

## Circle time done right.

I often make the joke that, at Real Schools, one important even that's going to happen one day is a bonfire. We're going to run an amnesty, in much the same way as John Howard did with guns in 1996, where Australian teachers can hand in their devices of destruction for incineration. And what exactly is that cruel, dangerous weapon? It's the "talking stick"!

Now bear with me. I'm not saying that Australian teachers have been killing anyone with all stick varieties from fluffy wands to spiky crocodile toys. What I am saying is that these devices have led to an impression in our schools that circle time, for students of all ages, must be done a certain way. That way is to hand the stick to the student on either our left or right and then to let the monologues, or even worse – the incessant passing or umming.

This simply isn't true. There is no ONE way to run a circle at all. Teachers who run truly successful circles are incredibly creative with how these circles go and they know that wait time is dead time. At Real Schools, our absolute determination is that circles have one key aim and three principles that underpin this aim being achieved.

### MAIN AIM OF A CIRCLE – ENGAGEMENT

Every circle's intention should be to have all students at their highest level of engagement for the longest possible percentage of time. Imagine taking a picture of your circle (even better is actually taking that picture) and study the percentage of students who are actively either speaking, listening, thinking or doing – that's how we measure circle engagement.

Further, circles should not only be engaging experiences but they should also elevate post-circle engagement levels. No matter the purpose of a circle, there should be the intention for something to be different afterwards.

- **Check-in circle** – students should be calmer, more in control of emotions and more able to think/learn clearly.
- **Check-out circle** – students' capacity to reflect on work ethic, collaboration and personal impact on the class should be enhanced.
- **Preparation circle** – students should be clear about behavioural expectations and their affect generation responsibilities.
- **Response circle** – students should be connecting conversation to actions and deliverables.
- **Learning circle** – students should be cognisant of learning intentions, demonstration opportunities, deadlines and noise requirements.

So Engagement is king. And we believe there are also three ways, or principles if you will, that will facilitate the highest possible engagement levels both during and after a decent circle:

• **BREVITY** – a quick circle is a good one. Only in the most serious of moments should a circle stretch out as long as 15 minutes. The longer a circle goes, the more likely it is that students will disengage. Often, our boys disengage through disrupting the circle, whereas our girls tend towards a quiet mental trip to another place. In preference to a long circle at the start of a lesson and then a long period of sustained learning work (the old 15/45 model), try making your circle a 3 minute experience followed by 7 minutes of sustained work. I contend strongly that your 3/7/3/7/3/7/3/7/3/7/3/7/3/7/3/7 model will trigger a far higher level of engagement across a 60 minute lesson.

• **ACTIVITY** – Circles are not opportunities for us to make a speech. Nor should they be a snorefest while certain students dominate the conversation with long remarks or via their uncanny ability to be chosen when hands go up. Have your students turn and talk to the person next to them for a minute and listen to three great ideas – in preference for everyone speaking individually. This is a mindset issue for we teachers. We simply need to let go of the paradigm that all communication must be heard by us and must come through us.

• **VARIETY** – mix your circles up. Sit on the floor, sit on chairs, stand strong, stand outside, lie on our bellies, use a tennis ball, use our bodies to communicate, place students with "non-friends", change your own position, use a whiteboard or butcher's paper, invite other staff to join you, use the iPads, discuss non-school topics, share stories/hopes/dreams/memories. When it comes to circles variety really is the spice of life.

The bottom line is that I use circles because they work. They work for me and for my students – and they can work for you too and you may just be a tweak away from outrageous circle success.

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*"Passion makes one  
think in a circle."  
-- Oscar Wilde*

### THE CHEAT SHEET

Don't have time to absorb the whole article today? Here's the big points ...

1. Eradicate turn taking and wait time.
2. Focus on engagement during and after circles.
3. Make your circles brief.
4. Ensure high levels of student activity during circles.
6. Change up your circles constantly to maximise variety.

**AITSL STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS**  
... and you addressed them by reading!

### The Big One

1.2 Understand how students learn

But also ...

- 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities.
- 3.3 Use teaching strategies
- 3.5 Use effective classroom communication.