



Nishnawbe Aski Nation

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HEALING THE GENERATIONS  
RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

2002 CURRICULUM UPDATE

## HANDOUT

### HISTORY OF THE TRADITIONAL TALKING CIRCLE

*By, Dan Ennis*

The Traditional Talking Circle is the most significant ceremony to the Native people even though it is conducted in an informal setting. The participants sit in a circle and pass a talking stick or an eagle feather from one to the other, always to the left. The holder of the (sacred) object is the one allowed to speak. All other participants must give their full attention to the speaker and not interrupt.

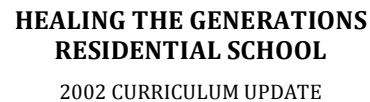
The talking circle is of special importance to our people. As is symbolized by the circle, it is a coming together of people. Unity can be felt within the circle, and this support enables one to speak without fear of criticism or ridicule. The oneness with the others in the circle heals us and gives us peace. This forum allows much more than just the exchange of ideas.

The Traditional Talking Circle is a way of bringing people of all ages together in a quite, respectful manner for the purposes of teaching, listening, learning, and sharing. It can be a very powerful means of bringing some degree of healing to the mind, the heard, the body, and the spirit.

The circle leader begins by passing around sweet grass, cedar, or sage so that the participants may "smudge" themselves (optional in the classroom). Our ancestors believe that these sacred herbs have a purifying effect upon our total being. "Smudging" is therefore the act of cleansing your mind, body, and spirit.

The Traditionalist opens the Circle with a prayer and proceeds to talk to the people without interruption. All participants are expected to listen respectfully until the speaker is finished. All who sit within the Circle will have the opportunity to express themselves if they choose to or they may simply listen. All speakers around the Circle will be given the same respect and allowed to speak from their hearts without interruption.

Source: <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~ahrc/elem6.html>



- All comments should be addressed directly to the question of issue, not to comments that another participant has made. But negative and positive comments about what anyone else in the circle says should be avoided. Just say what you want to say in a positive manner. Speak from the heart.
- Only one person speaks at a time. Everyone should be listening in a non-judgmental way to what the speaker is saying. Some groups find it useful to signify in some way who has to floor. Going around the circle systematically is one way to achieve this. Another is to use some object (such as a stone or stick) which the person who is speaking holds and then passes to the next person who has indicated a desire to speak.
- Silence is an acceptable response. No one should be pressured at any time to contribute if they feel reticent to do so. There must be no negative consequences, however subtle, for saying "I pass".
- At the same time, everyone must feel invited to participate. Some mechanisms for ensuring that a few vocal people don't dominate the discussion should be built in. For instance, no one speaks twice until everyone in the circle has been given the opportunity to speak twice. An atmosphere of patient and non-judgmental listening usually helps the shy people to speak out and the louder ones to moderate their participation. Going around the circle in a systematic way, inviting each person to participate simply by mentioning each name in turn can be an effective way to even out participation.
- It is often better to hold talking circles in groups of five to fifteen rather than with a large group, because in smaller groups everyone has time to say what they need to say without feeling pressured by time.
- The group leader facilitates the discussion by acknowledging contributions in a non-judgmental way (that is, by avoiding comments such as "good comment" or "great" which can be seen as making comparisons between different contributions), and by clarifying comments when necessary, (i.e, "If I understand what you're saying, you're...").
- No comments which put down others or oneself is allowed. Some agreed-upon way of signaling the speaker when this is occurring should be established. Self put downs include such comments as, "I don't think anyone will agree with me, but..." or "I'm no very good at..."



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### ***INFORMATION continued...***

- Speakers should feel free to express themselves in any way that is comfortable: by sharing a personal story, by using examples or metaphors, by analytical statements, etc.
- Some groups have found it useful to encourage participants to focus on consciously sending the speaker loving feelings. In this way listeners are supporting the speaker and not tuning out so they can think about what they will say when it is their turn.

Source: The Sacred Tree Curriculum Guide produced by the Four Worlds International Institute, 1988

