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THE ROLE OF THE TALKING CIRCLE WITHIN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The talking circle, which I have often experienced during my life with an Atikamekw Elder, Roger Echaquan, quickly appeared to me as essential in my teaching practice, whether in an Aboriginal environment or elsewhere. After a brief description of the talking circle, as experienced by Mr. Echaquan, I will present some themes to guide its application within the classroom or in other spheres of school. I will also outline some of the benefits in relation to teaching-learning and to group management. To conclude, I will stress some of the practical limitations of the circle within a school context.

PRACTICE OF TALKING CIRCLE

The talking circle is an ancestral autochthonous communication technique rooted in a philosophy of unity, *Kice Manito*¹. The ecosociety associated therewith is inclusive and comprehends differences as complementary.

Traditionally, people form a circle, in a place they choose. The person who acts as a guide begins with a purification ceremony², a song, before introducing himself by talking about his origins, relationships as an integral part of one's identity. The guide then gives the floor to the host of the activity who, in turn, presents the theme of the gathering and passes on a feather (or a talking stick or any other object) to his left-hand neighbour. Each speaks in turn (or chooses to remain silent) when given the feather, talking stick or any other object. Participants listen without judging, according to the ethic of non-interference. It is

then more comfortable to express oneself without fear of being interrupted or contradicted, which promotes freedom to BE of each person. Individual experiences are shared in the form of life stories, which allow understanding the complexity of reality and of human beings as well as the interdependence between emotional, physical, spiritual or mental dimensions. We talk using the "I" criterion of truth in Aboriginal epistemology which involves taking responsibility for one's actions, thoughts, emotions, and learning. Indeed, as in the humanist paradigm (Bertrand and Valois, 1999), it is considered that learning is an experience that takes place in the inner life of the "self-learner". For Roger Echaquan, education, *kiskinomaso*³, is "awakening what is in us, with what surrounds us". The human being, *nehirowisiw*, is a reincarnated being, talented and complete, who possesses all the necessary resources for its own development, external factors having a secondary function.

According to Roger Echaquan, it is all about "speaking from the heart. We should not have doubts, for doubts chase away the spirit." Authenticity manifested as such encourages others to recognize their own emotions and beliefs, inspires confidence and gives the feeling of being welcomed for oneself, respected throughout one's personality, values, opinions and silences. The person leading the circle must also have developed the ability to listen, to make meaningful connections, and use his multiple intelligences including his intuitions and sensations. Roger Echaquan refers to "being fully present", "creating a vacuum", a technique to tune in to "be as one"

with the circle, to “capture beyond words”. For him, “all thoughts conveyed in the circle allow raising the level of consciousness”, what Foy (2009) describes as the construction of collective consciousness.

We can end the circle with a song and a legend, which include lessons on sharing and promote learning in a “non-confrontational” manner. A second turn to speak is sometimes allowed to give free rein to resonance following the first shares. Then, participants “close the circle” by embracing each other or by thanking one another individually, following again the pattern circle to the left.

APPLICATIONS AND BENEFITS OF THE TALKING CIRCLE

Rarely used after kindergarten, the talking circle nonetheless has great potential in various spheres of the school’s mandate.

The conceptual map (Figure 1) shows, in yellow, examples of talking circle themes that can be used in schools. The question of origins is the one I address in every new circle, indicating that participants are free to talk about their geographic, family, or symbolic origins on an emotional level. It is easily accessible for people not accustomed to speaking in public, it gives confidence by connecting participants to their identity and respects Aboriginal presentation mode.

Anticipated benefits in a traditional Aboriginal perspective appear on the outskirts in purple; these are mentioned in the first part of the article, the development of self and one’s relationships being at the heart of the Aboriginal education process.

The green bubbles indicate possible academic expectations, particularly in the areas of identity construction and cultural *leadership*, inspired from the educational model proposed by Payment (2003)

