



Circle Time and Restorative Practices: The important differences & similarities

Circle Time and Restorative practices have different purposes but complement one another

There's often some confusion about the difference between my *Restorative Practices workshops* and my *Introduction to Circle Time workshops*. I've written this to hopefully clear up some of the confusion, so people know what I'm talking about when I say 'Restorative Practices' and when I say 'Circle Time'.

So let's begin by way of establishing some loose definitions:

Circle Time is also known by many as *Circle Solutions (CS)*, *Circle Time Solutions (CTS)* or *Circle Work*. I use the term *Circle Time* firstly out of habit and secondly out of respect to its origins. When I train schools, I am training under the auspices of an organisation called *Circle Solutions* founded by Sue Roffey, a friend and colleague of mine.

Restorative Practices is also known as *Restorative Justice* or *Restorative Approaches*. Restorative Practices, as we have come to know it in schools, has its origins in Restorative Justice programs first developed in justice settings around the world. The form that we know it in today was likely pioneered in New Zealand and Australia, however, this is up for debate depending on who you talk to!

I first discovered Restorative Practices, but it was the work of Sue Roffey and Belinda Hopkins that helped me discover the importance of Circle Time to developing a restorative culture in a school; and why Restorative Practices and Circle time are so important to one another.

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Circle Time and **Restorative Practices** have different purposes but at the same time are highly complementary pedagogies. At the end of the day, they both have a raft of research proving that they build safer and more connected school communities and improve learning outcomes. They also both share a theory of psychology that explains why they work so effectively to build and maintain safe and peaceful schools.

I recommend that a school committed to developing a closer-knit, more caring school, develop their practice and understanding in both Circle Time and Restorative Practices. Which one they train in first will likely be determined by staff wishes. In my experience, there's no right or wrong way!

Some people use the terms **Circle Time**, **Circles** and **Restorative Practices** interchangeably, believing they are the same thing. I'm not convinced that this is a good thing. My experience has led me believe that we all need to understand the difference between *Restorative Practices* and *Circle Time*, so we don't confuse kids about what we are sitting in a circle to do. Let me explain with a story.

A number of years ago, I took on a grade 3/4 class in a metropolitan primary school. Their fantastic teacher went on leave in the last term of year. I wanted to continue running

Circle Time, as it was my understanding that they already ran Circles regularly.

Well, in short, Circle Time with me was a disaster. The kids were silly, unsettled and even sometimes deliberately unsafe. I didn't get it! I'd never had this much trouble settling a class into what is normally a fun, safe and engaging time. I was supposed to be an experienced Circle Time practitioner; after all, I trained other teachers how to do this stuff. I was rattled!

We forged on. Circle Times were short, five, sometimes ten minutes. I made sure activities were fun, punchy and I then closed the Circle Time before things went downhill. I followed the old rule of 'leave them wanting more!' Despite me accepting that Circle Time would not look like I had envisaged for this class in the ten weeks I would teach them, there was something amiss. The silly behaviour in Circle Time looked to be a result of anxiety in some students. They weren't feeling

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safe in the circle, particularly one little fellow who had severe language difficulties and a history of tricky behaviours as a result.

Then one of the kids told me something that shed light on the issue. This student told me that with their past teacher, Circle Time was a time where the class would sit in a circle after recess time where students would talk about what went wrong during the break. They would talk of being left out, getting in fights or arguments, being teased, the list went on. This was a restorative process, known to me as a 'Check in Circle'. Its intention: to repair harm and restore relationships in the wake of conflicts in break times. They called this 'Circle Time'!

I'm not criticising check in circles. When run by an experienced teacher, who knows the students well, check in circles are a great way to raise and deal with issues from break time, forge solutions and allow the class to begin lessons feeling much better. When run poorly, they descend into a malicious 'dob fest' that intensifies negative feelings, divides the class, creating factions and eroding community.

So, when I said 'Circle Time', the kids emotionally readied themselves for some difficult conversations and students with a guilty conscience thought 'Oh no!'

The result of this was anxiety and a host of resulting behaviours. This class thought Circle Time was about holding people accountable, discussing incidents of harm and trying to fix problems. All worthy goals, but under the wrong name. This class had not experienced Circle Time as a fun, connecting and engaging moment with peers and teachers.

The lesson for me: **kids need to know exactly what they are sitting in a circle to do.** If it is to talk about an incident, "what happened", hold people accountable "What were you thinking?" and "Who has your behaviour affected?" and "What will make this better?" then we are running a **restorative conference**. The kids need to know that the conversation will be about something that's gone wrong. Those who will be called to account need to be prepared and at least for-warned.

