

Circle of One

Dorota Owen

*'I was born in the middle of a rock and a hard place
I needed a soft place to fall
You showed me a reason to rely on my feelings
You showed me a circle of one'*

A serious shock awaited me when I returned to mainstream schools in Scotland as a supply teacher, after ten cushy years abroad. Previously, I had been warned by my employers that I would never find another permanent contract because there was a glut of teachers in the Central belt. Yet now there is a distinct shortage of teachers in certain areas and in certain subjects and the result led directly to my meeting a disaffected class of twelve year olds who had listed a tally of twenty-two temporary English teachers over the first four months of their high school careers.

It was an ignominious start.

Standing in front of the rows of desks that first day, I made no impression at all and was simply ignored as the class carried on chatting to each other, throwing bags and books around in an atmosphere of general mayhem. I was invisible – they had become inured to strangers and had no recent history of a working relationship with an English teacher as guide or mentor, having received instead a succession of caretakers. As a

After 15 years of teaching in the UK, Dorota Owen worked as a teacher and as a counsellor in International schools and was most recently Executive Director of In Touch Community Services in Manil , Philippines , a trust providing counselling and personal development workshops for both Filipinos and expatriates. She is the author of 'Meditations for Mad Moments: A Stress Handbook for City-Dwellers,' a Manila guidebook.

Dorota Owen
The Garden Cottage
129E High Street
Forres IV36 1DX
00 44 (0) 1309 696902

supply teacher moreover, I was regarded as fair game. Over the next couple of weeks, I came to understand that they felt abandoned and angry, but right then, instead of care or compassion, I experienced a real sense of powerlessness. It was hard going, pulling every stunt from my armoury of 'interesting one-off lessons', and rapidly learning that no-one had much respect for the 'assertive discipline system'. In retrospect, it seems to me I held my breath till Easter then collapsed with relief, planning not to come back.

Yet the Easter holidays provided an unexpected resurrection in my vocation. At a conference, I was hugely inspired by Jenny Mosley's entertaining presentation about Circle Time and how she had devised this method during an earlier teaching career dealing with wildly reluctant detainees of the ROSLA years, whose attitude and behaviour bore a distinct resemblance to that of my own recent clientele. The strategies she had devised to bring interest and relevance to her classes were obviously tailor-made for mine, too. Better still, her infectious enthusiasm and self-disparaging humour had the audience in tear-streaked fits of laughter, so I knew for sure I was being shown how to bring in that all important element so often sadly ignored in education – fun!

After the 'show' I immediately moved fast to the stage and nabbed my new heroine, breathlessly asking about training in the Circle Time approach. She gave me the contact details but stressed, 'There needs to be authenticity in your method – keep a journal of what works and doesn't work for you personally.'

I also managed to watch half a workshop of Jenny demonstrating a Circle time session, which consisted of a few lively warm-up games, including ways to shape boundaries

and good practice into the activity, leading into a discussion of personal issues – but then I had to rush away for a prior appointment, and to this day, although I can start one, I still don't know quite for sure how to 'end' a Circle time session in the recommended fashion!

On the way out I asked a total stranger what time it was and that was the way I met and subsequently befriended, incredibly, the mother of one of my most difficult students. A delegate who could not attend at the last minute had given her a ticket, that's the only reason she was there, but what a startling coincidence. She asked me about Circle Time and whether I would use it with my classes, and I promised I would.

So there I was, armed with the barest of plans and the noblest of intentions. The very first day back in school, a boisterous army of third years (hormonally fired 14 year olds) exploded into the classroom unexpectedly, their exam having been cancelled due to an absence. Of course, I had no lesson prepared. 'This is it, then', I thought, and pretending utmost confidence, proceeded to arrange them in a circle and announce the beginning of something new...

An hour later, the bell rang for break and *nobody moved*. 'That was great, Miss, can we do it again next time?' Amazing!

How had it worked?

First of all, putting everyone in a circle removed the arrangement of a hierarchy with teacher at the head of the class, in one fell swoop. By putting myself in the circle, I became part of the group and played as an equal. Suddenly everyone was equally visible and equally audible, and in games where everyone took a turn to play, sequentially, it became quickly obvious that if even one person didn't play ball, the whole group suffered – immediately. Then spoken or

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unspoken peer pressure operated to make any rebels conform. What a powerful method! Immediately, I had the interest, attention and participation of the group – a radical behavioural shift.

