

# Reflective Practice Teaching Circles

(Laurel Black and John Woolcock, 8/26/05)

## **Definition: What is a Teaching Circle?**

Pat Hutchings, in her book *Making Teaching Community Property*, defines a teaching circle as “a small group of faculty who make a commitment to work together over a period of at least a semester to address questions and concerns about the particulars of their teaching and their students’ learning.”

In practice, “work together” can mean a variety of things, and groups have organized themselves in different ways to accomplish their goals. Some meet every two weeks, some less frequently; some combine socializing with working, some even reconstitute themselves year after year with new goals and plans. It’s easier, in some ways, to work alone. So why go to all this effort to work with others?

## **Rationale: Why Should I Join a Teaching Circle?**

We are often isolated in our classrooms, and visits from our peers are rare and usually connected to assessment and evaluation. Our frustrations and successes may be shared informally and briefly, even with colleagues in our department. There is little opportunity for long-term discussion, reflection, or the accomplishment of a shared goal or goals. Because of the demands of our work, we may often interact with those outside our department only on university committees.

Friendships, a growing sense of community, a heightened sense of possibilities, and a renewed energy for teaching are some of the intangible outcomes of participation in a teaching circle, while better syllabi, clearer assignments, new ways of assessing learning and teaching, grants for special projects, and greater depth of knowledge about a particular aspect of technology are all possible tangible outcomes, depending upon the group’s goals. The products—both knowledge and more tangible products—of teaching circles can lead to scholarly publications and presentations at conferences.

## **Shaping the Teaching Circle: What Kinds of Teaching Circles are There?**

A cross-disciplinary teaching circle (CTC) draws on the varied knowledge, methodology, and pedagogy of colleagues across campus to relieve isolation and accomplish goals personally important to members. A departmental teaching circle (DTC) is usually formed around areas of pedagogical interest within a discipline. A DTC might be a group of instructors teaching different sections of the same course. This offers a natural opportunity to conduct classroom research that can improve learning in the course as well as lead to scholarly publications and presentations. Either type of teaching circle might have a peer-mentor. This peer-mentor acts as the group expert and provides the voice of experience or guides the group as it works on the goals(s) they have selected.

## How it Works: Advice for a Successful Group

***Select a group that is of professional interest to you.*** Select a group that plans to study, experiment with or implement some issue or technique to which you can **personally and professionally commit**. If no group currently exists, float your topic and see if there are others who would like to join you in exploration and reflection!

***CTC Example:*** you are having difficulty getting good discussions going in your classes. You might find three other people from a variety of disciplines who teach a range of class sizes that have a similar interest in improving the content, duration, and outcomes of class discussion.

***DTC Example:*** You are distressed that over the past two years in your sections of the introductory course for majors, only about half of the students are passing the course. In talking to other instructors of this multi-section class, you find that two of them are experiencing the same thing while the third instructor has only given handful of Fs in the past two years. So, what should you do about this?

***Set a goal for the group. Then decide how you will meet it.*** Accountability to peers is an important part of a teaching circle, as is support. If you agree to take on a task that is necessary for the group to succeed—perhaps finding literature to read or gathering materials—and aren't sure you can do it alone, ask for help. But don't forget—both social and professional support are important aspects of successful teaching circles.

***CTC Example:*** After initial discussion, group members decide that they will compile an annotated bibliography of research on classroom discussion, they will split up the reading and report back to each other, and they will experiment with restructuring class discussion based on their reading and discussion. They will solicit feedback from their students as well.

***DTC Example:*** After discussing some possible reasons why students are not passing the course, the group of instructors decides to administer a type of classroom assessment instrument known as a background knowledge probe to students in all the sections to see if they are unprepared or under-prepared for the course. Then students will take a standardized exam in the course as a final exam. Instructors will use this information as part of a larger body of data they will gather.

***Make sure that everyone's goals are included in the circle's work.*** No one should feel like s/he is “on the fringes” of the circle. Given the time we have available to us, you are making a significant commitment. You should feel comfortable that it is worth it to you.

***CTC Example:*** One person has little difficulty with her small, upper level classes but really needs help with her larger, liberal studies course. Another person says students insist they like the discussion in class, but he's not convinced it actually helps them learn. Your own classes often have discussions, but most students listen or offer brief comments when forced to involve themselves while a handful carry the burden. Each person will be able to apply what s/he learns to his/her own classroom under the structure set up by the group.

***DTC Example:*** While waiting for the end of the semester and standardized exam results, the entire group agrees to visit each other's classes when the same topic is being

taught, and each will do a classroom observation and discuss what was observed regarding the content being presented.

