

On Circle Processes in Institutes of Higher Learning: Perspectives from Students and Community Partners in Reciprocal Learning and Community Building

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1. ABSTRACT

This conference paper highlights the critical reflections of Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) students, relating to their lived experiences in circle processes - applying restorative approaches.

2. INTRODUCTION

Project ReKnew is a student-initiated community-engaged (CE) project established in 2021, with aims to raise awareness of the need for respectful relationships between genders in university settings, through restorative processes.

The differential dynamics of two batches of students prompted this critical reflection into what makes circle processes impactful for students, and the significant role of our community partner, Lutheran Community Care Services (LCCS) in empowering students to participate in and facilitate community-building circles.

From insights built from students' critical reflections, the Office of Service-Learning (OSL) in SUSS aims to build and sustain a student-driven community to enhance circle processes; as well as deepening knowledge and learning focused on building respectful relationships between gender, and sexual harm/violence etc. in university settings.

3. METHOD

The OSL applied the experiential learning framework, and utilised participatory approaches to design two reflection activities. The reflection questions are detailed in Figure 1 below.

A total of 6 students participated in the experiential reflection activity. For context setting, OSL staff frontloaded that students could make use of this session to consolidate and critically reflect on the circle processes in the community circles that they had participated in thus far. In relation to Kolb's experiential learning cycle (refer to Figure 1), students would focus on the thinking and acting aspects of their learning.

For reflection activity one, the students were asked to visualize their participation experiences in community circles that were hosted by LCCS, as well as those hosted by SUSS students. They were encouraged to verbalize what stood out the most for them.

Building on what students had heard from one another (of what stood out for them in these experiences) - OSL staff laid out three concentric circles on the floor, and students were asked to consider if the circle processes that they experienced was easy for them (inner circle), moderately challenging (middle circle) or very challenging (outer circle). They could then step into the space that best represented their perceptions of circle processes and share their thoughts with their peers. They were encouraged to engage with other peers standing in the same

concentric circle as them and gather more perspectives of what kept them in common; or whether they had deeper thoughts to share.

For reflection activity two, students were asked to articulate one aspect of change that they had experienced, because of circle processes. Similarly, they were encouraged to assess if this was a small, moderate, or major change, and step into the respective concentric circle space. They were given some time to engage in conversations with other peers who were in the same concentric circle space as them, to build on their thoughts and cross-sharing.

After the reflective experiential activity, students and OSL staff transcribed the audio session recording, and made use of the transcript to unpack students’ reflections and perspectives. This was an opt-in engagement for the students, and 5 of them clustered emerging themes from the reflection data, and defined the final insights, including key learning takeaways.

Experiential Learning cycle	Reflection questions for students
Experiencing	To visualize the circles experiences that were most significant or memorable for you
Reflecting <i>What?</i> <i>Share what happened.</i>	1. How has your experience been like? 2. What stood out for you? 3. Has the circles processes been easy or challenging for you?
Thinking <i>So What?</i> <i>Form hypothesis based on what has been observed and discussed.</i>	4. What is one change that you have experienced from your engagement in this circle so far? <i>Small, moderate, or major?</i> 5. What is one key sharing you have heard that stood out for you?
Acting <i>Now what?</i> <i>Apply learning.</i>	What is one change you would like to see for your upcoming planned community circles for SUSS students? <i>To elicit from students: What are our desired actionable steps moving forward, to enhance circle processes and experience for SUSS students?</i>

Figure 1: Design of experiential reflection activity based on Kolb’s EL cycle (Iterative cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting)

4. RESULTS

Community-building circles provided students with a safe and non-judgemental space to express their feelings and needs, promoting personal awareness and growth. By cultivating a sense of trust and belonging, these circles allow students to build an inclusive and supportive community that values everyone's voices, promoting empathy and connections.

Evaluation of reflection data surfaced that perceptions of safety in the circles could differ between individuals, suggesting that the extent of participation could be self-limiting, and thus could negatively impact one's circle experience.

5. DISCUSSION

In relation to the change experienced by students from circle processes, it was mainly moderate. One key insight that emerged was how the learning mindset of students was key to community building outcomes in circle processes.

"I go into each session with a learning mindset, to learn more about each other. And although it's the same group of people, we still learn new things." – Student

With the trust built from multiple sessions of circle processes, students felt validated with one another's active listening and sharing – they gained new perspectives which enhanced their self-awareness,

"I realise that if I don't communicate my feelings properly, I'll only stand to hurt myself more." – Student

Students' reflections showed that they experienced some extent of behavioural change, specifically in their own self-expression, even within uneasy contexts - overall they had an improved understanding of others and their ability to act on solutions.

