

## *Organizing and Maintaining University-Wide Teaching Circles<sup>1</sup>*

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One of the most rewarding activities in which I have participated at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) has been organizing and maintaining teaching circles. A teaching circle is a group of persons who meet and talk about teaching and issues related to teaching. I first heard of teaching circles while attending the Southwest Regional Conference for Teachers of Psychology, where one of the conference attendees mentioned that she participated in a teaching circle at her institution.

How teaching circles came to be part of faculty life at SFA was due to some fortunate circumstances. Our university had been part of the American Council of Education's project on Institutional Change in Higher Education, and I was one of the committee members for that project. At one of the round table forums, I happened to sit at a table with several faculty from around our campus interested in teaching issues. I mentioned the idea of teaching circles, and a brainstorming discussion ensued. We proposed the idea of teaching circles at SFA to our Vice-President of Academic Affairs (VPAA) and received permission to start university-wide teaching circles. That was the easy part.

The good news is that, although it does require some time and effort, organizing and maintaining teaching circles is not horribly onerous. If you like the idea of teaching circles, but don't feel comfortable starting at the university-level, organize a circle in your department, or with faculty who you know personally across campus. Perhaps over time you and a few others might feel comfortable trying to increase participation across campus. I encourage wider, as opposed to narrower, teaching circles because I feel strongly that gaining perspectives from faculty in different departments has been one of the reasons our circles have been so successful. One important advantage of campus-based circles is that circle members often become friends with faculty across campus as a direct result of their participation in the circle. In a more global sense, I think it makes those of us involved in the circles feel like we belong to a university-wide community rather than to isolated departments.

In this essay, I will outline some properties of our teaching circles that I believe make them successful. I will then share some of the lessons about teaching circles that we have learned.

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<sup>1</sup> Scharff, L. F. V. (2003). Organizing and maintaining university-wide teaching circles. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2002* (Chap. 8). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>

## Basic Organization

A coordinator oversees activities across all campus teaching circles. Each circle has a facilitator who helps organize the meetings by sending e-mail reminders to circle members, sometimes obtaining and distributing readings, and sometimes sending discussion summaries so they can be posted on the teaching circles Web page. (These discussion summaries provide an idea of the variety of topics and readings that have been part of our circles.) Circles tend to have between 3 and 8 members in addition to the facilitator.

Circles meet once a month for one hour. Thus, depending on the calendar, there tend to be 3-4 meetings per semester. Some circles have opted to meet more often. The times and facilitators for the circles change each semester. When organizing the circles, my goal is to always offer some variety of times and days when the circles meet in order to maximize the number of people who might potentially participate.

Some circles have themes that guide discussions all semester, although most circles have very different discussion topics each meeting. Sometimes circles discuss a book or readings; however, most circle discussion is based solely on what is in the members' heads at the time. The meeting place is generally the facilitator's departmental conference room, although some circles have met in other places, such as a local coffee shop.

## Teaching Circle Coordinator Duties

A few weeks prior to the start of the semester, the teaching circle coordinator confirms who will facilitate the circles for that semester. I get 2 or 3 preferred meeting times from each facilitator and then set up a schedule that offers the best variety of days and times for everyone involved. After confirming the facilitators and their meeting times, I send an e-mail to the teaching circles e-mail list announcing that its time to sign up to participate in a circle. My e-mail list has grown over the years to include about 150 of our approximately 450 faculty at SFA. The list contains anyone who has participated in the past, plus other faculty and instructors who have asked to have their names on the list. I remove anyone as soon as they ask to be removed. Faculty reply to me by e-mail in order to sign up for their preferred teaching circle. I make a list of those individuals and forward it to the facilitators. I also update our Web page each semester so that those interested can also see what circles are being offered at what times and who is in them. When I receive the discussion summaries from the facilitators, I post them on the Web page. Based on input from faculty, I occasionally organize speakers and workshops. When I come across items of general interest, I may forward them through the e-mail list or through the current facilitators.

## Facilitator Issues

When recruiting potential facilitators, I make sure that they know exactly what is expected of them. The most important facilitator duty is to keep circle discussions from becoming merely gripe sessions. It is all too easy for most of us to complain about our problems regarding students, administration, and so on. My thought is that a teaching circle should offer more than just a place to vent and commiserate with like-minded colleagues. It should also serve as

a wellspring of ideas to inform our teaching. Although facilitators are instructed to allow a little venting, they know that the emphasis is on productive discussions of teaching issues, drawing on group member's combined teaching experience to address the issues at hand. I stress that facilitators do not need to feel like they are experts on all (or even any) teaching-related issues. Mostly they are there to facilitate and guide the discussion, not to lead it.

