

What Is a Drum Circle?

BY KALANI

With their recent rise in popularity, drum circles have come to represent many things to many people. For most participants, they are a setting for personal and group creativity, and they can even have positive physical effects not unlike those obtained from practicing yoga or meditation. For others, drum circles serve as a metaphor that can be used to illustrate the importance of teamwork, cooperation, and diversity in creating a healthy and productive community. And for some, drum circles are just a way to have fun. Let's take a look at some of the aspects of a drum circle and the results that can be achieved from participating in one.

A drum circle can be simply defined as "a group of people working together to create in-the-moment music using drums and percussion instruments." The key words and phrases in the previous sentence are: group, working together, create, and in-the-moment. Therefore, a percussion ensemble performing a piece of music is not a drum circle. Neither is a drum class that is being led by a teacher, or a group that is recreating music they have played before. A drum circle is a unique event that is spontaneously created by the facilitator and the participants.

It's been my experience that schooled musicians tend to see drum circles in a musical context and therefore think of them as "simple," "elementary," or even "musically boring." This view is an example of not seeing the forest through the trees. The real focus and power of a drum circle lies not in its musical or technical aspects, but in the process set forth by the facilitator and experienced by the group. A knowledgeable facilitator can create a multitude of settings for a variety of populations that illustrate any number of educational meta-

phors, all while the group is having fun playing drums and creating music together. *That* is power.

Is a drum circle about drumming?

Of course, you couldn't have a drum circle without drums and drumming, but in most cases, a drum circle is about anything *but* drumming. If you look around a circle and you see drums and drumming, then you are seeing the surface product. If, on the other hand, you look around the circle and you see people and expressions, you are seeing the process and the spirit that drives it. A "drum circle" is really a "people circle." It is more often

about a growth process than it is about the act of drumming.

Are there different kinds of drum circles?

Drum circles are used by a variety of people as a program medium. Ways in which facilitated drum circles are used by groups and organizations include team-building exercises, diversity appreciation, stress reduction, music therapy, fitness training, celebrations, socializing events for conferences, cooperative learning settings in classrooms, gender specific (such as women's circles), and community building.

How does a drum circle produce specific outcomes?

A drum circle has the *potential* to do many things, but it won't necessarily produce specific results without the guidance of an experienced facilitator. In fact, a poorly structured circle can do more harm than good.

For example, if the facilitator is not intentionally creating settings in which the participants feel a sense of inclusion, community, and the ability to shape their experience as a group, members can leave feeling disenfranchised and unimportant. Unorganized activities with no clear focal points can leave participants feeling "lost," and technically demanding activities can create feelings of inadequacy among members who don't have the "chops" to keep up. In most cases, this produces the exact opposite of the desired goal. Exposing a group to excessively loud drumming can not only cause hearing damage, but may also have members feeling as if they have no "voice."

In order to produce a specific result, a drum circle must



be part of a well-thought-out and facilitated program. Just as an individual drum has no “power” on its own, a drum circle does not necessarily have the power to facilitate positive change without clear intention and implementation. It is the *participants* who will change themselves through taking part in and shaping the process they co-create with the facilitator.

What exactly does a facilitator do?

A facilitator guides the group through various settings in order to help them reach their desired goals of cooperation, appreciation, community, and creativity. The facilitator often is the program designer and works with the host organization to support their goals, mission statement, and desired outcome. The facilitator usually provides all the drums and percussion instruments and is responsible for the overall setting of the event including the setup, providing basic instruction such as how to hold and play instruments, discussing drum circle etiquette, and helping anyone who needs special attention. In specific programs the facilitator also will post-process the outcomes with the group to draw metaphors between their experience in the circle and their work or personal relationships.

What kinds of instruments are good for drum circles?

Although any drums or percussion instruments can be used in a drum circle, there are certain qualities that make some a better choice than others. Some aspects to consider when choosing instruments are:

Portability: Instruments should be easy to store, transport and set up.

Instrument Volume: It's best to choose a group of instruments of similar volume, which helps give each participant a voice.

Group Volume: Every instrument adds to the total volume. For this reason, it's preferable to use instruments that are not individually very loud.

Playability: Instruments that are easy to hold, tune, and play are well suited for most groups (especially kids).

Variety: A range of diverse instruments offers more musical possibilities than a homogenous group, and better reflects a community!

Where can I find out more about drum circles?

Visit the Kalani Music or PAS Web sites for drum circle-oriented links, message boards, and list-serves. For more information about drum circle programs and facilitation, contact Kalani via his Web site (www.kalanimusic.com) or e-mail him at kalani@kalanimusic.com.

Kalani presents workshops, programs and drum circles at conferences, music stores,

educational institutions, and festivals in the U.S. and abroad. His university appearances include USC, CSUN, UMKC, CMSU, UCLA, University of Akron, University of Kentucky, and LSU. He has been a featured clinician at the Taipei Percussion Institute, the International Percussion Festival (Belgium), the World Rhythm Festival (Seattle), and several PASICs. PN

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