

Integrating restorative practices into formal university programming: A practical, step-by-step guide, with examples from Columbia University

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Many institutions decide to teach Restorative Practices and then discover that the hardest problem is structural: where the content would be included in the curriculum, who would be qualified to teach it, which partners would be able to supply the practice settings, and how the work would survive past its first champion. This chapter sets out the sequence a program developer can follow, in order to move from intention to a sustainable offering. It draws on the integration of Restorative Practices into formal university programming at Columbia University and Teachers College, where the author teaches two graduate courses, Introduction to Restorative Practices and Restorative Practices Practicum respectively. It is written to be read in sequence and the same six steps apply whether the host program is a single course or a full concentration, and whether the institution is well resourced or operating under tight constraints. The reusable models in the appendices are referenced at the point where each is used.

Why a Restorative Practices course belongs inside the curriculum

The concept of Restorative Practices is easy to treat as an add-on, such as a workshop or an orientation session. But a dedicated course, if only as a single elective bolted onto an existing program works better, and lasts longer, when integrated as structural content located within the program's core, assessed like any other competency, and taught experientially so that students leave able to actually facilitate rather than just describe. The reason is practical rather than theoretical. A couple hour workshop will not lead to behavior change or the mastery of skills, while a structured course built around experiential facilitation has the potential to produce graduates who actually practiced facilitating a circle or a conference. Moreover, a program that builds restorative work into its structure, rather than simply presenting it as supplementary, is far less likely to let the language of repair outrun the substance, where circles are convened while the institution's own practices remain unchanged (Zehr, 2015). The steps below are designed to keep that gap from opening.

A Step-by-Step Sequence

Step 1. Assess the context before designing anything

Begin by mapping what already exists. Identify the courses, faculty interest, and any informal restorative activity already underway; the institutional pain points the program might address, such as student conduct, residential-life conflict, or academic-integrity disputes; and the external partners, if any, who could host practice opportunities. The goal of this first step is a short context-and-stakeholder analysis, not a plan. Most program failures trace back to a design built without this assessment, so resist the urge to skip ahead to course content.

In practice, this assessment can be assembled quickly from sources a program developer can usually access within a few weeks. Useful steps include a review of the existing course catalog

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for adjacent offerings in conflict resolution, mediation, or social justice; short conversations with the offices that currently address conflict, such as student affairs, residential life, the ombuds office, and academic-integrity boards; and an inventory of faculty who already use circles or dialogue in their teaching, even if informally. The output is a one - to two-page document that answers three questions: what restorative or near-restorative activities already exist, what institutional problem will the program be positioned to address, and which external organizations could realistically host students, or what other, even nontraditional opportunities exist to facilitate student ongoing skill building. That document becomes the evidence base for every later decision, and it is worth documenting in the initial stages because the design and approval stages will repeatedly send the developer back to it. This is also the moment to record a baseline: the current state of the gaps, existing and needed skills, opportunities, on and off campus conflicts (if applicable) the program hopes to change. Baselines cannot be reconstructed after the fact and capturing them here is what makes the program-level evaluation in the programming examples, possible later.

Step 2. Decide how the content will sit within the curriculum

Next, settle the structural question: will restorative practices be a standalone course, an embedded module within existing courses, or a full concentration or certificate? Each choice carries different resource and approval implications:

- **Stand-alone course:** fastest to launch and easiest to staff, but also easiest to marginalize.
- **Embedded module:** reaches more students and signals that the content is core, but requires buy-in from colleagues who teach the host courses.
- **Concentration or certificate:** the strongest institutional commitment and the most durable, but the slowest to approve and the most resource-intensive.

At Columbia, the two Restorative Practices courses are taught as dedicated graduate coursework rather than as a single survey session. In the School of Professional Studies, Introduction to Restorative Practices is a three-credit elective delivered as both an in person and a virtual intensive, combining the philosophy, methods, and values of restorative work with some experiential facilitation. At Teachers College, a Restorative Practices Practicum extends this into applied practice. Together they reflect a design principle worth carrying into any program: pairing conceptual grounding with hands-on facilitation is what allows students to develop actual facilitation skills rather than leaving only able to describe concepts. The sample syllabus in the programming examples, is a reusable model for a course of this kind adapting its texts and assessment structure to the level and setting of the host program.

Step 3. Build the course around experiential practice, not only reading.

