

FACILITATED DRUM CIRCLE



MAIN FEATURES

Reinforced skills (TASC Cluster)	CONSTRUCT - LEAD - SUPPORT
Suitable for	Teachers, Students
Difficulty level	Medium
Setting	Group
Minimum number of participants	10-15
Average time length	At least 60 minutes
Special Equipment	Yes
Online version	No

1. DESCRIPTION

A facilitated drum circle is a rhythmic event in which a group of people arranged in a circle and seated together plays drums and percussion, improvising rhythms and experiencing and expanding a sense of musicality, with the guidance and support of a facilitator.

Drum circles are events that promote people's creative potential through rhythm and music, revealing the best qualities that make for a close-knit and united group. Facilitators guide and encourage participants to create music. The purpose is to encourage communication and collaboration among people. In drum circles any type of percussion instrument is welcome, even if it comes from different cultures or is handcrafted. The drums and percussion instruments are distributed or are on site available for anyone who wants to use them.

In a facilitated drum circle everyone is part of the musical experience, there are no rehearsals; music is improvisation, no one makes mistakes; no prior musical skills are needed, everything is welcome as long as there is freedom of expression. There is no master, the drum circle is led by a facilitator whose task is first and foremost to create a group spirit to the rhythm of music. Thanks to the power of the "circle" and "rhythms with percussion," participants, with their own ability and sensitivity, can express themselves with sound, experiencing a way of being together in which the rule is necessary not as an imposition, but as a condition for a dialogue in which there is room for everyone.

Origin of drum circles

The drum circle movement originated in North America in the early 1990s taking root in indigenous cultures such as West Africa where for millennia the community drum has been a fundamental practice for marking the most important passages of life and keeping the community cohesive and resilient. In particular, the cultural and social phenomenon of the drum circle can be traced back to the West African drummer named Olatunji. Olatunji arrived in the United States in the 1960s and began in the 1980s to inspire large groups of people to drum together. Thus was born a drum circle "philosophy" that views the promotion of community expression, the joy of making music together, and the value of each individual within the circle as an important contribution to the whole [1].

Over the years, different drum circle models have developed according to an evolving process of experimentation and expansion in terms of approaches, recipients and contexts of application: some models focus on a teaching approach in which recipients learn how to play some specific rhythms, others prefer a more community-centred approach focused on the creation of improvised rhythms with the support of a facilitator and a protocol, and still others adopt a process-oriented group improvisation model without predetermined protocols or procedures.



Among the pioneers of facilitated drum circles are internationally renowned individuals such as Arthur Hull and Christine Stevens who have developed their own drum circle model over the years. Christine Stevens, a music therapist, began offering a training course called "HealthRhythms" to train people to facilitate drum circles directed at small groups and for therapeutic purposes. Arthur Hull, a percussionist, is considered by many to be a motivational trainer and the father of "modern" facilitated drum circles. Arthur inspired the birth of a movement of people from diverse cultural backgrounds who use rhythm as a means to promote and stimulate social interaction. In 1980 he founded Village Music Circles (VMC), teaching over 7,000 students at the University of California Santa Cruz and providing team building experiences to organizations in the United States, Europe and Asia. Today he travels the world training drum circle facilitators and bringing the Village Music Circles experiences to communities, associations, multinationals and schools; his trainings are accredited and recognized by MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) with UNLA - Unione Italiana Lotta all'Analfabetismo - for their high pedagogical and educational value.

Programs and research studies in school settings

Over the past two decades, school-based experimentation with rhythmic events using percussion instruments to develop students' social-emotional skills (SEL) has become increasingly popular. The objectives of such experimentation are many: to promote socialization in the classroom, to improve relationships between students and teachers, to counter inner discomfort, aggressive/oppositional behavior and some phenomena such as school dropout, bullying, etc.

