

Performing Critical Pedagogy Through Fireside Chats

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Abstract

In this essay, I introduce fireside chats as a critical pedagogical practice, which can strengthen students' compassion and contemplation by enhancing communication practices and opening discussion about students' learning ideas, dreams, reflections, questions, and fears, while changing hierarchical communication patterns between teachers and students.

Throughout history, people have gathered in circles around a campfire, kitchen table, or other spaces and environments to connect with others, coming together as a community to brainstorm ideas, share stories, solve problems, provide support, and strengthen relational bonds. In circling, participants situate themselves as both givers and receivers, ideally honoring the presence and stories of all participants. Regardless of whether participants sit on the floor around a campfire, sit in chairs, or circle in an alternative fashion, the ultimate goal of circling (Baldwin, 1998; Pranis, 2005; Pranis et al., 2003; Zimmerman & Cole, 2009) is to invite participation, connection, and inclusion.

In this essay, I will explore one type of circle process, *fireside chats*, which can strengthen students' compassion and contemplation by enhancing communication practices and opening discussion about students' learning ideas, dreams, reflections, questions, concerns, and fears through five steps:

- building classroom culture and community by illuminating multiple viewpoints, practices, and experiences as a tool to recognize and celebrate our interconnectedness.

- providing opportunities for students to share information about their learning, course content, and their everyday lives.
- allowing students to actively and reflexively participate in the creation of classroom meaning.
- attending compassionately to each other's ideas and reflections in a way that maximizes contemplative inquiry.
- encouraging valuable insight, feedback, and assessment regarding learning and teaching.

By inviting students to participate in the creation of course content, teachers are better able to create a welcoming, supportive, and compassionate community in which learners experience shared leadership through enhanced engagement in their personal as well as the group's success. Through fireside chats, teachers can create a more egalitarian experience wherein learners feel comfortable challenging the status quo, recognizing that the personal is pedagogical, and pedagogical is always political (Shor, 1996; Freire, 1998; Wolk, 1998). Moreover, fireside chats encourage participation from students often silent or silenced in traditional learning settings, inspiring critical and creative learning while changing hierarchical communication patterns between teachers and students.

Opening Ceremony

Long ago, in a place not so far from here, I heard a story about a magical classroom experience involving a course discussion (Bell, 2008) and a storytelling project (Higgins, 2008) taking place around a mock campfire constructed from Christmas tree lights arranged in a pile in the center of the room. Intrigued by this idea, I created a mock campfire storytelling speech activity for my public speaking course, following in the footsteps of Horace Miner's (1956) famous essay, "The Nacirema." Entitled "Making the Familiar Strange" (Blinne, 2012). I designed this speech to help students look critically at an everyday experience, practice, activity, ritual, or event, creating a story that performatively re-languages this practice. The mock campfire, as an alternative pedagogical method employed in this speech activity, further deconstructs and makes strange the classroom space in supporting creative expression while also performing the activity itself.

Imagining how mock campfires could be employed in the classroom for other purposes, I began to host what I affectionately termed "fireside chats," in the tradition of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's series of informal radio talks, as a tool to help build community and foster enhanced engagement within my communication classes. In doing so, I discovered that fireside chats supported and brought to life my passion for contemplative pedagogy (Grace, 2011; Miller, 2006; Repetti, 2010) and critical, feminist, and/or radically-democratic and performative pedagogies (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Denzin, 2009; Kincheloe, 2008; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Freire, 1998; Giroux & Shannon, 1997; Hernández, 1997; Keat-

ing, 2007; McLauren, 1994; Moreno-Lopez, 2005; Shor, 1996) while reinforcing my interest in peaceful pedagogies (Harris & Morrison, 2003; O'Reilley, 1993).

Like FDR, who through these weekly chats informed the American public about positions and actions taken by the U.S. government (Lim, 2003), my goal has been to address and discuss issues of concern while offering an opportunity for students to experience a more democratic classroom. This idea has been further invigorated by my ethnographic fieldwork with the Rainbow Family of Living Light,^{*} who have taught me much about community building through consensus, the sharing of heartsongs^{**} around the fire, and circle council processes, additionally encouraging me to experiment with fireside chats.

