

The Uses of a Modified Talking Circle for Encouraging Dialogue among Oneida and Hobart Community Members¹

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Background:

The relationships between the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin³ and the Village of Hobart in northern Wisconsin near Green Bay have been strained off and on for many years.

One issue concerns the Oneida Nation's desire to acquire land within the formal tribal reservation boundaries but also within Village boundaries and convert it to "trust" land. Hobart community leaders are concerned about Oneida acquisition of land presently on the Village's tax roll and convert it into land held by the US Government in trust for the Tribe. That trust status of the Tribal land would remove it from the tax rolls of the Village, which could lead to increased property taxation of the remaining private landowners in the Village.

Another issue is which governing unit has authority over planning and development concerning land which lies within both jurisdictions.

There have been at least six court actions (many more, if appeals are counted) involving the Oneida and Hobart communities as plaintiffs or defendants since 2003, costing their governments an estimated combined total of more than \$2 million in legal and court fees in the past six years alone. There have been other negative encounters. There have also been instances of communication and cooperation since 2003, but they have often been constrained by mutual distrust.

This paper describes modified Talking Circles for dissolving tensions and encouraging respectful dialogue, at least to some extent. The purpose of the paper is to provide a record of the Oneida/Hobart talking circle experience which the participants can use to inform others of how that experience evolved and with what effect.

Some of the core theoretical expectations which have evolved to date can be summarized as follows:

¹ The opinions and descriptions of events contained in this paper are those only of the authors, and do not represent the views of participants in the Talking Circle, nor of the Village of Hobart, the Oneida Tribe of Indians, Terra Institute or the Wisconsin Humanities Council. Any errors are the responsibilities of the authors.

² Supported by Terra Institute and the Wisconsin Humanities Council.

³ In this paper the term "Oneida Tribe of Indians" is equivalent to the term "Oneida Nation".

The expectation is that application of Talking Circle peace-making among Oneida and non-Oneida Hobart community members will.....

- Encourage respectful dialogues*
- Dissolve tensions and improve trust*
- Strengthen Oneida/Hobart mutual understanding and local institutions for infrastructure investments and other community improvements.*

Modified Talking Circles

Through consultations with leaders of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin and Village of Hobart, a team from Terra Institute and Consensus Development, LLC⁴, with some financial support from the Wisconsin Humanities Council, undertook a project to use Talking Circle concepts and procedures to encourage the two communities to find ways to overcome past tensions through respectful dialogues.

Gradually a more specific desirable “outcome” for the project emerged⁵—*establish a new organizational structure wherein Oneida and Hobart community members engage in continuing respectful dialogues and in strengthening mutual understanding.*

While the project was being discussed, the Wisconsin Indian Education Association encouraged the involvement of high school students from the Oneida and De Pere High Schools as observers of the Talking Circles to provide opportunities for the Talking Circle participants to demonstrate to students and teachers the value of respectful dialogue inherent in the process.

The principles of the talking circle as adapted for these conditions encourages talking together where:

- Everyone is respected
- Everyone gets a chance to talk without interruption
- All participants explain themselves by telling their stories
- Everyone is equal – no person is more important than anyone else

Everyone sits in a circle facing each other, without a table or other furniture between them. Respect is very important in the Circle:

- Speaking with respect
- Listening with respect

“Circles allow people to balance ancient wisdom about being in community with modern

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⁵ An “outcome” is defined as a change in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution. See: Sarah Earl et. al. “Outcome mapping: building learning and reflection into development programs”, IDRC, 2001, page17. See http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1- DO_TOPIC.html.

wisdom about honoring individual needs, interests and differences”⁶.

To summarize the relations between the Tribe and Village:

- 1) There have been positive experiences of Tribe and Village meetings during the past decade, as illustrated by the Service Agreement signed in 2004, but terminated in 2007, the Guardian Pipeline Project in 2005, and the information meeting arranged by the Tribe in 2007 which ended in a call for cooperation.
- 2) Meetings with less positive outcomes included the Reservation Roads Program in 2007, the termination of the Service Agreement in 2007, the Biomass plant re-location in 2011, and the suspension of the first meeting of Goodwill Neighbor Gathering in 2012.
- 3) Lawsuits—at least five have been initiated by the Village directly or indirectly against the Tribe, and one initiated by the Tribe against the Village. The village appealed the storm water fee assessment case to the 7th District Appeals Court and then to the Supreme Court, and the Village claim was denied in both appeals.

