

## The Invitation Circle: Creating Space for Decolonizing and Humanizing Inquiry

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*Abstract: This article discusses an invitation circle, a process of inviting workshop and classroom participants into collaborative and humanizing inquiry and provides guidelines for initiating an invitation circle. Drawing from indigenous and posthuman traditions, invitation circles model decolonizing inquiry, encourage participants to develop humanizing connections with one another, and foster imagination of futures unconstrained by the colonial imaginary.*

*Keywords: humanizing inquiry, decolonization, futurity, participatory inquiry, workshop*

The invitation circle stems from a desire to enact Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) "decolonizing projects" such as storying to foreground collaborative discussions within the traditions of decoloniality (Mingolo, 2007) and humanizing inquiry (Paris & Winn, 2014). Invitation circles draw upon land and experience-based knowledge, inviting participants to consider divergent perspectives while sharing stories that situate understandings beyond the Western settler-colonial gaze (Tuck & Yang, 2012). While heralding from indigenous traditions, the invitation circle does not claim indigeneity nor does it require prior knowledge of indigenous, decolonization, or humanizing practices. Invitation circles are a low-barrier approach for collaboration in ways that require little prior knowledge. Circles invite people into humanizing inquiry yet ask little other than to sit in a circle and follow directions.

### Context

There are multiple goals for invitation circles. Some goals are pragmatic: introducing people to one another, breaking the ice, and marking the beginning of collaboration. Some goals are theoretical, such as modeling particular types of humanizing and indigenous projects. Other goals may be aspirational in that the materials used (namely, the scripts, which are discussed later) point participants in thinking toward particular directions. The goals overlap. Along with designating a beginning, invitation circles also normalize an ethos of collaborative inquiry and prepare participants to confront present conditions while modeling efforts to engage in "futurity," what Goodyear-Ka'opua (2012) calls the "ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures" (p. 86).

This article will first describe the concept of an invitation circle. Then, the article will discuss the scripts used before examining the process of conducting an invitation circle. Finally, the article will conclude with brief reflections, testimonials, and implications for invitation circles as a decolonizing and humanizing method.

### Situating an Invitation Circle

Invitation circles are useful when beginning workshops, classroom learning sessions, or professional development opportunities. I have used invitation circles to mark the start of workshops for professional adults, high school and undergraduate class sessions, and community conversations. Depending on the size of the group, a successful invitation circle will require 30-45 minutes to implement and likely require two-three hours of prep work.

## Materials: Preparing the Scripts

Invitation circles rely upon short scripts (See: Table 1) that participants are asked to read in a round (one person reads a statement, then the next person and so on until all of the scripts have been read). These scripts lower barriers of participation by providing short, fact-based prompts for participants to read. Scripts are researched and closely connected to the land, culture, and material conditions of the place in which the invitation circle is taking place. The order the scripts are read matters as well, particularly the scripts that will be read first and last.

When I host invitation circles, I mark the opening and ending scripts with clear language indicating they should be read aloud first and last. Table 1 includes a sampling of the language I have used in previous scripts. As shown in Table 1, some of the scripts play off of one another in ways that demonstrate and highlight relationships.

**Table 1. Samples of invitation circle scripts that are read aloud.**

ID	Sample Script	Order
1	Welcome. You are invited to be here, to listen, to contemplate, and to speak. Please take what knowledge you need and consider leaving the wisdom you are willing to share.	First
2	Welcome. Thank you for joining us. Here are some shared understandings to guide our time together: We are here to learn. We learn by listening. We listen by being present. We are present when we make ourselves fully available to the moment at hand.	Second
3	Thank you for being here this morning. Please communicate in a way that feels comfortable. Be silent when silence feels appropriate. Ask questions when you feel you should. Be respectful, always.	Third
4	We should acknowledge that we meet here on the historical lands of the Dakhóta (Dakota) and Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe) people. Their displacement was not accidental, but a matter of policy (Wolfe, 2006). Let us also acknowledge the genocide of indigenous people was traumatic but also unsuccessful. “The Minneapolis–Saint Paul metropolitan area is home to one of the largest and most tribally diverse urban American Indian populations, numbering well over 35,000” (Neerdaels & Lippert, 2018, n.p.).	Any
5	As we meet here, let us remember that over 2 million people are currently incarcerated in the United States. Another 5 million Americans are under state mandated supervision through parole or probation (Maruschak & Minton, 2020).	Any
6	As we gather here this morning, young children in Syria, Iraq, Brazil, Ethiopia, United States, Honduras,	Any

	France and other countries are playing, singing songs, and imagining what life might be like when they grow older.	
7	During our time together, you will be asked to communicate your truth. You will be asked to accept that others will also communicate their truths.	Any
8	As we sit here this morning, a third grade student attending Indianapolis Public School is cheerfully embracing his best friend.	Any
9	As we sit here, let us remember that 745,200 inmates are currently sitting in county and local jails across the United States. Two-thirds (482,000) are unconvicted and are in jail because they are awaiting court action or they are unable to make bail (Zeng, 2019).	Any
10	Thank you for being here. Throughout the world, nearly 500,000 people are currently writing a love poem for someone special. Most of these poems will never be finished. Some will be shared with their intended recipients. Approximately 1,000 will gain a wider audience when published.	Any
11	Somewhere, someone will be pulled over by the police. In the U.S., this will happen nearly 50,000 times a day (“Stanford Open Policing Project,” 2020). Thousands will wonder if they will survive the interaction. While Black Americans make up 12.4% of the U.S. population and drive less than whites, they are 63% more likely than whites to be stopped by police (Horn, 2020).	Any
12	Somewhere, a teenage boy will refuse to give up.	Any
13	As we sit here this morning, a fifth grade student attending Minneapolis Public School is eager to submit her math homework to her teacher.	Any
14	Thank you for being here this morning. We are honored you have decided to join us and share your gifts.	Last

