean of expression and allowing for spontaneity. The students struggle with the tension they are feeling, “but it’s a creative tension.”<sup>40</sup> Students are having to take a leap of faith with this process, opening themselves up and honoring those around them, which is challenging for them, given their history of education. Ultimately, social work students “must learn to look at the world holistically in order to understand the interconnections of the parts to each other.”<sup>41</sup> Altogether, these guidelines help students in their understanding of the impact that harm does to the whole community.

My role as an authority figure is also transforming into a facilitator, and our reflection of these guidelines becomes an Engaged Pedagogy. I invoke Kay Pranis who wrote how “guidelines help participants put their personal values into practice. In this context, guidelines are seen not as rigid rules imposed from without but rooted in each person’s own values.”<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. *The Way of Council (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Wilton Manors, FL: Bramble Books. 2009. p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Baldwin, C. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. 1994. p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> Giroux, H. *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers. 2001. p. 202

<sup>42</sup> Pranis, K. *The Little Book of Circle Process*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books Publishers. 2005. pp. 104-105.

These guidelines connect students to their social work values and Code of Ethics, including the principles of “dignity and worth of the person; importance of human relationships; and integrity.”<sup>43</sup> Once again, this process must be experiential, not just theoretical. “This is why liberatory learning cannot be standardized. It has to be situated, experimental, creative.”<sup>44</sup> These guidelines, culminating in students being spontaneous, defies the traditional educational setting of regulation and order, and allows students to engage in learning actively.

### **Talking Piece**

While discussing all of this with my students, I hold in my hand the talking piece I will use for our Peace Circle: my own meditation beads. These are small bone beads that I have possessed for years which I often use as a talking piece. “If a group is meeting in council for the first time, the leader may want to choose a familiar object as a talking piece.”<sup>45</sup> Directing our attention to the talking piece, I explain to students what it is and the purpose it serves. I describe how we will conduct the Circle process, with the talking piece passed around for everyone to use and that participants speaking only when they have this talking piece. I illustrate to students that “the talking piece slows the pace of conversation and encourages thoughtful and reflective interactions among participants.”<sup>46</sup>

I want to be clear and guide students through their understanding of the importance of the talking piece since this is new for most of these students. I reinforce for students that, “holding the talking piece silently while making eye contact with everyone in the circle, can be a profound

---

<sup>43</sup> National Association of Social Workers: Code of Ethics. <https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/default.asp>

<sup>44</sup> Shore, I., & Freire, P. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers. 1987. p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. *The Way of Council (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Wilton Manors, FL: Bramble Books. 2009. p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Pranis, K. *The Little Book of Circle Process*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books Publishers. 2005. p. 35.

part of the practice.”<sup>47</sup> I emphasize for students that holding the talking piece without speaking, or choosing to pass are options. Students have been reinforced in education that they are to only speak when spoken to, and that when singled out they need respond with the ‘correct’ answer. I want students to know that, “whatever the reason, expressing oneself through silence is always acceptable.”<sup>48</sup> As Paulo Freire notes,

The importance of silence in the context of communication is fundamental. On the one hand, it affords me space while listening to the verbal communication of another person and allows me to enter into the internal rhythm of the speaker’s thought and experience that rhythm as language. On the other hand, silence makes it possible for the speaker who is really committed to the experience of communication rather than to the simple transmission of information to hear the question, the doubt, the creativity of the person who is listening. Without this, communication withers.<sup>49</sup>

In a conventional classroom, a student’s understanding of silence only comes from being a passive recipient of information. For the Circle process to work, I need students to know how to actually be silent while still being actively engaged. I do this through teaching them about mindfulness and using a moment of mindfulness as the opening ritual of the Peace Circle for class.

### **Opening Ceremony: Moment of Mindfulness**

---

<sup>47</sup> Zimmerman, p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>49</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 1998. p. 104.

Each Circle process begins and ends with a ceremony or ritual. Umbreit and Armour have described how this can work.

