

Valor Academy's Circle
By Wade Lee Hudson
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I found "[How one school is centering social-emotional learning](#)" to be profoundly inspiring. This PBS "Brief but Spectacular" video documents a [Valor Collegiate Academy](#) mutual aid "Circle." Since 2014, Valor has expanded to more than 30,000 students nationwide. Their success suggests the holistic, egalitarian movement is spreading. Time is short, however. The world may be on a deadly downward spiral.

Daren Dickson, Valor's Chief Culture Officer, says

Our dream has been to turn circle facilitation over to the kids as they get into high school. We all know that middle schoolers are much more impacted by each other than by adults, so having them lead the practice will be more meaningful.

This [11-minute video](#) captures a Circle led by a Valor student.

Valor encourages students to share what's going on in their lives and accept support. Their mission is "sharp minds; big hearts." They aim to create a

community of care “to empower our diverse community to live inspired, purposeful lives,...bring our diverse community together, and support each other in identity and relational development.” Valor bases its approach on four pillars: 1) top-tier academics; 2) intentional diversity; 3) built to last; and 4) whole child development.

Foundation support makes the school tuition-free. Two-thirds of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch. Their “Composite ACT score” is in the top 1% among the state’s open-enrollment high schools. Numerous organizations have given them accolades and awards.

One of their teachers said, “Teaching has got to change. Teaching before was, ‘I tell you. You do. You go home. Life is good.’ If I never tap into your truth, I’ve failed you as a teacher. When people feel seen and known amazing things happen.”

Valor works on self-development in “Compass Circle,” a weekly communal experience for scholars and staff. The Circle aims to get at “the root of what makes you so special.” In Circles, members support each other reach their whole and full potential, including those who are having a rough time.

Valor uses [the Compass model](#), a nationally recognized framework for comprehensive human development. This brief [video](#) discusses the model.

They say:

Through Valor’s Compass Model, all members of our community (yes, adults too!) work to develop their own Inner Compass, which we hope will be a reliable source of guidance throughout their lives.

Our Compass model is grounded in the foundational elements of being a human: mind, body, heart and spirit. “Working the Compass” means that we are intentionally developing key disciplines, habits and mindsets that support excellence in mind, body, heart and spirit. Our Compass model is comprised of four key components:

COMPASS COMMITMENTS

...Through our commitment-based culture, we create a foundation of trust and safety so that everyone in our community is able to take the risks required for true growth and development.

COMPASS DISCIPLINES

All members of the Valor community aspire to consistently access and live from their True North, to balance their Sharp Mind and Big Heart, and to constantly work to Align their Actions to their Noble Purpose.

COMPASS CORE HABITS

...We have defined a set of Core Compass Habits – two per Discipline – that we believe are essential to developing a reliable “inner Compass.”

COMPASS-ALIGNED BADGEWORK

...In many ways, the Compass Phase System is like the process of earning badges in Boy Scouts. Participants perform different experiential tasks – which we call Badgework – that are designed to help them grow....

The Valor [Circle Handbook](#), which includes numerous links to many videos that address issues discussed, reports:

Circles have been used as structures for meeting communally for thousands of years. Some of the earliest known tribes and native people, across all continents, used Circles, sometimes called councils, to meet to discuss the most important matters their communities faced. In this sense, Circles are natural to us and are not anything new. In many ways, the Valor Circle is a new spin on an ancient practice.

Adopting the Circle model involves using a set of organizational practices and an intentional culture to support these practices. Their Handbook describes the thinking behind their work, presented in the following sections.

Circle Defined & Intended Outcomes

Intended Outcomes. *The following are intended outcomes of adopting the Circle model.*

- Identify Early Warning Indicators & Check Community “Vital Signs.”
Early identification facilitates intervention.
- Reinforce & Recognize Community Commitments.

- Create a Safe, Intentional Space for Individual, Relational, and Communal Growth. *Providing space for open expression of experience and collaborative, solution-focused problem-solving...embracing a sense of agency towards continuous improvement.*
- Develop High Trust via Hierarchy Flattening. *Everyone in the Circle is equal concerning the commitments.... Everyone makes themselves available for public praise and feedback.*

Circle Foundations: Theoretical Underpinnings of Development

Comprehensive Human Development: We Teach Who We Are

Adults are encouraged to "walk their talk" in terms of commitment to their own individual and relational growth.... The primary way we train adults to lead Circles with scholars is by having them participate in their own faculty Circles....

This comprehensive approach to skill and mindset development is known as a Balanced Education....

At Valor, we call (this) "working the Compass".... A focus on academic knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient.

