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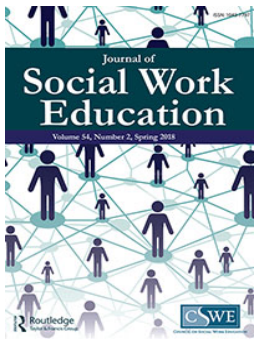


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Anthony Nicotera

ABSTRACT

The Circle of Insight is a dialectical, open, purposeful, and enlightening process that moves those engaged toward deeper, liberating insight. It is a pedagogical construct I created over the past 15 years that I have used in teaching and developing my social justice social work classes. It integrates a see, reflect, act cyclical process that is at once personal and social. In this article, I present the Circle of Insight as a teaching tool, a creative, transformative pedagogical process for explicitly advancing Competency 3, Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice, of the Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* for baccalaureate and master's social work programs.



ARTICLE HISTORY

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I have been teaching social justice, spirituality, multifaith leadership, and nonviolent peacemaking classes with university students for 15 years. My central construct for creating, teaching, and continuing to develop our classes is what I refer to as the Circle of Insight, which I created and revised over the years in light of my experience in the classroom. It is a see, reflect, act cyclical process that is at once personal, or internal, and social, or external. It is a dialectical, open, purposeful, and enlightening (DOPE) process, which in my experience, moves those engaged toward deeper insight. The Circle of Insight stems from Catholic social teachings (John XXIII, 1961; Wijsen, Henriot, & Mejia, 2005), social analysis (Holland & Henriot, 1983), and Aristotelian social ethics and pastoral cycle paradigms (Wijsen et al., 2005). It is consistent with and integrates concepts from Freirean liberation education (Freire, 1970; Shor & Freire, 1987), liberation theology (Gutiérrez, 1988), socially engaged mindfulness and contemplative practice (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Hick, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Nhat Hahn, 1975; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010), social justice theory (Austin, 2014; Freire, 1970; Hick, 2009; hooks, 2003), indigenous peace and healing circles (Pranis, 2003, 2005), and holistic engagement (Pyles & Adam, 2016). It is what I refer to as a purposeful pedagogy, a method inviting movement in a particular, meaningful direction. In this article, I present the Circle of Insight as a teaching tool, a creative, transformative pedagogical process for promoting and fostering Competency 3, Advance Human Rights and Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice, of the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE, 2015) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (pp. 7–8).

The September 11 call

I created my social justice classes in the wake of September 11, 2001, when I found myself asking in a new way how it is that we as educators are invited to teach peace and justice and help build Martin Luther King Jr.'s "beloved community" (King Center, 2014). Although I had worked in Calcutta with Mother Teresa; counseled, taught, and accompanied marginalized, disadvantaged urban youths and

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families in Chicago, Philadelphia, Camden, NJ, and Matagalpa, Nicaragua; and engaged in non-violent civil disobedience with Father Dan Berrigan, S.J. and other dedicated nonviolent activists, I still felt relatively unprepared to respond to the September 11 call. In my roles as university chaplain, social worker, educator, and citizen, in light of the horrific acts of terror and violence perpetrated that day, I found myself asking why. Why was I, and why were the majority of U.S. citizens, so unprepared to respond? I also found myself asking what I was going to do about it. The answer, it seemed to me, had something to do with transformative education and action. It had something to do with learning more about, and critically reflecting on, peace and justice initiatives and stories, and asking what they had to teach us about living our professional ethical mandate to advance social justice and human rights.

In the past decade and a half, I have found that using the Circle of Insight has helped ensure that students are more “knowledgeable about theories of human need and social justice and strategies to promote social and economic justice and human rights” (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). Many students report that the class and Circle of Insight opened their eyes not only to new knowledge but also to a new way of learning. One student commented that course material was not presented as fact alone but rather as narratives and questions to be considered, asserting that this allowed for deeper reflection and learning. In this spirit, I offer the Circle of Insight as a practical, paradigmatic pedagogical process that social work educators can use to teach social, economic, environmental justice, and human rights classes and curricula consistent with CSWE (2015) accreditation standards and our profession’s ethical standards and commitments (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). See Figure 1.