The first studies involved the Holyoake Institute's DRUMBEAT® program [7]. DRUMBEAT (Discovering Relationships Using Music, Beliefs, Emotions, Attitudes and Thoughts) originated in Australia as a formal program to provide a safe environment for youth and to promote adolescents' self-esteem, social skills and sense of belonging, using the stimulus of music as a tool for engagement and inclusion [12]. DRUMBEAT consists of ten sessions, each of which explores, with the support of an appropriately trained facilitator, a different theme (e.g., peer pressure, feelings and emotions, bullying, identity, social responsibility, teamwork) through a combination of experiential learning moments (rhythmic events) and reflective moments based on a cognitive-behavioral approach. The pilot project, begun in 2003, included action-research on this educational practice with interesting results: the study described in [13] reports significant improvements in self-esteem, school attendance and behavior among 39 Australian Aboriginal students. The same is true for the study [11] conducted on 60 students classified as "high risk" in three schools in Australia, which showed that the DRUMBEAT approach produced improvements in attendance, social integration, and student behavior as well as a reduction in suspensions. The article [10] reports on an evaluation conducted in 19 schools participating in the DRUMBEAT program. According to surveys administered to 180 students, school data on student behavior, and teacher feedback, positive changes emerged such as increased self-esteem, improved social relationships, decreased behavioral incidents and increased school attendance.

Still, the study [17] looked at 62 students showing increased mental well-being and decreased antisocial behavior especially for male students. Finally, according to the study [9] conducted in 6 Australian schools, the DRUMBEAT program made significant improvements in self-esteem and in countering students' inner distress and challenging behaviors.

Based on the above research, the more recent Rhythm2Recovery model [8] developed from the DRUMBEAT program; it always combines rhythmic music played in groups with cognitive reflection and is based on the same principles as the original DRUMBEAT model. However, it is a more flexible practice model, with a broader focus and influenced by new approaches (i.e., acceptance strategies, mindfulness, action engagement, positive psychology) geared toward discovering strengths and finding solutions rather than deepening problems. Rhythm2Recovery is accredited by the Education Department of the state of New South Wales (Australia) as a social-emotional skills development program.

Programs such as DRUMBEAT and Rhythm2Recovery are generally popular not only in Australia but also around the world due to the training of facilitators (music therapists, educators, teachers, etc.) who can rely on the provision of specific trainings that are open to all and also available online.

In conclusion, the studies described above show that the use of musical language has high potential for drawing young people into an educational environment where rhythm, collaboration and discussion can reinforce understanding of intra- and interpersonal processes.

Experimentation of facilitated Drum Circles in Italy in school settings

Based on the knowledge known to us, it does not appear that the above programs have ever been tried out in Italy; however - thanks to the presence of numerous facilitators trained on Drum Circle facilitation according to Arthur Hull's method - rhythm events are conducted more or less regularly in almost all Italian regions. In the school context, it may be useful to highlight a couple of experiences: in Tuscany, the project "Drums for Friendship" [20] promoted by the Drum Circle Spirit group [4] in collaboration with the teaching staff of some primary and secondary schools of I° and II° grade, for the implementation of rhythmic paths addressed to students with the aim of counteracting isolation and bullying in schools and developing noncognitive skills such as listening, dialogue, collaboration and more. In Piedmont, the pathway "Circular Music - Drum Circle 2021/2022" [3] developed in a 1st grade secondary school as part of the PON project "The 100 Languages of the School" with the aim of enhancing students' key competencies and stimulating them in the discovery of their talents, but also fostering the enhancement of sociality and group life of female students. The pathway was also posed as an intervention for the reduction of school dropout and students' academic success. The spillover was particularly positive in terms of personal growth, self-esteem, free and ethical self-expression, improvement of effective and nonjudgmental communication, indirect stimulus to greater commitment to study, collaboration and sharing of practices and emotions with the group.

Role of the Facilitator

The Facilitated Drum Circle described in this fact sheet reflects Arthur Hull's method, the most widely used approach to facilitation worldwide for what concerns the drum circle model for community building through the creation of improvised rhythms with the support of a facilitator and a protocol.