The Valor Compass: A Model for Human Development



(This graphic) is a visual representation and metaphor...(that guides) development towards an Inner Compass.... Through the practice of Circle, scholars, and adults are supported to explore and reflect on the Compass Disciplines and core Habits.

Theory of Growth: Working the Compass

- Attachment Theory & Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB): The Importance of Relationships
Throughout the lifespan humans are continuously in need of sound, relational interaction and support.... A necessary condition for growth and learning is healthy, safe relationships.
- Narrative Theory: Multi-Storied Identity Development
The question of "Who am I?" is one that is pondered over and over again throughout life....
- Contemplative Practices: Finding True North
Valor places emphasis on True North practices, or contemplative practices, to support effective and grounded navigation.... Rather than

simply reacting impulsively to experiences, scholars learn to slow down long enough to ensure that their actions are aligned with their intentions and values.

- Strengths-Based Approach: Recognizing, Illuminating, and Applying Strengths

At Valor we embrace tenets of positive psychology and the greater strengths-based approach to development....

- The Natural State Hypothesis

At Valor we believe that an important part of healthy human development is learning to access our most balanced, present, and open state of being — our "best self" — on a regular basis and to stay connected to this (natural) state of being on a more and more consistent basis....

Community Commitments

Community commitments serve as the moral code for a strong community culture and help create the backbone for Circle. They are the primary agreements made among members of the community that guide three primary responsibilities: to improve one's self, one's relationships, and one's community.

Valor asks everyone to affirm these Commitments:

- *I commit to keeping myself and others safe.*
- *I commit to leaving no community member behind.*
- *I commit to seeking diversity of perspective.*
- *I commit to showing up with Valor.*
- *I commit to speaking from my heart but using my head.*
- *I commit to speaking to the person, not about the person.*
- *I commit to walking my talk.*
- *I commit to working the Compass.*

The Handbook defines "Roles & Responsibilities."

Participants. *This typically includes scholars, teachers (i.e., faculty), leaders (i.e., principals, assistant principals, CMO faculty, etc.), and staff.*

Facilitators. *The term "facilitator" refers to those individuals who oversee and guide the Circle practices.*

Facilitation is based on these principles:

The most effective Circles successfully invite participants to shift into a different type of "being and doing" than the rest of their daily lives. While this may sound mystical, there are concrete facilitation principles at work that help make this happen....

Find Your True North. *Finding your own center, or groundedness, before facilitating....*

Use the Center. *Moving people to the center of the Circle has a powerful effect because it invites the entire Circle to support them, and their work, with their attention....*

Direct the Flow.... *The facilitator should always direct the flow of interactions (e.g., participants should only respond to invitations to contribute when requested by the facilitator)....*

Support a Sense of Calm.... *Circle facilitators should find ways to produce increased feelings of calm, presence, and balance....*

Move Content into Relationships.... *A general rule is that if something feels flat or lacks energy, have people talk directly to each other. This almost always adds a layer of connection and authenticity....*

Follow Process, then Content.... *While Circle also requires that facilitators listen for content, or the what, it is important to develop the capacity to more deeply listen for the how as well.... what resonates at an emotional or values-based level....*

Encourage the Circle to "Drop In".... *There is an actual shift, or "dropping in", that can be felt when attention shifts (drops in) from the head to the heart....*

Keep Circle Sacred. *Through multiple means, the role of the facilitator is to communicate that Circle is sacred and is to be respected....*

Stay Focused on The Work.... *This might mean stopping the check-in and reminding everyone to be brief or gently bringing the focus back to values, feelings, relationships, and commitments for a participant who is stuck in his/her head.*

Maintain Circle Rituals. *One role of the facilitator is to reinforce the rituals (i.e., the structure and practice protocols) of Circle. At a high level this means following the structure of Circle and ensuring that the group moves through each of the elements of Circle in the correct order....*

Make Circle Time Valuable.... *Facilitators can encourage this by rewarding participants with time in Circle who have been working hard, by granting time to someone the group agrees is in need, or by suggesting that someone wait to do work who has been granted a lot of time recently.*

Keep Circle Alive All Week. *The best Circle facilitators...think about ways that everything happening in the community — healthy or unhealthy — might*

be most effectively brought into Circle to be worked on and recognized collectively....

The handbook then presents a list of recommended norms for facilitators and participants to honor. Preparation norms include:

Set the Mood. It can be helpful to turn the lighting down, open a shade, light a candle, roll out a rug in the center, or any other small adaptations to help 'set the mood' for Circle.

