

Learning Circles for Engineering Educators to Nourish and Heal

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Abstract—This Special Session paper introduces participants to constructivist listening strategies. As educators, we encounter institutional power and hierarchical systems as we work to affect educational change. Simultaneously, we navigate the effects of internalized conditioning and oppression from living within these systems particularly for those who are marginalized. These effects may be unseen and many of us feel there are not venues for discussing them and moving towards healing. We argue that different creative structures are needed to provide such venues and this session aims to begin to do so. Deepening authentic relationships both within a supportive community and across ideological divides are necessary to enact and sustain true change. We are proposing in this session an opportunity for educators to come together to build community and interrupt structures that result in isolation and inaction.

Keywords—learning circle, constructivist listening, collaborative dialogue, community building

I. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE FOR THE SESSION

We will introduce techniques from Paulo Freire [1], [2], Myles Horton [3], and Julian Weissglass [4] and will invite educators to join us in building community with each other through sharing stories and listening. We see this as a first step in beginning a journey of nourishing and healing, features that are not commonly associated with engineering or engineering education. The constructivist listening techniques we will use in the session emerge from indigenous cultures and have been used in many domains, showing up in community-engaged learning to create community and collaborative understanding around action. For example, the now-defunct Educators for Community Engagement (previously the Invisible College) organized their National Gatherings in the form of Learning Circles. However, Learning Circles are rarely seen outside of the community engagement context in higher education and, in particular, engineering education. We will introduce the techniques in the context of building a community of engineering educators, people who are looking for a different way of coming together around educational change. Each of these techniques is structured in a way to provide equality in voice to participants. Being heard within this structure is powerful and compelling.

A learning circle provides participants with an opportunity for deep dialogue and reflection. The group collectively

responds to a sequence of questions through several rounds, passes through the circle, working their way toward action. There is a facilitator who calls the group together yet at the same time is a participant in the circle, respecting others' experiences and knowledge [3, pp. 272–278]. Each participant is given equal time to respond to the question prompt and has the attention of all other participants. Learning circles are similar to First Nation talking circles [5] that ensure all leaders in a tribal council are heard. Baldwin talks about three practices for participants in talking circles: speaking with intention, listening with attention from the heart, and self-monitoring their contributions [6]. These are relevant to learning circles and again underscore the importance of the listener.

Constructivist listening is a technique to engage in challenging topics and to heal from past experiences. It is distinct from most forms of listening in that its purpose is to benefit the speaker. The listener listens intently to the speaker and provides a human presence for the speaker as they reflect, release emotion, and construct new meaning during the process. It enables the speaker to access calmer and clearer ways of thinking [4], [7]. In forming constructivist listening sessions, the following aspects are critical. Each person is given an equal amount of time to speak. The speaker is allowed to use their time to speak, pause, reflect, and continue with interruption. The listener does not interject or refer back to what their partner said when it is their time to speak. The listener maintains confidentiality of what the speaker said both during and after the dyad. And to repeat from earlier, the listener gives the speaker their undivided attention. A constructivist listening session can be initiated with a prompt or each can be free to speak about what is present for them. They are often configured as a dyad with two people who alternate between speaking and listening roles. Constructivist listening is a powerful and moving practice and is used by organizations such as the Luna Jiménez Institute for Social Transformation [8].

II. SESSION OVERVIEW

A. Goals

Our goals for this session are both cognitive and affective. We will introduce participants to two techniques and co-create a space for all to experience and reflect on them.

- Introduce engineering educators to constructivist listening strategies
- Create a safe and open space for inquiry
- Collectively experience one or more of these techniques
- Reflect on the session and discuss how one might adopt these strategies

B. *Intended Audience*

This session is accessible to any FIE attendee. It will be valuable for those who are interested in learning about techniques that can help promote and sustain community building at various levels including department, friend group, classroom etc. It may be particularly useful for those incorporating community engagement into their courses, for example, as a different approach to discussing challenging readings and events. Each student will have an equal opportunity to share their thoughts and/or feelings on the reading resulting in the class hearing from more voices than a discussion dominated by a few vocal ones.

C. *Agenda*

Our tentative agenda is given below. The type and number of learning circle *rounds* or dyads will be dependent on the number of participants.

Time	Topic
15 min	Check in, framing, setting ground rules
5 min	Introduce learning circle and dyad techniques
50 min	Depending on the number of participants, run one to two learning circles or dyads/triads. The facilitators will introduce a prompt at the start of each round or dyad.
15 min	Debrief, reflection, check out

We would like to conduct this special session as a learning circle. However, given the intense and personal nature of the learning circle experience, the limited time for this special session, and the fact that we will not know the number of attendees ahead of time, we feel it is necessary to have a contingency plan of dyads/triads. If the number of participants is too many to have a meaningful learning circle experience in the 50 min allocated, we will instead have participants share in groups of two or three. This will still be a constructivist listening experience where each speaker is given an equal amount of time to speak in response to the prompt. Possible prompts include “Tell us about an experience you had in trying to enact change.” Or “Tell us about an experience you had in confronting a challenge.” Each listener aims actively listen and to focus on the speaker. Speakers focus on their own stories rather than referring back to previous speakers. The facilitator keeps time and indicates when to move on the next speaker.

Again, given the nature of the experience, we feel it is imperative to set ground rules establishing this as a safe or brave space and to provide some time for debrief, reflection, and a transition back to the “regular” world of the conference.

III. ABOUT THE FACILLITATORS

The authors have facilitated many workshops, interactive sessions, and learning circles. They have experience creating learning environments that enable difficult dialogues about inequities in engineering education. The authors will help attendees from various backgrounds situate themselves and will “hold the space” for all.

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IV. IN CLOSING

We expect participants will be moved by their learning circle experience and will feel empowered from it. We will provide resources on learning circles and constructivist listening to participants who may want to incorporate these into their work and/or other aspects of their lives. We invite participants to form a community around using learning circles and/or constructivist listening that will continue past the session virtually and/or in person at future engineering education meetings.

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