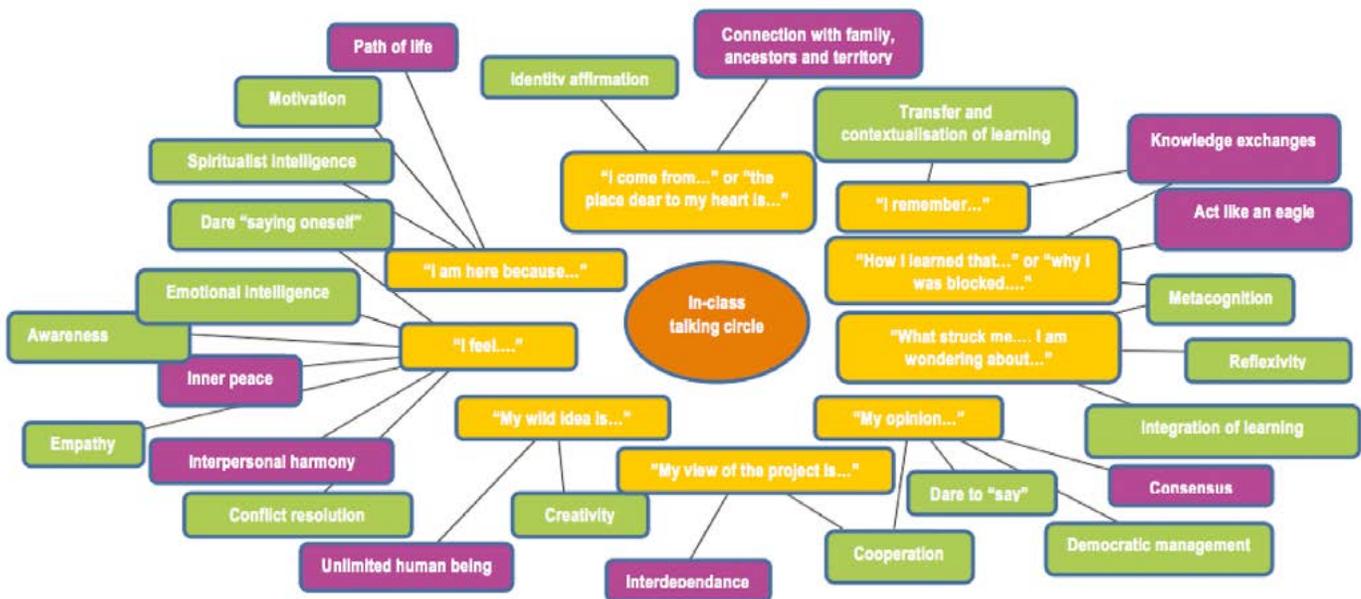


Figure 1

for minority groups. On learning of oral communication for instance, the circle achieves several goals that the author considers essential for the construction of identity in minority communities: "TO SAY" means to articulate thoughts using appropriate words; "SAYING ONESELF" is the ability to express one's values and feelings authentically, and "DARE TO SAY" implies "to show courage and boldness to say aloud what everyone thinks to themselves". Language becomes an articulation tool for the person, which promotes learning and establishes it as a key element of identity. (Paieiment, 2003, p. 234).

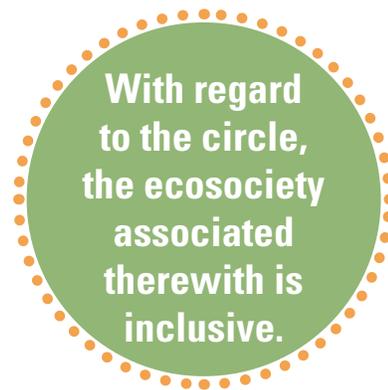
Students and adults' enthusiasm for the circle confirms the pleasure that it gives them, another factor facilitating learning. This pleasure can be attributed to the individual and collective dynamics that come from self-expression and from listening to oneself as to the other. Classroom atmosphere and management are largely facilitated by practising the circle in terms of hospitality, inclusion, sense of belonging, and group cohesion.

The circle is particularly effective to rapidly establish genuine communication with students and, according to Bohm (1996), a coherent group dialogue, since making explicit certain unconscious assumptions. Hence, the practice of circle contributes to the personal development of individuals; it also sharpens critical thinking, to the extent that the act of listening without judgment helps to "seriously"⁴ consider other perspectives and thus, open to real change of points of view. Foy (2009) has also recorded several contributions of the circle: it allows to link experience and theory, in a holistic and collective manner, as well as having access to student preconceptions.

Beyond the classroom context, teachers' professional development, either in faculties of education or in professional learning communities, would benefit greatly from the "circle" approach; it particularly promotes exchange of experiential and theoretical knowledge, while giving meaning to the lives of individuals and the group. It is, for example, a key pedagogical practice in the Masters in Psychosocial Practices Studies at Université du Québec à Rimouski (Galvani 2008).

Moreover, in management, the circle has already been adopted by contemporary leaders and is commonly taught in management schools. If leaders in education were to reclaim this ancient concept, they

could avoid the bias of a hierarchical system, including abuse of power, to move toward a consensus decision-making. As for Bohm, he encourages circles without themes to allow a real transformation; themes, objectives or predetermined programs limit eco-social inventiveness. He draws from rallies of hunter-gatherer groups: "they talked, talked and talked, with no apparent aim. They did not make decisions... The meeting continued until finally it stops for no reason, and the group dispersed. After that, everyone seemed to know what to do because they understood each other so well. They then gathered in smaller groups to do something or make decisions" (1996, p. 6). This type of social organization still prevails in non-formal Atikamekw communities, especially in the territory, and can be adapted in the classroom for democratic management learning.



PRACTICE OF SCHOOL-CIRCLE LIMITATIONS

On a spatio-temporal angle, following a schedule can prevent from enjoying the fullness of the present moment, affecting the free expression of each and therefore, articulation of all human dimensions (physical, mental, spiritual and emotional). Storytelling is also compromised by time constraint. Thus, with classroom rarely counting fewer than 20 students, the number of people is one of the limiting factor, since, above 15 participants, young people often lack the necessary patience to listen to everyone. Space is another critical element: the shape and size of the rooms can indeed be an impediment to arrangement of seats in a circle, especially in science classrooms where the tables are fixed to the ground. On a psychosocial aspect, the classroom context also implies the obligation for students to attend, while in Aboriginal culture, participation in a circle is not compulsory, nor is learning. Foy (2009) noted that young

