

Morning circles in class

Short guide to morning circles
and non-violent communication



EN

Introduction

How many times did you spend the first 15 minutes of class by talking to your students instead of teaching your subject, who wanted to share with you and their classmates about their weekend or what presents they got on their birthdays, complain about having lots of homework or how they failed on a test? Still, more and more schools are starting to implement morning circles into their daily schedule as an alternative to class lessons. Maybe, you only started and do not know how to manage it. You are holding a short guide to morning circles on how to make it work, what to not forget, what to avoid, what to prepare etc.

When we both started with morning circles as homeroom teachers with our sixth-graders and eighth-graders, it was a difficult period, fights, yelling and sanctions. We had many years to learn every day from our experience: meet in a non-violent spirit of friendship, humour and joy but also in trouble. Gradually, we implemented it into our lessons during group work, we combined morning circles of two classes together at once and we introduced evening circles during class trips. Through this, the students were able to learn how to bear more responsibility for their conflicts, feelings and needs, they learned to manage circles themselves, and bring self-evaluation instead of marks and much more.

Bulletin about Morning Circles is another in our edition of inclusive topics, which Inkluscentrum publishes as a practical guide on the adventurous journey to inclusive education. Creating morning islets of meetings between children and class teachers is at the same time an effort to improve interpersonal relationships and reflection as the centre of attention in the teaching process. A unique form of these kinds of circles is also the philosophy of Non-violent Communication (NVC) from Marshall Rosenberg. However, the position of the teacher in this model of teaching is definitely not being diminished, it is quite the opposite. Instead of the position of a leader, the teacher becomes more of a guide and a facilitator of relationships and communication, which greatly strengthens self-directed learning and shared growth.

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What is a morning circle?

- **10-15 minutes of an informal and simple gatherings** "here and now" of the homeroom teacher with the students, while this activity is fully implemented into the compulsory schedule every morning, e.g. from 8 AM to 09 AM before the beginning of the first lesson (5x a week, i.e. 45 minutes a week = 1 as a "class" lesson),
- **bringing everyday joy and worries**, the morning mood of the group before starting to learn,
- mutual sharing of feelings and needs (morning way to school, bad sleep, conflicts from the previous day, test coming up, etc.),
- **gradual building of relationships** from a firm structure with rules to more freedom and responsibility of students (self-governed circles);
- a space where authenticity, trust, and listening (by teachers as well) plays a key role, building of a new inclusive school culture,
- gathering, which can significantly enhance classroom relationship, rules, behaviour, and learning process.

"If there is something difficult waiting for us at school, I will find out here how my classmates feel."
—seventh-grader

"One of my best experiences is when all of us are laughing together."
—eighth-grader

What is the role of the teacher?

- according to C. Rogers, teachers should be mainly:
 - i. **authentic** – speaks honestly about his feelings, is himself a part of the circle,
 - ii. **emphatic** – tries to understand and not evaluate the feelings/experience of others,
 - iii. **facilitative** – facilitates communication and understanding of all,
- with its approach, he can create a safe space and trust between the children,
- sets an example with his own way of communicating and behaving,
- especially at the beginning, the teacher helps to transfer the students' expressions into non-violent communication, and cares for their feeling and needs,
- cooperates with the school support team to specifically support children at risk.

"You are such an idiot!" (a girl in the classroom addresses her classmate, who previously insulted her.) "You are angry that Martin talks to you this way, and that is why you answer in a similar manner. Martin, you talked to her this way, because right now you two have a bad relationship..."
— the teacher calls out what she sees and perceives without any judgment

"Ms. Teacher. Andrea is late to our meeting again!" (angry student) "You are angry because you would be glad if all you were together from the beginning..."
— the teacher translates the student's expression

How to preserve discipline within the circle?

- **Safety** – at the beginning, it is very important to insist on the agreed rules and make sure to follow them (even with possible penalties) initially, the work and communication are structured, the teacher gives the floor, various techniques are used, or rituals, and gradually the communication becomes more of an open and spontaneous interaction;
- **Only one person speaks at a time** – so the thoughts of every student could be expressed and heard;
- **The rule of raising hands** – if there is a need for silence in the group, the teacher or any student can ask for silence and attention by raising his hand. At first, it takes some time to silence the group, therefore it is necessary to train the group in becoming silent;
- **Do not comment** – the opinion of every class member is respected. His perception can differ from that of the others, some can disagree, but still hears him out;
- **The right not to speak** – it is an important way of showing respect. When we give a question to the group everyone has the right to not answer. We do not judge nor do we allow anyone else to judge. Sometimes we can encourage someone to speak;
- **We only talk about ourselves** – describing my own feelings and experience. If I want to point to someone else's behaviour that I did not like, I will say, e.g.: "When you yelled at her, I felt uncomfortable";
- **Students always like those kinds of rules that they themselves helped to establish** – in the group more rules can be gradually added with the help of students, for example, during feedback, students point out to excess shouting: "What will we do the next time so it can be better?"

