Introduction

The use of dialogue circles is an important process within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. This process has been used by Indigenous people from around the world for centuries to **build respectful relationships**, **learn from a collective group** and to **preserve and pass on cultural knowledge**.

By using dialogue circles as a teaching and learning strategy, student understandings of Indigenous knowledge and ways of working with this knowledge are enhanced. This strategy is suitable for students across all phases of schooling.

Dialogue circles as a process

Dialogue circles are a process that allows collective learning to take place and often results in a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity.

As this process strongly resembles Indigenous ways of interacting with knowledge it is advisable to discuss the use of dialogue processes with the local Indigenous community and learn about how it is implemented in their community.

What is a dialogue circle?

A dialogue circle is a process:

- that is the interface between Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous communication
- that demonstrates respectful interactions between participants
- that provides a forum which allows honest communication and shared responsibility
- where people sit in a circle and listen deeply while taking turns to talk.

What can a dialogue circle offer?

A dialogue circle can:

- enrich the school curriculum and learning experiences of students
- promote student/student and student/school/community connectedness
- allow people to explore other viewpoints with mutual respect
- provide a safe environment for people to speak honestly and to be heard
- give a sense of empowerment and inspiration while promoting habits of respect, responsibility and accountability
- be used as a tool for reciprocal sharing and learning.

What is the process of a dialogue circle?

A dialogue circle process includes the following:

- participants sit in a circle (nothing in the centre)
- a facilitator, who must introduce the process
- no hierarchy — all participants are considered equal

- a "power instrument" is passed around clockwise and only the person with the item speaks
- the group chooses a "power instrument" of significance to them
- everyone listens intently to the person talking
- each participant has a chance to speak in turn — clockwise around the circle
- in the first round, participants introduce themselves and share something about themselves others may not know
- in the second round, participants talk about a focus question
- discussion or debate occurs only in sequence and not across the circle
- participants must show care, understanding and respect
- the facilitator allocates time for participants to write thoughts or evaluations
- the final round focuses on reflecting
- the facilitator ensures everyone leaves the circle feeling calm with no unfinished business.

An effective dialogue circle

To ensure the dialogue circle runs smoothly and is effective, it is recommended that:

- the group is kept to a manageable number — if the group is too large to manage engage other staff or parent assistance
- the local Indigenous community is consulted about their use of dialogue circles
- a community member is invited to be involved
- community members or other staff involved are given instruction in the process
- a focus question is discussed or there is a clear purpose
- a "power instrument" is used (see dialogue process).

When is a dialogue circle useful?

Dialogue circles can be used for many purposes including:

- hearing people's views on a topic
- reciprocal sharing and learning
- building trusting relationships
- dealing with conflict before it leads to other disciplinary measures.

Further reading on this topic

Bohm, D, Factor, D, Garrett, & P 1991, *Dialogue — a proposal*, <http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html>

Bennet-McLean, D 2000, *The Yarning Circle*, <http://www.rilc.uts.edu.au> (select Resources > CPE > Projects and Papers > Community Cultural Development, then download Conference papers from Education and Social Action Conference and scroll to page 4).