Talking Circles as a Metaphor and Pedagogy for Learning

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The purpose of our paper is to enrich ageless ideas with current theory a) to support the significance of integrative conversation, b) to illuminate a structure and process for facilitating such conversation, and c) to promote increased competence among emerging leaders in requisite skills. A premise of our argument is that highly-effective processes of inclusion and integration are not new. They have existed for thousands of years within indigenous cultures that thrive on rich social interrelationships grounded in epistemologies that value the contextual richness of stories, the importance of learning from experiences, the significance of diversity and inclusion, and the wisdom of elders to guide the process. What is new, however, is a vast amount of relevant research that is emerging about underlying processes that enable these integrative processes to work well.

Integration Conversation and the Talking Circle.

It is becoming more apparent in today's interconnected world that people with different values and beliefs often do not work well with one another, usually because they do not understand one another, usually because they do not sincerely listen to one another, often because infra-structures and foundations for doing so are inadequate or missing. An absence of work harmony is certainly not new by any means, however, its consequences are becoming detrimental at an accelerating rate. An example of difficulties arising from such weak social connections apparently occurred at Electronic Data Systems (EDS) prior to the arrival of current CEO, Dick-Brown:

> "Individual operating units had no incentive for cooperating with each other to win business. The company's top leaders had grown aloof and cut off from people at the front lines. 'We'd have meetings, meetings, meetings, but nothing would ever get decided,' says Heller [EDS Vice Chairman]…. Brown quickly signaled that he would not put up with the old culture of information hoarding and rampant individualism…. Systems were crashing, deliveries were failing, and projects were late…. When projects were finally delivered, the quality was unacceptable…. Almost everyone paid lip service to the call to collaborate, but not enough people acted on it" (Breen, 2001: 112-113).

Clearly, EDS was in need of awakening to the need for social harmony (e.g., Quinn, 1996), of healthier organizational synapses, and of ways to enable people to realize the value of understanding and working with each other.

Nevertheless, essential skills of listening and working cooperatively were not in place, just as they are not prevalent in many other organizations.

We propose that the basics of "integrative conversation" are lacking not only in most organizations but also in educational institutions. Integrative conversation involves the exchange and creation of new meaning and feelings of cohesion. It is not simply a sharing of individual opinions, beliefs, and perspectives. Further, it is not the mere projection of what individuals already know, unfolding competitively in order to create and win arguments. Instead, integrative conversation requires that individuals become part of a bigger story, creating new meaning in concert with all others rather than any select subset. An integrative conversation is a genuine exchange of ideas, feelings, perspectives, opinions, and so forth, where for each person involved there emerges a sense of self as part of the whole. To participate in integrative conversation, one accepts responsibility not only for actively listening to every perspective, but for creating an integrative story along the way. In doing so, the underlying dynamics of power shift from traditionally myopic, self-centered, and rigid to inclusive, interconnected, and fluid. In other words, participants let go of the typical craving to adhere to individual perspectives -- or those of a privileged few -- and assume willingness to change, take ownership of the collective outcome, and experience real potential to impact relationships.

The Talking Circle provides a proven but seldom employed structure and process for facilitating integrative conversation. Though the Talking Circle is not new, it has never been integrated into mainstream Western-European education nor so-called "modern" organizations, ironically perhaps because it is inclusive and thus inconsistent with the foundation of much of Western-European philosophy (cf. Friere, 1993). Fortunately, there exists a growing awakening these days to the possibility that mainstream structures and processes of learning inadequately support organizational and societal needs. Theory of the Talking Circle: Ageless Wisdom & New Research.

The Talking Circle is a process that arose naturally in different cultures around the world. It arose not as a fad or quick fix to current

dilemmas, but as an empirical response to a diverse world and as a practical way of creating integrative knowing. Integrative knowing is antithetical to many Western European conceptions of learning and organizing, which tend to emerge from values that are linear, fragmented, and controlling. This does not mean that Talking Circles are better than Western European perspectives, but only that they add considerable insight.

The Talking Circle as a way of knowing stands on the premise that real-world diversity is essential. Just as we cannot understand a forest by staring continually at a single tree, we cannot understand a group of people by listening only to the most vocal or dominant perspectives. In a Talking Circle, no voice is wrong, right, overemphasized or disregarded. Challenges of participating in a Talking Circle include both contributing individually in an authentic and honest manner, and listening genuinely in a receptive, integrative way. When engaged to its full potential, the Talking Circle transcends individual egos, exclusive dichotomies (e.g., us versus them), and fragmented, disconnected outcomes, and instead provides a whole story.