How to develop communication skills?

- **students often do not know how to express their feelings,** discern anger, sadness, joy. Therefore, initially the teacher should transfer their statements into non-violent communication, he asks less and expresses/ guesses more with three dots at the end: "...I hear, that on your way to school, you experienced real adventure, it must have been difficult...".
- on a big paper, we write all of our feelings, which the children can recognize and describe during which situation they felt it (I am bored when someone talks longer),
- giving students cards with feelings according to NVC and when they talk about their experience, they chose a card with the corresponding feeling,
- for teachers, there is a training in Non-violent communication and for students, there are many different activities, there is even a whole program dedicated to training in Non-violent communication.

"My best experience was every circle, where we solved our quarrels."
— fifth-grader

"The best thing is that each of us can say how we feel."
— fifth-grader

"During the morning circles, we have to be careful to not talk over each other, insult or wild promotion of one's own opinions, and overall, the teacher must maintain his authority..."
— student, anonymous survey

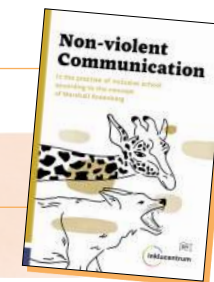
"We can talk about difficult things and classmates always help or advice you."
— student, anonymous survey

Four steps to Non-violent communication

The students and the teacher need to learn the four basic steps to Non-violent communication, i.e. to know how to describe reality without any kind of assessment, express your feelings from the variety of feelings, needs, which are (not) fulfilled, when... and finally express our wish, if we need something from others. Non-communication is great for expressing an appreciation.

- 1 Observing** – camera eye: What do I see? I describe what kind of behaviour I see, but I don't judge. (When you said, when you did, I saw, I heard),
- 2 Feelings** – what are my feelings in this situations (I feel... It bothers me that... I like.... I do not like... I feel angry... I am uncomfortable... It worries me... I am sad... I am glad...),
- 3 Needs** – from which un/fulfilled needs do my feelings come from, description of consequences of the observation and experience from my situation (Because, it causes me..., I miss..., It makes me feel..., Because of that I...),
- 4 Wishes** – what would I like to achieve, a proposal for situation resolution (What if we could agree... Please, could we... I suggest, that next time we can...).

More information to the topic can be found in **one of our bulletins:** inklucentrum.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Bulletin-Nenasilna-komunikacia.pdf



How to ask questions? From questions to reflection.

- it is necessary to avoid manipulative and closed questions ("Do you like... Would you want... It is difficult, when... Do you agree with what I said...?"),
- start the question in a way, that leads the student to answer more broadly: "What do you need to feel more secure on Slovak lessons? Why do you think that? What is it exactly that made you angry in his speech? What is your strong side? What do you value in your classmates?"
- the teacher creates a space, so that all the students can ask questions and he does not focus on giving questions directed toward him,
- giving questions is a helping tool in the beginning, gradually, asking becomes less important, even undesirable. Behind questions there is curiosity, we demand answers. Gradually and targeted, we create an environment for real self-expression of students in a form, that will be their own and not required/moderated by us.

"Few times I led the morning group, while I was substituting. I was surprised to learn, how student can use the space, they just need a simple question and mutual respect and 10 minutes is gone. And you are left with this nice feeling for the day."

— the principal

How to make sure not to exceed the time?

- morning circles are a place for sharing, starting a day, it is a short meeting,
- if a conflict occurs, which we cannot resolve right away, we will **meet up later during the day**,
- if there is a difficult issue to deal with, something hard, personal, the teacher will catch the student after the circle to **talk privately**, and in case it is serious, it is necessary to get advised or even move the case to a school psychologist,
- **not everyone has the time to talk within the circle, at least in the beginning**, when the children learn to listen to each other but at a certain point it is possible, e.g. we can use different techniques: work in smaller groups or in pairs and later have short joint sharing through "speakers", 1-10 intervals, smiley faces. The centre of universe, shared drawing on one big paper, cards...

"The most important thing I perceive is patience. The first weeks we were only training our discipline, I was very directive: everyone showed their fingers to express show they were doing and then I gave the floor to 2-3 students to tell us with words, at the end I praised the circle, if it was pretty successful that day. Later we added other techniques, so that eventually it was more free, and I went to the morning circle to relax as well, because I didn't have to direct anything anymore, but I became a nice part of the circle."

