# The Circle

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The circle formed on Wednesday nights. Far from the English department, in a room decorated with meteorological charts, my composition class would sit in silence for an hour reading and writing comments on each other's papers. The circle began as a less threatening way for shyer students to receive peer response, but grew to become much more. Through this written conversation, a community of learners and writers formed and evolved. This community challenged us to engage in honest dialogue, and gave us support, a sense of having been true to ourselves and a chance to be heard. Reflection on the experience led me to see broader implications about the place of the personal in academic life and students' potential contributions to academic discourse communities across the curriculum.

From the beginning, I had structured the composition class to require regular writing. To enable me to respond to students while they were in the process of writing, I required a five-page paper every week on the topic of the student's choice and a weekly conference outside of class. I formally evaluated only revised versions of pieces in portfolios submitted at midterm and at the conclusion of the course. While I did not grade their weekly papers, I underlined mechanical errors and wrote a page of commentary responding to the work. In my written comments, I tended to focus on the effectiveness of the writing. In conferences, I responded more to the content of the papers.

I also wrote a five-page paper every week. I shared aspects of my composing process and my finished papers with the class. The course established a rhythm over the first several weeks, and I was generally

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satisfied with its progress. Students seemed to be working on issues important to them in their writing and taking more control of their weekly conferences. But I was concerned about response.

Students needed more response than my comments on their papers each week. During the Wednesday class session, I provided time for students to read their pieces aloud to the class and receive commentary. Those students who availed themselves of this opportunity found it valuable, but most couldn't bring themselves to read their work in front of the group. The same students always seemed to take advantage of the sharing sessions. I was concerned that the majority weren't getting response from their peers.

The idea of the circle was to create a less threatening way for students to get peer response. Written response, while lacking the interactive quality of oral sharing, would allow everyone to receive feedback on their work in a single class period.

To introduce the circle exercise, I simply brought a stapler and some loose sheets of paper to class one Wednesday night and asked everyone to attach several sheets of blank paper to the back of their composition. After we had moved our chairs into a circle, I explained how the exercise would work. To begin, we would pass our papers to the right. We would read the piece we received and write comments on the paper stapled to the back.

I asked students to center their response around two basic questions, "What works?" and "What needs work?" and to be as specific as possible, as this would help the author more than general comments like, "Good paper." When they had written their comments, they were to look for someone else who had finished in order to exchange papers. With these simple directions, "the circle exercise" was born.

Shortly after the first pieces had been passed to the right, a stillness fell over the room as everyone began to read. I turned to the piece which had been passed to me. I noticed my reading of the piece changed when I wasn't underlining errors. I began to relax and follow the words. I wrote on the attached paper, sticking rather strictly to my own guidelines about responding to what worked in the piece and what needed work and looked up for someone to pass it on to. Everyone seemed to

be reading intently; a few were writing comments. The only sounds I heard were noises filtering in from the hall. Finally someone looked up. We crossed the space in the center of the circle to exchange papers.

With this second paper, my reading became even more relaxed. As I read of this student's experience with appendicitis, I found myself thinking about the time I had spent in the hospital with my son's hernia operation. When I reached the end, I read the comments of the student who had read the piece before me. She had followed my guidelines for response rather loosely: "The lead really caught my attention, but I think you should explain more about the hospital room—maybe add more description." Then she had taken off in another direction: "Something like that happened to me once. I could relate to a lot of what you said here. When I was in sixth grade, I had to go to the hospital for an operation on my heel. I was scared and felt very lonely." The piece had also brought up memories for me. I decided to let the author know.

As time went on, my responses in the circle exercise became more those of a person and less those of a writing teacher. I enjoyed my reading more, not worrying if I was teaching them anything, knowing I would write my teacher-oriented comments later. I became more fully a member of the classroom community.

I left it up to the students to choose if they would sign their comments. Most did not. When I received my own pieces back at the end of a circle session, I usually did not know who had written the comments.

