

A GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS

ABOUT YARNING CIRCLES

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Cover artwork: Janine Dunleavy 2013

Introduction

Weaving our stories together enables us to speak respectfully from our differing world-views and contribute the knowledge that each of us brings to the circle. In a yarnning circle talking is focused on finding ways to grow sustaining places based in mutual understanding.

Dialogue

The need for dialogue in our public life is less well understood than the need for debate and activism. Debate and activism are well-used tools in the repertoire of social justice and equity. It was and is largely through these forms of public engagement that social change is achieved.

Dialogue has a vital, if quieter, role to play in a culturally diverse society. It can build bridges across divides in the body politic. It can promote healing in small communities that are struggling with a controversy. It can also reduce hatred in the arena of public opinion, and potentially dangerous misrepresentations in our discourse saturated media.¹ Click on the title to read [Fostering dialogue across divides: a nuts and bolts guide](#).

Yarning circles

Yarning circles are a timeless way of learning. Ever since people first walked the earth, we have been sitting down together and sharing stories. Many groups have developed different approaches to yarnning circles all of which are valuable because they are based in human processes of caring and communicating.

When we think of our stories we must recognise that stories are vitally significant in all our lives. These narratives reflect our experience, affirm our identity and allow us to share the significant meanings of our life and culture. Through sharing and interweaving our understandings we may see a way to grow healing spaces with individuals and find healing pathways for groups and communities.²

In a yarnning circle, all participants are provided with an opportunity to speak in a safe non- judgmental place and to share their strengths in an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. Yarning together is always focused on strengths not problem solving or criticism.

It is important to be present in the moment, to have respectful interactions, to be open and honest, to listen deeply, acknowledge other's strengths and offer your own strengths and knowledge in turn. In a yarn, all points of view are equally valid and all respectful verbal statements are equally valid. In a yarnning circle verbal statements can be a word, sentence or a longer explanation.

Strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach recognises the resilience of individuals. It focuses on abilities, knowledge and capacities rather than on what people do not know or cannot do. It recognises that the community is rich in resources; assumes that people are able to learn, grow and change; encourages positive

¹ Quotation (Herzig and Chasin, 2006, pp. 1 & 2)

² Quotation (Sheehan, 2012, pp. 109 - 111)

expectations of learners and is characterised by collaborative relationships. It focuses on those attributes and resources that may enable adaptive functioning and positive outcomes.³ Click on the title to download [Starting school: a strengths-based approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#).

An eminent 20th Century management theorist, Peter Drucker, observed that organisations were successful when there was an ‘alignment of strengths in a way that makes a system’s weaknesses irrelevant’.

If we ask what makes us effective, and if we build on our skills and our energies, we will do much better than asking ourselves how we can correct our weaknesses. There are five features of the strengths-based process,

1. The whole system participates – the sum is always greater than the parts.
2. The focus is inquiry and dialogue – not “problem-solving”.
3. The process is rich in interactions, narratives, and dialogues.
4. There is a focus on honouring differences and searching for common ground – not conflict resolution.
5. It is task focused on and about building a vision and plan that will make a real difference not simply getting together to discuss and reflect.
6. It requires collective commitment to action.

The approach has been used widely around the world, and is consistent with a human rights approach – in fact the process has been used in United Nations forums.⁴ Click on the title to read [‘Be inspired’: Indigenous education reform](#).

How yarning circles work

- ❖ Participants respect each other’s views.
- ❖ Participants sit in a circle
- ❖ The facilitator guides the circle
- ❖ No voice is of greater importance than another
- ❖ Talk proceeds around the circle in a clockwise direction
- ❖ Each participant speaks from their strengths
- ❖ Everyone listens to the speaker
- ❖ Participants talk in turn
- ❖ To question others, a participant’s turn must come around again
- ❖ Sometimes participants may wish to pass their turn

³ Quotation (Armstrong et al, 2012, p. 6)

⁴ Quotation (Calma, 2008, Slide 13)

Story and learning

Stories can nurture empathy and connectedness. Sharing stories can give us courage and empower us to honour our own and other's personal experiences. Our family and community stories shape our beliefs and identities.⁵

When we put ourselves into a story, it becomes experience and learning follows experience. We recognise the spirit of stories that teach us throughout the course of our lifetime. The learning journey that each of us travels to arrive at awareness of our strengths is largely the result of our learning spirit being invigorated, nourished, challenged and motivated by encounters between our own story and those of significant others.⁶

Our classroom

Within and without the concrete and steel of buildings is Country. So, we are teaching and learning on Country even when we are located in university classrooms. Whilst there is much diversity among Indigenous people throughout Australia, a unifying theme is the knowledge that we are all connected to each other and all other entities through the ground upon which our feet walk daily. Thus, we have rights and responsibilities with regard to nurturing the quality of these relationships. To this end, the quality of the contexts in which our teaching and learning is conducted needs our careful care and attention.

Inside every human being is their core of humanness.⁷ Country speaks to this part of people. Knowledge also flows through and from Country. So, if we care for and nurture the ground (contexts) upon which our teaching and learning occurs, the classroom which is Country will take up the task of teaching from there.

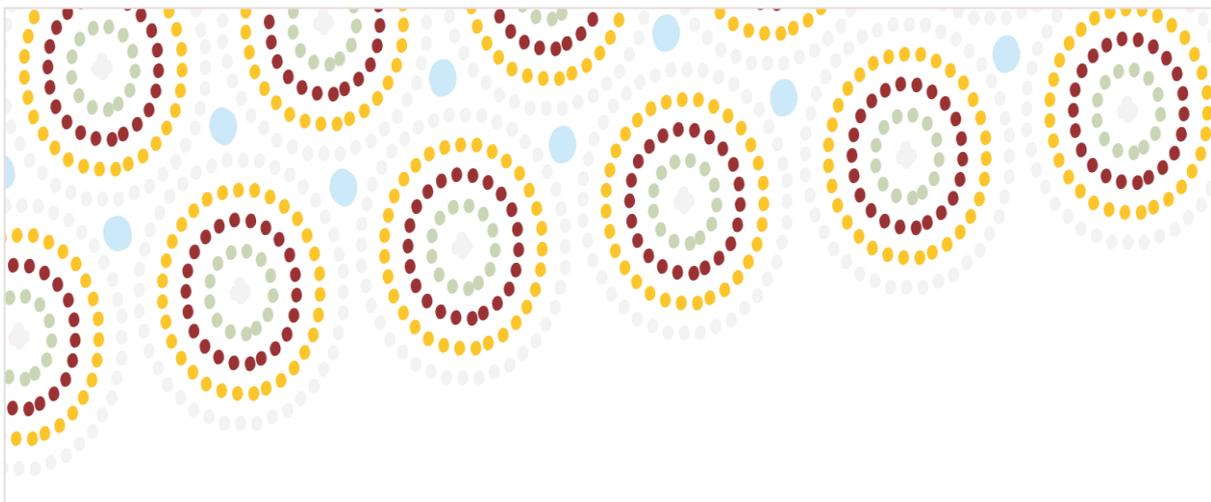


Figure 1: Learning communities (Williams 2013).

⁵ (Anuik & Gillies, 2012, p. 74)

⁶ (Kelly in Anuik & Gillies, 2012, p. 74)

⁷ (Graham, 2008)

References

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