"Real-Time Circle Norms" outlines what facilitators and participants do during a Circle. They include:

- *Set and Uphold High Behavioral Expectations....*
- *Show Presence....*
- *Coming to the Center of Circle....*
- *Closing with Physical Contact....*
- *Right to Pass....*
- *"Thank You for the Time in Circle, Circle May Move On."...*
- *Use Hand Signals....*
- *Welcome New Participants....*
- *No Deflecting Appreciations....*
- *Fully "Soak In" An Appreciation....*
- *One-to-One Appreciations....*

The **structure** of Circle is composed of five core components: 1) True North, 2) Check-In, 3) Circle Work & Resonance, 4) Appreciations, and 5) Closing, which are followed in this order.

- 1) **True North** *practice is (a mindfulness exercise), "often guided, that helps participants find their sense of center, including a sense of balance and presence...."*
- 2) **Check-in** *is a brief "whip-around" whereby "each participant provides a brief snapshot of their emotional state and shares whether they have Circle Work (to do)."*
- 3) **Circle Work** involves three types of practice: 1) Individual Work; 2) Relationship Work, and; 3) Community Work (which "impacts the entire community or multiple relationships within the community.")

Individual Work “comes in three forms: 1) Phase Work; 2) Sharing, and; 3) Re-Commitments. Phase Work “is a form of Individual Work outlined and prescribed by the Compass Phase System.” Sharing is “a form of Individual Work with content that originates from participants and consists of sharing important information in a participant’s life.” Re-commitment enables “participants to publicly take responsibility for their behaviors, to identify the impact these behaviors had on themselves and others, and to re-commit for the future...”

Relationship Work is “a catalyst for relational growth, which follows a prescribed process and includes content generated by participants.” The purpose is “to provide a space for deep, solution-focused relational work between participants and provides an alternative to finger-pointing or blaming.” At times Relationship Work also serves as a hierarchy flattening mechanism between participants.... It “has a prescribed set of core stages, or steps, which must be followed in the specified order:... Commit, Listen & Communicate, Resolve & Re-Commit.

Community Work addresses an issue that impacts the entire community or multiple relationships within the community.

Community Work is a call for collective, community growth.... During this time, the participant sharing provides a brief description of the concern, identifies the impact of the concern on him/herself and others, and states the relevance for the community. Topics for Community Work may include but are not limited to:

- *School and/or classroom-related concerns...*
- *National or local events with themes that impact the community (i.e., police brutality, elections, community violence, marches or advocacy efforts, etc.)*
- *Themes that may lack adequate space in curricula (e.g., race and equity, cultural awareness, etc.)*

Community Work should not be making announcements or trying to problem-solve community issues.

Resonance “provides those who did Circle Work the opportunity to hear from other participants about the ways their work impacted them and what values they exhibited through their work...”

- 4) **Appreciations.** "Participants and facilitators show gratitude, or appreciation, for an action(s) of another participant(s)." They have a three-pronged structure: 1) Provide specific evidence or direct observations; 2) Identify impact. Appreciations should include how or why the direct observations, or the experience, impacted the person(s). 3) Bring it home. Appreciations should be closed in a meaningful way.... (The receiver) should simply "soak it in". Two norms that help ensure this happens are that the receiver is not allowed to give or receive the next appreciation, and the receiver is only allowed to say "thank you".
- 5) **Closing.** The purpose of the Closing is "to formally end Circle and provide a moment of pause for participants to check-in with themselves to acknowledge and reflect on the effects of the practice." Closings have a four-pronged structure:
1. *Unite.* All Circle participants join together in a circle formation that includes physical touch.
 2. *Drop-in.* The facilitator prompts participants to drop-in, or do a silent, personal check-in, to consider the effects or impact of the Circle practice.
 3. *Reflect or Remark.* The facilitator invites reflection from a participant(s) on the effects or impact of Circle.
 4. *Break the Circle.* The Circle is "broken", and participants move out of the circular formation.

Valor trains, supports, and coaches educators to become expert Compass facilitators with a three-year process. Once partners meet baseline metrics, they move to the third and final stage: becoming [a credentialed "Powered by Compass" school](#).

My Comment

In addition to the warmth and vitality shown by the participants in the PBS video, Valor impresses me with its whole-person development, hierarchy leveling, enabling students to be facilitators, attention to community issues such as police brutality, and training other schools to use its methods.

I'm intrigued by whether any projects other than schools use Circles as rhwy do, or in a similar way, and whether any of their students use the Circle after they've graduated. I sent them inquiries on those two questions.

Their methodology is sophisticated and complicated, with numerous rules that guide participation. As such, it requires a three-year training process before they certify other schools. I'm not so sure so many rules are necessary, but it seems they work.

Nevertheless, I wonder if a simpler approach might enable other projects to adopt similar Circles more easily, which could help spread egalitarian mutual aid more widely and quickly, as did the 12-Step model.

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