I tried several variations on this structure, but the students indicated they preferred the basic format. I occasionally added specific things to comment on (e.g. leads, focus, order, etc.) that we had been discussing in class.

## Concentric Circles

Once a routine was established, several things I hadn't anticipated started to happen. I began to notice signs that the expanded audience provided by the circle was affecting the composing process. Students frequently asked in conference if they would have a chance to pass their piece around the circle. Sometimes they asked my opinion on whether the class would like a certain piece. I did not require them to submit the

paper they were currently working on if they did not wish to. I provided the option to submit a previous piece in case the current one dealt with a personal topic the student would not feel comfortable sharing. Most often, however, their reason for not sharing was that they felt those pieces did not represent their best effort.

Students began to care about their writing more and depend on the response they were receiving from their peers. Response validated what was said. One student said he was "testing the power of writing...I have found this tool has infinite leverage." Another wrote, "Stories have shown me that past experiences can be re-experienced through writing. The experience will never leave you if you have it in front of you." We learned about the power of being heard. "It helped me to express feelings and write stuff that normally I would not have written." We learned how our writing could affect readers.

*Testing the Waters*

Students began to use the circle response sessions to test the effectiveness of their writing. They judged the success of their efforts by their peers' responses. One student wrote:

> I set out to write a cliffhanger. And judging from the response I received, it worked. 'I must read the ending!' and 'When you finish this, you better let me read it!' were some of the favorable responses I got.

Another explained, "My intentions in writing the piece were to get the feelings on paper. From the responses, I guess I did that."

But responses that pointed to problems in the piece were also highly valued. Students used these responses to show them where they needed help in the writing. Even though the pieces we passed around were that week's finished copies, the responses often led to revisions. One student wrote:

> The most valuable kinds of responses I got were when people gave me ideas of ways to make the piece better or asked questions that I could use the answers to add more in the paper.

Questions were viewed as signs of reader interest:

> The responses that best stay with me are the questions. When you hear or read questions, you know what you have to expand on. You understand what you left out and are able to see what the reader is interested in. Through questions I am able to learn what is more important to others and what needs to be elaborated on more within the story.

As were requests for clarification and more detail:

> I liked it when people told me specifically what needed to be fixed.... And I also like it when they (the readers) tell me where they need more detail. I may have it in my head, but they don't understand because it jumps around too much. This helps my story develop into a better story that a reader will better understand.

When the audience expanded beyond the teacher to include peers, revisions made more sense and took on more importance. Even if the writer didn't choose to revise the particular piece being commented on, she took what was said into consideration the next time she sat down to write.

*Community*

Maxine Greene (1988) describes how we need to open up "a public space, a space of dialogue and possibility" (xi). She holds out hope for education to provide a context for open dialogue between authentic beings. "In contexts of this kind, open contexts where persons attend to one another with interest, regard and care, there is a place for the appearance of freedom, the achievement of freedom by people in search of themselves"(xi). The circle allowed us a space in which we could begin to speak the truth. One student wrote:

> A lot of [comments] also supported me when I wrote about topics which were very emotional for me. I was also there for others who

> chose to open themselves up, looking for support. I remember one girl wrote about how she didn't want to move into her new stepfather's house after her parents' divorce. Another girl wrote about her sister attempting suicide. It felt good to be able to comment on those papers and support the writer's point of view. This encouraged them to open up even more in the next essay...by sharing our essays we became a unit.

Students began to use this community to seek help with problems. One woman said of a piece she wrote about her troubled relationship with her parents, "I wrote it hoping someone could relate to it and maybe give me some ideas." And sometimes they received it:

> The response that affected me the most came from my essay about. . . when my mother announced she wanted a divorce from my father the night before I left for college. The quote was, You are a tough woman, [name]. You are going through a lot and not only are you handling it well, but you can share it with others. I appreciate the fact that you can share this with me.' I don't know who wrote that, but it certainly made me think. I realized I did feel better after writing how I felt in the essay.... This person really helped me to feel better. To whoever it was- thank you!