Secondly, although I had some rudimentary ideas of how to run the circle, I certainly did not have much more. My most overwhelming contribution to our success that day was the depth of my ignorance. I had zero knowledge, zero experience and zero expertise. So when I asked the group to volunteer games they knew themselves from Primary, great delight ensued as they vied with each other to reconstruct 'old favourites'. Then, as the pace quickened, these were elaborated and we moved to another stage – co-creation. 'Let's do it like this, 'someone would say, or 'Let's have a rule like this to make it work better'.

Collaboration, co-creation; a new order was developing in the room. You could hear a pin drop between games and catch a palpable new emotion. Anticipation. When I found a

point where it could work we moved out of the games entirely and into a process of discussion, with each person taking an equal turn. We talked that day about what things could make it better to be a student in that school, and soon they were off and running, sharing sensible, zany, creative ideas in a supportive atmosphere with attention for each individual at an all-time high.

It was a revelation for me in that job. Here was a versatile tool for getting to know every brand-new class I got landed with, whatever the subject. I could ring the changes with a variety of preambles : 'Well, I know you're disappointed your PE teacher is off today, but I'm sure you'll enjoy these MENTAL games...' or ' We're going to do a different sort of drama today...'

I discovered that when it came to any subject in the humanities, Circle Time had a valid and useful role to play. It didn't just get me out of a tight spot; it was genuinely educational AND an entertaining experience. No wonder I would get stopped in the school playground ; 'Miss, can you do that thing with us, that you did with so-and-so's class?'

For me personally, the most valuable aspect of the process was that it could be a short cut to finding out about the inner lives and the personalities of those individuals I would go on to teach in various other subjects, and this certainly brought in a more considerate and caring approach in my relationships with students in various environments around the school. It was a quick way for me to get to know them, and vice-versa.

Unsurprisingly, I was curious to find out more, so I went to my own children's primary school

and asked their head teacher. I discovered that Circle Time is now widely used nationally in Primaries to great effect, and that there is a whole catalogue full of materials such as source books, talking sticks, puppets and motivational stickers to back up the positive results of regular circle time sessions. The website (www.circle-time.co.uk) lists the many and varied uses, advantages, methodologies, applications and training courses offered by Jenny and her team of consultants. It is a one-woman tidal wave of positivity, with the aims of raising self-esteem, awareness, emotional literacy and transparency.

Knowing this now, whenever one of my own daughters tell me their concerns at school, I encourage them to raise their worry during Circle Time with their teacher, confident that this is the most effective arena for change. So far this has always done the trick, rendering superfluous remedial visits to the school or calls to other parents. I also know now that if any pupil is experiencing anything unpleasant, unhealthy, negative or damaging, whenever there is a Circle Time process, eventually it will be raised in the group, as nothing can hide in an atmosphere of openness and mutual support. Extreme sensitivity, tact and discretion are the qualities which require to emerge in the group in these cases, and it can be surprising, and almost unendurably touching, to witness how healing this group-inspired empathy can be.

At the same time it is worth noting that these beneficial effects do not appear by accident. Once I realised what a Pandora's Box was being opened in these sessions, it took all the skills and experience of more than twenty years of teaching and counselling to facilitate positive outcomes and proper closure .

In some secondary schools, guidance departments use Circle Time methods to encourage personal sharing on sensitive subjects, but it is far less utilised in the upper

age groups, which is possibly why I found it so well-received. Clearly, the age-old tradition of sitting in a circle for entertainment and story-telling and personal sharing is a precious part of our culture still, one which creates an opportunity for bringing much more than mere harmony to a group. You can gather together a disparate group of fiercely individual adolescents who may be out looking for a fight, but sitting them down in a circle and creating a harmonious frequency by using circle time games has an extraordinary alchemy . It creates what Oleta Adams sang of in 'A Circle of One' - a safe place where real feelings are aired and shared.

There are also long term lessons to be learned. Recently, attending the SETT conference in Glasgow, I heard a lively and inventive presentation from a group calling themselves 'Space Unlimited'. This was a very right-brained experiment in which a BBC director, some teenagers and a larger group of 7-11 year olds co-created a learning experience which involved making a digital recording of a mission to discover their local environment in a variety of fun and innovative ways.

Impressed by their pride and confident delivery, I stayed behind to ask, 'How did you get the ideas on how to proceed as a group?' and the answer came, 'Well, first of all, we all sat in a circle and then began to bounce ideas off each other – the director, us, the primary kids...'

'And where did you get THAT idea?'

The answer sums up Jenny Mosley's work:

'We remembered sitting in our circle in Primary... it always worked well... You feel like equals, don't you? It seems sort of natural, dunnit?'

