



COMMUNITY LISTENING CIRCLES TOOLKIT

Developed by Concordia University's Art Hives Network, 2018





Rationale about the motivations for initiating the circles

As Canada commemorates the 150th anniversary of confederation, the Art Hives Network acknowledges the ongoing struggles of Indigenous people caused by colonization. We join together to examine the role of non-Indigenous Canadians in the truth and reconciliation process to help establish and restore Indigenous people's rights in Canada. We believe that non-Indigenous Canadians have a responsibility to understand the shared history of colonization and how we may be continuing to perpetuate colonial relationships in our personal and professional lives.

We invite people in communities across Canada to come together to form small listening circles, where we sit in a circle and listen to each other, and reflect critically on personal and collective choices and experiences. Adding spontaneous and informal art-making about a topic that may be uncomfortable, uncertain and unclear helps to maintain an empathetic space. We believe such community listening circles can generate the necessary dialogue to uncover and examine how our personal and collective story intersects with colonialism, and how we may reproduce it in our lives and cause harm to Indigenous peoples. This "unsettling the settler" work is necessary to truly participate in the transformative possibilities of reconciliation (Regan, 2010), and to start imagining a shared future of mutual recovery and respect.

This toolkit is a work in progress. It is a beginning, initiated by a group of non-Indigenous Canadians to share our process and learning with readers, with the hope to inspire them to do the same. We hope this toolkit will continue to expand as more communities experiment with it. We welcome feedback and participation data at network@arthives.org.

Method used for the community listening circles:

- Our exploratory learning process included five circles of two hours each, taking place monthly on Sunday afternoons at La Ruche d'Art St-Henri in Tiohtià:ke (Montreal). The third space quality of the art hive makes it a welcoming and relatively neutral environment that can hold potentially uncomfortable conversations. The addition of non-directed art making can help provide further containment for difficult, oppositional feelings. The number of circles and their frequency can be modified to suit the needs of the group. We recommend spacing the circles out, so that participants and facilitators have time to read the text and process their learning.
- Having the same two facilitators at each circle worked well. Usually, one would be responsible for opening the circle while the other would close it. We recommend having two facilitators to keep a balance, without over-personalizing interactions, and make space for modeling self-care during the circle itself.

Communication method: passing a talking piece (e.g. stone, stick)

We chose to adapt a communication protocol traditionally used in many Indigenous cultures during meetings to ensure a code of conduct of respect.

- A participant holding the talking piece indicates that it is their turn to speak, while others remain silent and mindfully listen without interrupting.
- Once a participant has finished speaking, the talking piece is passed on to the next person in the circle, and so on until it comes back to a facilitator who explains the next step.
- Participants are not required to speak — they may choose to pass once the talking piece reaches them.
- If a thought arises while someone else is talking, participants are encouraged to write it down and bring it up, if needed, when the talking piece returns to them.

Rationale:

- The chosen method draws upon traditional methods used by Indigenous people entering a circle. It allows equal space for each participant to come forward and to listen quietly and mindfully to themselves and to one another (Contré Migwans, 2016). It encourages ways of listening for feelings, thoughts and visions that are living within us and others, and entering dialogical rather than monological ways of communicating (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996, in Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 191).
- This structure format fosters a sense of inclusion, mutual respect, shared leadership, empathic listening and understanding, and equality (Contré Migwans, 2016; Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996, in Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 191).

Circle structure:

Opening (20 minutes):

Each listening circle starts with:

- One of the facilitators expresses a few words of gratitude.
- Each facilitator introduces himself and briefly explains to participants the rationale for hosting the circles, presenting Paulette Regan's book, *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010), as well as the communication method and the circle's structure.
- The facilitator who is opening the circle invites participants to engage in the introductory circle round by explaining the procedure and initiating sharing. Holding the talking piece, each participant states their name and if willing, shares a few words about how they are feeling in the moment (What are you arriving with?).

Dialogue and art making (60 minutes):

- Invite participants to use the creative art materials within reach on the table.
- Each participant takes a turn — using the talking piece method — to share quotes, a story, an experience or a reflection on the topic.
- Invite participants to take time in silence to finish their artwork, meditate, walk, etc. (10 minutes)

Closing (20 minutes):

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- Continue by passing the talking piece as participants share their artwork, what they are leaving with or something they learned.
 - At the end, facilitators may informally share any upcoming events in the community that are aligned with truth and reconciliation work.

Challenges encountered and solutions we came up with:

Question: Should we include a participant arriving late to the circle?