The drum circle facilitator facilitated according to Arthur Hull's method [1]:

- **does not have to be an expert percussionist**, however, it is important that he has a stable sense of rhythm and some playing ability. His or her goal is to make the experience as easy and enjoyable as possible for all who participate, not to perform in a performance;
- **creates an inclusive atmosphere** and takes people **from an individual perspective to group consciousness** by encouraging the creation of small, successful rhythmic experiences and **mutual listening**;
- **makes the experience accessible** to beginners by enhancing those with greater expertise in rhythmic skills. Therefore, he uses short, progressive rhythmic suggestions for difficulty during the event and takes elements offered by participants and makes them available to the circle;
- **is open to new rhythmic cues** that may arise from participants showing adaptability and flexibility with respect to an already established facilitation plan;
- **intervenes only when necessary** (e.g., when the music starts to change and the rhythm in the group is lost) and avoids entering the circle when the rhythm in the group is working. In "Arthurian" terms, the facilitator "gets out of the way" by demonstrating to the group that he trusts his ability to be able to create his own music independently;
- **uses one or more senses** (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic) to observe the circle and possibly intervene;
- **interprets and responds to some action of a participant** (or himself) **only as a learning opportunity and not as if it were a mistake**, thus avoiding causing embarrassment and reinforcing his judgment of himself;
- **transfers specific information to participants without sounding like their teacher** so as not to undermine the process of individual empowerment; uses metaphors (e.g., "We are here to give space for each other's rhythmic creativity," "Can you hear and feel the dialogue taking place between the instruments?"); and creates experiential examples (e.g., showing the different timbres present in the circle). In "Arthurian" terms, the facilitator **"teach without teaching."**

2. AIM / BENEFITS

Drum Circles foster group cohesion and the development of self-awareness (understood as the ability to come into contact with oneself, as knowledge of one's own resources, potential and preferences), curiosity, creativity, communication and interpersonal relationship skills, listening and expression of one's emotions through a percussion instrument. In addition, if part of more articulated and integrated pathways (such as DRUMBEAT or Rhythm2Recovery), the benefits noted can be:

-
- improved relationships among peers and with adults.
 - increased sense of belonging and community connection
 - improved level of emotional control
 - reduction in school suspensions
 - improvement in behavior outside the classroom
 - increase in students' self-esteem
 - increased ability to work in groups and collaborate, including within other disciplines
 - improvement in the level of attention and concentration

3. COMPETENCIES CLUSTER(s) related

CLUSTER NR 1 CONSTRUCT, NR 2 LEAD and NR 4 SUPPORT

Why

1. The drum circle contributes to the development of the CONSTRUCT dimension as it **stimulates and promotes personal and group agentivity** through the language of music and rhythm in particular. During a rhythmic event, relationships of trust and mutual listening are built that lead the group to co-create meanings through the act of playing together. The drum circle is an ongoing process of mutual influence in which each participant is stimulated and inspired by the facilitator and other participants in creating their own music in tune with each other. Each element plays an active role in maintaining a good rhythm (which we might interpret as a good classroom climate), all the actors involved (including the facilitator) learn from each other;
2. The drum circle enables the facilitator in particular to develop the dimension of LEADERSHIP. Leadership that is based on the ability to build a trusting relationship with participants, to read the group, to be flexible and focused on collaborative leadership that allows him or her to empower the group to achieve the goal of creating music together;
3. The drum circle fosters SUPPORT competence when the facilitator encourages the creation of small, successful rhythmic experiences, listening to each other, and when he interprets and responds to some action of a participant (or himself) only as a learning opportunity and not as if it were a mistake, thus suspending his judgement of himself and others.

4. HOW TO DO THE EXERCISE

The facilitated Drum Circle described in this practice follows Arthur Hull's Village Music Circles facilitation protocol [1, 21].

