



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING CIRCLE

"Tell me and I forget; teach me and I may remember; involve me and I learn."

— Benjamin Franklin

OVERVIEW

Students sit in a circle, center themselves with a Mindfulness Moment, and use a talking piece to respectfully take turns sharing their level of understanding of an academic topic. They close the Circle process by reflecting on the effectiveness of the process itself.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At a midpoint in a unit to learn how students are feeling about their level of understanding and mastery of content
- To brainstorm as a class how best to support collaborative learning for all students
- Anytime to build trust among students and encourage risk-taking and vulnerability in learning

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- Chairs arranged in a circle (or all participants sitting on the floor in a circle) preferably with no furniture in the middle
- Talking piece
- Bell or chime (optional)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice self-assessment skills about their learning
- Increase collaboration in learning with other students

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Choose a subject, topic, assignment, unit, or concept for students to reflect upon during the Circle process.
- Based on your own experience of the content selected, take a moment to answer the questions that students will be asked during the Circle process:
 - What part of the academic content do you understand best? Is any part unclear or confusing to you?
 - What do you think would help you understand the content better?

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Creating a safe classroom is a foundation for academic success. Students need to feel safe with their teacher and their peers in order to ask questions, admit confusions, and try new skills.

This “Check for Understanding” Circle features student self-assessment of what they believe they understand about a particular subject, topic, assignment, unit, or concept. The purpose of this Circle is to encourage a classroom climate where students are forthcoming about areas of confusion or misunderstanding and learn to develop a positive habit of asking for help.

Note: *Application of the Circle process to resolve conflict or engage in difficult conversations requires [training for facilitators](#).*

THE PRACTICE: “CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING” CIRCLE

Through the structure of the circle practice, teachers create a space to encourage all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another—on an equal basis—and to seek a deeper understanding of themselves and others.

The Circle presented here is simple and can be practiced with the easy-to-follow directions provided.

- Seat all participants in a circle (preferably without any tables).
- Choose one person (teacher, facilitator, or student) to act as Keeper of the Circle.
 - The Keeper welcomes everyone to the Circle, explains its purpose, plans and performs the opening and closing, poses questions, responds to each round as a participant, and passes the talking stick either to the left or the right.
- Purpose:
 - The Keeper of the Circle explains the purpose of the circle to participants:
 - *The purpose of this Circle is for each person to identify any areas of confusion or misunderstanding for themselves and problem-solve together ways to help each other learn.*
- Welcome:
 - The Keeper of the Circle welcomes everyone to the space of the Circle.
- Mindfulness Moment:
 - The Keeper of the Circle leads everyone in a mindfulness moment:
 - *Close or lower your eyes, take a deep breath, and listen to the sound. Open or raise your eyes when the sound ceases.*
- Opening:
 - The Keeper of the Circle begins with an opening (and ends with a closing later) to mark the Circle as a distinctive space for dialogue. The following quote can be used to open the Circle or the Keeper can choose one of their own:
 - *"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn." - Benjamin Franklin*
- Round:
 - Use a talking piece passed sequentially around the Circle, giving each person the choice to speak or pass when the talking piece comes to them. Honoring the talking piece means actively listening to each person and respecting their right to pass.
 - The right to pass reduces the fear and stress that may block higher brain functioning, making it more possible to participate constructively. The choice to say “no” encourages students to engage—provided the questions are real and meaningful and the opportunity to participate is always present.
 - Remind students that they are invited to speak when the talking piece comes to them, to listen when they do not hold the talking piece, and are free to pass.
 - The Keeper of the Circle tells participants:
 - *First we are going to do a quick check-in round to assess how well you feel you understand the material we are studying. If you put up a full hand—all your fingers—you feel completely clear on everything we have studied so far. Just your fist—no fingers—means the opposite: you are feeling pretty lost and confused. One finger means you have lots and lots of questions; two fingers means fewer questions and so forth.*
 - *On this first round, just do a show of fingers.*

- **Round:**
 - The Keeper of the Circle always answers authentically the question posed in order to provide a model for the participants and to honor the value of equality for all participants within the Circle. The Keeper tells participants:
 - *Now we are going to go deeper. If you put up a full hand, can you tell us what you think you understand best? If you kept down some or all of your fingers, can you share what you feel most unclear about or confused by?*
- **Round:**
 - The Keeper of the Circle asks participants:
 - *What do you think would help you personally to get a full hand of understanding? What do you think we can do as a class so all students have a better understanding of this material/unit/concept?*
- **Check-Out Round:**
 - The Keeper of the Circle asks participants:
 - *How was the Circle today?*
- **Closing:**
 - The Keeper of the Circle closes the Circle with the following quote (or may choose one of their own):
 - *"None of us is as smart as all of us." - Ken Blanchard*

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Reflect on how this Circle might provide feedback for you on the presentation/teaching of this unit or concept.
- What have you learned from your students' final brainstorm? What changes might you make in the future?
- If students are struggling to articulate areas of confusion or competency in a lesson or unit, break down an assignment or concept into specific skills or topics for self-assessment. (For example, ask students if they can explain the causes of the U.S. Civil War, or describe the difference between evaporation and condensation, or ask if they can find solutions to a specific set of quadratic equations.)

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Restorative practices, such as the Circle Process, are proactive processes used by educators to foster strong relationships and community among school staff and students in order to prevent conflict.

While research on the effectiveness of restorative practices is limited, one [study](#) of Pittsburgh public schools looked at the impact of these practices in 22 schools versus 22 control schools. Outcomes in the implementation schools included improved school climate (according to teachers), and reduced suspensions, especially among African-American and low-income students. Overall, the disparity in suspensions between African-American and white students, and low- and higher-income students decreased as a result.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A positive school climate is built on a foundation of trust and care among students and staff members. Indeed, students who feel a [sense of safety and belonging](#) at school have greater academic success and well-being. They're more motivated to learn and less likely to engage in risky behavior.

Teachers and school staff [benefit](#) from a positive school climate as well. A supportive work environment lessens staff emotional exhaustion and feelings of low personal accomplishment. It also increases their commitment to the profession, lessening attrition rates while bolstering their belief that they can make a difference in students' lives.

SOURCE

[Circle Forward](#) is a resource guide designed to help teachers, administrators, students, and parents incorporate the practice of Circles into the everyday life of the school community with comprehensive step-by-step instructions for how to plan, facilitate, and implement the Circle. It provides over one hundred specific lesson plans for the application of Circles in many areas of school life.

[The Center for Restorative Justice](#) offers training and professional development in restorative justice practice for K-12 schools and universities. Also see the book [Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School](#).