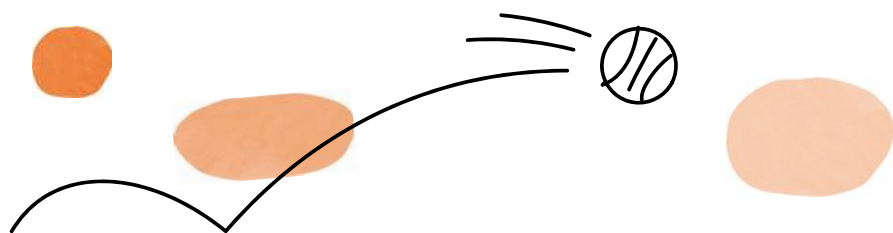
— class teacher



"I mean, people won't always get the floor."
— student, anonymous survey

Techniques I.

- **Scaling** – Show, on your fingers, how you feel today, with what setting are you starting this day. If 1 is the lowest, 10 is the highest. Thumb can be an alternative (thumbs up = great, middle = don't know, down = bad), the attitude (the lower to the ground, the worse I feel). With groups of 20+, we recommend 1-5 fingers. We can change the scale (e.g. today we will assess our feelings from yesterday's trip, 1 is the best, 5 is the worst);
- **Cards** (e.g. more emotions, cards with stories, any cut out pictures) – We will ask the questions and everybody chooses a card that describes your answer/feeling. More children can share one card. If there is not a lot of time and the group wants to talk, we will choose 4 cards, we will place them within the classroom and each one will stand up next to the one that is the closest to them;
- **Small ball/talking thing/hat** – the one, who holds it – talks, when he finished, another one takes it or it stays in the middle. Students can also give questions.;
- **Story** – on one paper, the teacher writes students' answers, each will say a word/sentence, and the student to his right continues (it can be a specific topic or a free one);
- **Dance** – one student, or a group of students will prepare choreography for their classmates as a morning warm-up.



Techniques II.

- **2 truths and a lie** – everyone will write two truthful one false statement about themselves, others guess, which one is false;
- **Who am I** – every student writes one thing about themselves, that nobody else knows about them, the teachers draw the papers (the advantage of the time limit, not all papers have to be drawn) and the group guesses who it is about. Another version is when we write a name of a person on the board, one student stands with his back to the board and by questions to the group he tries to find out whose name is written on the board (there can only be yes/no answers);
- **The centre of space/scale** – something reminding us of a monument is put in the middle of the circle (if there is not enough space in the classroom, the window can be the monument and the scale can be the path from the door to the window). The teacher or student says a statement and everyone stands as close to the monument as much as he agrees with this statement.

"A person can talk about almost anything with the others. In the circles, we can resolve our conflicts and many other things."
—student, anonymous survey

"At the beginning, I was very scared about how it will go, if I won't get complaints from parents or the teachers won't see it the same as me. However, because I have given teachers enough freedom on how to spend the morning time with the kids, I have given them enough time to learn and adapt and did not push them into anything, I think it was helpful that it gradually became domestic in every classroom."
—the principal

Risks

- **discipline** – it is a process, the teacher gradually and to a limited extent creates greater freedom and helps to promote responsibility,
- **not everyone is heard** – there are techniques on how to ensure that everyone will be heard, but because the children meet every day during the whole year, talking one by one, eventually everyone will get the floor. Not everyone has to talk, that is alright, it is a process. Initially, when we start, there is a pressure, because there is a space that everyone wants to use, but eventually they learn how to use it effectively,
- **work with silence** – there is not always relaxed atmosphere mood, or it takes longer for the student to respond – we should not be scared of silence, sometimes the group only needs some time to take a stand, get some courage, or just experience the present,
- **depth of the content** – the morning circle is not a therapy, it is important not to go too deep at least in the beginning, to not stir emotions, express empathy and sensitive topics close very carefully and subsequently ask for advice or help from the school psychologist,
- **teacher as a commentator and moralizer** – if the teacher switches the role of a facilitator for the role of a commentator of each statement from the children or constantly talks about his moral thoughts and in good will comments on everything, he will fill the space too much. If a student does this, it can be sensitively reflected, or the class will give him feedback,