How can respectful dialogue and practical cooperation be encouraged in the relations between the Tribe and Village?

A Modified Talking Circle as Consensus Development—April 10, 2014

In late 2013, some Oneida and Hobart residents expressed interest to Leland Wigg-Ninham about applying the principles of “Talking Circles” to encourage respectful dialogue and cooperation among members of Hobart and Oneida communities. Terra/Consensus Development staff invited interested people from both communities to participate in a Talking Circle on April 10, 2014 at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall in the Town of Oneida.

Some invited participants had been involved with the Goodwill Neighbors meeting in 2012, but others agreed to come to a modified Talking Circles meeting out of personal interest after being consulted by Leland Wigg-Ninham. People were invited to participate as individuals, expressing their personal beliefs and knowledge, and not as representatives of other organizations. Elected leaders and staff from the Village of Hobart and from the Oneida Nation were not included in this initial meeting.

Leland Wigg-Ninham, Consensus Development LLC, facilitated the organization of a Circles based workshop involving residents from the Oneida and Hobart communities to encourage dialogue and cooperation to resolve issues in a respectful manner⁷.

Being a private meeting in the VFW Hall, no uninvited people attended.

⁶ www.project-nia.org/docs/Peacemaking_Circles_overview.pdf. For access to publications on origins and uses of talking circle ideas, contact Living Justice Press, <http://www.livingjusticepress.org>

⁷ Leland’s mentor on consensus development is Bob Chadwick, of Consensus Associates based in Idaho. For an idea of Bob’s concepts for developing consensus through talking circles see: Bob Chadwick, 2010, “Beyond conflict to consensus: an introductory learning manual”, found on: <http://managingwholes.com/chadwick.htm>

Parallel with the modified Talking Circles was the involvement of 10 students of history from De Pere and Oneida High Schools who were invited to observe the April 10th session and participate in the discussions as desired. Under the guidance of their teachers and based on their observations of the modified Talking Circle, the students produced educational materials for use in their high school classrooms to acquaint students and faculty with Talking Circles, using the Oneida/Hobart Workshop example. Students observed how the principles of Talking Circles can be used to encourage respectful dialogue on Indian/Non-Indian relations as well as how to apply such principles in other situations in schools and elsewhere.

The ground rules for the conduct of the consensus building workshop on April 10, 2014 were:

- 1) People who participate in the workshop will do so as individuals, not as representatives of any organization
- 2) Participants will express their personal viewpoints and perspectives.
- 3) There will be no blaming or accusations against any other participant
- 4) One person speaks at a time
- 5) Everyone listens with respect
- 6) No foul language
- 7) Participants will review reports that the students may prepare.
- 8) If participants think that a part of a student report misrepresents their views, the report will be modified to the satisfaction of the participants before producing a final product.
- 9) No material describing the Workshop discussions will be produced to the detriment of any participant or of any organization.



Figure 6: Talking Circle on April 10, 2014 at the VFW Hall

As the participants entered the hall, the facilitator team greeted them, and invited them to take a cup of coffee and a donut. While this was going on, Leland placed posters on the walls to orient

participants to the origins of “conflict” and the importance of learning new perspectives. People could look at the posters and talk informally, part of the greeting process.

POSTER 1: Conflict Generators

- Rapid Change
- Perceived Scarcity
- Power Struggles
- Diversity
- Incivility
- Ideology

POSTER 2: Welcome to a learning environment. If you are...

- Apprehensive...
 - Uncertain...
 - Anxious...
 - Frustrated...
 - Impatient...
 - Uncomfortable...
 - Self-conscious...
 - Irritated...
- BE AWARE!! You are ready to learn!!!

The meeting began around 8:30 a.m. under the coordination of Leland Wigg-Ninham.

GREETING

The facilitator started the meeting with a Greeting. The purpose of this segment of a Talking Circle is to help participants:

- Meet friends and strangers
- Make personal contact, reducing role perceptions and stereotypes
- Reduce feelings of intimidation
- Release the energy of anxiety and apprehension
- Balance power
- Foster a sense of community, belonging
- Create a learning experience
- Foster “self consciousness” and its acceptance

Artley Skenandore offered some “good words” in English about respectful dialogue in English and in the Oneida language. Artley’s opening gave the group words of encouragement, and asked the Creator to help the participants to listen to each other with good minds and open hearts.

