

# Thinking circles

## Introduction by Steve Williams

I invented thinking circles to help people gather their ideas prior to choosing questions for an inquiry. Thinking circles encourage private reflection on the concepts people perceive in stimulus material such as stories, poems, pictures or objects. Individual thinking circles could be shared with others in small groups so that members could compare interests, questions and notes before creating a 'group question' to go forward for consideration by the whole community. Thinking circles provide an effective focus for initial exploratory dialogue.

After inventing thinking circles, I realised that I had probably been influenced by David Hyerle's *Circle Maps* (2004) and also *Concept Circles* (Vacca, Vacca and Gove 1987).

## How thinking circles work

Look at the diagram on the following page. It is a thinking circle I made after reading *Something Else*, a picture book by Kathryn Cave and Chris Riddell.

1. The centre circle is divided into four segments. In each of the segments, I write some initial concepts that occur to me as I consider the story and pictures.
2. In the outer circle, I write either some new concepts as I continue thinking or some concepts related to my four initial ones. So, for example I associate 'bullying' and 'force' with 'rejection'. I connect 'character' and 'humanity' with 'compassion'.
3. In the space outside both circles I write questions or notes as I go along. I might write these immediately after noting each outer circle concept (as an elaboration on the idea in my mind) or after I have finished writing all the concepts in the outer circle. I might even write some of the notes and questions first and then summarise the key concepts in the outer circle. Thinking circles can be used very flexibly.
4. When you use thinking circles with pupils, you might try asking them to create questions in the outside space that link several of the concepts in the circles (eg. 'Is it possible to educate people to be compassionate?' Or 'Does bullying always involve force?'). The pupils may or may not need this level of guidance. In the early stages of introducing thinking circles you could begin by talking with the whole class about what concepts they think should go into the four central quadrants. Then leave it to them to elaborate with their own related concepts, notes and questions. You can use thinking circles in very flexible ways – experiment.

## Other uses for thinking circles

1. Use thinking circles when you are preparing your own thoughts, session plans and activities on a stimulus for inquiry.
2. Use thinking circles as a tool for helping people observe an inquiry. For example, you could have an outer circle and an inner circle of pupils. While the pupils in the inner circle discuss a question, those in the outer circle track the discussion using their thinking circles. They can use the outer space not only to record interesting opinions, reasons, questions and so on but also to note their observations on the process of inquiry (Eg. 'Most people listened well' or 'not many people referred to what others said') You could give more or less direction to people about what to focus on.

## References

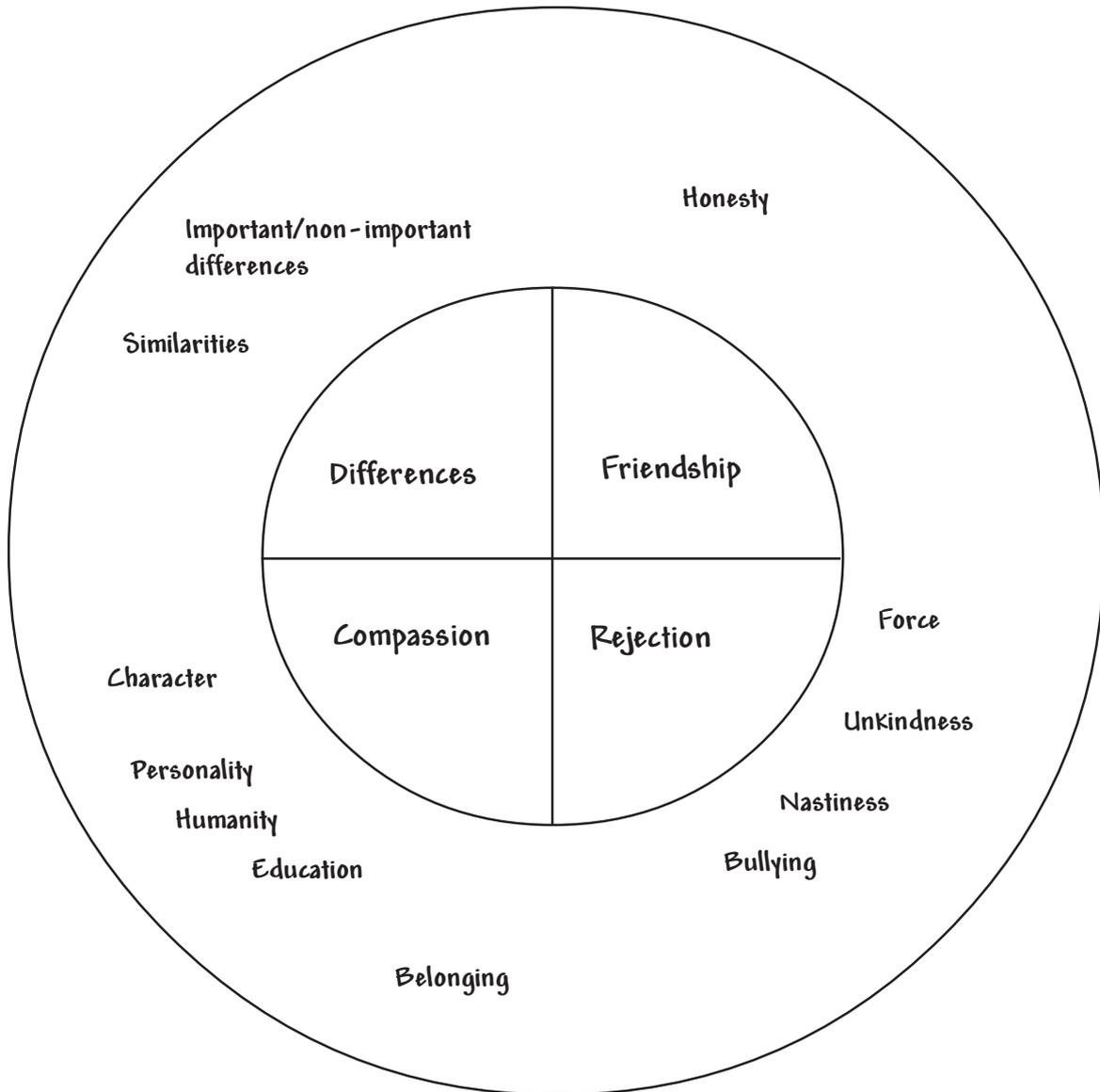
Vacca, Vacca and Gove (1987) *Reading and Learning to Read*. Boston: Little, Brown  
Heyerle, ed (2004) *Student Successes with Thinking Maps*, Corwin Press  
Cave and Riddell (1995) *Something Else*, Puffin Books

What human differences are most and least important?

Differences: tastes, 'culture', appearance, fur colour, abilities

The creature felt compassion for the other 'something'.

Does bullying always involve force?



The creatures are more similar than they are different.

Is it possible to educate people to be compassionate?

Is it always wrong to reject people?

Something Else felt compassion towards the other something