“I was able to express my thoughts more specifically in situations where I’m uncomfortable. Previously I didn’t speak up because I was afraid of making people uncomfortable and upset.” – Student

Most students felt that circle processes were moderately challenging for them. For this group of students, the key insight that emerged was how their perception of safety in circles could be self-limiting and externalized – that the psychological safety is not drawn around the student individual, but more towards how other people might react - which would negatively influence the extent of their participation and outcomes.

“Actually one can only be...feel as safe as one wants to be in a circle.” – Student

“I may not have given myself the permission to feel safe, even though objectively I did know all of us will be judgement-free and it is a zone, a space where we have all agreed to keep things safe” – Student

“I don’t want to bring pity to myself, I don’t want people to pity me in any way.” – Student

This insight correlated to students who found circle processes easy for them, primarily because their perceptions of safety in circle was not anchored on others,

“I didn’t think so much about how others would react to what I say.” – Student

It was evident that they had the confidence to share their thoughts with others,

“I trust that what happens in the circles, stays in the circles and that everyone is non-judgemental. Hence, it gave me more confidence to share my thoughts with others.” – Student

This sense of confidence stemmed from the trust they had placed in circle processes, including those who participated in the circles, and their sense of belonging to the group slowly built up over time.

“It has been easier than I thought. At the start it was quite hard because I didn’t really feel comfortable sharing when I had just known the group” – Student

LCCS played a critical role in building students’ confidence and establishing students’ trust in circle processes, through training the students in circle facilitation and the time invested to build this safe space within the circle community.

“If you are very task driven, and every time you wanted to go into the topics immediately, I think it would have been very different as compared to the time that we choose to set aside to actually build the sense of safety first.” – LCCS staff mentor

6. CONCLUSION

LCCS played a critical role in empowering students’ social development in community building, through the way the students built greater confidence in learning how to hold space for self and others in daily contexts. Currently, ‘Circles Facilitation’ and ‘Restorative Practices’ workshops are provided by LCCS to students of Project ReKnew, allowing them to understand the restorative justice approach, and become effective circle facilitators who can lead and develop conversations amongst their peers.

In this training process, students learnt about respecting individual student’s voice – students had permission to decide what and when they want to share within the community building circles (willing participation). When provided the safe space and knowing that the circle is for safe dialogue without judgement, students are more willing to express themselves, be present, and cultivate empathy for one another's circumstances.

They can also decide if they want to take on a more facilitative role and contribute innate gifts. By setting guidelines for engagement and letting the students know how they are here to create a safe space, LCCS staff mentors were surprised the activities that students came up with were all very thoughtful, interesting, and reflective – that they all brought something unique to the circle in their sharing.

Through working with the students of Project ReKnew, LCCS has also come to appreciate what matters in the engagement of students from the Institutes of Higher Learning (IHL) community. Fundamentally, the circle is a dynamic process. Even as experienced practitioners prepare for circles, the outcomes of the circle may not be guaranteed. The ambiguity can create anxiety for new practitioners, and perhaps even more so for students who may not have experienced circles as part of their culture.

LCCS equipped the students with a fundamental set of skills in running circles and provided mentorship so that they may be able to facilitate circle processes effectively. Principles of the circle process were often discussed and LCCS created a platform for the mentees to share honestly and genuinely (termed voice space). Students were also empowered to decide on the topics that they found relevant for their circle participants. These conditions provided during discussion were replicated in the circles that the students facilitated - sharing without judgement, a culture of empathy, being present and demonstrating support.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In our partnership with LCCS, it was evident that beyond the desire to deepen knowledge and learning focused on building respectful relationships between gender in campus etc., we need to enhance community-building circle processes and students' capabilities, so as to sustain the circle learning space and community with students as full actors, with minimal staff intervention.

Given how students' perception of safety in circle processes is key to the extent of their participation and contribution to community-building circles, we can study deeper into how students may enhance psychological safety in circle processes. This extends to how students are able to apply the knowledge and skills gained from participating in and facilitating community-building circles in their personal relationships.

Overall, students feel that there is potential to expand on community-building circles topics, e.g., on the concerns of sexual harm, seeking commonality amongst students will help us

identify systemic issues, and establish the sense of belonging to a supportive community. Students could potentially share mutual information to help them tackle issues they are currently facing; especially if the challenges are school-based, and students are not aware of where and how to seek assistance.

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KEYWORDS

Experiential Learning, Restorative Approaches, Circle Processes, Community Engagement, Community Partnership

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