Circle of Insight in action: What we do not know

To demonstrate the Circle of Insight in action, I begin our class by adapting an exercise inspired by one of my mentors, journalist and peace educator Colman McCarthy (2002). I tell students that I am going to share with them five names, and I will give them an A for the course if they can identify the five people I name. I also tell them that the sad thing is that I have never been able to give anyone the A. In fact, in 15 years I have never gotten past the second name. I then begin to name contemporary Nobel Peace Prize laureates. Students often give me that blank stare that reveals the tragic truth—they have never heard of these global peace and justice advocates, whose wisdom and insights may have helped us respond more effectively to the September 11 call. Sadly, like so many Americans, my students know very little if anything about the work and lives of these Nobel laureates who represent

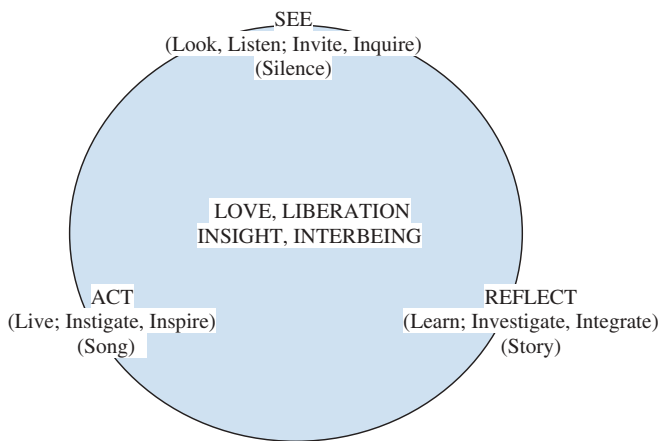


Figure 1. Circle of Insight.

just a few of the myriad people and organizations committed to building the beloved community and promoting social and economic justice and human rights. Also of note, when I ask which social worker won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, few know it was Jane Addams.

Social justice and peacemaking are central to the roots of our profession, central to its founding and to its future. If we do not teach students the stories not only of Nobel laureates but also of other peace and justice advocates, educators, and activists in a way that moves beyond the periphery or surface, if we do not use a tool like the Circle of Insight to delve more deeply into what their stories invite us to consider, how they invite us to act today, we will remain impotent when the next September 11 call comes. Furthermore, these stories, critically examined, offer hope and healing in the face of terror and tragedy.

Circle of Insight process: Three phases—See, reflect, act

See

The Circle of Insight invites us first to see, to probe and examine as a reporter or detective trying to ascertain all the facts, the stories of people and organizations struggling against injustice. According to liberation theology pedagogy, the verb *sentir* (in Spanish) is used to describe this first phase of the Circle of Insight. Literally translated “to feel,” it is more broadly understood by liberation theologians as the act of absorbing with all one’s senses *la realidad* (the reality) of what is happening (Gutiérrez, 1988). In the process of absorbing these stories of struggle and marginalization, one “enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Nhat Hanh (2007) captured the heart of the notion of *sentir* and the Circle of Insight’s first phase when he stated, “If we consider violence to be a disease, we can use the medicine of deep listening to treat it” (p. 164). After September 11, the organization September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows absorbed with all their senses our nation’s retaliatory response to the terror attacks perpetrated on our country and directly on their families. The group’s members all lost loved ones that day, and yet they came together collectively to say “our grief is not a cry for war,” (Potorti, 2003, p. 43) and to echo the prophetic words of Martin Luther King Jr., from which they take their name, “Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows” (Potorti, 2003, p. 54).

