



LISTN

Language Instruction Support and Training Network

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Conversation Circles | Instructors' Bulletin

Conversation Circles

Organizations are starting to add conversation circles to their roster of settlement service offerings for newcomers. These informal settings can be a great, casual way for students who are otherwise unable to attend formal LINC classes to practice a new language, meet new people, and learn about the community. Conversation circles can be accessed through local libraries, community centres, schools, and immigrant serving organizations.

Several conversation circles are now available in the LINC community, and students can benefit from these additional opportunities to enhance their English language skills—especially listening and speaking—outside of regular LINC-class hours. In addition, clients who are on waitlists or have other barriers to class attendance might access the more informal conversation circle setting for language support and a designated time during which they have to use English. As many LINC students are surrounded by their own languages, conversation circles are also a great option to develop connections in the community while practicing English.

Facilitators who run conversation circles are usually volunteers. Participants might drop in or register for a set number of sessions. There are many variations of a conversation circle, and participants have different reasons for joining.

Different Models of Conversation Circles

Demographic Groups

Some conversation circles specifically target such as seniors, parents, youth or gender specific groups. This could be because of funding, the organization offering the conversation circle, and possibly due to the location. For example, a conversation circle at an elementary school might target parents whose children go to that school.

Advantages of a demographic group-based circle are that participants will have more in common, the topics can be more focused on participants' needs, and there may be an increased level of comfort.

Leveled Groups

Some conversation circles group participants according to language level. Some might conduct a formalized pre-assessment whereas other groups might have participants assess themselves. Some circles might only accept participants who have achieved a specific CLB level. While having participants of a similar level might be the most useful grouping, it might not be an option for drop-in conversation circles. Also, even within a leveled group, participants will still have varying abilities.

Theme-Based Conversation Circles

Some conversation circles may have set curricula, themes, or specific topics; for example, some conversation circles might only on topics such as citizenship or the workplace. Conversely, other groups might be very casual and don't require much preparation or materials.

These are some of the different models of conversation circles. Anyone wanting to start a circle should consider these different components and adjust according to the specific context.



Conversation Circles. Photo by Laurelville Mennonite Church Center for Flickr. Released under CC-BY-2.0

Conversation Circles

Some Challenges of a Conversation Circle

Multi-level groups

Ask participants to come prepared. Provide materials ahead of time so that when participants come to the conversation circle, they are all on the same page. Pair participants strategically.

Low-level groups

Think of conversation circles for low-level groups as dialogue practice circles. Use handouts and write things down for participants to see. Keep topics and questions simple, and focus the conversation at the level of the group.

Fluency vs. Accuracy

In a conversation circle the focus should be more on fluency than accuracy. Don't interrupt participants to correct them as this could disrupt the flow of the conversation. Make a note of common mistakes and review later.

Best Practices

- Be prepared:* Facilitators and participants should come to the conversation circle organized and ready.
- Have patience:* Remember that facilitating an ESL conversation circle means that participants will need extra time to process and think of what they want to say.
- Be supportive:* Facilitators and participants must be understanding of and helpful with each other.
- Be flexible:* Things won't always go according to plan. This isn't an issue provided the conversation is meaningful to the participants.
- Be positive and relaxed:* Speaking another language is scary. If you are relaxed, your participants will also be relaxed, and they will get more out of the session.

More Resources

Conversation Group Facilitators Workshop

<http://j.mp/convogroups>

An excellent Prezi about facilitating conversation groups at the Mamie Doud Eisenhower Public Library. It covers general best practices useful in any context.

Hot Topics: Conversation Starters for ESL Classes

<http://j.mp/eslconvostarters>

A list of several conversation topics—food, customs, jobs, etc.—and starter questions. Compiled by the Washington English Center.

Key Principles



Settlement At Work has an excellent Toolkit for ESL Conversation Circles. Below are the key principles they highlight.

- Respecting the experience of adult learners is one of the cornerstones of adult education.
- Learning is an exchange between adults who trust and respect one another as equals.
- Learning must be relevant to the learner's life.
- Adults learn best when they are actively involved in choosing and organizing what they will learn.
- Adult learners respond to positive reinforcement and a physically and emotionally comfortable environment.
- Learning begins with attention to the learner's strengths and successes rather than deficiencies and failures.

Read more at <http://j.mp/cc-toolkit>.

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