

Talking Circles in the ELL Classroom

By Inés Poblet

Biographical Information:

Inés Poblet

Originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina

Over 10 years experience in the ELL field

Tenured Professor – ESL-Academic

Whatcom Community College

During my third year teaching ESL-Academic at Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, Washington, I began a year-long commitment to the Social Justice Leadership Institute, a cohort of thirty community college faculty and staff of color in Washington. This professional development opportunity offered by Bellevue Community College starts with a weekend retreat and is followed by a series of meetings throughout the year to discuss social justice issues, listen to guest speakers, and reflect on our roles as leaders in our perspective institutions. As a Latina, originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, being a part of this community of inspiring individuals has been absolutely transformative. Not only have I come to more strongly identify myself as a leader but I have also come back to my campus with new tools for fostering equity and access in my classroom.

During that first retreat, however, I recall coming into the experience with some self-doubt. I remember thinking: *How am I going to fit in here? What kind of professional development experience will this be? Do I have enough experience with social justice to be here?* If we are very honest with ourselves, it's common to experience a tiny

bit of anxiety as we enter a new social dynamic. We want to know how to work within the context we find ourselves in. It got me thinking, if I, an experienced professional, felt this sense of hesitation, how much more so is this true for my students? How much more amplified is their feeling of hesitation in entering the ELL classroom for the first time?

Thankfully, I was soon to learn that this would not be your typical professional development experience. Why? My first meeting with the SJLI started with a Talking Circle.

I had had some brief experiences in the past with Talking Circles through diversity meetings and social justice-themed workshops, but I'd never experienced how powerful it could be quite like my first SJLI practice. Namely, "A Talking Circle, also known as a Peacemaking Circle, uses a structural framework to build relationships and to address conflict within a community. But Talking Circles serve other purposes as well:

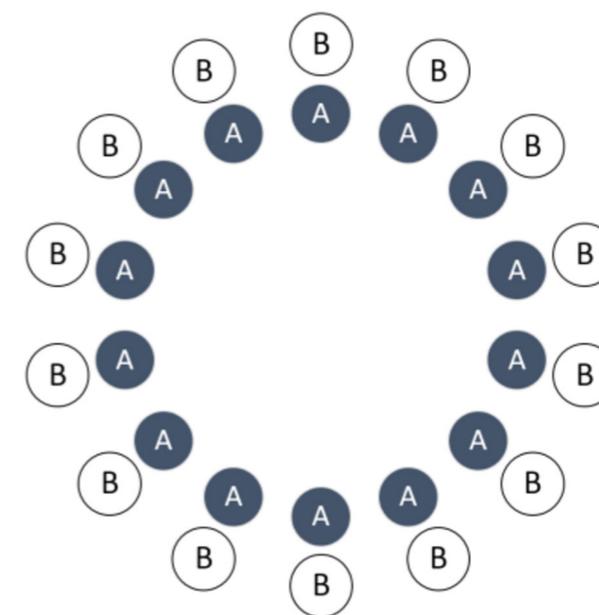
they create safe spaces, build connections and offer teachers a unique means of formative assessment,"
(Teaching Tolerance).

What does this have to do with ELL? Plenty! As I came back from my first retreat experience with the SJLI, refreshed and ready to start the academic year, I started to think about how I might pass this feeling on to my students:

this sense of being understood by my colleagues, this sense of safety and support from the get-go. Of course, this is always a priority and goal for educators, but how can we best achieve this dynamic in our classrooms? The answer, or at least the start of one for me, was in the very thing that set the tone for my year-long experience.

Though I had not tried this in an ELL classroom before, I made a plan to use this tool as a "start-of-the-quarter" activity with a few tweaks to help students get to know each other and maybe even themselves a bit more. It was essentially an icebreaker with a whole lot of punch. I created a series of questions for students to take turns sharing about and tried it in my advanced writing and reading class the first week of classes. The questions focused on identity, values, and goals. I used an online timer and projected it on the classroom projector screen so that students knew how much time they had left to talk. I asked students to form an inner circle of chairs facing an outer circle of chairs. Partners took turns sharing and listening to each other. After they'd each talked, the inner circle would rotate to their right and work with a new partner. This was my twist on the traditional talking circle. Talk about communication building skills. It was a hit!

Visual Aid: Inner Circles / Outer Circles



Students shared about their culture, fears, goals, and questions with each other and the impact was incredible. The classroom was filled with a joyful and productive noise. This was the noise of work being done that would benefit the whole and carry us through the quarter through thoughtful peer-editing, engaged group work, and motivated discussions about readings on social justice issues (a new theme I had taken on for the course). Never have I seen a class meld with and know each other so quickly and so meaningfully in such a short amount of time. Usually, this type of classroom atmosphere takes weeks to develop - not so with this group.

In fact, I had a student write about her experience and about how she felt after that day. In her In-Class Essay, she described initially feeling rather hesitant and unsure about the course because she was repeating it. She shared that she felt self-aware and was inwardly comparing herself with her classmates. After the talking circle, however, she wrote,

“I feel like a part of the class more now because I got the chance to talk[ed] and get to know my classmates and I don’t feel so nervous. I learned that I have a community to learn from in this class.”

The truth is Talking Circles or Peacemaking Circles are nothing new to Native-American tribal communities of Washington; great respect should be paid to the indigenous communities that carry on this practice. However, what might be revolutionary is applying this sage practice to the academic experience of international and immigration populations. As an immigrant myself, I can attest to how powerful the need for a sense of belonging is for a newcomer to a classroom, to a new city, to a new country. TESOL professionals are uniquely situated to create a space for this sense of belonging in the classroom. We can facilitate safe and equitable classrooms for our students to thrive in, to learn in, and this can change everything.

The possibilities and effects of Talking Circles in the ELL classroom are endless. Incorporating a tool that bonds people for a shared purpose is something that every devoted teacher seeks out. I wonder how it could complement your classroom?

References

Teaching Tolerance: Diversity, Equity and Justice. (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2017, from <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/talking-circles-restorative-justice-and-beyond>



Ines Poblet teaches in the ESL-Academic program at Whatcom Community College. Her passion for language teaching comes from her own experience as an immigrant from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her research interests include sociolinguistics as well as growth-mindset theory and social justice in the E.L.L. field.