Some type of ceremony is used to open and close the circle. The opening ceremony sets the time and space for the circle apart from the usual hustle and bustle of the day. It establishes the tone for the circle and moves participants themselves and others in different ways. It centers the person psychically and shifts his or her perspective inward from head to heart and from a focus on outer concerns to unseen forces that provide a sense of the universal connectedness of all that is. It fosters a sense of community and connection with others.<sup>50</sup>

My background is in community and clinical social work and I am trained in forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy such as Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT). DBT integrates mindfulness skills in working with people who experience emotional suffering. Mindfulness techniques have been demonstrated to be highly effective in working with a multitude of emotional and mental health issues, as well as pain management and trauma.<sup>51</sup> Not only do social workers need to develop mindfulness skills, so they may be present and in the moment with those with whom they work; they also need to know these techniques so they can pass them on to clients and communities to help address issues of trauma and harm in communities. As Marsha

---

<sup>50</sup> Umbreit, M., & Armour, M. P. *Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2011. p. 189.

<sup>51</sup> Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2013). *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Press, 2013. p. 189.



Linehan, creator of DBT notes, “Mindfulness in its totality has to do with the quality of awareness that a person brings to activities.”<sup>52</sup>

Anapanasati, or awareness of breath, is a simple mindfulness technique that helps guide participants towards breath awareness and calming of the mind.<sup>53</sup> Mindfulness is an important part of my teaching strategy and I begin every class period with a moment of mindfulness to help introduce and reinforce these skills to social work students. This is most easily introduced to participants though the counting of their breath. As the Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh instructs, “Counting is an excellent technique for beginners. Breathing in, count ‘one.’ Breathing out, count ‘two.’ Continue up to ten and then start counting over again. If at any time you forget where you are, begin again with ‘one’.”<sup>54</sup>

For me, having our opening ceremony be a moment of mindfulness is a way to encompass aspects of the Circle process for students. The ‘moment of mindfulness’ is a ritual that can “create atmospheres in which other spiritual components can be actualized.”<sup>55</sup> Mindfulness moments also serve as “inclusive, nondenominational, nonthreatening rituals to help move people into the Circle space and then out of it again. Ceremonies promote a sense of community – of pulling together around shared visions, aim, and endeavors – within the Circle.”

<sup>56</sup> These are ideas I must balance when working with students from different ethnicities, backgrounds, spiritual beliefs and ideas. “The language used to describe council and introduce

---

<sup>52</sup> Linehan, M. *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press. 1993. p. 146.

<sup>53</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh. *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press. 2012. p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Umbreit, p. 77.

<sup>56</sup> Pranis, K., Stuart, B., & Wedge, M. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. 2003. p. 82.

themes should be as secular as possible.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, I want to create an atmosphere that “combines this ancient tradition with contemporary concepts of democracy and inclusivity in a complex, multicultural society.”<sup>58</sup>

Mindfulness also reinforces the importance of listening from the heart. I explain to students that listening from the heart means to listen mindfully and respectfully. “Respectful interaction refers both to respect for the participants and respect for the process. In their preparatory meeting and in the dialogue session, facilitators remind participants to be respectful listeners.”<sup>59</sup> Listening mindfully cannot be an abstract concept for social work students; it must be a tangible and lived experience. The process of learning and integrating the guidelines, along with participating and engaging in the Circle process, helps to reinforce mindfulness and listening from the heart. Paulo Freire does well to connect the ideas of speaking from the heart and listening from the heart.

The person who knows how to listen demonstrates this, in obvious fashion, by being able to control the urge to speak (which is right), as well as his or her personal preference (something worthy of respect). Whoever has something worth saying has also the right and the duty to say it. Conversely, it is also obvious that those who have something to say should know that they are not the only ones with ideas and opinions that need to be expressed.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Zimmerman, p. 163.

<sup>58</sup> Pranis (2003), p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Umbreit, p. 103.

<sup>60</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 1998. p. 105.

Mindfulness is also where I do more than just teach. I demonstrate my commitment to this process and reinforce the work I have done to prepare myself for this kind of activity. Engaged Pedagogy cannot be a theory that I expound on; it too must be my lived experience. I cannot just tell students how to be mindful listeners or how to listen from the heart; I must respect the process itself. The banking model of education is useless in this endeavor. If I do not do this work myself and believe it in myself, then I am of no use to the students who are learning this.

### **The Circle Process and Reflections**

After reviewing the Circle process and instructing students on the technique of mindfulness, I request that students prepare themselves for our opening ritual. As Baldwin notes, “Opening a circle with ritual is essential to help people drop their expectations that the circle is just another name for a committee meeting, a task force, or a project team”<sup>61</sup> or in this case, just a class. Ringing the mindfulness bell, we settle in, directing our awareness towards our breath and centering ourselves, becoming present and being in the moment. After a few minutes, I ring the mindfulness bell again, indicating the ending of the opening ritual and the beginning of the Circle process.

