



# Witness Blanket



Teacher Guide

A Human Rights  
Classroom Culture

# A Human Rights Classroom Culture



It is essential that teachers take time to set up their learning environment using a trauma-informed approach that supports students and allows them to safely express their responses to what they are learning.

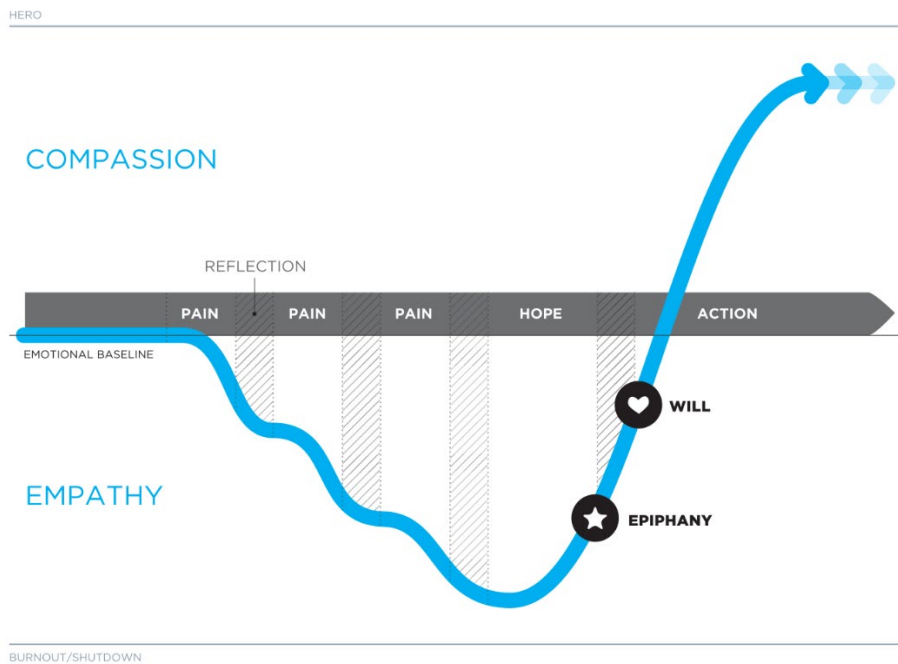


Figure 1: <http://inzovucurve.org>

The *Inzovu curve*, pictured above, provides a visual representation for how teachers can approach difficult topics in the classroom. Providing space for reflection and learning moves students forward in their journey from encountering pain to discovering hope. Students also realize that groups and individuals who experience loss, atrocity and genocide can move forward themselves.

In this document, we share the foundational pedagogies of this teacher guide as well as ways to develop a classroom culture that supports these values. There are three lessons provided below: “Ceremonies and Rituals,” “Talking Circles” and “Reflection Wall.”

## Indigenous pedagogies

This guide uses Indigenous pedagogies as a foundation for building a human rights classroom.

Talking circles come from Indigenous pedagogies. They are democratic, as all have an equal voice in the circle. In an Indigenous context, a leader might call on a group for their feedback and reflections in the planning of an event. This gives everyone an opportunity to reflect and share feelings. The leader can learn things about the group, plan activities and assign roles to participants. When we bring this pedagogy into the classroom, it normalizes sharing and listening, it centres on student voices, and it promotes reflection before action.

Finally, this direct feedback is an opportunity for evaluation. The teacher can hear students' reflections and, over time, can observe any growth in the way they share their reflections.

## Class Culture

This set of lessons will develop a class culture rooted in learning and respect, key elements of a human rights culture. This culture will leave space for students to reflect, feel and share as a part of their journey of truth and reconciliation.

## Ceremonies and Rituals

There are many ceremonies and rituals teachers and students engage in daily, such as taking attendance, reviewing the class agenda or standing for a national anthem. The ceremonies and rituals that take place in a school help us celebrate different aspects of our communities.

Those ceremonies and rituals are often set by teachers or school leaders without any discussion or input from students. It can be helpful to reflect on these types of ceremonies and rituals as entry points to establishing a safe culture for exploring the *Witness Blanket*. Collectively developed ceremonies and rituals will help students establish ways of learning and working together where everyone is valued and respected.

## Objectives

- Review school ceremonies and ways of doing things
- Develop a list of ways to show respect for others in the school that can be used daily

## Learn and discuss

Many classes collectively establish contracts, agreements or treaties at the beginning of the school year to encourage all to show respect to each other. This activity will provide an opportunity to establish or revisit these types of agreements.

- a. In small groups, create a list of all the formal and informal rituals and ceremonies that take place in the school.
  - i. In an early-years setting, it may be helpful to read a book such as *How to Get Your Teacher Ready* by Jean Reagan, which illustrates the rituals that take place in a typical classroom.