Restorative facilitation is a skill, and skills are learned by doing. Design the course so that (1) students facilitate circles and conferences in the classroom in both structured and non-structured role-playing, (2) receive feedback from the instructor and their peers, and (3) build

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toward independent facilitation by the end of the term. Three design choices make this work in any program:

1. **Sequence theory and practice together.** Pair each set of readings with an experiential session in the same week, so that concepts are immediately enacted.
2. **Assess facilitation directly.** Allocate a meaningful share of the grade to observed facilitation, not only to written work, so that the competency the program claims to teach is the competency it actually evaluates.
3. **End on application.** Make the final assessment a design task: students design a restorative intervention for a defined international, national, institutional or community context, which mirrors the work they will do after graduation.

Because facilitation is assessed by observation, the grading scheme must be stated in advance and given to students within the first week. A workable distribution for a three-credit course allocates roughly 20 percent to preparation and facilitation of and participation in at least two circles, 40 percent to observed facilitation of and participation in at least two conferences, and 40 percent to the final intervention design. Observed facilitation is marked against a rubric of a few named domains rather than an overall impression: opening and framing, question sequencing, management of silence and of dominance, response to an unexpected disclosure, and closing. Each domain is scored on a simple three-point scale, with the second facilitation weighted more heavily than the first, so that students are graded on movement rather than on their starting confidence. Where students facilitate off campus, that work is verified rather than graded: the instructor grades only what the instructor has observed, and the sign-up sheet, in the programming examples, records that the facilitation took place. Site mentors are asked for narrative feedback and never for a grade. They have not seen the rubric, and asking a partner to assign a mark strains the relationship Step 4 exists to protect. The programming examples model this structure, including an assessment scheme weighted toward participation, facilitation, and a final intervention design.

Step 4. Secure practice settings through formal partnerships, if available.

A university course can teach facilitation, but the most valuable learning often comes from practicing in real settings beyond the classroom, and real settings require opportunities and agreements. A program that wants to extend practice in this way should identify partners, such as community mediation centers, school districts, municipal justice bodies, or international organizations, that can host students or graduates and provide experienced mentors. Then formalize the relationship in writing before any placement begins.

A partnership memorandum should name each party's actual contributions rather than gesture at collaboration, designate points of contact and a meeting rhythm, and set explicit terms for confidentiality and data, particularly the requirement that any use of partner data for research or publication has prior written consent. The MOU template in the programming examples, is built Integrating restorative practices into formal university programming: A practical, step-by-step guide, with examples from Columbia University by Dianne Williams is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#), except where otherwise noted.

to be adapted to the partner type and can be completed from its bracketed fields. Treat the responsibilities section as the most important part: vague commitments are where partnerships quietly fail.

When approaching a prospective partner, it helps to arrive with a specific and modest proposal rather than an open-ended request to collaborate. Name the number of people to be placed, the time commitment expected of a site mentor, the support the program will provide, and the period the placement covers. Partners are far more likely to agree to a defined commitment they can plan around than to a general invitation. It is also worth settling, in the agreement itself, what happens to the work product: who holds the records of a circle or conference, how confidentiality is maintained, and on what terms, if any, anonymized material may inform teaching or research. Resolving these questions in writing at the outset prevents the most common late-stage dispute, which arises when a program's research interest meets a partner's duty of confidentiality after placements have already begun.

Step 5. Build the Facilitator pool, drawing on the served community

A program may need more facilitators than its founding faculty can supply, and it needs a way to deepen the skill of those it has already taught. Build the pool deliberately by developing advanced students and graduates into facilitators, recruiting practitioners from partner sites, and, wherever possible, drawing facilitators from the communities the program serves.

Beyond the classroom, the single most effective way for students to build facilitation skills is to practice regularly in a real setting, and this need not wait for a formal placement program. A practice worth adopting is to encourage every student to approach a local school or community organization and arrange to facilitate circles on a structured and recurring basis, at a frequency and schedule that suit both the student and the host. In the author's courses, students are given a simple sign-up sheet that the host principal or director signs to verify that the facilitation took place; a reusable version is provided in the programming examples. The verification matters less as a grading device than as a way of converting a good intention into a standing commitment. This approach scales to any program because it draws on settings that already exist, costs the university nothing, and gives students far more facilitation repetitions than a single course can contain.

A further pathway continues after the course ends. In the author's practice, graduates are invited to work alongside an experienced practitioner on real consultancy engagements, particularly pro bono work, moving from observing to co-facilitating to leading as their judgment develops. A concrete vehicle for this is a structured follow-up built into every training engagement: each consultancy with a training component is paired with a three-month series of weekly post training sessions, frequently facilitated by the more experienced students with assistance from those more recently trained. This gives the people trained a sustained period of supported practice rather than a single event, which is what makes the training hold, and it gives the facilitators a graduated setting in which to advance.