Nobel Peace Prize nominee Kathy Kelly, who helped organize Peaceful Tomorrows, joined them to present their story to our class. However, to be clear, you do not need to know Nobel laureates or nominees for this step of the circle. For example, I e-mailed Nobel laureate Mairead Maguire (1999), whose book we were reading in class. I never met Mairead. However, she not only responded to my e-mail but also replied directly to several questions from my students. Peaceful Tomorrows has a speaker’s bureau, and many of their members welcome the opportunity to speak with students and educators. The point is to share stories of those engaged in creatively confronting injustice in a way that invites deeper understanding. You might use Mairead Maguire, Kathy Kelly, or Peaceful Tomorrows’ blogs, writings, or videos. You might share the writings and reflections of such people as Jody Williams (2013), Wangari Maathai (2006, 2010), Joseph Rotblat (Rotblat & Ikeda, 2007), Desmond Tutu (1999), Badshah Khan (Easwaran, 1999), and stories of nonviolent encounters and movements (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000; Wink, 2000; Zinn, 1997). Educators might also search for these stories on alternative media websites and podcasts, like Waging Nonviolence (<http://wagingnonviolence.org>), Democracy Now (<http://www.democracynow.org>), On Being (<http://www.onbeing.org>), and Peace Talks Radio (<http://peacetalksradio.org>), just to name a few.

Reflect

For social work and social justice educators, Phase 1, seeing, necessarily invites Phase 2, critical reflection consistent with the ethics and values of our profession, and examination of the principles undergirding the stories of the justice and peace practitioners with whom we are in dialogue. For

example, teachers might ask, What do our Code of Ethics; or understanding of justice; King's (1967) triple evils of racism, militarism, and poverty; or Jane Addams's perspective on peacemaking have to say about Syrian Refugees or Black Lives Matter or the War on Terror? Students might reflect on what Peaceful Tomorrows' writings, speeches, and actions have to say to us about our educational system, media, and society, about what we are being invited to do to make the world a more just and peaceful place. To deepen our reflection and consideration, we also use the cycle of socialization, which asserts that all of us born and raised in the United States inherit a legacy of racism, sexism, privilege, oppression, and structural injustice (Adams, 2000). Thus, in short, Phase 2 invites students and teachers to apply learning and theory, including social work values, social and political theory, and ethical principles, to practical, messy stories and cases. It also challenges us to delve more deeply into what this seeing and reflecting might be saying to us about how to act.

Act

The third phase of the Circle of Insight invites us to consider and move to appropriate action—to make choices and live in a way that might bring deeper, more lasting peace, justice, and liberation. This action must necessarily be informed by, and grow out of, the previous two phases of the cycle. After seeing and reflecting on the events of September 11, Peaceful Tomorrows members chose to march for peace from Washington, DC, to New York City, visit war victims in Afghanistan, and lobby Congress to provide assistance to these victims (Potorti, 2003). Their story continues to challenge us to consider individually and as a profession and society the nature and substance of just action.

The dynamic of the class throughout the semester mirrors this see, reflect, act Circle of Insight process. The first third of the course is heavily focused on listening to the stories of peace and justice practitioners. The middle third of the course examines more explicitly and in greater depth the principles undergirding these stories, such as King's six primary principles of nonviolent peacemaking (King Center, 2014), the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's restorative justice principles (Tutu, 1999), Maathai's (2010) principles of environmental justice, and Gandhi's *satyagraha*—relentless pursuit of the truth (Bondurant, 1958). The final third of the course looks more closely at various nonviolent practices in light of Gene Sharp's (1973) 198 methods of nonviolent action. As a final project, students are invited to work together to apply the circle in response to an issue of injustice of their choosing, researching the issue, applying learning from our class, and making recommendations for action. In many cases, students create and participate in some form of social action, such as using social media to create awareness and call attention to an issue in a way that invites others to begin the circle process.

Circle of Insight: Two levels—Internal and external

It is also important to note that the Circle of Insight process happens simultaneously on two primary levels, internal or personal, and the external or social. In the classroom the Circle of Insight serves as a tool for personal and social analysis, insight, and transformation. We use the circle on both levels throughout the course.