Talking Circles unfold in many ways depending upon the levels of experience and mastery among the people involved. In a Talking Circle, participants sit in a circle in order to see and hear everyone, not just a "teacher." Talking Circles begin with an identification of purpose and someone taking the lead to talk. Often a Talking Circle begins with whomever is seated in the East, which is the direction that symbolizes the start of a new day. Each person, in turn and clockwise, shares openly and honestly and then passes to the next person -- often by handing forward a "talking stick" -- until everyone has had a chance to contribute. The underlying structure for this process is the Medicine Wheel, depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The Medicine Wheel Structure of the Talking Circle:
An Array of Multiple-Intelligences

Mental
(pattern & insight)

Physical ———— **Spiritual**
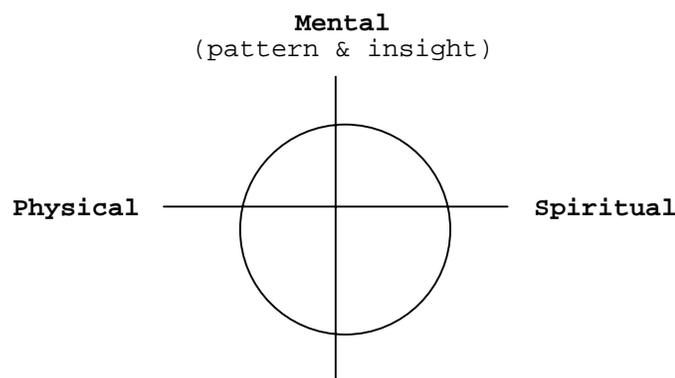
(reflection & precedence)   (vision & imagination)

Emotional
(feeling & detail)
Represented in Figure 1 are the cardinal directions or cornerstones of the Medicine Wheel, a Native American structure symbolizing the diversity and interconnectedness of reality. The Medicine Wheel embodies a mix of unique intelligences that only together comprise humanity. It reveals the fact that humans are not only physical beings, but also mental, emotional, and spiritual beings, with the potential to develop and manifest all of these (cf. deBeauport, 1996). Such inclusive structures are found not only in the roots of Native American philosophy (e.g., Storm, 1972; 1994), but also in integrative philosophies of Celtic (e.g., Dames, 1992; Meadows, 1989; 1990), African (e.g., Fu-Kiau, 1985; 1991), and Far Eastern (e.g., Musashi, 1974) cultures, each with an array of distinct cultural inflections.

The Talking Circle is an age-old embodiment of the integrative Medicine Wheel. In other words, it is a philosophy and pedagogy suited for tapping into the diverse awareness, understanding, and talent of a group of people. With mastery, participants in a Talking Circle recognize the needs and values of mental acuity, spiritual clarity, emotional sensitivity, and physical grounding -- and learn to take responsibility for each as needed. Today, researchers are claiming discovery of these intelligences as if they are new. In recent years, we have begun to hear more about emotional intelligence (e.g., Goleman, 1995), spiritual intelligence (e.g., Emmons, 1999), naturalist intelligence (e.g., Gardner, 1999), and so forth, framing each as an enrichment of previous understanding of mental intelligence. The genuine value that such in-depth studies contribute to the Medicine Wheel is systematic application of scientific methodology to specific intelligences. With this effort has come richer understanding of the composition and function of each intelligence and a hint of their combined potential.
Toward Mastering the Skills of a Talking Circle.

A central part of our work with the Talking Circle in a Business School environment is to help students learn to think critically as well as in

concert with others. Thinking critically means relating to course material and to our environments in ways that enable us to understand both explicit and implicit meaning. It is having the ability to switch contexts and to develop self-awareness and self-assessment along the way (Loacker, Cromwell, Fey & Rutherford, 1984). These competencies are gained only from adequate exposure, sustained practice, and accumulated experience -- not only with our local environment but also with our feelings and the broader world environment around us. A common theme in developmental psychology is that experience has the ability to change us fundamentally, i.e., to change our personalities, actions, thoughts, beliefs, and values. Accordingly, developmental change is measured by an ability to interpret, to synthesize, and to integrate what is occurring around us broadly and within us deeply.

