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Journal article

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# Yarning Circles in the Literacy Classroom

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The teacher and year 5 students (9.5 to 11 years old) sat in a circle on some logs in the corner of the schoolyard, silently contemplating the positive changes they could make in the local community (see Figure 1).

Teacher: Just start to think about what you want to say about how to make places more happy and healthy. We've walked through different natural and urban places in the community and observed what makes places happy and healthy. Now we get to say something for the future.

Some of the children had their eyes closed, and others were tracing patterns with sticks in the dry dust as they contemplated. There were no sounds of children – only a chorus of crickets, varieties of birds, the whispering of the breeze in the eucalyptus leaves, and even the sound of our own breathing.

Teacher: In a big voice, I want you to share with the group what you came up with in your reflection. Who wants to go first to? [Female student picks up message stick in the center of the circle of children].

Sarah<sup>1</sup>: I was thinking, like, some more bins around schools, and also more trees, because there's lots of litter. More trees so more birds come [returns stick to ground in center of circle].

Teacher: That's great, Sarah. Thank you. Who's next?

Jacob: [takes stick from center of circle] Um, put prices down a little bit...like cars and all the good stuff, like, furniture [returns stick to center of circle].

Michael: I was thinking of more buses, and more train stations near us, because there's not enough train stations around my area, yeah.

Emily: I was thinking of more car parks for people, because at the hospital my Dad couldn't find a car park. And I was thinking... more play areas, and more green grass.

Joshua: They should put more [car] parks in the school because some people have to park all the way across the road.

Hannah: Put more [safe] playgrounds in, 'cause people keep get getting hurt over there. And they could widen our roads, and put more paths in.

## Pause and Ponder

1. How can we negotiate cultural diversity more consciously in our classrooms?
2. How can oral language practices contribute to literacy learning?
3. How can you extend your current repertoire of literacy practices to include the valued oral language practices of Indigenous communities?

<sup>1</sup> Names are pseudonyms



**Figure 1 Yarning Circle with Year 5 Students**

Matthew: I was thinking about shopping centers. They could lessen the amount of plastic bags they use, and have [pause] reusable [pause] bags. They could lessen the amount of plastic bags they use, and have [pause] reusable [pause] bags.

Teacher: Great! [returns stick to the ground]

This particular example of the yarning circle became the basis for the students' script writing about how to improve local places, which the children presented at a local community conference.

We think the lagoon is a safe, friendly, and happy place... If we were community leaders we would make...more green spaces so we can relax and protect our environment

This is just one of many excerpts of writing that the students produced after formulating and sharing their ideas in the yarning circle. Sometimes the children's ideas were more reflective and personal, and at other times they formulated ideas to be shared publically through a range of modes (e.g., words, images, audio) and text types. In this article, we answer the following questions: What are yarning circles? Where did yarning circles begin and why use them? How do teachers implement yarning circles?

### **What Are Yarning Circles?**

The yarning circle is a speaking and listening practice that can be used for reflecting on new experiences or for rehearsing ideas in preparation for writing or drama activities. Oral language is a foundation for children's reading and writing (Mills, 2009). Speaking and listening activities have long been used in classrooms as a rehearsal for writing. Teachers have adapted the yarning circle for many literacy purposes, such as to generate ideas when introducing new content or study areas for factual writing, to reflect on learning experiences, or to discuss ideas from a literary text.

### **Where Did Yarning Circles Begin and Why Use Them?**

The oral language tradition of the yarning circle is often used among Australian Indigenous communities and is sometimes called *Dadirri*—inner deep listening to the land (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002). The yarning circle extends from the traditional Murri "Bora"—a circular ceremonial space for communal gathering and sharing (Bennet-McLean & Dutton, 2004). It has also been identified as a traditional practice among Indigenous people in Canada and North America, including among the Lakota and Ojibwe (Umbriet, 2003).

Miriam Rose, an Australian Indigenous author, writes:

In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions. We learnt by watching and listening, waiting and then acting. (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2002)

Watching, listening, and learning through community gatherings, and from direct experiences, are practices that facilitate learning. The “message stick” that is passed around the group is used in *Dadirri* (yarning circle) to reflect on the richness of Indigenous history and culture (Davis-Warra et al., 2011). An Indigenous teacher and leader of Community Durithunga introduced the yarning circle to our students to engage them in understanding Indigenous ways of experiencing the world. We began by introducing ourselves one by one using the message stick.

The children were then led to a large Indigenous art mural on the school walls where they were encouraged to view, touch, and ask questions about the visual meanings. We returned to the place where we had begun the yarning circle and passed a sprig of eucalyptus leaves around the circle of students, rolling the leaves between our fingertips, and breathing in the fragrance to heighten our sensory awareness of the land. Then we were invited to take the message stick from the center of the circle to reflect and talk about the symbols observed in the mural. An Indigenous student confidently took the lead, having being socialized into this practice in her community.

### **How Do Teachers Implement Yarning Circles?**

The aim is to create a safe, nonjudgmental space to discuss an experience or issue, allowing children to speak without interruption. Speakers and listeners engage equally in sharing personal insights that are acknowledged by the group. The only material needed to implement the activity is a message stick—traditionally a wooden cultural artifact with symbolic etchings of significance to the tribe. However, any object of cultural significance to members of your class is suitable. Yarning circles only take 10 minutes, depending on the number and length of contributions, and can be conducted indoors or outdoors. Before beginning the yarning circle, the teacher establishes the practice:

1. The teacher opens the topic or purpose of the yarning circle.
2. The speaker picks up the message stick from the center of the circle and brings it back to his or her original place in the circle.
3. Only the person holding the message stick can speak.
4. Others listen with respect.
5. The message stick is returned to the ground in the center of the circle to signal the end of a speaker’s contribution.
6. The next speaker takes the stick and shares his or her experience, without criticizing earlier contribution.
7. Any person can have the opportunity to speak or choose to only listen.