Mindfulness practices and meditative reflections are a regular part of our course and help students use the Circle of Insight on a more personal level. For example, during each class, I sound a singing or meditation bowl, and we take time for mindfulness practice to simply be present, to pay attention to our breathing or body, and to enter into a few moments of quiet. Students often report that they have rarely taken or made time for silence. Lewis said that “the present is the point at which time touches eternity” (Lewis, 1942, p. 57). In silence, students are invited into the eternal

present to listen to the insights that speak in the depths of their being. After the first few classes, I invite students to lead the class in this internal Circle of Insight practice.

Social analysis—applying stories and concepts studied to current social justice, ethical, economic, religious, human rights, and environmental questions and events—is also a regular part of our course and helps students practice the Circle of Insight on the external, social level. A group activity I refer to as the Four Quadrants is one way we engage in social analysis and social justice reflection and dialogue. The room is divided into four quadrants, the north wall is labeled *just*, the south or opposite wall *unjust*, the west wall is labeled *ineffective*, and the east wall is *effective*. Students are then given a one-page social justice scenario, for example, a summary of the story of the Catonsville Nine (Peters, 2012), describing how activists in the name of justice and peace are arrested and jailed for using napalm to burn draft files to protest the Vietnam War, saying it is better to use it to burn files than children. After reading it, they are invited to take a stand, to move to one of the quadrants in the room, demonstrating literally where they stand, whether they think the action described in the scenario is just or unjust, effective or ineffective, and to what degree. We discuss why we are standing where we are and give one another permission to move if we are persuaded by another’s perspective.

Circle of Insight process: Dialectical, open, purposeful, enlightening

Although it has three phases and two levels, the Circle of Insight should be understood as a single process with central characteristics; it is dialectical, open, purposeful and enlightening. As some of my students like to say, it’s dope!

Dialectical (mutual, reciprocal)

One student described the Circle of Insight process as a movement from a form of philosophical indoctrination to what she was seeking, which was a more critical analysis and open-ended dialogue. Seminal liberation educator Paulo Freire (1970) put it this way:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-students with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. (p. 80)

This pedagogical dialectic is central to the Circle of Insight process. It inverts the traditional banking method of education and instead invites what Freire calls problem posing, liberating education, and a continual humanizing process where students are “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (p. 81).

In our course, we use this dialectical process in various ways. In addition to pairing and sharing in dyads and small groups, guest speakers engaged in the work of social justice share their stories and perspectives with our class. Students are invited to continue the conversation outside class by doing group projects, engaging in online discourse, and interviewing members of social justice and peacemaking organizations and advocates. We also read primary source documents and talk, sometimes literally, most often metaphorically, with the authors. We use role playing, creative exercises, journaling, reflection papers, and music as well as videos, blogs, podcasts, mindfulness meditation and movement, multimedia presentations, and student-led reflections and presentations.

Additionally, show-and-tell-type activities demonstrate the mutuality and reciprocity of this dialectical process. I have shared sacred objects that help remind me of the pain and joy inherent in the Circle of Insight dialectic, like the handcuffs I wore after being arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience or the singing bowl I used when I was with Thich Nhat Hanh and his Plum Village community. I encourage students to share their stories and sacred or

important objects, emphasizing the fact that the dialectical process challenges us to mutuality and reciprocity, to build the beloved community even in the classroom, to get to know one another, call one another by name, and share some of our own stories and questions with one another. hooks (1994) said it plainly,

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. (p. 21)

Certainly, this has been my experience.

Open (receptive, vulnerable)

The Circle of Insight's dialectical nature also requires openness, or receptivity, to the other that allows Freire's (1970) problem-posing pedagogy to flourish. The banking form of education is closed and cocky. It starts with ready-made answers; formulas that inhibit creativity, dehumanize, dichotomize, invite rote memorization and regurgitation; and treat students as objects (Freire, 1970). Alternatively,

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire, 1970, p. 83)

This is a process "directed toward humanization" (p. 85) that meets students where they are, and respects them as cocreators in the process of learning and liberation, creating a pedagogy of fellowship and solidarity that is "revolutionary futurity. Hence it is prophetic (and, as such, hopeful)" (p. 84).