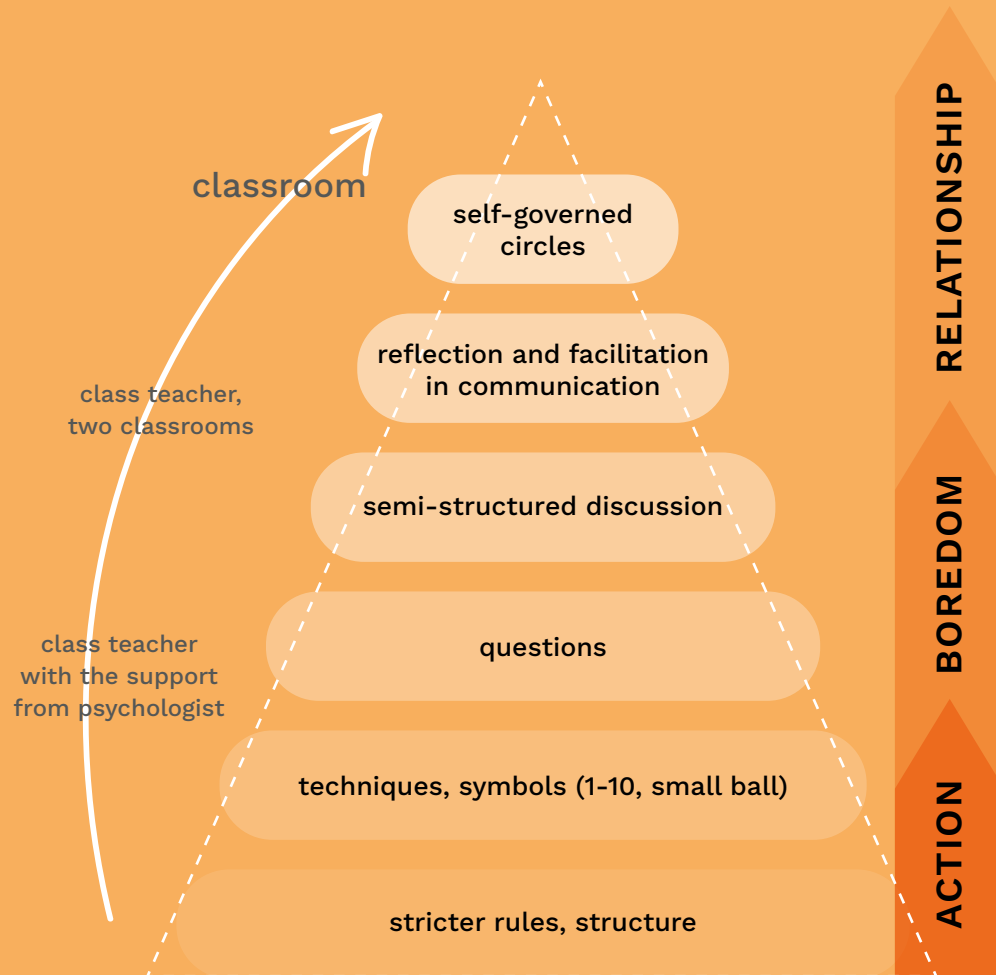
- **safe space** – there is many different levels of safety between people. The more students feel safe, the more they are willing to resolve conflicts, try new ways of communication, reveal their feelings and therefore take some risk as well and get out of their comfort zone. If students reject to talk to each other during the morning circle, it can suggest deep mutual distrust, that the teacher needs to reflect on.

"At first, I thought of it as a lame jaw-breaker from our teacher, who forced us into it, but later I noticed we have learned to talk in a manner that does not allow any insults and lets us argue wisely."

— ninth-grader



The development of morning circles



Inclusive education helps to reach the full development of potential for each person

"I had a really difficult class of first graders and for three months I was not able to get them together and learn to listen to each other. One day, I had this great idea to get them together once a week in a morning circle with ninth-graders and their homeroom teacher. Regular meetings broke out into fantastic intergenerational relationships outside of the class as well, pairs were created with one younger and one older student, the morning circles gained momentum, and as teachers, there was two of us – one facilitated and the other helped to maintain discipline."

— first-grade class teacher

"I love when I have the opportunity to talk to people, whether something is good or bad and share my feelings or listen to someone else. Morning circles just put a smile on your face :)."

— seventh-grader

"I noticed on myself many times that I was angry and mean to everyone, but my teacher helped me during the morning circle to realize it and open the conflict, which I recently had with my classmate."

— sixth-grader

"The language of non-violent communication was very hard for me. In the beginning, I had to be more quiet, if I wanted to be non-violent :). At first, I made lots of mistakes, but I was learning to reflect on myself and come back to it with others as well. Later I was successful at expressing myself and even learned to help others translate their offensive statements into understanding their own feelings and needs. It is a great experience to then see how the student is disarmed and moved when I express understanding and also disagreement without any threats or criticism."

— class teacher

We cover Inclusive education

Inklucentrum – The Centre for Inclusive Education is an advocacy, educational, consulting expert organization on a national level, working in the field of support to inclusive education. It is dedicated to supporting quality and humanistic education in the school environment for the benefit of development of potential for all children, families and the school staff. It provides support, consulting and education in accredited programs and workshops, especially for pedagogical and professional employees.

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