After I started employing fireside chats in my classroom, I found additional guidance from the peacemaking circle tradition (Baldwin, 1998; Pranis, 2005; Pranis et al., 2003) and council processes (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009) as well as from educators who employ consensus decision-making processes in their classrooms (Sartor & Young Brown; 2004). Peacemaking circles have a long tradition of success in restorative justice programs, beginning in the Minnesota criminal justice system as a means of bringing people together via a circle process that respects and values each person's contribution, creating space for people to share stories and experiences without interruption and providing a forum for a more participatory and inclusive community-building and democratic process (Pranis, 2005). In a variety of contexts, peacemaking circles have been utilized for solving conflicts or disagreements, making decisions together, engaging in team-building, sharing ideas, addressing issues, encouraging learning, or celebrating community (Baldwin, 1998; Pranis, 2005; Pranis et al., 2003). As Pranis (2005) states,

Peacemaking circles use structure to create possibilities for freedom: freedom to speak our truth, freedom to drop masks and protections, freedom to be present as a whole human being, freedom to reveal our deepest longings, freedom to acknowledge mistakes and fears, freedom to act in accord with our core values. (p. 11)

A core element of this process is to support and encourage respect, sharing, empathy, compassion, and trust by creating a safe space that encourages diverse and divergent viewpoints that honor the individual and the collective.

Peacemaking circles are spaces that encourage deep listening and storytelling, providing "moments when we can witness the path another has walked as

* Each year the Rainbow Family of Living Light (herein referred to as "Rainbow") hosts a national gathering on public land, created as a non-commercial event, charging no entry fees into the gathering nor for any service (e.g. food or medicine) provided on-site. Rainbow is a type of leaderless, nonhierarchical organization, arriving at many decisions via consensus in council meetings. Further, Rainbow celebrates a diversity of cultural traditions, spiritual belief systems, and a rich array of political parties and activist stances. By embracing both the individual and the collective, Rainbow is an assembly for all who gather to practice peaceful respect, one of the only rules Rainbow has for gathering.

** Feelings, observations, dreams, visions, or emotions articulated at Rainbow gatherings in council meetings, around campfires, or in passing.

well as feel that others appreciate our path” (Pranis et al., 2003, p. 3). Circle processes provide a forum that is paradoxical in that “They’re both structured and open, ordered and spontaneous, framed and free, limited and unlimited” (Pranis et al., 2003, p. 7). Fireside chats can be structured to incorporate Nichol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) seven principles of good feedback practice, including: clarification regarding what good performance is; facilitation of self-assessment and reflection in learning; delivery of quality information to students about their learning; encouragement surrounding peer and teacher communication about learning; development of positive motivational beliefs; opportunities to bridge current and desired performances; and finally, information to teachers about how to improve teaching (p. 205). Thus, students can offer suggestions and reflections to better organize and deliver class content. To do so, however, students need to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas with the teacher and each other, which requires teachers to spend additional time building classroom community. Fireside chats are one of many options to facilitate this.

Setting Our Intention

Though the teacher serves as the fireside chat facilitator, or as the Rainbow Family would say, “vibeswatcher” or “focalizer,” ultimately, participants are the keepers of this process, not dominating or managing the activity, but guiding the process instead. The role of the teacher or “vibeswatcher” is to maintain the focus and integrity of the conversation. To do so, a teacher might start each fireside chat with an introductory script similar to the one below to set the tone:

In the spirit of sharing, I hope we can treat each other’s ideas with respect and compassion, recognizing that our time together should be used productively. Please avoid statements or behaviors that make it difficult to accomplish our mutual objectives and ability to create a safe space for sharing our stories. Our ability to deeply listen to each other is vital to the success of this circle. I encourage each of you to speak with intention, contributing purposefully, while listening with attention, focusing deeply on what others are offering, and to compassionately and consciously reflect on your words and actions throughout this process.

It is important also to acknowledge and respect each other’s confidentiality; therefore, whatever is shared today belongs to this circle and we must listen without judgment, while taking responsibility for our own participation and support of others. At any point in this journey, any of

* Vibeswatchers serve to monitor the mood of a meeting or council circle process and work to redirect the council energy if it becomes unproductive, argumentative, or uninclusive. While all participants should serve as co-keepers of the circle, it is helpful if one person is designated with this title to maintain the focus, call for moments of silence, or bring the group back to the agenda. A focalizer is an organizer who distributes information, prepares events, and serves as a conduit or liaison among members.

you may call for us to refocus our energy, take a time-out, have a moment of silence, or redirect our conversation more fully to attend to the groups' intentions or needs, recognizing that our process is emergent and flexible. As Beat Poet and popular San Francisco radio personality, Diamond Dave (personal communication), suggests,