GROUNDING

The facilitator initiated the next segment of the modified Talking Circle called “Grounding”.

This segment:

- Assures that each person speaks, establishing a verbal territory
- Fosters listening with respect
- Fosters a sense of equity and fairness
- Engages the “whole brain”:
 - Left Brain---Logical thinking
 - Right Brain—Feeling
- Allows apprehensions and concerns to be expressed
- Fosters a sense of safety and security
- Provides initial information to the facilitator
- Encourages the expression of hidden agendas

In a single inclusive Circle, each person introduced themselves and their relationships with Oneida/Hobart. The purpose was to establish a group environment for people to speak and listen respectfully. The facilitator discussed the two parts of our brains—the analytical and the emotional--and the importance of engaging them both in the dialogues.

FIRST SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION—DEFINITION OF “CONFLICT”

Two groups with 5 people each (plus student/teacher observers) were formed randomly (while in a single circle, people counted off 1-2-1-2), with a group facilitator and recorder selected by each group. The intent was to create balance by grounding the participants in the thinking and feeling process, applied to the discussion of a specific question: “Define conflict and what do you feel about it?” Each group discussed, and recorded points made by participants on flip charts.

Each group facilitator presented the points from the group discussion to the inclusive Circle.

This introductory exercise around the definition of “conflict” mostly served to encourage people to speak and listen using the rules of the talking circle. During this session, however, one participant introduced the idea of “dissolving conflicts” rather than resolving or mediating conflicts. This way of conceiving an outcome of respectful dialogue subtly recognizes that the elements of a dissolved conflict remain in the environment, requiring a degree of care to keep them from combining again in the future.

Second small group discussion—Evidence of conflicts between Oneida and Hobart communities

Using the same two groups, the task the facilitator defined was to discuss “What is evidence of conflicts between Oneida and Hobart and what do you think about them?” The two groups discussed and recorded main points on flip charts.

Each group facilitator presented the points from the group discussion to the inclusive Circle.

This session started to get at sensitive topics. People mentioned general and specific evidence of Hobart/Oneida conflict as: Lawsuits; Polarized communities—people use “we/they” terms; Understanding vs misunderstanding of “sovereignty”; Inclusion/exclusion practices of both; lack of service agreement; land/taxes; Tribe wants more land; lack of representation on governmental units; borders—alien to tribe.

POSSIBILITY THINKING

The facilitator presented the basic ideas of “Possibility Thinking”

- Both worst possible outcomes and best possible outcomes of the workshop are present, or inherent, in the present situation and can be fostered.
- Worst possible outcomes: Feared future outcomes, often experienced in the past, with presently experienced emotional, chemical and physical responses that tend to foster the feared outcomes.
- Best possible outcomes: Desired future outcomes, sometimes not previously experienced but vividly imagined in the present, with presently experienced emotional, chemical and physical responses, which tend to foster the desired outcomes.
- The task of the following two group discussions was to define worst and best possible outcomes of this workshop concerning Oneida/Hobart relationships.

WORST POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF THE WORKSHOP

Again in two small groups, the discussion question for community participants was: “What are the worst possible outcomes of this workshop?”

Students were asked to describe the worst possible outcomes from continuing conflicts.

Each participant in the two small groups recorded privately on 3x5 cards their worst possible outcomes of the workshop. Students also recorded worst possible outcomes from the conflicts affecting Oneida and Hobart communities. Then each participant handed their card to facilitator, who read each worst outcome to the inclusive Circle. A brief discussion ensued of “worst possible outcomes”, including:

- Time and effort wasted. “We all leave Circle, go home and nothing further gets done, no establishment of next steps, goals.” That our time and effort was wasted and unproductive.”
- Negative emotions expressed: Anger, feelings of inferiority or embarrassment within oneself; lack of respect of others; fear of one group by another; expressions of hostility; sadness about lost history and bleak future;
- Continued deterioration of relations between Oneida and Hobart communities: Oneida might take over Hobart; violence, racism, mistrust, threats grow, more segregation rather than communication; more lawsuits.
- Disappointed students: “The youth here have not learned from this group”; “The students have this same conversation in the future”. One student expressed fear of eventual civil war, involvement of military, State legislature interventions.

BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF THE WORKSHOP

In the next segment of the workshop, the facilitator asked the two small groups to consider the question: “What are the best possible outcomes of the workshop, and what do you think about them?” Again in the two small groups, each person recorded their best possible outcomes from the workshop on 3x5 cards. Then each handed cards to the facilitator, who read each best outcome to the inclusive Circle. The comments can be grouped into three categories: 1) improve mutual understandings; 2) build new relationships between the communities; and 3) continue the talking circle of the workshop.

1) Mutual understandings improved

“We acknowledge the problem centered on land and concept of land”;

“Acknowledging Oneida Nation sovereignty as strength”;

“The Oneida and Hobart people learn to accept each other’s way of life”;

“We’ll all live in harmony, feeling good not only ourselves but the next generations in the future”;

“Better focus on what the points of difference are, and the willingness to make concessions for the good of all”;

“A relationship of respect is formed and upheld within all future generations”;

“Understanding of the opposite viewpoint, with our elected and appointed officers”;

“Chose to learn the true Indian clan histories to understand what we have been through as the indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere”;

“We would become friends and some sort of family”; and

“Gifts of the earth—work together as fellow human (families) neighbors—not Oneida versus Hobart.”

2) New relationships between Hobart/Oneida communities:

- Creation of a declaration of relationship between Oneida Nation and Hobart
- Structured co-governance (service agreement, public services shared)
- Groups of Hobart citizens meet with Hobart Village President to encourage communication with Oneida Tribe and also decide on common goals
- Group of Oneida representatives meet with Tribal Chairman to encourage them to meet Hobart Board to work on problems/conflict resolution
- Get government leadership community together to consider recommended solutions
- Both sides can make small sacrifices and draw up a sensible conclusion that both sides can be happy about

3) Commitment of the workshop group to continue dialogues

- Establish next steps/goals
- Brainstorm solutions to each conflict or obstacle
- Communicate joint recommendations to each government and both communities
- Take this technique back to our neighborhoods—let this talking circle be a good example for future meetings.
- That we listen respectfully to each other, come to consensus, agreement on the issues
- The best possible outcome would be that we did community activities and social gatherings

TOWARD ACTION

The final discussion session addressed the question: “What are the strategies, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes to foster the best outcomes?” Some suggested strategies/actions for encouraging the best outcomes from the Talking Circle were:

1) Foster communication and trust among both communities’ residents

- Continuous meetings like this one
- Meet and do things together
- Joint activities
- Calendar share (events on the calendar) —media Oneida/Village
- Discussion-encourage dialogue
- Joint programs
- Identify our accomplishments

- Develop communication networks
- 2) Improve understanding of histories of both communities
 - Study Oneida history 1820-present
 - Look at how Indian peoples struggled with being forced from their lands. New York and Wisconsin. Past treaties
 - Expand curriculum in schools to teach history of all our neighbors
 - Put aside past struggles, these weigh us down, cause sadness, prevent us from moving forward, to allow mutual understanding
 - Consider both communities' histories to benefit future and find path forward
 - Ask for respect as to how Tribe lost their land
 - 3) Encourage empathy among residents of both communities, understanding of different perspectives
 - Start with one person at a time, neighbor-share-empathize-heal
 - Practice empathy
 - 4) Find means for co-governance of Oneida/Hobart land
 - Look at solutions, i.e., mapping possible re-drawing of Tribal and Village boundaries
 - Negotiations with local government and Tribe
 - Put land into trust—both communities agree

ENDING

In the inclusive circle, the facilitator asked each participant: “what did you think of the workshop, how do you feel about it, what did you learn about how to be successful?” The group agreed to meet again on May 8, 2014 to make specific plans of action and bring another person to “widen the Circle”.

Gladys Humecki provided some closing thoughts and best wishes for future efforts.

1) Honoring of participants

Individuals were invited to step into the center of the inclusive Circle, where their contributions to the workshop and community were individually honored.



Figure 7: Honoring of Circle Observer

May 8 Talking Circle—Move toward action

The objective of the May 8, 2014 Consensus Building Workshop was to define what actions by whom and when can help produce the best outcomes for both communities.

Each of the two student groups presented their summaries of the events which transpired at the April 10th Workshop. The Oneida High School summary was in the form of a video: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/22285543/Talking%20Circle.mp4>

The De Pere High School History Club summary was in the form of a Power Point: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/22285543/The%20Talking%20Circle%20April%202014%20De%20Pere%20High%20School%20Draft.pptx>

Two Discussion Groups were formed following the student presentations.