Step 1 / Preparation

The facilitator prepares the environment by reserving at least 30-40 minutes before the actual drum circle begins. Depending on the number of participants, the chairs are placed in a circle next to each other in a single row (up to 30 participants) but leaving two exit aisles (circle divided into two semicircles) or according to concentric circles (30 participants and up) with four exit aisles (the circle is divided into four "slices").

Once the chairs are placed, an instrument must be placed for each chair.

Music instruments are generally distributed with the logic of balancing timbres and pitches (see section 6. Equipment) throughout the circle and with the caution to place the bass drums-which form the foundation of rhythm-in the innermost circle.

Step 2 Starting the drum circle

At this stage the facilitator starts the first rhythm of the drum circle. This rhythm can start when all participants have taken their seats (perhaps the most appropriate mode in a school setting) or starting with one group of people while others gradually join the circle.

This very first and crucial phase initiates the **building of the relationship of trust between the facilitator and the facilitated group**. The facilitator takes care of the physical space by making sure the front rows are filled first, focuses on serving the group, **welcoming participants** and **making eye contact** with them. He or she also **defines each person's role in the circle** and his or her role through verbal communication (e.g., "we are here to have fun and cooperatively create a beautiful musical experience together") with the intent to be perceived as a support figure and not as someone who has to tell the group what to do or entertain them.

Step 3 / Protocol "Dictator"

At this still early stage, the facilitator "sets the rules" for **imparting with clear body language the main facilitation signals, always working with the whole group**. These signals are: call to attention, call to rhythm, stop, keep playing, volume up and down, call and response, speed up and slow down, accented note, roll [1, 21]. This phase allows for group awareness and the involvement of the whole group to establish an **inclusive and trusting atmosphere** in which everyone feels comfortable and not under judgement, as they would probably feel if asked individually. In addition, this phase allows the facilitator to establish a common language and a platform from which he/she can begin to direct the group's attention to the elements that make a drum circle work.

Step 4 / Protocol "Director"

Once participants understand and follow body language cues, the facilitator **directs their attention to musicality**. The facilitator fosters an awareness that they are creating a drumming ensemble through the process of "sculpting." The tool of sculpting allows for the identification and selection of a person, group, or type of drum to be given specific directions [1]. At this stage, **various subgroups can be sculpted and highlighted**: circle sections, instrument type, gender, characteristics, etc. [21].

It is possible to sculpt sections of the circle (halves, one-quarter, two-thirds) to **encourage mutual listening** [21, minute 24:23]: while one half of the circle plays, the other half listens and follows the facilitator in the call-and-response signal. The facilitator can also offer ideas for improvisation [21, 25]: for example, by sculpting the circle, one half of the circle can be invited to continue playing and the other half to respond to the facilitator's call by improvising [21, minute 25:15]. In addition, you can create fun dynamics by sculpting by gender (perhaps with the help of signs) or by other criteria (who wears glasses, who has blond hair, etc.). It is also possible to vary the musical dynamics by modulating the sequences with different speeds [21, minute 26:48].

Step 5 / Protocol "Facilitator"

When participants have practised listening, interaction, and rhythmic dialogues, the facilitator can foster awareness of how each individual can contribute to the **co-creation of a rhythmic melody**. At this stage, the facilitator "sculpts" and showcases participants' music by creating small hits and musical dialogues by sculpting songs with mixed percussion timbres and pitches [21, minute 27:55]. This educates the group in the awareness of being an orchestra and allows for platforms for more sophisticated musical interactions.

The facilitator enters the circle when necessary, to establish rhythmic connections, to increase the musicality of the whole group through the **tool of "carving" a song** ([1, p. 64], [21, minute 30:12]): after selecting 3-4 elements that seem to be in rhythmic harmony with each other, the facilitator can stop the rest of the participants, let the song go on for a few bars and finally bring the participants back to play, either all at the same time (call to rhythm) or using a technique, called layering, in which you gradually add individuals or sections or types of instruments.

