

Perceptions of Drum Circles

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Recently, I was presented with a unique opportunity to further my understanding of how drumming is perceived by people who have not drummed before. I facilitated a recreational drumming experience for a class of college students who were required to attend a “drum circle”. I remembered the 2005 PASIC the Recreational Drumming LAB that Kalani presented. This LAB focused on identifying motivations and concerns of recreational drumming participants and to identify Best Practices for facilitators.

What made my experience unique and potentially useful to these objectives was that the students were required to complete a written assignment about their preconceptions of what the drum circle would be like and a written assignment about the actual experience.

After reading the students papers, I realized that this may be useful to other facilitators and organizations that wish to further the understanding of how drumming is perceived by people who have not drummed before.

The purpose of this article is to summarize this experience, identify preconceptions/concerns of the participants, identify benefits perceived by the participants, identify qualities of the facilitator that the students found helpful and calculate how many students said they would either return or told others to try drumming.

The group consisted of 30 undergraduates at a local community college. Though they were all freshmen, they were all different ages. Most were right out of high school but there were students who were older who were returning to school. The group was a good mix of both men and women who were all part of an Intro to Sociology class. Their participation was voluntary yet they were expected to complete a written assignment relating to the drum circle.

I was asked to facilitate the drum circle along with my friend, a psychologist and drummer. We have done a couple of programs together and have a format we tend to follow to try and make the experience as significant and authentic as possible.

The circle was held at a retreat center that is set in a remote wooded area. We had set the room up in a large circle with the drums in the middle and percussion instruments underneath the chairs. Students started to arrive on time yet many were late. It turns out that many students had trouble finding the center in the dark and were a little rattled by feeling lost.

I gave a brief introduction as to how to play the instruments and my partner gave the group suggestions regarding being present and staying in the moment. I facilitated the first 30 minutes of the experience. We started with “echoes” and then moved to playing a unified constant eighth note rhythm on the bass tones of the drum. I encouraged the group to listen to see if we were playing as “one drum”. I began sculpting sections of the circle and assigning parts. After allowing the students to hear their rhythms together, I started showcasing sections and finally ended with some “rumbles”. We gave the students a break to use the rest room and their cell phones.

The second half began with opportunities to process the first half and discuss different ways to engage in a non-facilitated drumming experience. For the next 30 minutes, we played freely without any facilitation. Many students switched instruments and after a little encouragement got up and began dancing. We ended the drum circle with a quiet “soundscape” where students were asked to take deep breaths, close their eyes and reflect upon the experience. The circle was closed with participants giving a one-word summary of their experience.

The following week the professor gave me copies of some of the students writing assignments. After reading the papers, I realized there was a lot of useful material.

Many of students had preconceptions of what the drum circle would be like having never been to one. I noticed their preconceptions seemed to fall into three different categories:

- There appeared to be a lot of concern for the *uncertainty* of what a drum circle is.
- There were questions about what would be like, would they be expected to play something correctly, and would they be embarrassed.
- There were also a lot of comments about the circle being *a ritual* of some kind similar to a cultural or religious experience.
- Finally, many believed the experience would be *fun*.

The students in their post experience papers described enjoying the drum circle a lot and noticed many benefits that they believed occurred. These comments could be placed in the following categories:

- Release of negative energy/emotions
- Increased sense of presence
- Increased connection with others
- Increased feeling of relaxation
- Increased energy
- Increased insight into self
- Fun!!

They found qualities in the facilitator like *patience/calmness, and a genuine desire to educate* helpful. Also, having some instructions given and having the facilitator initially lead the group were also found to be helpful. Out of the thirteen papers submitted, eight stated that they would return to the community circle at this same location and five stated they had told others they should try drumming.

I believe the reactions written in the student's papers reflect the general public's perceptions about drumming. As facilitators, we are able to address people's concerns about participating in drum circles and confirm the benefits they provide. We can also share what things we did during the drum circle that were beneficial to the participants in order to further develop a Best Practices. By sharing our experiences and educating others, we can bring the benefits of drumming to a much greater audience.

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REX BACON is a board certified music therapist, professional drummer and drum circle facilitator. Rex received his B.A. in Music Therapy from the University of Dayton in 1997. As a full time music therapist, Rex has worked in various healthcare settings including mental health center, children's home, alternative school, and prison.

As a TOCA Percussion, ThunderEcho Drums, and Peripole-Bergerault Inc. endorser, Rex has facilitated hundreds of drum circles in churches, schools, libraries, hospitals, wellness centers, corporations, colleges, camps, and weddings. He has presented drumming workshops to colleges, social service agencies, and music therapy conferences. As co-director of Rhythm Culture, a Cleveland-based drum circle facilitation business, he has placed drums and percussion in the hands of thousands of children and adults.

Rex combines creative drumming techniques with warmth and humor, enhancing the feelings of wellness and community within each circle he facilitates. Rex is a member of the American Music Therapy Association, the Percussive Arts Society, and the Disabled Drummers Association.

Rex has been playing drums since 1993. Rex has studied jazz drumming with Steve Barnes and fusion drumming with Kip Volans. Recently, Rex began studying drum set and djembe with Rusted Root's drummer Jim Donovan including performing together at the Winterstar conference in 2004.

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