



Circle-Based Pedagogy in a Multiethnic Environment

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Abstract: *As an experienced middle school teacher in the USA, Joe Provisor has worked for more than 30 years with students with a migrant background. In this article he discusses three resources which helped him and other teachers to deal with the complex educational issues of migrant students: Paulo Freire’s investigative circles, James Asher’s Total Physical Response, and ‘circles’ – all methods that value students’ inherent wisdom.*

Keywords: *circle, Paulo Freire, Total Physical Response, diversity*

When I began teaching in the early 1980s in Los Angeles, my students were all children of recent immigrants and refugees. Many were deeply traumatized by experiences of fear and brutality I could not imagine. I credit these students with helping me to wake up from my privileged white male bubble. When I came to know their stories, my heart broke open.

Their stories, however, were not told in English until late in the school year. I was fortunate, however, to meet three career-shaping influences at that time: Paulo Freire, James J. Asher’s Total Physical Response (Asher & Adamski, 1982), and circles. From Freire, I learned to listen to my students and to serve their needs. I learned that my students would teach me. I also learned about how Freire and his team developed the most successful second language learning modality to teach indigenous adults in Brazil to read

and write Portuguese. He used a process called “investigative circles” (Freire, 2003). Freire did not want to bring a colonial mindset to his teaching. He did not want to excise or devalue the native languages and cultures, as was done so often with indigenous people in the USA and Canada. He wanted students to understand that they were indeed teachers, carriers of wisdom about their ways of life, not empty vessels to be filled in what he called “banking education”. The process involved listening to the people, noticing their ways, and honouring their genius, their *stories*.

Freire’s team would observe the people go about their daily business – caring for the children, working the fields, hunting, gathering, storing, and cooking food. They would then draw pictures or take photographs of these scenes. Sitting in a circle, each adult would tell stories



of their personal experiences in the village, stories about the field and the river, of survival and joy, of loss and grief. The language learning, then, centred around these experiences, acting out their stories in the new language through what Asher later called Total Physical Response. Further, Freire's team motivated these adults who were taking on this arduous task of second language learning after having worked all day. He indicated to them that the value of reading was to enhance what they already knew, to bring new perspectives, other ways to interpret and practise the tasks of life. This learning was always done in a circle, both to demonstrate respectful egalitarianism and to bear witness to one another.

Asher's pedagogy involved *doing* what you *say*. He used novel commands to bring levity to the process. For example, he would call out, "Touch your nose." "Walk to the window." "Touch the window." "Touch the window *with your nose!*" It turns out that one can even acquire facility with complex grammatical structures involving many tenses using this method. And the language sticks because it is infused into muscle memory (Asher & Adamski, 1982).

When we rearrange the classroom with a free-standing circle of chairs, opening a play-action space, students see each other, not just the backs of heads and the teacher in front. In the multiethnic classroom where students can physically demonstrate (dance or draw) the ways of their people and their land, something happens far beyond the usual listen-and-repeat of

the linear classroom. Students can "mirror" one another as they use language to describe activities. Studying expressions and energy to match what others are doing builds capacity for *empathy* and the ability to read *social cues*. Students learn, in effect, to listen to the bodies, the non-verbal expressions of their peers, by imitating their movements as they are listening to and repeating the words. Asher also emphasizes the use of "realia". The teacher and the students bring in real objects – fruits, toys, flowers, cereal boxes – and they interact with these items, describing what they are doing as they are doing it. In the circle, even if only one student is acting out a story, the students watching are receptive to language and the expressions of the body. At the same time, through this playful *theatre*, we are lowering what Stephen Krashen (2003) calls the "affective filter", because this is all really play. The Sufis say, "No learning without laughter. No learning without leisure."

Language learning is not all about talking. Making art in a circle is especially valuable with students bringing varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds to the classroom. I have had students simply put colour on paper plates, and then we ceremonially pass the plates around the circle, in effect silently sharing the stories these "mandalas" reveal. The purpose of language is to communicate, which is a matter of expression and receptivity. One might say it is learning to speak and listen "from the heart". In another activity, we provide a heart-shaped template, and we ask students to draw what is *in*



their hearts – people, places, events, activities, and objects. Simply passing these images around the circle communicates a great deal. And when we can start to say things like, “I carry my grandmother in my heart,” or “I carry my former home in my heart,” cultural barriers, the fear of making mistakes, and the illusion of separateness fall away.

To learn a new language is not to lose one’s identity. We know how important it is to encourage students to stay fluent in their native language as they study a new language in a multiethnic environment. Second language acquisition is greatly fa-

cilitated when a student is already fluent in another language. But there is something more going on when we embrace a student’s native language. Language, customs, lore, mythology, arts, and play all contribute to a person’s identity. As Freire did with indigenous people in Brazil, we must first find ways to acknowledge the value of what our students already know. Then, when we convene circles in the classroom and ask students to tell their stories, they will come to value the truth of their experiences and our worldviews will expand exponentially in our multiethnic world.

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PROVISOR, J. Využití kruhových praxí v multietnickém prostředí škol

Joe Provisor jako zkušený středoškolský učitel v USA pracoval více než 30 let se studenty s odlišným mateřským jazykem. Následující text pojednává o třech zdrojích inspirace, které jemu a dalším učitelům pomohly se vypořádat s náročnou výzvou, kterou vzdělávání žáků-cizinců bezesporu je. Jedná se o investigativní kruhy Paula Freireho, celkovou fyzickou odpověď Jamese Ashera a „kruhy“ – všechny tyto metody oceňují původní moudrost kultur studentů.

Klíčová slova: kruhy, Paulo Freire, celková fyzická odezva, různost