When you sculpt a song you raise the level of everyone's ability to listen, to collaborate and cooperate with each other, and you give the group the responsibility of creating the music, ideally to the point where you no longer need the facilitator figure.

Step 6 / Protocol "Conductor"

The ultimate goal of a facilitator is to lead participants to create a conscious musical orchestration in the moment, a community in which connections are made beyond the music. As the group's musical creation becomes more sophisticated, the facilitator's body language and proposed facilitation sequences may also become more sophisticated [21].

Participants are able to pay attention to each other, understand the roles of the different instruments they are playing, and converse through the circle, connecting at different levels.

Through mutual trust and with the group's permission, the facilitator plays and orchestrates the group's music, using what the participants offer and their senses (auditory, visual, kinesthetic) to observe the group. An example of a composition that can be carried out at this stage is to exchange the rhythm by carving out sections: the facilitator carves out a section (e.g., a quarter circle) and ask it to continue to play, stop the rest of the circle, then carve out a section of people who are not playing to pass the rhythm of the previous section, and so on, the facilitator transfers the rhythm from one quarter circle to the other [21, minute 45:58].

Step 7 / Conclusion

The facilitator terminates the drum circle when the time set for its end has been reached or when the energy of the group is such that it is appropriate to end the experience. There are several ways to end a drum circle. One dynamic way to create an empathetic ending to a group rhythm might be to remove sections of different instruments, making the groove more spacious and gentle, until no more instruments are playing [1, p. 81].

5. DEBRIEF

At the end of a drum circle the facilitator, after thanking all participants, might invite them to describe in a word or two the experience they have just had. In a second moment, the facilitator may implement the so-called "critique technique", a useful technique for reflecting on what happened.

The facilitator, as if he or she were a third person, objectively reviews the actions and interactions that took place during the circle, suspending his or her own judgments. The facilitator then analyzes the participants' responses to his or her own actions during the drum circle and reflects on what worked and what needs elaboration.

The facilitator considers moments of learning those situations that perhaps did not work as he or she would have liked, and considers the circle participants as teachers.

Finally, the facilitator analyses his or her actions from his or her perspective by reflecting on questions such as, "If you had the opportunity to do this again, what did you observe in facilitation that you could do differently to make the experience more effective?" [1, p. 116].

6. SPECIAL MATERIALS

The performance of a Drum Circle requires chairs and appropriate instrumentation. Instrumentation is generally divided into two general categories based on the timbres of the small percussion instruments and the tones of the drums. Small drums can be distinguished into three tones: (1) **wooden blocks and claves**: sticks on wood; (2) **shakers**: beads on surfaces or inside containers; (3) **bells**: sticks on metal. The three most easily distinguishable tones in drums are (a) **low pitches**, related to a low-pitched sound emitted by double-skinned drums; (b) **medium pitches**, which can be associated with sounds emitted by instruments such as congas or djembé; and (c) **high pitches**, which can be associated with sounds emitted by instruments such as darbuka, bongos, frame drums, talking drum, fifth. If you do not have any instruments at hand, you can try to build percussion instruments with salvaged materials (bins, tin cans, containers, beads, etc.) trying to obtain the appropriate timbres and tones [22]. In addition to chairs and instruments, it may be useful to print signs (depicting different types of instruments, colours, etc.) for use during facilitation.

7. TIPS AND TRICKS

To try your hand at facilitating a Drum Circle according to Arthur Hull's method, reading Arthur Hull's books [1] and [24] and watching the video "The Art of Drum Circle Facilitation" is strongly recommended.

It is also possible to participate in training courses organised worldwide throughout the year. These courses are certified by Arthur Hull and in some countries are accredited by the Ministry of Education for the high educational value.

8. ONLINE VERSION

Because of the goals of facilitated Drum Circle practice, it is appropriate to conduct the practice in presence.