*Cast a wide net
find a common thread
let life flourish
then
don't panic, keep it organic*

Whoever is holding the stick has the floor. If you would like to comment on what has been said, please address the speaker who can choose to respond to your request to talk or not. The purpose of employing a talking stick (or other object chosen by the group) is to build a space of deep listening; one can only speak when holding the stick. The process creates an order, rhythm, and structure as well as a pattern of listening as one must wait to speak; however, there is no obligation to talk and the stick can be passed in silence to the next person. By constructing the circle process in this way, everyone is invited to participate through voluntary involvement. The circle as a metaphor suggests that all parts are equal with no top or bottom, symbolizing cycles and patterns of movement that are emergent and flexible. In this format, each person will have multiple chances to speak and be heard.

Let's begin by checking-in with each other. For instance, you might share how you are doing today. What, if anything, is going on your life right now that you might be willing to share? Initial thoughts or responses to this activity? Or, if you are uncomfortable with these prompts, you might tell us a joke, describe what you are doing over the weekend, or relate something of interest to you in this moment as a way for us to warm-up. When the talking stick circles back to the teacher, there are multiple options for how to proceed. One can summarize what has been said, start another lap around the circle that starts a new conversation direction or continues what has been started, open up the space for a group discussion, abandon the talking stick, place the talking stick in the center to encourage anyone to redirect the focus, or ask specific people to clarify or continue discussing, among a variety of options.

Circle Process

I have had success surprising students by not introducing fireside chats in advance, but if one has limited time, I would recommend fully introducing the concept in a class session before engaging in one. Before moving forward, however, it

is important to consider if students would be receptive to this activity, if there is enough time in the schedule, and if a safe, supportive space can be facilitated to encourage trust, compassion, and listening. On the day of the the fireside chat, I ask students to help me ready the classroom space. Once I arrange the Christmas tree lights in a circle in the center, I invite students to sit on the floor around the lights. If students do not feel comfortable sitting on the floor, then desks or chairs can be arranged in a circle as well. I then turn off the lights and join the seated students. Ultimately, there are a variety of different ways fireside chats can be integrated within the classroom, such as:

Building Classroom Culture- This activity could be easily integrated into the beginning of a course as an “ice breaker” or introductory exercise designed to help students get to know each other better.

Check-In and Group Reflection- Fireside chats are a great way to see how students are doing and what stresses they are currently experiencing as well as to share how the course is progressing and more deeply explore how they are learning. This also offers an opportunity to better understand the group’s experience of the course as a whole.

Midterm Course Evaluation- Fireside chats can be a complementary activity to a midterm course evaluation (discussion, reflection paper, anonymous survey, or other feedback system). Once the responses are organized, teachers can address student concerns, obtain feedback on course content, and create an agenda for the remainder of the semester.

Discussing Specific Course Content- Fireside chats can also be utilized to engage specific course themes or content. Ask the students to provide a series of questions regarding reading materials or assignments and then narrow these questions to an agenda of two to four items, depending on the time. During the activity, each student could provide responses to these concepts.

Identifying and Managing Class Problems- This method is extremely helpful for opening up conversation regarding class issues. For example, asking, “How can we improve classroom discussion?” or “What makes a productive/non-productive discussion?” might be ways to approach silence or lack of participation by certain students in the classroom space.

Course Closing- Employed for this purpose, the fireside chat would serve to wrap up course content, to address concerns about grading, to answer

questions, to reinforce policy or expectations, as well as to provide space for students to reflect and comment on the class journey as a whole.

Mix & Match- Fireside chats employed throughout the semester as listed above and actualized between 1-3 times within a 15-week semester. However, employing this activity even one time would be beneficial.

There is no correct method for incorporating fireside chats within your classes; however, depending on the needs of the class, fireside chats can be organized to encourage open discussion with no predetermined topic or agenda, allowing for free-flowing discussion surrounding current interests and topics or focused on a predetermined series of topics or agenda. Some limitations of employing an open discussion may result in continued participation dominance of a small number of students and quieter students may still feel unable to participate; moreover, conversations can easily wander off track if not focused/mediated.