Circle Time is not a forum for dealing with the emotional fallout from specific incidents where people are asked to take responsibility and make amends.

Circle Time, also known as **Circle Solutions** or **Circle work** by teachers of older students, is a fun and interactive time where students sit a circle and engage in a range of activities, many of these are games. These activities are designed to mix students up and to get them interacting outside of normal social groupings. Activities also see students sharing ideas, thoughts and information with each other in pairs, threes, fours or as a whole circle, through processes such as sentence completion activities or go-arounds. In many classes, a talking piece is passed around the circle. When holding the piece, students can have a say on a particular topic. Circle Time operates on three very important principles: *inclusion*, *safety* and *democracy*. These principles underpin all interactions in circle time, as well as the rules of circle time.



Relationships and cohesiveness naturally build and student behaviour improves as the class come closer *into community* with each other, sharing and aligning values.

Curriculum and social and emotional learning can be delivered in Circle Time because of the high levels of engagement and interaction.

Sometimes, class groups may use Circle Time to discuss issues that affect the whole group BUT with the understanding that there is no naming, blaming or shaming. Circle Time is not a forum for dealing with the emotional fallout from specific incidents where people are asked to take responsibility and make amends. Tricky issues that affect the class might merely be 'put out there' during circle time to get individual's thoughts and feelings, and to help the group see what the prevailing

thoughts or values are in relation to a topic or challenge. An experienced teacher will cleverly facilitate the circle to ensure that it doesn't turn into restorative conference. If it is clear that an issue that was raised in circle time needs a restorative resolution, a conference will be planned for another time.

During restorative conferencing, specific language and questions based on the Restorative Conference Script are used. The person facilitating the conversations asks a set of scripted questions to those involved in an incident.

A commitment to regular Circle Time, at least once per week, takes class groups to a point where Restorative Practices will work much more effectively because:

- An ethos of caring and understanding has developed among students and staff
- Students have become accustomed to working in a circle and have developed circle skills like listening to each other, withholding judgement, taking turns to speak, responding succinctly and using a talking piece
- Students have built a level of familiarity, even relationships with one another that they will consider worth *repairing* when conflict damages those relationships.

Restorative Practices are a range of approaches that usually involve structured conversations between people who've been harmed and those responsible for causing harm. These interactions normally happen in the wake of disruption, conflict or harm. These interactions might be called **conferences, restoratives, restorative chats, class conferences** etc. Conferences vary in structure and formality, depending on the nature of the incident being addressed and the number of people who need to be involved.

In Restorative conferencing, affected people are called together (usually in a circle), to talk about an incident, the harm or upset caused, people's thoughts and feelings at the time of the incident, since the incident and in the present. The conversation is then directed by the facilitator to how those involved think the harm might be repaired so people will feel better and move on.



These conversations range in formality from a quick chat between a teacher and student to address some mow-level behaviour (an individual

conference), right through to a meticulously planned and prepared formal meeting that can run over several hours (a formal conference). Written agreements (conference

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agreements) sometimes come from restorative conferences and become the centrepiece of an

ongoing process of review. Sections of my first book “Working Restoratively in Schools” are dedicated to the ins and outs of managing these conference agreements and ensuring successful post conference information sharing, follow up and review.

During restorative conferencing, specific language and questions based on the **Restorative Conference Script** are used. The person facilitating the conversations asks a set of scripted questions to those involved in an incident. The focus is on maintaining respect, but also allowing people to talk honestly about the harmful behaviour and the impact it’s had. People are asked to take responsibility for their behaviour and work with others toward repairing the harm. As mentioned before, these processes sometimes end with the writing of a formal conference agreement between those involved outlining how harm will be repaired and what the new behavioural expectations are.

So how do these two get confused?

Simply put, they both happen in a circle. Also, as I mentioned earlier, there are trainers in Restorative Practices (very good and experienced trainers), who call conferences ‘circles’ or even ‘circle time’, which causes a great deal of confusion. It’s of course not intentional, but for some, particularly those new to working restoratively, or running circle time in their classes, this blurs the important lines between the two.

Restorative Practices and Circle Time do have a common psychology of emotion

In the first paragraph, I mentioned that Circle Time and Restorative practices share a theory of psychology that explains why they are both so effective at building and maintaining safe and peaceful schools.

Circle Time maximises shared positive affect in a community setting. We do fun and connecting things with others that are interesting and enjoyable, and because we are in a circle where we can see one another's faces, these affects become incredibly contagious.