Question for both: What actions should be undertaken to assure the best outcomes?

Ideas which emerged concerned the formalization of the talking circle, the production of an education/communication program, and promotion of inter-community linkages.

Formalization of the Group:

- 1) Restart Good Will Neighbor Gathering (GWNG), in format of a Talking Circle—flexible topics
 - a) Need Hobart and Oneida leadership.
 - b) Shared topics: drugs, gangs, crime, health
- 2) Recruitment of active members is urgent for Good Will Neighbor Gathering
 - a) Mailbox stuffers
 - b) Newspapers
 - c) Church bulletins
 - d) Present at Neighborhood Watch
 - e) Place information on web sites
 - f) Free stuff or raffle

Promote communication/education:

- 1) Education on the Indian and non-Indian cultures
 - a) Continue Talking Circle with student groups
 - b) Use GWNG to foster education
 - c) Newsletter from GWNG?? Present a current issue with both sides, as a discussion with each other, Problem/Solution
- 2) Open Forum with public speeches
- 3) Educate/inform history of Oneida/Hobart (newspapers)
- 4) Offer lectures in history of Oneida and Hobart in schools, and in other venues
- 5) Media outreach after next round of elections. Topics of interest addressed at joint media sessions, print media co-authored by Tribal Chair and Village Administration
- 6) Publicize the efforts of the Talking Circles
- 7) Calendar share for both communities in Green Bay Press Gazette, Kalihwisaks

Encourage inter-community cooperation:

- 1) Incorporate/joint ventures with Pulaski A.C.E to facilitate community wide events (e.g. Easter egg hunt)
- 2) Economic growth, shared effort in a vacant building
- 3) Observe each other's political processes (council meetings). This may be put on the shelf until later
- 4) Leader (Village President) to Leader (Tribal Chair) conversations
- 5) Promote social events

Plenary:

Both Groups met together to produce Workshop refinements for coming actions to be undertaken, first to re-start GWNG.

- 1) Hobart/Tribe together in Talking Circle

- 2) Facilitator alternated in each meeting
- 3) Sally will send out requests to GWNG via email for new leaders
- 4) Each person bring one other
- 5) Let Oneida/Hobart officials and media know that GWNG is restarting
- 6) Press release—David draft for review by Art, Sally, Chris, and Pete
- 7) Next meeting, VFW, June 12, 1:00 p.m., Leland as facilitator

Epilogue

This project officially ended with the May 8 workshop. However, progress has continued after that date toward producing the outcome of creating a new organizational structure for useful and respectful dialogues among Oneida and Hobart community members.

The GWNG met again on June 12 with 16 people in attendance of which six people were new to the Talking Circle, to discuss a plan of action for the GWNG about how to improve relations.

A fourth GWNG meeting was held on July 10 to discuss: ***Racism/Reverse Racism/Tolerance/Race Exclusion***, but with only eight people attending. Leland Wigg-Ninham continues to be a facilitator but is gradually fading into the background after training others in that role. The July 10 meeting was facilitated by the participants themselves, without Leland being present. A functioning GWNG is a major positive outcome engineered by a group of people committed to finding ways for the Tribe and Village to use their combined resources for the well being of the Hobart/Oneida community.

It is more difficult to define what outcomes emerged pertaining to the two groups of history students and their teachers. As far as outputs are concerned, as specified in the grant agreement, the two groups of history students produced their two summaries of the April 10 workshop which are available to their teachers for future classes.

The Oneida student video can be seen at:

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/22285543/Talking%20Circle.mp4>

The De Pere student power point can be viewed at:

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/22285543/The%20Talking%20Circle%20April%202014%20De%20Pere%20High%20School%20Draft.pptx>

But what about outcomes? The preparation of this report certainly was influenced by these two products in that what the students observed. Their observations certainly strengthened the content in this paper.

Several participants commented that the presence of the students in the workshops was rewarding. The participants, Oneida and Hobart, agreed they felt rewarded in contributing to the education of young people about their communities' histories as emerged in the workshops. It seems reasonable to conclude that the involvement of students contributed to building social relations among the participants.

How the students' products are used in their schools in the future remains to be seen. The two teachers, Laura Studee at Oneida High School and Randy Soquet at De Pere, both suggested that we meet again in the fall in their schools to discuss how their teachings of history incorporate materials from the Talking Circles.