Once the circles are formed, the facilitators are in charge of their individual circle organization. I send them an e-mail list of their members, and then they contact the members about the specific dates and locations of the meetings. I strongly recommend one to two reminder e-mails be sent prior to each meeting.

### The Web Site

In our first semester of the teaching circles, I set up the teaching circles Web site (<http://hubel.sfasu.edu/otherendev/tc/teachcir.html>). It is not very fancy, but it helps communicate what teaching circles are about, and makes it easy for faculty to find out about the current circles and any other related events that might be scheduled. The Web site has also helped recruit new circle participants because I have coordinated with the SFA Web master so that there is a link to the site from the faculty page for SFA.

### Recruiting Circle Participants

At SFA, participation in the circles is voluntary. We encourage all participants to bring friends, and to tell others about the circles. Occasionally I attend the SFA chairs' meeting so that I can ask the chairs to tell their faculty about the circles. It is important that faculty know that their chairs support their participation in teaching circles (although some chairs do not). Faculty are more likely to see participation in the teaching circles as a good use of their time for both personal and professional reasons (an activity to report on one's annual review) if they know that their chair supports their participation in the circles. Finally, I attend the New Faculty Orientation session and talk about teaching circles.

### Bringing in Speakers and Holding Workshops

Several times I have coordinated with individuals both on and off campus to organize talks or workshops related to teaching. Because these are university-wide circles, I choose speakers carefully so that the topics aren't too narrow to be useful for the faculty at large. Our VPAA has been very supportive of the teaching circles and has paid for some travel and honoraria for presenters and for refreshments at the workshops. The workshops are a good way to help increase the visibility of the teaching circles. I make them open to everyone, not just those who have participated in teaching circles. I also make sure there is an article in the school paper, which means more people are likely learn about the circles.

### Lessons Learned and Other Things to Keep in Mind

The first semester that we held teaching circles at SFA, a wonderful chair from another department coordinated recruitment. She contacted other chairs and asked for names.

Unfortunately, many of the names given to her were those people that the other chairs felt should attend the teaching circles, rather than individuals who wanted to attend (many of this latter group did not learn about the circles until later). Obviously, such a recruitment strategy would lead to problems, both in participant attitude and attendance. Needless to say, we did not take that approach again.

Facilitators can be difficult to recruit. Many of my colleagues from around campus enjoy being participants in the circles, but hesitate to be facilitators. Often they claim that they do not know enough or are too new to teaching. Some seem afraid that it will take too much time. The best solution I have found for this problem is to assure potential facilitators that the discussion usually leads itself; the facilitator's job is to keep the discussion on track and do what they can to avoid the discussion turning sour. To help new facilitators to get started, I share articles with them if they need fresh topics for their circles. Once a facilitator has "led" discussions once or twice, they almost always report that it was easier and more enjoyable than they expected

We do not take attendance. I stress this point during sign ups. Although it's just one meeting a month for only an hour, many faculty feel that they do not have time for teaching circles. In addition, many faculty who are interested are very active in all phases of their work, which means they have many other meetings, conferences to attend, and so on. So, I encourage (over and over again) that they should sign up and attend as many meetings as they can. I think such an approach encourages people to sign up, which is the first step toward participation.

Realize that some circles will be more successful than others. This is an especially important point if you are starting with only one circle for the whole campus. Many factors influence a circle's success: member personalities and how well they mix (or not), unavoidable scheduling difficulties, social skills and organizational abilities of the facilitator, location of the meeting (room atmosphere, how far people have to walk to get there), and so on. I try to talk to circle facilitators and participants so I know how well the circles are going. If participants are not happy with their present circle, I suggest that they switch circles or try a different one the next semester. Be positive. Have unhappy attendees talk to a faculty member for whom the experience was good. That way you reduce the likelihood that they will drop out of the circles.

## Summary

Teaching circles are a fantastic means by which to create a sense of community among faculty who care about teaching. Participants in our circles often report feeling isolated in their departments before they joined a circle, and that their participation helps them realize they are not unique in some of the issues they face. Further, it revitalizes faculty and gives them new ideas and techniques to try in their classrooms. Even faculty who do not believe that they are currently struggling can benefit, sometimes simply by sharing, and sometimes by gaining ideas that they had not considered previously. Thus, teaching circles are worth the effort needed to organize and maintain them.