

WHY A CIRCLE?

For those of us who are used to standing in front and conducting a choir or instructing from a chalkboard, the circle will take a little getting used to. Remember, it's called *drum circle*, not *circle drumming*.

Here are some reasons why the circle is so vital:

- It offers a sense of *equality*. There is no front or back. No first or last. We are all equal.
- It offers a sense of *community*. We sit or stand side by side and see each other face to face. Everyone has a place in the circle.
- It offers a sense of *connection with world cultures*, who traditionally gather in a circle for music-making. This may be a big reason why percussion instruments from around the world fit so well with drum circles. These instruments seem to reflect the global nature of the drum circle.
- It lessens the need for *discipline*, especially with younger students. Because there is no front or back, there is no back row. In everyday music class, how often have you had to discipline students in the front row? The back row?
- It offers a safe environment for *peer-to-peer learning*. Young people are very strongly influenced by their peers. Drum circle allows peers to share with one another, and learn from one another, in a safe environment where *you* set the parameters.

HOW TO CIRCLE

There are many great reasons for establishing the circle. And there are many ways to set up a circle. In elementary music class, where students typically cannot bring their own instruments, here's one way that works.

- 1.** Before the students arrive, place the instruments, along with all necessary mallets, in the center of the room (or whatever the music space happens to be). This helps establish a center or focal-point of the circle that isn't the facilitator.
- 2.** Place chairs around the room in a circle wide enough for students to enter and sit. If you teach in a multi-purpose room where chairs for all students aren't available, the students can sit or stand in a circle. Younger students are used to sitting "criss-cross applesauce," but older students, with longer legs, will need to stand from time to time. Also, a few chairs will be needed for those playing large hand drums. The advantages of chairs are that they tend to be more comfortable,

and they allow you to design the circle in advance. Often a student-formed circle will have gaps or corners that need to be adjusted.

- 3.** If you have more students than will fit in one circle around the room, have two (or more) concentric circles. This is not the ideal, but may be the only practical way to seat a large group. If you know in advance that you will have a large group, have the concentric circles set up in advance. This will save hurt feelings later on since you won't need to tell some students to form an "outer circle." Make sure there are several people in both circles so that no one feels like an outsider.
- 4.** As the students enter, have them sit in the chairs, or form their own circle around the instruments. Some students will be too tempted and will play a drum on their way to a chair. It happens. Kindly ask them to stay in the circle and wait until it's time to choose an instrument. (This way differs from some community drum circles. In those circles people may bring their own drums, or calmly walk to an instrument which has been placed by, on, or in front of a chair, and join in the rhythm. If you want to see all-out mayhem, tell two dozen first-graders who have just entered the music room to go pick an instrument. See if any of them actually hear you when you shout, "No, don't run! Remember to share! Wait, Maria had that first! Everyone will get to play the djembe eventually!")
- 5.** Once the students are in a circle, invite small groups to choose instruments and take them back to the circle. Try to make the groupings arbitrary, such as, "All those with red shoes may go choose an instrument." Assure those who choose last that there will be plenty of opportunities to exchange instruments. You may need to help some of the younger students take their instrument choices (a large conga, for example) back to the circle. If you have concentric circles, make sure there is enough space for students in the wider circle to enter the center of the room and return to the circle with their instrument choice.
- 6.** Through the course of the drum circle, have the students exchange instruments. You may need to help facilitate amicable exchanges. A good way to do this is to have the students put the instruments down and move three spaces to the left.
- 7.** After the drum circle time has come to a close, choose arbitrary groups to take the instruments back to the center of the circle, then line up (back to lines so soon?) at the door.

