Selected Classroom Discussion Techniques from **Discussion as a Way of Teaching; Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms** by Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, Jossey-Bass, 1999.

The Circle of Voices

The circle of voices is an activity revered in Native American, First Nation, and Aboriginal cultures. It describes the very simple procedure of giving each person an equal chance to contribute to the discussion. As we note in Chapter Five, the circle of voices can be introduced in the middle of discussion to allow those who haven't yet spoken some time designated for their voices alone. When we use it to open a discussion, we do it in the following way.

Four or five students form a circle. They are allowed up to three minutes of silent time to organize their thoughts. During this time, they think about what they want to say on the topic once the circle of voices begins. Then the discussion opens, with each student having up to three minutes of uninterrupted time. During the three minutes each person is speaking, no one else is allowed to say anything.

Students can take their turns to speak by going around the circle in order or volunteering at random. Although the latter arrangement sounds relaxed and informal, we have found that the opposite is often the case. Moving sequentially around the circle removes the stress of having to decide whether or not to try to jump in after another student has finished speaking. An important benefit of using the circle of voices at the start of a discussion is that it prevents the development early on of a pecking order of contributors. Introverted or shy students, those whose experience has taught them to mistrust academe, or those who view discussion as another thinly veiled opportunity for teachers to oppress or offend will often stay silent at the beginning of a course. The longer this silence endures, the harder it is for these individuals to speak up. By contrast, in the circle of voices, everyone's voice is heard at least once at the start of the session.

After the circle of voices has been completed and everyone has had the chance to speak, the discussion opens out into a more free flowing format. As this happens, a second ground rule comes into effect. Participants are allowed to talk only about other people's ideas that were expressed in the circle of voices. A student cannot jump into the conversation to expand on his own ideas; he can only talk about his reactions to what someone else has said. The only exception to this rule is if someone else asks him directly to expand on his ideas. We like this simple ground rule because it short circuits the tendency towards "grandstanding" that sometimes afflicts a few articulate, confident individuals.

Circular Response Discussions

As we point out in the next chapter, one of the habits students find most difficult to acquire is the habit of attentive listening. The circular response exercise is a way to democratize participation, promote continuity, and give people some experience of the effort required in respectful listening. We learned of this technique from David Stewart (1987), who in turn learned of it from Eduard Lindeman (1987). In this process, students sit in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else, and each person in turn takes no more than three minutes to talk about an issue or a question that the group has agreed to discuss.

Speakers are not free, however, to say anything they want. They must make a brief summary of the preceding speaker's message and then use this as a springboard for their own comments. In other words, what each speaker articulates depends on listening well to the preceding speaker as much as on generating new or unspoken ideas. We often tell students they must respect the following six ground rules:

1. No one may be interrupted while speaking.
2. No one may speak out of turn in the circle.
3. Each person is allowed only three minutes to speak.
4. Each person must begin by paraphrasing the comments of the previous discussant.
5. Each person, in all comments, must strive to show how his or her remarks relate to the comments of the previous discussant.
6. After each discussant has had a turn to speak, the floor is opened for general reactions, and the previous ground rules are no longer in force.

Through this exercise, all participants must demonstrate that they heard and understood what the preceding speaker said and that their own ideas are at least partly prompted by someone else's. In circular response, no one can prepare remarks ahead of time because what each person says depends on paying careful attention to the words of the preceding speaker. Everyone is under the same expectation to speak clearly and listen attentively. This activity gives students practice participating in discussions where collective and cumulative understanding is more important than the contribution of anyone individual: The downside is that under the ground rules of circular response, there is really no obligation to absorb and review critically what anyone except the previous speaker has said or to keep track of the general direction of the discussion. So although this exercise is a valuable way to enhance listening skills, it has only limited value in fostering conversational continuity.

Circular response can be altered, however, to give at least a few students experience in tracking and summarizing the discussion and in identifying recurring themes. The adaptation is simple. The ground rules remain the same except that two or three students are designated as summarizers before the exercise begins. Their job is to listen carefully to all participant contributions, taking notes where necessary, and to end the exercise with a synthesis of the discussion's highlights. They recount key points and recurring themes, giving everyone involved some sense of the whole.

Snowballing

One way to make a discussion developmental and increasingly inclusive is to use a process called "snowballing" or "pyramiding" (Jacques, 1992). Students begin this activity by responding to questions or issues as individuals. They then create progressively larger conversation groups by doubling the size of these groups every few minutes until the large group has been re-formed. Here are the instructions students follow:

We are going to try something a little different today. It's called "snowballing," and it gives you a chance to think and talk about issues in a variety of configurations. Notice that there are some questions at the bottom of this sheet. Begin this activity by gathering your thoughts on these questions in private reflection. Jot down some of these reflections if you wish. After five minutes of solitary thought, you will begin a dialogue on the questions with one other person. After another five minutes, you and your partner should join another pair to form a group of four. You will continue the discussion for ten minutes and then merge with another foursome to create a group of eight. The discussion proceeds for twenty minutes this time, after which two groups merge again, and the process continues in twenty-minute intervals until the whole class has been brought together at the end of the session. The discussion can end when the class is reunited, or continue for a final twenty minutes (or however much time is available).

On the one hand, this exercise gets a lot of people talking to each other while retaining much of the value of small groups. It also contributes a festive quality to the class. People mill about excitedly and greet each other warmly as they meet in new configurations. On the other hand, snowballing can sometimes have a frenetic, disjointed feel. But sometimes the regular change of group membership is just the thing needed to shake students up a little.