Sitting silently for a few moments, holding the talking piece, I reflect on how I want students to authentically engage. I really want students to engage in the process and reinforce the importance of speaking and listening from the heart. I also do not want to dictate their responses

---

<sup>61</sup> Baldwin, C. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. 1994. p. 31.

or have them just answer questions they think I want to hear. This process must be open and I should be mindful of my role in not influencing student responses.

The role of the facilitator as nondirective and nonjudgmental during the dialogue meeting is a measure of the respect accorded the parties and the fact that the dialogue and its outcome belong to them. The facilitator's nondirectiveness also empowers the participants to engage with each other.<sup>62</sup>

Our social work students are often asked, "Why do you want to be a social worker?" We even have them write an essay prompted from this question in our introductory course. Even though this is a valid question, it does not solicit deep reflection and a student's standard response when asked in class is often, "To help people." I am trying to build community in this class and introduce complex ideas of restorative justice. I want students to really process and reflect. I shift this standard question they are often asked to one that requires a more complex and thoughtful response. I pose the question, "What brought you to social work?" I then place the talking piece in the middle of the Circle for a time of silence. As simple as this may seem to restructure the question, it places students in a position to be more contemplative.

After a few moments, a student approaches the center and picks up the talking piece. The changing of that question changes the dynamics of student answers and places them in a position to think about the personal aspects of their lives that brought them to their current point. As the talking piece passes around, students begin to open up and disclose their personal connections to social work. For some, this becomes cathartic. Many reflect on their first experience with a social

---

<sup>62</sup> Umbreit, p. 82.

worker, or some event in their lives where someone helped them. Some begin to connect ideas of human rights and social justice to their responses. The talking piece gets to me and I disclose my own personal background, history and the events in my life that brought me to social work. I cannot have students open themselves up without me doing the same. This is what Engaged Pedagogy is really about.

After questioning students on what brought them to social work, I then have students do an exercise where they write down two values on a piece of paper that they feel are important to them. We send the talking piece around and students reflect on what two values they chose and why they are important to them. It is through this process that I am working with students to understand their own values in relation to social work values, especially the values of “social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, competence, (and) human rights.”<sup>63</sup> Once they share their values and the importance of them, they place the sheet in the middle of the Circle. By the time the talking piece circles around, everyone’s values are in the middle, symbolically becoming the “shared” values that we will have in class as we move forward. We will continue to process this values exercise throughout the semester.

We engage in this Circle process for around an hour and a half, and then we prepare for our closing ceremony. We end with another moment of mindfulness in the closing ceremony, and as the sound of the mindfulness bell fades, I find that I am not very mindful as my own thoughts wander to the way the students participated. Once the bell stops, I sit quietly for a few

---

<sup>63</sup> CSWE (complete citation)

moments and then tell the students that we will take a short break, and thereafter reconvene to reflect on the Circle process.

Students return from the break and settle in and we begin to process our experience with the Circle. Interestingly, some students reflect on the discomfort they felt because of the ambiguity of the environment. Students reinforced their preconceived expectations of the first day of class, and how just entering into the traditional classroom, transformed into a Circle, was anxiety provoking. This makes me think of educator Ira Shore's response to the resistance he received from students when he transformed the classroom. "Still others were actively hostile, challenging me in ways to stop the critical thrust of the class. They were committed to tradition and saw the class as a threat to their established values."<sup>64</sup> Transforming the class on the first day of the semester and having students engage in an experiential process such as the Peace Circle generated anxiety and some resistance, and as Baldwin notes, "experience is not always a comfortable teacher."<sup>65</sup> Most students, however, are able to reflect on how powerful the overall experience was, noting that they learned aspects of themselves and their classmates that they had never known before.