Strive for a balance between scripts that include research-based claims (and corresponding citations) and those that lean more on the anecdotal and rhetorical. Some scripts should pertain to general global and national realities. Others should pertain to the specific conditions, histories, and events of the place in which the invitation circle is taking place. For example, what are the material realities of police brutality in Indianapolis versus Minneapolis or Belmopan, Belize? What are the historical and current conditions of the Indigenous in the places that the Western cities of New York, Mexico City, or Detroit now occupy? Drawing upon local historical knowledge is a strength of the invitation circle and important in modeling practices of humanizing inquiry, storytelling, and futurity.

## **Incorporating Desire-Based Frameworks**

While the scripts draw attention to historical and ongoing injustices, the invitation circle should also move beyond “damage centered research” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409) by refusing to essentialize people by the trauma that has been inflicted upon them. Scripts should also draw attention to desires and assets. Table 1 provides an example of what this desire-based focus (Tuck, 2009) might look like. For example, script #6 challenges notions of non-Western children as in need of intervention, focusing instead on aspirational imaginations. Likewise, scripts #8 and #13 position children in American urban school systems as joyfully eager to learn.

In this sense, the scripts encourage participants to consider the often invisible experience that contribute to the totality of lives. The circle primes participants to step into moments of beauty and loss and models storying as a way to discover commonality while centering inquiry on relational knowledge.

## **Conducting an Invitation Circle**

Ideally, participants will sit in a circle. Preferably, scripts (printed on paper strips) are placed on seats so participants retrieve them as they sit. Alternatively, scripts may be passed around after participants take their seats. If participants will be asked to read multiple scripts (because there are more scripts than participants), mention that each script should be read in the order it is distributed. At the beginning of the invitation circle, facilitators should establish some ground rules:

1. Each person will read one script, starting with the script marked as the first one, and proceed one script at a time, working clockwise (or counter-clockwise) until the last script is read.
2. If a script is too difficult to read (because of pronunciation or the nature of the content), participants may ask someone else to read. Participants may also refrain from reading any script.
3. Scripts may be read while seated or standing.
4. Personal introductions will occur after all scripts are read.

Other ground rules are incorporated within the scripts (see: Table 1). A successful invitation circle will invite participants into the process intuitively, without too much instruction.

## **Fully Extending the Invitation: Closing the Circle Through Introductions**

After reading the scripts, the facilitator should ask participants to introduce themselves. Typically, I ask each person to respond to three questions:

1. What is your name?
2. What brought you here today?
3. What is one place that has taught you something?

After the final participant responds, the invitation circle has concluded.

## **Impact: How Are Invitation Circles Perceived and Felt?**

Previous participants who later facilitated invitation circles were asked about their impact. Dr. Cristina

Santamaría Graff invoked a circle during a faculty meeting. She reported:

I implemented an invitation circle with the urban teacher education faculty at IUPUI. [They] seemed intrigued when I handed them pieces of paper with different sentences on them. These sentences were derived and adapted from a ‘welcoming’ script and ‘invitations’ to reflect upon ways we, as a society, think about and operate within spaces often racialized or stratified. ‘Invitational’ statements captured facts, observations, or general musings to bring attention to the ways that different people experience the world. Faculty members circled together looking down at their statements and at one another. Without being prompted, they stilled their voices and movements. It was as if coming together in a circle brought reverence to the moment. This feeling of honoring deepened as they read their welcoming statements. The words bypassed our intellect and entered our hearts as we sensed a human connection between all of us in the circle. After the last person spoke, there was a sacred silence that ensconced us.

Dr. Kiesha Warren-Gordon also implemented an invitation circle at an international conference and offered this:

I used an invitation circle in Ghana during the summer 2019. The group consisted of people from the U.S. and Ghana. There was sense of emotionality immediately after we completed the circle. We had to take a moment to reflect on what we had just read and learned. The circle sets a tone of reflection that was maintained throughout the session.

### **Conclusion: Group Collaboration Through Humanizing Inquiry and Desire-Based Frameworks**

Invitation circles provide pathways to collaborative, critical, and humanizing inquiry by inviting people into a relational epistemology. The activity also connects participants to the gathering place, allowing those who have an ontological relationship with the space to examine these connections more deeply while providing those unfamiliar with the place an opportunity to become more intimately connected. The scripts allow the sharing of empirical and humanizing research, and the personal introductions provide openings of authenticity that continue to humanize participants through relational expertise and lived experience.

Participants are able to make contributions and take something of value away from the storying process. Invitation circles push participants to see beyond trauma and damage, noting the various ways that people make knowledge and engage in living a fuller human experience than what is typically accounted for within critical research. This fuller— more honest— account of experience and knowledge claims is the basis for what constitutes humanizing inquiry. By centering invitation on a humanizing process of inquiry, invitation circles prime participants to imagine what futures may lay beyond the current social imaginary of the colonial world order.

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