This idea of movement from one level of development to more inclusive levels is particularly represented in the work of Piaget (1971). Piaget explains how humans mentally develop through naïve and immature consciousness to inclusive and mature ways of processing. In a preliminary stage, we have only the capability to respond reflexively to our local environment. As we develop to what Piaget considers a second stage, we develop broader understanding by acquiring and employing the skill of connecting objects and events to language or other symbolic representations. A third stage involves a period in which we develop more complex schemes or maps of the world in increasingly expansive circles. Ultimately, in what is considered a final stage within this framework, we take our knowledge and experiences, abstract meaning from them, and use this as knowledge in other contexts.

Observing the experiences of particular students within a Talking Circle helps us to understand how people develop from such ill-informed levels of understanding to more mature, integrative perspectives. Using student feedback about a Talking Circle used in a Business School Leadership course during Spring 2000, we found that novice users of the Talking Circle typically behave in ways that correspond closely to what know about human development stages. Initially, many of these students reported that they were not comfortable with the Talking Circle as a way of communicating in class. They

did not view themselves as active agents in the process nor were they sure how to respond in such a role. They came to class expecting and wanting to passively experience the ideas, opinions and emotions of their classmates and instructor. Many of these students reported feeling that they "had to talk" in initial stages of using the Talking Circle. They also described spending the majority of their time trying to form what they would say when their "turn" came, instead of really listening to others. Essentially, they described a stage at which they inefficiently processed available cues, information, and stimuli in their environment. They had not yet learned how to actively and selectively attend to the ongoing conversation, nor how to engage effectively in the flow of dialog.

Another theme that emerged from this student feedback pertains to the evolutionary nature of the Talking Circle. Students described how -- over time -- as they became more familiar with the process and with their classmates, they began to develop the skills of listening carefully and responding in more informed ways based on what they learned from others in the Talking Circle. This insight suggests an adaptation to the process and a refining of their skills as communicators and learners. Many of the students emphasized the interactive nature of the process and how this interaction helped them to develop their own ideas about a particular topic. While many of the students began the process feeling intimidated, they slowly progressed to a point at which they acknowledged the developmental benefits of allowing everyone to have a voice in the discussion. In the following section, we take this developmental idea further by examining various potential ways that emerging leaders can learn from the Talking Circle.

Leadership Development and the Talking Circle.

It is important to realize that leaders have important opportunities -- and responsibilities -- to learn more from Talking Circles than the content of conversations that emerge within them. First is an opportunity to see beyond individual contributions to patterns that connect a community of people. Second is an opportunity to notice distinctions and connections among the four intelligences embodied in a circle: physical, mental, emotional, and

spiritual. This opportunity challenges young leaders to tune into not only spoken words but also into feelings, intuitions, and perceptions. Third, from a broader perspective, Talking Circles provide opportunities for emerging leaders to recognize and understand forces that enable truly integrative conversation, and forces that constrain or diminish its value. Even broader, an opportunity presents itself for learning to translate insights from the Talking Circle process to other processes of human exchange within and throughout an organization.

An array of requisite capacities, such as deeply listening, making meaningful interconnections, and employing multiple intelligences accompany the first two kinds of learning as they are employed with increasing mastery. The third kind of learning points in a different direction, involving an understanding of how the Talking-Circle process functions. Borrowing from an analogy, this kind of understanding would involve knowing how a racecar operates rather than just gaining competence in driving a racecar well. Ultimately, a leader's challenge is also to bring out the best in other participants and to enable others to advance their skills in these various ways. Thus, leaders not only learn how to participate well in a Talking Circle and how to gain usable insight along the way, they also learn subtle intricacies about the Talking Circle process and its fit into various contexts, i.e., when, where, and how to employ a Talking Circle effectively.

Certainly the Talking Circle cannot promote all leadership skills, just as it is not appropriate for all organizational situations. However, it remains a time-tested and rich process for enabling emerging leaders to understand and to work within the social world beyond the boundaries of one's own beliefs and values. The Talking Circle is more than a pedagogy -- it is a compelling metaphor for leadership development, indicating through its insights how, when, and where to let go or to take control, to guide or to empower, and so forth. Thus, real masters learn to not get hung up on the "Circle," but instead to live the Circle as an inclusive, integrative philosophy of life.

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