When I am introducing ideas of community building and restorative justice to students, I have to break from the traditional educational setting and have students engage in a process that is authentic, experiential and liberatory. Teaching restorative justice cannot happen in the standard classroom where I am the authority figure expounding on theories that are alien to student's lived experiences; we have to engage in this process together. For students steeped in the banking model of education, becoming active participants as opposed to passive recipients

---

<sup>64</sup> Shore, I., & Freire, P. (1987). *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers. 1987. p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Baldwin, p. 150.

can be unsettling, but once engaged it can be very liberating. “Liberatory education is fundamentally a situation where the teacher and the students *both* have to be learners, *both* have to be cognitive subjects, in spite of being different.”<sup>66</sup>

I am asking students to liberate themselves from the confines of traditional education and engage in a process that defuses the hierarchal, power dynamic in the class, and “instead of granting power to a leader, the circle requires that participants trust the process and not force its direction or its outcome.”<sup>67</sup> Drawing again from the philosophy of Engaged Pedagogy, Paulo Freire feels that education has to be liberatory as opposed to oppressive. Utilizing Engaged Pedagogy as a teaching philosophy in restorative justice and beginning a semester-long social work class with a Peace Circle, “students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher.”<sup>68</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Restorative justice is not a concept that can be taught using the banking model of education; it is something that must be experienced and must be experiential. Mark Umbreit writes that “Restorative justice is more of a process than a product.”<sup>69</sup> That is why engaging social work students in a restorative justice process is essential in dismantling the banking and antialogical nature of education, and thus changing student interactions with communities. “The context for transformation is not only the classroom but extends outside of it. The students and teachers will be undertaking a transformation that includes a context outside the classroom,

---

<sup>66</sup> Shore, p. 33.

<sup>67</sup> Umbreit, p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing. 1970. p. 81.

<sup>69</sup> Umbreit, p.22.

if the process is a liberating one.”<sup>70</sup> Having social workers engage in restorative justice with communities also changes the dynamics of how social workers are often perceived. “Circles also break down barriers between professionals and the community, allowing the community to see the professional as more than ‘just a badge.’ Professionals reintegrate with their communities beyond their roles.”<sup>71</sup>

Utilizing my philosophy of Engaged Pedagogy in conjunction with using a Peace Circle to start a class becomes a restorative process for students.

It is fundamental for us to know that without certain qualities or virtues, such as a generous loving heart, respect for others, tolerance, humility, a joyful disposition, love of life, openness to what is new, a disposition to welcome change, perseverance in the struggle, a refusal of determinism, a spirit of hope, and openness to justice, progressive pedagogical practice is not possible.<sup>72</sup>

Restorative justice and the Circle process are alien to students who have been indoctrinated in a paternalistic, hierarchical and antidialogical method of education. This traditional form of education directly opposes the values, ethics, human rights and social justice components of social work. Engaging in a Circle process with social work students counters this and

---

<sup>70</sup> Shore, I., & Freire, P. *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers. 1987. p. 33.

<sup>71</sup> Pranis, K., Stuart, B., & Wedge, M. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. 2003. p. 27.

<sup>72</sup> Freire, P. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 1998. p. 108.



demonstrates to students that, “Restorative justice encounters (between people) create empathy and mutual understanding.”<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Umbreit, p. 72.

## References

- Baldwin, C. (1994). *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. New York, NY: Bantam Books
- Beck, E. (2011). Introduction. In E. Beck, N. P. Kropf, & P. B. Leonard (Eds.), *Social Work and Restorative Justice* (pp. 3 – 14). New York, NY: Oxford Press.
- Boyes-Weston, C., & Pranis, K. (2015). *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press.
- Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2013). *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Giroux, H. (2001). *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge Press.

Kozol, J. (2005). *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Kropf, N. P. (2011). Justice, Restoration, and Social Work. In E. Beck, N. P. Kropf, & P. B. Leonard (Eds.), *Social Work and Restorative Justice* (pp. 15 – 30). New York, NY: Oxford Press.

Linehan, M. (1993). *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

National Association of Social Workers: Code of Ethics. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/default.asp>

Pranis, K. (2005). *The Little Book of Circle Process*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books Publishers.

Pranis, K., Stuart, B., & Wedge, M. (2003). *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press.

Shore, I., & Freire, P. (1987). *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming*

*Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.

Thích Nhất Hạnh (2012). *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

Umbreit, M., & Armour, M. P. (2011). *Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing.

Zehr, H. (1990). *Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for our Times*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press.

Zimmerman, J. & Coyle, V. (2009). *The Way of Council (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Wilton Manors, FL: Bramble Books.