Talking circles are based on the governance practices of Native Americans. According to the author, a peacemaking circle is a practice of people who come together for a common purpose or goal, whether the goal is to allow for authentic expression in order to discuss issues, to understand differences, to heal from traumatic or painful experiences, to decide disciplinary actions, to provide support, to build community, to resolve conflict, to welcome one back into the community, or to celebrate accomplishments.

Peacemaking circles always consist of the following: a ceremony, a talking piece, a facilitator or keeper, guidelines, consensus decision-making, and personal stories.

Peacemaking circles usually begin with a centering activity, such as a reading or meditation or some other ritual. This helps to provide the element of ceremony for the circle. Opening ceremonies are designed to “help participants to center themselves, be reminded of core values, clear negative energies from unrelated stresses, encourage a sense of optimism, and honor the presence of everyone.”

“Closing ceremonies acknowledge the efforts of the Circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives.”

A talking piece is a symbol that is passed around to give each individual an opportunity to speak. Only the person holding the object has permission to speak. While speaking is not mandatory, it is understood that each person has a turn at speaking. The talking piece is a way to maintain order and respect.

The keeper monitors the tone of the group interaction and reminds the group of the guidelines they have established. He or she does not try to impose his or her will on the group.

Guidelines are non-judgmental rules created by the group that will allow everyone to feel respected and heard.

Consensus decision-making allows for buy-in about what will take place in the group. It equalizes power among everyone in the group through agreement of the terms.

Life experience (personal stories) is more valued than expertise since it is understood that everyone brings wisdom through their lived experience. It is this information that is used to build community and to move any conversation forward.

The peacemaking circle is but one strategy that can be used to conduct difficult dialogues about race. Depending upon the purpose of the circle, the outcome varies. For example, a talking circle designed to explore ideas would be considered successful if participants walked away with different ways of viewing reality; a circle brought together for community-building would be successful if members walked away with ground rules that could help govern each meeting. Talking circles provide room for reflection and expressing varying points of view.