9. BIBLIOGRAPHY - SITOGRAPHY

1. Hull, A. (2006). *Drum circle facilitation: Building community through rhythm*. Santa Cruz, California: Village Music Circles. Edizione italiana 2021: *Drum circle facilitation: Rafforzare la comunità attraverso il ritmo*.
2. Baroni S. (2022). *Circular Music - strategie innovative per la didattica e l'apprendimento*. Edizione Solos Media. [Link](#).
3. Scuola secondaria di primo grado Einaudi di Cavallermaggiore (CN). *Progetto PON "I 100 linguaggi della scuola" - percorso "Circular Music - Drum Circle 2021/2022"*. [Link](#).
4. Drum Circle Spirit - Drum Circle in ambito educativo. *ne*. [Link 1](#), [link 2](#).
5. Varner, E. (2022). *Group Drumming as Conduit to Enhanced Self and Community Relationships*. *Journal of General Music Education*, 35(3), 28–31. [Link](#).
6. Snow S., D'Amico M. (2010). *The drum circle project: a qualitative study with at-risk youth in a school setting*. *Canadian Journal of Music Therapy*, 16(1), 12–39. [Link](#).
7. Holyoake's DRUMBEAT® Programme. <https://holyoake.org.au/drumbeat/>
8. Rhythm to Recovery (R2R) Model. www.rhythm2recovery.com
9. St George J., Freeman E. (2020). *Social-emotional learning through a drumming intervention*. *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy*, 12(1), 30–42. [Link](#).
10. Wood, L., Ivery, P., Donovan, R. and Lambin, E. (2013). *"To the beat of a different drum": improving the social and mental wellbeing of at-risk young people through drumming*, *Journal of Public Mental Health*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 70-79. [Link](#).
11. Faulkner, S.C., Wood, L., Ivery, P., & Donovan, R. (2012). *It's not just music and rhythm: Evaluation of a drumming based intervention to improve the social wellbeing of alienated youth*. *Children Australia*, 37(1), 31– 39. [Link](#).
12. Faulkner, S. (2012). *Drumming up courage*. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 21(3), 18- 22. [Link](#).
13. Faulkner, S., Ivery, P., Wood, L. & Donovan, R. (2010). *Holyoake's Drumbeat Program: Music as a tool for social learning and improved educational outcomes*. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 39, 98-109. [Link](#).
14. Faulkner, S. (2017). *Rhythm to recovery: A practical guide to using rhythmic music, voice and movement for social and emotional development*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. [Link](#).
15. Faulkner, S. C. (2022). *Rhythms of learning—a model of practice supporting youth mental health in the era of COVID-19*. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 1-7. [Link](#).

16. Wood & Faulkner (2014). *Reach me & You can teach me - Engagement and social learning through hand drumming*. Journal of Relational Child & Youth Care Practice, 27,1 p18-26.
17. Martin, E.M, & Wood, E.J. (2017). *Drumming to a New Beat: A Group Therapeutic Drumming and Talking Intervention to Improve Mental Health and Behaviour of Disadvantaged Adolescent Boys*. Children Australia, 42, 4, 268-276.
18. Slattery, B (2018). *In the groove: A case study into drumming and student engagement*. [Link](#).
19. Kalani. World Drum Club Youtube Channel. *Community Drumming Facilitation (CDF)*. [Link](#).
20. Drum Circle Spirit. *Progetto Tamburi per l'amicizia*. [Link](#).
21. Village Music Circles. *The Art of Drum Circle Facilitation Video*. [Link](#).
22. Eniscuolachannel. *Costruire strumenti di percussione con materiale di recupero*. [Link](#).
23. Drum Circle Spirit - *Training*. [Link](#).
24. Arthur Hull (2014). *Rhythmical Alchemy Playshop: Volume 1 Drum Circle Games for Music Educators, School Teachers, Recreational Drummers & Drum Circle Facilitators*. Santa Cruz, California: Village Music Circles.