Employing a talking stick or other object can serve to limit or open discussion, focusing on one speaker at a time. This method works well with both open and structured agendas, allowing time for each student to voice ideas about general or specific topics. Some limitations of utilizing a talking stick include: less organic and immediate feedback to individual comments; students may still interject even if another is speaking; or some students may still attempt to dominate the conversation by taking more time to talk. Depending on the class size (up to thirty students works best) and session time allowance (allow 50 minutes to an hour or longer depending on the class size), it may only be possible to go around the circle 1-3 complete laps. A general discussion is beneficial at the conclusion to ensure that all ideas have been addressed.

To fully engage with all that fireside chats can offer participants, teachers and learners must be willing to jump into the unknown with openness, allowing the process to carry everyone into new places of awareness as no two circles are ever alike. This does not mean that all are equally invested in this agreement but are willing to compromise to accommodate the needs of the group. As Sartor and Young Brown (2004) instruct, with consensus, more voices are added to the overall conversation, offering new direction and clarifying questions as a result of having many different perspectives engaged equally. They further contend that consensus inspires increased engagement among learners because they experience a greater sense of belonging in the classroom as a result of being “heard, seen, and known” (p. 34). As Pranis (2005) states,

Entering a consensus process requires an attitude of exploration rather than of conquering or persuading. The deep and respectful listening to all participants resulting from the use of the talking piece makes consensus decision-making a natural outcome of the Circle Process. (p. 38)

Consensus processes allow each participant to uniquely contribute, deeply listen, give feedback, better understand the group ethos, identify patterns for change, while letting go of a particular outcome and attempting to incorporate and meet everyone's needs as fully as possible through creative problem solving (Pranis, 2005; Pranis et al., 2003; Sartor & Young Brown; 2004).

An important part of this process, however, is not only to learn how to design and facilitate a circle, but also how to be a compassionate member. Therefore, creating a guide for fireside chat conduct, stemming from a common vision, will help set the tone for the process. Guidelines should be arrived at by consensus (for more information about facilitating consensus in the classroom, see Sartor & Young Brown, 2004) and can determine understandings for maintaining focus and attention, respecting the talking piece or discussion structure, regulating the pace of the activity, as well as organizing spatial logistics and conduct guidelines for remaining in the circle, how and when to interrupt, when to open and close, when to break, and how to maintain these guidelines, among other options.

After students have checked-in during a warm-up circle lap, I usually begin with items on our structured agenda in an open discussion style. If we are using a talking stick, we make another lap around the circle, responding to what has been presented in the first lap, or we begin to discuss items on our agenda. Throughout this process, I serve as a facilitator to keep the conversation on track, regardless of the chat format. When our conversation starts to wrap up, I generally summarize the experience and/or incorporate some other type of closing ritual. It is extremely helpful and rewarding to incorporate a fireside chat debrief during the next class session. Multiple methods could be engaged, including: asking students to free-write about their experience, doing a question-answer-reflection session, creating an anonymous feedback form, or openly discussing reactions and suggestions regarding the previous conversations.

After facilitating this activity in multiple communication classes, I asked my students to evaluate the experience. I would like to share some of their responses, which I have grouped into four main categories, including: feedback, communication, space and atmosphere, and teacher-student interaction. Regarding giving and receiving feedback about the class, students stated:

"I believe that teachers get so caught up with sticking to the syllabus that they lose focus on the class. We are the students, so it's beneficial to get our feedback during the semester instead of at the end so that we can fix any problem to better the class for the rest of the semester."

"It made ideas seem more presentable due to the setting. I feel like this would be the most approachable way to receive student feedback. It was an amazing idea in general."

“This helped me better understand what is expected from us and how we can shape the class.”

“The campfire gives students a chance to sit back and reflect on everything we have done and therefore be more confident in the class.”

“I really enjoyed the fireside chat because it allows us to share our feelings about class structure thus far and to be vocal about how we want the rest of the semester to be.”

In these statements, students voice how meaningful it is for them to check in about how the course is progressing as well as having time to reflect on our shared process, while feeling confident that they can shape the next phase of our time together. The next statements show that students also expressed that this activity allowed them to be more “personal” and to communicate more openly about their lives and learning needs, thereby creating more enhanced opportunities for group dialogue:

“The campfire sets up a situation where people are free to express their concerns openly.”

“I think that it made us more comfortable with the open setting. We felt less like students and more like friends.”

“It was a more personal way to interact with not only you, but everyone else in the class.”

“This gave us a chance to just take a break from normal class work and just talk about how we feel. We had issues that needed to be addressed and this was the atmosphere to do it in.”