This hopeful, open pedagogy begins with questions, and a willingness to engage in an authentic, frank, vulnerable exchange of ideas. hooks (1994) said that liberation education requires that "professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit" (p. 21). Openness and vulnerability nurture the genuine humility and authenticity for which students are hungry, and that, in my experience, has the greatest potential to foster deep and transformative learning.

Purposeful (cyclical, continual movement)

The Circle of Insight's dialectical, open process is also purposeful. It is a movement toward something meaningful, in our case, the realization of social work values and ethics in practice, and building the beloved community. Again, hooks (1994) said, "I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build 'community' in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor" (p. 40). Thus, this process, this community building, although necessarily messy and human, is not aimless but rather moves with a purpose and power in continual, cyclical fashion toward truth and insight. In the documentary by Ellis and Mueller (2004), Howard Zinn said, "When the truth gets out a power is created and the power that is created is more powerful than the power of guns and money." It has the power, as King and Gandhi have stated, to turn an enemy into a friend. It has the power to make manifest the transformative power of our Code of Ethics, to liberate the oppressed, and to create communities capable of transforming hearts, minds, and indeed even unjust social structures.

Enlightening (inspiring, revealing)

The Circle of Insight also has the power to enlighten and inspire aha moments in those who use it, revealing the truth that we need each other—teachers and students, students and teachers—to move more authentically and meaningfully toward liberation. As Nhat Hanh (2003) asserted, we inter-are; we are inextricably connected. Thus, we cannot, as a people, as a society, make our way to deep, lasting justice, peace and wholeness, without one another. As I look to the other, I see my sister, my

brother. I see myself. This truth reveals that the flower and the soil are dependent on one another, for as Nhat Hanh (2014) reminds us, “No mud, no lotus” (p. 12). The mud is the process, the means; the lotus is the purpose, the end. Both are required for organic growth and transformation.

Evaluation

Using the Circle of Insight invites educators to incorporate a dynamic pedagogy that has the potential to help us move toward deeper, more lasting justice, healing, hope, and wholeness. It can serve as a tool to help transform an educational system that is arguably less effective, relevant, and just in this moment than what the ethical values of the social work profession require. It can help us better respond to the September 11 call and to ethical mandates to “promote social and economic justice and human rights” (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). However, further evaluation of its effectiveness is required. I can report 15 years of qualitative student testimonials attesting to the circle’s ability to invite students’ deeper understanding and practice of social justice; however, I invite others to experiment with and study further its ability to encourage and deepen social justice pedagogy and practice.

See—observation, fact gathering—is the ability to look and listen deeply to the other and to investigate, as a reporter, the reality in which the other exists and seeks meaning, to invite and inquire into facts and information, requiring silence and deep listening with all one’s senses

Reflect—critical reflection—is using socioeconomic, political, religious, spiritual, cultural, ethnic, environmental, theological, psychological, ethical, and so forth knowledge and wisdom to ask reflective questions given the particular reality observed, fostering deepened learning and integration, to critically integrate information, requiring investigative, informed storytelling

Act—just and liberating action—in light of what is seen and reflected on, or learned, is how one acts and lives, instigates and inspires, requiring one, metaphorically, to sing her or his song in and for the world.

This dialectical, open, purposeful, enlightening circle or cycle process continually moves from seeing to reflecting to acting (looking, listening, inviting, inquiring; learning, investigating, integrating; living, instigating, inspiring) and then begins again, all the while inviting deeper movement toward love, liberation, justice, and insight consistent with the core values and ethics of social work.

Notes on contributor

Anthony Nicotera is adjunct lecturer at New York University.

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