Using Circles as an Instructional Tool

Some teachers have found circles to be a successful instructional tool for engaging students who might otherwise remain passive in discussions. The premise in using teaching circles is to use questions that help students learn from each other.

Teachers who use circles for instruction often introduce this technique after their students have become comfortable with community-building circles or dialogue circles. The fishbowl is one particular type of circle that can be helpful in focusing a discussion about complex issues.

Michelle Palank, Alternative English teacher at Sligo Middle School in Montgomery County, recently shared:

“I have been using circles as an instructional tool formally for 2 years now. Last year I used circles with my English 6 class and they were very successful!

This year I am teaching a section of English 8. This class consists of 11 at risk, below grade level students. My classroom is set up in a circle, students have been participating in dialogue circles every Monday during our BEST period. They are very familiar with the process and enjoy discussing different topics. I use this enthusiasm as a tool for instruction. The students in my English 8 class feel comfortable discussing literature topics and are confident in taking risks. The circle process allows for student discourse and rich discussion. We do not use a talking piece during class because the students respect each other enough not to talk over one another. I sit in the circle with my students and guide the discussions. I have found the circle to be a useful tool in student’s writing. With every writing prompt, we discuss our thoughts in a circle and take notes on a graphic organizer (self-created). I have discovered that when we discuss the writing prompts in a circle their writing is MUCH better. If my students are not given the opportunity to discuss the writing prompt in a circle they often summarize the reading. Summarizing the reading is not what these students should be doing. They benefit from circles because they hear the thoughts and input from their peers. These thoughts transfer to their writing.

The use of circles as an instructional tool has allowed me to expose these 11 students to the advanced English curriculum and texts. We are currently reading Animal Farm and all of the students understand the relation and reference to the Russian Revolution. I do not believe they would have gotten this without the use of circles and discussion.

The students in my English class have asked me to share this instructional practice with every teacher and have often stated they wished every teacher set their classroom up in a circle. I invite other teachers to come observe my class to experience the power of the circle.”

Natalie Baughns, Social Studies Teacher at Collington Square Elementary Middle School in Baltimore City, shared:

“Teaching in a circle provides an open format with every student feeling included and welcomed into the learning space. The teacher is a part of the circle rather than in the middle or outside which adds to the feeling of equality. Everyone is encouraged to participate and learning takes place through a shared discussion with the entire group as well as smaller interactions with "shoulder-partners". The focus is the learning process and the ability to use social cues, pre-established expectations, as well as the topic at hand to guide both the conduct and the responses of the learners.”