The Indigenous oral tradition of the yarning circle highlights the bodily dimension of human communication (Shilling, 1993). For example, the circular formation of the group, whether all standing or all sitting, means that children and the teacher can have eye contact with anyone in the circle, interpret facial expressions, and interact as part of a unified group. Through equal participation in this community practice, children learn to be responsive and aware of their physical relation and connectedness to others. This bodily engagement in communication contributes to the shared understandings generated in the yarning circle.

We conducted the yarning circle during an excursion to a local lagoon. This was to heighten children’s sensory awareness of natural places—information to be included in their information reports about the local area. Seated in

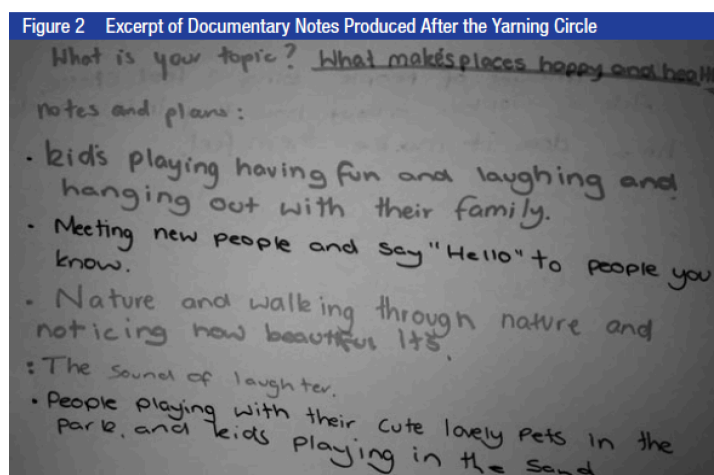
a circle, we first closed our eyes silently for three minutes to become more attuned to the sounds and associated feelings in our bodies that are commonly ignored in the rush of daily life. The teacher used prompts such as, “Listen to the loud and soft things, close things and things that sound far away.” Then the children used the message stick to vividly describe the sounds they had just heard, forming an exchange of heightened sensory memories and feelings

Narratives Example: Share a story of importance to your community
Information Reports Example: What do we know about the turtle?
Description Example: What did you see, hear, and feel in this place?
Persuasive Texts Example: What are some reasons why we respect others in our community?
Instructions Example: What rules are important in our community?
Transactional texts (e.g., interviews, apologies, vote of thanks, invitation, emails) Example: What questions do we want to ask when we interview people in our community?

Table 1: Yarning Circle for Literacy

(Sunderland et al., 2012). Students were reminded to listen carefully to others, and each child’s contribution was original and different to previous observations. This activity enabled all children to comfortably contribute, and many of the students drew on the yarning circle when they constructed texts

Similarly, yarning circles can prepare students for speaking and writing for a range of purposes and genres—narratives, information reports, recounts, persuasive texts, instructions, and transactional texts (see Table). For example, the yarning circle described in our introduction prepared the students for writing documentary scripts in pairs about changes needed in the local community. A written outline of key points for a documentary script by Alexis and Ethan is shown in Figure 2. Once they had edited the scripts, the students practiced expressively reading their script aloud, and these vocal performances were audio recorded with the assistance of an adult.



### Listening, Reflecting, Rehearsing, and Responding

Yarning circles provide a context for students to use spoken language to develop their reasoning, formulate ideas for their factual writing (e.g., interviews and documentary scripts), and reflect on issues in depth, as illustrated in the following recorded yarning circle discussion.

Teacher: What sort of things happen with your health, well- being, and happiness when you’ve got plenty of

money?

Matthew: The environment you live in.

Teacher: Yes—good one Matthew, very good. What kind of place would it be, do you think?

Matthew: A very big house, with a big yard.

Teacher: Have you ever lived in an apartment or a flat?

Matthew: Yes, once. Back in Russia we lived in an apartment because... there weren't many houses, because it's, like, too cold to have houses with big yards. So no backyards, and there's just, like big apartments.

Teacher: Is it really different here than in Russia?

Matthew: Yeah ... there, it's really cold and it's like, a lot more complicated. I don't know how to explain it. Like a lot worse... A lot more... a lot of people living without a house, and a lot of people don't want to work, and not many people want to pay the taxes.

Teacher: That's really insightful, isn't it? Did you hear that? It's really different to this country [Australia], and Matthew has made his own observations about why it's different. That's a good word—*complicated*. It's a great word, isn't it—to describe the social situation

In this example, the teacher provided Matthew with extended time to share, while asking questions that provide a mechanism for him to elaborate further, formulate, and share his ideas. This group dialogue was a crucial opportunity for the learners to make connections between their diverse social and cultural experiences and the texts they produced. Research has demonstrated how talk, combined with writing, enhances the retention of knowledge over time (Mercer et. al, 2004). During yarning circles, students can listen, reflect, rehearse ideas, and respond to others in a context that is safe from criticism.

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