

The Learning Circle Project: *Activities for Circles*

Inclusion Activity by Janice Brant

Acknowledgement

This is an adaptation of an exercise that Janice Brant learned from Rod Jefferies. It incorporates ideas about the importance of sitting in a circle that were developed at the Widening the Circle Symposium.

The Idea

In learning circles, the configuration of people around a table or in a circle of chairs is important. This configuration embodies a fundamental aspect of a learning circle that everyone's knowledge is important and that learning involves the negotiation of knowledge among participants, not the imparting of knowledge by a teacher.

It may be useful for participants in a learning circle to reflect on this aspect of their group. When they join the learning circle, the seating will be arranged for them in a circle. They may not, at first, realize the importance of this seating arrangement. This exercise is designed to stimulate reflection, discussion and a conscious appreciation of this fundamental aspect of their group.

The Method

After several meetings, when the participants in a learning circle have become comfortable with each other, the facilitator rearranges the seating into rows facing the facilitator. The facilitator tells the participants that they will be trying a new seating arrangement, and that they will discuss this new seating arrangement in the last half-hour of the session.

In the last half-hour of the session, the facilitator asks the participants how the new seating arrangement changed things. Was it easier or harder to talk? Was it easier or harder to listen? Was it easier or harder to come to a decision? The facilitator invites the participants to talk about the feelings that they experienced in this new arrangement.

Then the facilitator rearranges the seating into a circle. On large sheets of paper, s/he draws the two seating arrangements, people on chairs without faces, and, in the case of the new seating arrangement, a faceless drawing of himself/herself sitting in front of the rows. The number of participants in the drawings should be the same as the number of participants in the groups. S/he asks the participants how the lines of discussion went in the two seating arrangements. In the circle arrangement, the lines will criss-cross within the circle. In the row-by-row arrangement, the lines will fan out easily from the facilitator to the group and back, but zigzag awkwardly among participants. Then the facilitator asks each participant to draw an expression on his/her face in each of the drawings. After they have done this, the facilitator draws an expression on his/her face. The exercise, and the session, concludes with a discussion of what was learned about arranging seating in a circle.