- b. Ask each group to share their list and have students do a gallery walk to explore the ideas of other groups. As they look at others' ideas, ask them to place a mark by the rituals and ceremonies intended to build respect for others and the space. Examples from the classroom might include:
  - i.* End-of-day clean-up
  - ii.* Sharing school supplies
  - iii.* Raising hands
  - iv.* Using phone etiquette
- c. As a class, review the list of marked ideas and discuss how these actions show we value and respect each other. For example:
  - i.* Raising hands allows others to be heard.
  - ii.* Turning off your phone allows you to listen with intention.
  - iii.* Putting things away allows others to find and use them.
- d. Ask students to review their list and categorize them into three or four bigger concepts. For example:
  - i.* Listening
  - ii.* Equality
  - iii.* Empowering others

### **Reflect and share**

1. Ask students to consider how these rituals and ceremonies help us support each other when we experience emotionally challenging topics, such as residential schools.
2. Allow students to develop and write down an agreement on which concepts they will value and uphold.

## Talking Circles

The primary goal of the talking circle is to make space for learners to share by listening and taking turns speaking. All participants are valued, and no one interrupts. The purpose of this exercise is to validate all learners in the classroom, including the teacher, and acknowledge the journey they will embark on together. Establishing the talking circle as a classroom ritual prior to exploring the *Witness Blanket* will support thoughtful discussion and deep reflection.

The challenge for some talking circle facilitators is time management. There will be occasions where the process is new and no one is comfortable enough to share. There may be occasions when everyone wants to share and you need to go around the circle more than once. As talking circles become more familiar and the interactions more respectful and responsible, students can be taught to lead their own talking circles.

### Objectives

- Understand how reflection and sharing are necessary parts of learning
- Develop the ritual of running a talking circle in your space

### Activate

1. Gather in circles and play the telephone game with students. The complexity of the word or phrase should be sufficient that the message is mixed up in the end.

### Learn and Discuss

1. Sometimes in class, it is important to share our ideas or how we think about things so that everyone can hear us, and we can learn from each other.
  - a. Is the “telephone” method an effective way to do this? Why or why not?
2. Introduce the idea of a talking circle and how it will be used when exploring the *Witness Blanket*. Highlight the following elements:
  - a. The physical space**
    - i. All are equal in a circle, including the facilitator. Everyone will sit on the floor or in chairs to demonstrate that equality.
    - ii. Being in a circle means everyone can see and hear each other.
  - b. Listening first**
    - i. A talking circle has many equal voices. Being part of a talking circle is mostly about listening. It is not just waiting to talk.
    - ii. All ideas are important, and all learners are important.

**c. Protocols**

- i. One person holds a special object and can share without being interrupted, then passes it on to another person.
- ii. Each person should have an equal opportunity to share.
- iii. The object may make its way around the circle more than once.
- iv. Participants need to understand they are not obligated to share or speak and should feel comfortable to simply hold the object before passing it on.

3. Practice a talking circle with some simple topics.

- a. My favourite activity is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
- b. My favourite food is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
- c. My favourite character is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

## Reflection Wall

A reflection wall is a space where students and teachers can share their thoughts, feelings and ideas. They give space to those who are not oral processors, or those who may want to share visual interpretations of what they experienced. The reflection wall also provides time for those that need to work through an idea or experience. The ability for students to post on the wall encourages them to further reflect on their importance as communicators and learners who get to decide when and how they share.

Special reminders and agreements about what can be shared on the wall should be part of the building process for this ritual. Depending on the age of your students and the difficulty of the subject matter, you may see ideas that make you uncomfortable, but those moments are opportunities to ask students what their post means to them, rather than opportunities to censor or censure the student.

### Objectives

- To develop a plan for their reflection wall
- To review what it means to share in a respectful way
- To develop a list of ways to use the reflection wall

### Materials

- Reflection wall shapes ([see Appendix B](#))

### Activate

1. Hold a teacher-led\* brainstorm about one of the following topics.
  - a. Things we do in our free time
  - b. Things we do when we are happy
  - c. Things we do when we are sad

\*Be intentional in putting yourself in the centre of this exercise and edit student responses for length and clarity as you record the responses.

### Learn and discuss

1. Talk about how brainstorming is good for folks who have words ready right away, but that the teacher is in charge. The teacher records responses and call on who they think is ready. They might miss someone. They might change the topic.
2. Discuss and highlight the differences between a teacher-led brainstorm and a talking circle. Identify that a weakness of talking circles is that thoughts are not recorded and cannot be shared.

3. Introduce the reflection wall concept in the context of the Witness Blanket.
  - a. Discuss how the reflection wall will give us an opportunity to share and record our thoughts and reflections, both spoken and unspoken.
  - b. Discuss how to share thoughts through single words, longer forms of writing, poetry, doodles, art, emojis and more.
  - c. Discuss how and where to place reflections on a wall, bulletin board, or another easily accessible space. Students should feel welcome to add thoughts to the reflection wall at any time.

The reflection wall shapes provide an opportunity to create a mosaic collection of thoughts and reflections in a similar style to the Witness Blanket.

### **Reflect and Share**

1. Ask students to make their first contribution to a reflection wall by responding to the following question:
  - a. What do I expect to learn or experience when we explore the *Witness Blanket*?