Solution: We decided not to accept someone that arrives more than 10 minutes after the circle has started. This is to foster a sense of safety and respect to participants and avoid disrupting the circle dialogue.

Question: What should we do if certain participants dominate the circle?

Solution: Remind participants at the beginning of the circle to respect the schedule and be mindful of the time spent talking so that everyone has equal time to share. If time allows, facilitators can suggest additional talking turns.

Question: Should we hold the circle in different spaces when significant opportunities to work with Indigenous people come up?

Solution: Discuss the opportunities case-by-case and assess their accessibility. Inform regular and potential participants of any changes as early as possible on the Facebook event page, promotion posters, etc.

Question: What should we do when someone is not respecting the communication method (e.g. commenting or interrupting someone who is talking)?

Solution: The facilitator reminds the participant of the methodology used and encourages them to write down their ideas to be shared later.

Question: How should we encourage participants to make spontaneous art during the circle dialogue?

Solution: Continue to display art materials on the tables and invite participants to make art at the beginning of the circle. Make it clear that art making is a suggestion, not an obligation and doesn't have to be shared. We welcome and respect everyone's personal way of participating and processing the experience. Facilitators can model simple art making behaviours, such as doodling and coloring. You can suggest to participants that they could also make art after the session, on their own time, and share it with the group at the next circle gathering, if desired.

Significant group learning:

- Reconciliation starts at a personal level, on a day-to-day basis.

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- The sessions that featured exchanges with Indigenous people (e.g. KAIROS blanket exercise, visit to a native community) attracted the most participants. This highlights the interest in and need to build and strengthen contact with the neighbouring Indigenous communities.

Discussion on how the book, art making, blanket exercise and visit to the Native community (Kahnawake) contributed the listening circles.

Book:

The recommended reading of Paulette Regan's *Unsettling the Settler Within* provided a foundation and common approach from which everyone could reflect and gain a shared understanding of the topic. Regan's focus on non-Indigenous peoples' responsibility to examine themselves and the peace-maker's myth stimulated reflection and dialogue on how non-Indigenous Canadians can take action and contribute to reconciliation.

Artmaking:

Engaging in a simultaneous art making process as we listened and spoke helped the expression and containment of arising emotions, thoughts or visions that might have been more difficult to express verbally.

Art served as a medium to record personal experience and note key points which could be shared with others or revisited later.

KAIROS Blanket exercise:

This scripted exercise, in which participants are invited by an Indigenous facilitator to take on the roles of Indigenous peoples of Canada, helped to evoke unsettling emotions and raise awareness and knowledge about the historical counter-narratives of colonialism. This allowed participants to take a critical look at the mainstream history of Canada and de-construct the myth of settlers as peacemakers.

The workshop provided an opportunity to listen to the Indigenous facilitator's own story and the effects of colonialism. This contributed to participants' understanding of the effects of colonialism, both on a personal level and as something that is still being experienced by Indigenous people.

Visit to a local Indigenous community:

Organized through an invitation of Mohawk collaborators living on the Kahnawake reserve, this visit created an opportunity for the circle to meet and listen to members of a local Indigenous community. The experience "unsettled" our usual structure by inviting us to deeply listen to some of our Indigenous neighbours' perspectives, and question our colonized methodologies, sense of time and ways of initiating contact.

Other outcomes:

- A Facebook page was created for participants to share resources, information and events with each other in relation to the topic. This provided a sense of continuity between circles, eased communication of any changes and formed a dynamic platform for networking and extending reflection towards action.

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- The listening circles invited participants to listen and learn from one another's visions and initiatives towards reconciliation, inspired action and propelled some participants to become more engaged in their community. For example, a participant initiated the writing of a collective letter to the mayor of Montreal, asking to prevent the closure of a local drop-in centre largely serving an Indigenous population.
 - Our exploratory circles progressed organically from listening to our personal and familial stories as non-Indigenous Canadians in relation to colonization, to more action-oriented dialogues, and increased contact with Indigenous people in the last three circles.

Evaluation and statistics:

Attendance statistics are collected at each circle. At the end of the circle series, the group was invited to engage in a reflective, collective art piece. Each participant was asked to complete a short evaluation with the following questions:

- How did the experience of participating in the listening circles go for you?
- What was your most significant learning during these circles?
- What would have helped make this experience more meaningful?
- Anything else that you would like to share with us about your experience?

References

Contré Migwans., D. (2016). Le 'bâton de parole' selon les coutumes autochtones [Powerpoint presentation].

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