The late Psychologist Silvan Tomkins PhD, developed *Affect Script Psychology (ASP)*, a brilliant and complex theory of human emotion and cognition that explains, very effectively, why Restorative Practices and Circle Time work. If Tomkins could have lived to see how ASP has been applied as a construct to explain and deepen our understanding of

Restorative Practices and Circle Time, he would have very pleased.

In Affect Script Psychology, Tomkins proposed that all humans are born with nine innate, *biologically pre-programmed* motivational programs. These programs develop in our nervous system before birth, and run continuously from the day we are born. Tomkins called these the *innate affects*.

Tomkins' 9 Innate Affects

Interest – excitement
Enjoyment – Joy

Surprise – Startle

Fear – Terror
Anger – Rage
Distress – Anguish
Disgust
Dismell
Shame – Humiliation

These *affect programs* are the biological (inborn) basis of emotion. Their purpose is to direct our attention to whatever is important within our environment at any given moment. Put simply, affects are the gateway to attention. Tomkins taught us that nothing (no stimulus), can come into our conscious

awareness (be perceived), unless it first triggers one of these nine affect programs. Affects tell us what is urgent and motivate us to act to ensure our survival.

We are born into our human lives with the propensity to survive, and the nine innate affects kick in immediately to help us do so, moving us to cry, connect, and learn. There are nine affects, each containing its own unique experiential signature, each attaching a specific type of meaning to

information as it is taken in, stored and recalled. Affects are the inborn protocols that, when triggered, bring things to our attention and motivate us to act. Affects are not the same as emotion. They are the biological system that underlies emotion

(The Tomkins Institute website: www.tomkins.org)



The first two of these innate affects, *interest* and *enjoyment*, feel good and are inherently rewarding. We want more of these.

The third affect, *surprise*, feels neither good nor bad; it merely

puts our system into a state of sharp awareness to whatever is

coming next. The remaining six affects: *anger, distress, disgust, dissmell and shame*, feel different shades of awful and are inherently punishing.

Tomkins proposed a very important theory that he called the *central blueprint*. This blueprint dictates the motivations of all humans, every minute of every day. Because we have evolved with an affect system with some affects that feel good and some that feel bad, each human is motivated to:

Tomkins' Central Motivational Blueprint:

1. Maximize positive affect: *do more of what feels good*
2. Minimize negative affect: *do less of what feels bad*
3. Both of these actions work best when all affect is expressed: *allow the expression and sharing of affect*
4. Anything that helps the performance of these three rules is good for human life; anything that interferes with them is bad for us

This is how we humans come to 'want'. When we can balance these 4 imperatives both individually, and collectively, we do best.

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contagious. We catch these affects from others as they express them, and we also express these affects freely. Tomkins called this phenomenon *mutualising affect*, which feels great when the affect being shared is positive and brings us closer into community through our combined *interest in enjoying ourselves*. We create feelings about one another that are based in the positive affects of *enjoyment* and *interest*.

This shared positive affect is critical to building connected communities. When there is a sense of *genuine interest* in one another as well as a *genuine interest* in how *interested* others are in us, things go better and the inevitable relational hiccups tend not to turn into earthquakes.

Contrast this with a classroom where individuals have become self-interested and care little for the interests of those around them. Small conflicts quickly escalate because nobody can be sure if others have a genuine interest in their needs. Negative affect (shame, fear, anger, distress, disgust and dissmell) dominate and drive behaviours that further maximise negative affect. In these places, social capital is low and people become unwell in all sorts of ways, including teachers.

Restorative Practices serve us well when the social connections that bind us through the affects of *interest* and *enjoyment* are compromised by conflict or wrongdoing. This is of course inevitable from time to time. When someone acts in a way that triggers any of the negative affects in others (shame, fear, anger, distress, disgust or dissmell), these affects need to be expressed (in line with central blueprint imperative 3). Harm and conflict throws our central blueprint out of balance, and we can no longer maximise positive affect and minimise negative affect.

We tend to become preoccupied with trying to minimise negative affect and may withdraw from our community, or act in ways that are awfully out of character as a result.

Restorative practices work to have humans work together to appropriately express the negative affect related to a harmful event, or series of events (central blueprint imperative 3), so we can all become *interested* in repairing the harm caused, and return to a situation where positive affect can return and

negative affect be relieved. This is a social process and is based in our earliest *attachment scripts* that tell us that other people are our best relief from negative affect. Other humans can be the greatest form of distress but also the greatest source of relief as well when problems are dealt with relationally.

I hope this has been helpful in drawing some important distinctions and similarities of Circle Time and Restorative Practices. Please feel free to contact me if you'd like some more information on what I've said in this article, or if you'd like to find out about some training in these areas.

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