Some of the support was simple validation for the writer as a writer. One student says simply, "The most valuable information I have received this year is that there are people who like some of the things I have written. This makes me have more confidence and determination to write a piece that is even better..."

The circle created community. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991:1) describes this type of academic community as "an extended family unit that functions as a support system for students' exploration of personal and intellectual literacy development." Our community supported our efforts, spurring us on to attempt pieces we would not have tried to write under normal circumstances.

This community was unique in that while virtually all comments were positive in spirit, the vast majority were given anonymously. We

received support from the group, most often without knowing which individuals it came from.

The trust level was high in this anonymous community. The personal content of the pieces that were passed around surprised and impressed me. Experiences with alcoholism, drug use, suicide attempts, divorce and rape made their way around the circle and were treated with respect. This level of trust challenged us to meet a high standard of honest writing. And the truth-telling taught us writer's truths. As one woman put it, "I learned that honest pieces get the most reaction from your peers. I also learned that it is hard to write pieces that are completely honest."

*The Conversation*

The circle helped us establish a dialogue in which one piece led to another, not only about personal experiences, but ideas. Papers about experiences would trigger memories or give someone the courage to write about similar experiences. Papers about ideas sparked connections and drew us into communal written conversations. Some papers were written directly in response to others. We developed an ongoing conversation on several issues: abortion, suicide (right to die), and the drinking age among them.

In response to several different papers about abortion, I wrote a paper about how unfulfilling I found the public debate and about the lack of real choices in this country. One of the authors of the papers I was responding to wrote, "You got me thinking. I liked the way you compared your experiences in Santo Domingo with the United States. It gives another perspective." Another wrote, "It's hard for me to see the side of the pro-lifers, but I like how you don't really ram anything down the reader's throat." Another considered the issue for the first time: "I never really thought much about what abortion really means. What was also interesting was the amount of time mothers get off from work after they have a child." Another made a personal connection:

> I really liked this. It makes you think about what choices women have in life. I work in a hospital in Somerville, Mass, and I see

poor people who are lacking medical treatment because they do not have money. It is pretty sad to think a baby must have a baby to be loved.

Some students consciously began to use the circle as a forum to inform their classmates about issues important to them like the rain forests, animal research, and capital punishment, or to educate them about things they were familiar with. One writes, "I liked the fact that I could educate the class about a whole other culture so different as Jamaica."

We all learned from this exchange of ideas and experiences. We learned about the ideas, but more about ourselves and the power of writing to reach people and to change lives. One student used a quotation from Bob Dylan to describe the circle: "We were all the same; we just saw it from a different point of view."

Clearly the circle gave these student writers (and their teacher) a way to be heard. This forum inspired us to write better pieces each week and helped us generate ideas. A member of the class put it this way: "Through the process of learning to write I can now see more. Everything has come into focus...In the effort of returning to a whole person, I meet people along the way. This is the gift of living."

## Implications

In her study of the academic literacies of college students, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991b) found that university students were asked to write within a very narrow range of forms in their content courses. Their personal understandings of course material were not valued or considered relevant. She recorded no incidents of sharing of student writing outside of the English class.

When the concept of circle response moves beyond the writing classroom's focus on process into content-oriented classes, the purposes expand and the effects are transformed. The power of the circle exercise stems from its duel nature as personal, yet public, discourse.

Students care more about writing they know they will share with peers. Traditionally, academic writing is produced for an audience of one, the teacher, who typically knows more about the subject than the

writer and whose sole purpose in reading is evaluation. Sharing of academic writing among students in a class transforms the writing situation. The writing becomes "authentic" (Edelsky, 1986) in that the writer writes in order to create and communicate meaning. When students care more about their writing, they work to make their ideas clearer to the audience and thus the ideas become clearer to the students themselves.