***Make sure your group is a workable size.*** It's difficult to function with more than five members or less than three. Find a time when you can meet: consider early morning breakfast meetings, evenings, or longer meetings that are less frequent.

***Select a facilitator and assign other roles or tasks to all group members.***

The selection of a facilitator is one of the most important decisions in setting up a successful teaching circle. The individual who accepts this role should take care of meeting logistics including setting the next meeting day, time, and place; sending out reminders at least one day ahead and remind the members of the focus of the meeting; and sending reports at mid-year and at the end of the year to the appropriate people. Another important role for a member is to act as a moderator or discussion leader. This is someone who will tactfully keep the meeting on task but who will allow each person in the group to participate in the discussion. Once these two are identified, divide up other tasks that may be needed to keep the group functioning, such as someone to find literature or other resources the group needs and someone to take notes of the teaching circle meeting to help when the group's final report is submitted.

***Set goals for each meeting.***

You may ask that everyone come with sample syllabi and reflections on them or having read a particular text and applied it in some way. Keep these goals "do-able" given the frequency of meetings and time allotted for each meeting.

***CTC and DTC Example:*** Group members promise to come to the next meeting with sample starter and follow-up questions and the rationale for them, based on the course content, learning goals, and the research. Everyone follows through, and everyone gets feedback and commentary.

***Take the time to reflect on your group's progress at several points along the way and celebrate your group's success.***

Have your goals changed somewhat as you've worked together? Was your original goal unrealistic? Are you working at a speed that doesn't allow you depth or time for reflection? What are you learning and how are you using that new knowledge? What benefits are you gaining? What has been problematic? This kind of discussion often leads to new directions or points up underlying divisions that need to be addressed. If a group member loses interest, can the group shift to accommodate new interests? If not, contact the RP Coordinator to see what other groups may be of more interest to the member.

***CTC and DTC Example:*** Attempts to make discussion more productive don't seem to work. The group talks it over, and decides that since the research and discussion/planning portion of their goal took much of the first semester, there was little time to make changes late in the semester with their particular courses. So they begin to work on their next semester's syllabi, including more information on discussion and building in more time for it. They set new goals for the second semester. One person in the group will be on sabbatical, but another person wants to join. After discussion, they feel the new person can be brought up to speed by using the bibliography and selected readings, and the group reorients itself.

***Keep Notes of Attendance and Progress on Tasks.***

At the end of each semester or the end of the academic year, you will be asked to send a report of the group's activities to the Teaching Circles Coordinator. These reports are posted on the Center web site and will help us as we document the accomplishments and growth for the Reflective Practice Group(s). Creating these reports and keeping notes may also be very helpful in your own work: they can become part of a professional portfolio or may assist you in publication: many of our RP members have wound up publishing, presenting, or receiving grants related to their work in teaching circles.

***CTC Example:*** After a year of work, the group has an annotated bibliography, has created a variety of assessment techniques for class discussion, and has realized that diversity of all kinds plays an important role. A copy of the annotated bibliography is sent to the Center library of teaching resources and the final report is put on the web site. The group is asked to do a large group presentation on assessing discussion, and also wind up presenting their work at a national conference. They reconstitute themselves with two goals: publication of material related to their previous year of work and new research on diversity and discussion.

***DTC Example:*** Its year of work has produced a variety of assessment techniques, and the group members have a much stronger grasp of what aspects of the course content need to be strengthened and what can be given less attention. The group presents its work and findings to the larger Reflective Practice community and also to a national audience in its discipline. They also go to a local restaurant and celebrate their accomplishments. They decide they will continue to work the next year to implement changes across sections, work toward greater standardization balanced by individual professional practice, and reassess the course.

***Keep in mind that these are neither committees nor simply social groups.***

Committees working groups that focus on efficiency and getting business done. Teaching circles are more like development teams. They spend a great deal of their time shaping their purpose, defining their goals, and exploring how an individual might best contribute to the group *gestalt*. They are safe places for learning, exploration, change, and accomplishment at various levels. Effective teaching circle meetings are marked by creative discourses on problems of and solutions for difficulties in teaching. So don't try to solve all your problems in one semester but try to accomplish at least one thing no matter how modest.

**Use Teaching Circles to Help you Rediscover the Joy of Teaching and Learning!**

Teaching circles are safe places for learning, exploration, change, and accomplishment at various levels. The primary goal of improving each other's teaching is never obscured, and members work to create an environment that is supportive, caring, and collegial in the finest sense of the word, one that celebrates the commitment to teaching and learning made by members.