In the following group of comments, students focused their feedback on the space itself and how this activity shifted the classroom experience and atmosphere, suggesting:

“It was very nice to be in such a relaxed setting and just chat about the semester, breathe, and listen, and not be worried or anxious for once.”

“I loved it! I’ve never had anything like this in any class.”

“It changed the normal classroom setting into a comfortable and inviting group circle. We were much more talkative in this type of environment versus sitting in our desks as usual.”

“Being in the dark helped me feel more comfortable expressing myself. We should do this more often.”

Finally, students also commented on how this activity impacted teacher-student-interaction, highlighting the importance of feeling understood and heard by their teachers:

“This activity is beneficial because it allows the teacher to see that their students’ lives are stressful. It helps students express themselves.”

“I feel like most teachers wouldn’t care what the students think, but I saw that you really took an interest about what everyone had to say.”

“It was nice to be talking to a teacher who actually listens and understands students’ problems.”

While the above responses represent only a small selection of students’ feedback, as a whole, my classes consistently state that this activity is a more personal way to interact with each other and me in a relaxed, stress-free manner. In an average class of twenty-eight students, ninety-five to ninety-eight percent have responded positively to this activity, often offering important feedback on course content and direction as well as the circle process itself.

Closing Ceremony

Before integrating fireside chats into your classroom, ask yourself the following questions: What is my purpose for doing a fireside chat (building community, introductions, evaluation/feedback, enhancing another assignment, or other)? Will my classroom or meeting space be able to accommodate this activity? Will participants sit on the floor or in chairs or desks? Are there electrical outlets to support a mock campfire? Moreover, how often will fireside chats be incorporated into the course structure? What method (open discussion, talking stick, supplement to activity) might work best for our class needs? How will I introduce fireside chats and discuss the impact after completion? Answering these questions in advance will help you focus this experience to create a positive activity for all participants. I organize my fireside chats into the following phases:

Phase One – Preparation:

This phase includes gathering supplies and introducing the concept to participants. I suggest creating conduct guidelines as well as determining the focus or purpose of engaging in a fireside chat. I would also recommend fully explaining how the process works (e.g. talking stick) and determine what the group's goals are for this activity.

Phase Two – Opening Ceremony:

After the campfire is set up and students are sitting in a circle, I ask my class to begin by taking a series of deep breaths together - but a variety of opening exercises could also occur in this step. I incorporate mindful breathing as a way to engage everyone in a collective experience. During this step, I welcome participants, (re)introduce the activity, remind everyone about our conduct guidelines and discussion format, and then go around the circle one time to check-in.

Phase Three – Circle Process:

In this phase, the facilitator can call for another lap around the circle or open discussion, based on what the students have presented in the warm-up circle lap (in the case of an open agenda discussion) or we can begin to discuss items on our structured agenda in a discussion style. If we are using a talking stick, we might make another lap around the circle, responding to what has been presented in the first lap, or we could begin to discuss items on our agenda. In the next lap, the group can shift the conversation to exploring new ideas and course content or direction, devising a plan through consensus.

Phase Four – Closing Ceremony:

Throughout this process, the facilitator should keep the conversation on track, regardless of the chat format. When conversation starts to wrap up, you can summarize the experience and/or incorporate some other type of closing ritual or circle lap. I generally close with another round of breathing before exiting the circle. I often recite the following poem to end the activity:

Take what you need,
 give what you can.
 Where you can. When you can.
 However you can.
 In other words, lend a hand.
 And what happens then?

Strangers become friends.
Friends become family.
Family becomes community-
A community on the move...
That's the movement.
-Diamond Dave (personal communication)

Discussion

Fireside chats can create an extremely warm, personal space within a traditional classroom setting, offering opportunities for students to get to know each other and the teacher better, voicing opinions in a fun and informal manner, while providing important on-going feedback on the group's learning goals, interests, and needs; hence, this space has the potential to welcome and enhance communication and discussion about student and teacher expectations, thereby creating a community of student-teacher learning collaboration. The fireside chat, as a critical pedagogical tool, helps teachers and students to transform their learning community through a diversity of worldviews, experiences, knowledges, and learning goals, while recognizing the interconnectedness of the group. Moreover, fireside chats invite the personal, political, pedagogical, and performative to dance together like the cracking flames of a fire, burning brightly, extending warmth and comfort in sharing stories, making friends, and re-inventing learning spaces.

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