The opportunity to educate their peers about a topic allows students "authority" in the sense of being an author. Freedom of topic choice enhances this authority by allowing them to establish some turf (Graves, 1983) within the field in an area personally meaningful to them. We should urge students to "start where they are"(Lofland and Lofland, 1984) in terms of topic selection, using their personal histories as a way of identifying potential areas of interest within a field of study, thus maximizing the tranformative potential of the class.

Written response demonstrates the social context of learning within a field, and creates a community within which honest dialogue can take place. As students build on and react to each other's ideas, they enter into a collaborative conversation with other minds. This free exchange of ideas introduces them to the process of academic thinking.

Most instructors recognize the value of academic dialogue and try to encourage oral discussion within their classes. Public writing and written response is a natural extension of this concept, but provides several advantages over classroom discussions.

Written response provides an equitable way to share student writing and ideas in a classroom situation. Research suggests that men tend to dominate oral discussions. Thorne, Kramarae and Henley (1983,17) attribute this not to any natural passivity on the part of women, but to "the mechanisms, such as interruption, [and] inattention to topics women raise which men use to control women's silence in mixed sex talk." In a written exchange, everyone's voice has an equal chance to be heard. The option of anonymity increases the chance that all contributions will be equally valued.

The process of writing for a public forum encourages the writer to reflect on content. Applebee (1984) cites four advantages of written over oral discourse in promoting thinking. The permanence of the

written word allows for revision and reflection, while the need for writing to communicate across space and time demands explicitness. The conventional forms of written discourse provide resources for organizing and thinking through relationships among ideas. Finally, the active, recursive nature of writing allows for exploration of the implications of otherwise unexamined assumptions. The writing of short papers to share in class encourages students to consider how their pieces will be received and reflect on the implications of their material.

*Suggestions for Implementation*

Allow students freedom to write about subjects they care about. Personal connections increase the chance that course material will transform personal understandings. Lofland and Lofland (1984) point to a long tradition of social science researchers who have used their personal histories as starting points for research. They caution that, "without a foundation in personal sentiment, all the rest easily becomes so much realistic, hollow cant." (10)

Keep papers relatively short (no more than five pages) to allow for more responses in a shorter time period and to avoid reader fatigue. Position or reaction papers which assume greater personal voice are better suited to this type of activity than more traditional research papers.

A climate of acceptance in our classrooms encourages expression of differing points of view and free exchange of ideas. Welcome diverse voices and encourage students to bring private literacies into a public forum, creating a space where course material can interact with and shape personal truth.

Bringing circles of written response into the content classroom requires changes in the type and frequency of writing assigned, and larger changes in our thinking about student potential. We need to turn away from deficit models, a focus on what students cannot do, and begin to look at what students do know and can contribute. Change is always difficult, but the potential rewards are great.

*Public Spaces, Personal Voices*

One of my composition students wrote, "To write to be able to expand on ideas and to clear our minds seems too easy to be a course." Another said, "Words to me are no longer words, they are feelings." He said in writing he is "running toward the truth." I do not believe these matters are peripheral to education. As Toby Fulwiler (1990) notes, "self-knowledge provides the motivation for whatever other knowledge an individual learns and absorbs... In the end, all knowledge is related." (261) Or as one of his students put it, "I put myself into it and I write well. It bothers me when people tell me to make it less personal— to take me out of it. I'm afraid I can't write unless I am in the paper somehow."

"The greatest lie of all," says Chiseri-Strater (1991b), is "that education itself should be neutral, that education should be separated from personal and private knowing, that education should transform students' ideas without transforming students themselves." Academic discourse communities grow out of real dialogue, engaged reading and committed writing. They can become an extension of the private literacies all students bring to our classrooms. Yet, unless a course is structured to foster the concept of community, such discourse communities remain the province of professional scholars writing in academic journals. The circle taught me that communities which support literacy growth and conditions which allow course material to transform students lives happen when we see the personal as relevant to the educational endeavor and provide public space for private voices.

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