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The progression is itself the incentive, but only if it is made explicit rather than assumed. Graduates invited into engagement work should receive named credit on the engagement, a reference grounded in observed practice rather than coursework, documented facilitation hours that count toward professional certification where a jurisdiction recognizes it, and first call on paid facilitation as engagements are funded. The sequence from observing to co-facilitating to leading is stated at the outset, with the criterion for each move named, so that the invitation reads as a pathway rather than an open-ended request for unpaid labor. Where an engagement carries a training budget, the selected facilitators are paid from it. Pro bono work is a stage in the progression but not its destination; a program that never converts its most capable graduates into paid practitioners will lose them, usually at the point where they have become good enough to be worth keeping.

Over time, a small number of long-standing practitioners trained this way will become lead facilitators who themselves train other trainers within specific engagements, such as in a nationwide restorative justice rollout or a ministry partnership. This apprenticeship sits outside the university curriculum rather than within it, and the distinction is worth preserving: the course produces capable beginners, while the years of accompanied practice that follow are what produce trainers of trainers. A program developer can build a comparable pathway by being deliberate about which graduates are invited into real work, treating the invitation as a structured progression rather than an occasional favor.

Where a program serves a specific community, reserve places in any training for members of that community and, if possible, budget for their participation rather than assuming volunteer time. Community-based facilitators carry contextual knowledge no curriculum can supply, and resourcing their involvement is the most concrete way of designing a program in collaboration with the served community rather than designing a program for the served community without their input. The failure to do so is one of the most common ways a program drifts back toward being something done to a community rather than with it.

Step 6. Plan for sustainability from the start

Finally, decide at the outset how the program will outlive its founders. A program that depends entirely on one faculty member's energy will end when that person's attention moves. Build durability by (1) training the next cohort of facilitators each cycle, (2) documenting curriculum and partnership arrangements so they can be passed on and (3) evaluating against outcomes rather than activity counts. The distinction in the final point matters: counting circles convened measures motion, while asking whether the conditions that produced the conflict have changed measures whether the program is working. A delivery launched without a sustainability plan is the second greatest source of program failure, after a design built without assessment.

Concretely, sustainability is easier to secure when three records are kept from the start: (1) a teaching record complete enough that a new instructor could teach the course without the

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originator present; (2) a partnership record of the signed memoranda and contacts, so a partnership does not collapse when the person who built it leaves; and (3) an evaluation plan that names, before launch, the few outcome measures the program will track rather than stipulating a finite number of sessions to be held. None of this is onerous, but it is almost always deferred, and deferring it is precisely what turns a promising program into a one-person project that ends with that person.

Two instruments make this evaluation concrete, and both are provided as reusable models. The first measures the people the program trains: a participant assessment administered at four points, before training, immediately after, at the close of the three-month follow-up, and again at six months, covering knowledge, self-rated facilitation confidence, and an observed-facilitation rubric. The four points are what distinguish a real measure of learning from a momentary post training glow, since they show not only what participants gained but whether the gain held while support was in place and survived once support ended. This instrument is provided in the programming examples. The second measures the program itself: a monitoring-and-evaluation framework built on a results chain that tracks activity but reports outcomes, so that a program is judged on whether the conditions it set out to change actually changed, not on how many sessions it ran. This framework is provided in the programming examples. Used together, they answer the two questions a program must keep answering: are the people we train becoming capable, and is the program making the difference it promised?

One practice deserves particular emphasis because it is so often omitted: a structured follow-up after any training event. A single workshop, however well delivered, rarely changes practice on its own. Building a defined period of regular post-training sessions into every training engagement, for example a series of weekly sessions over roughly three months, gives newly trained people a sustained setting in which to practice with support, raise the problems that only surface once they begin, and consolidate the skill before they are left to apply it alone. Where a facilitator pool already exists, these follow-up sessions are also an ideal training ground for it, with more experienced facilitators leading and newer ones assisting. The follow-up is inexpensive relative to the training it protects, and it is frequently the difference between a skill that is demonstrated once and a practice that endures. It is also the natural place to take the three-month measurement in the participant assessment described below; a final measurement six months after training then shows whether the practice survived once the follow-up support ended.

Sequencing the Whole Effort

The six steps map onto a four-phase framework, as set out in full in the programming examples, that keeps the larger effort on track. The phases are ordered but not rigid: assessment findings reshape design, and delivery surfaces needs that may send a developer back to assessment. The discipline the framework asks for is that no phase must be skipped. The table below shows how the steps and phases align:

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Phase	What to do	Key artifact
1. Assess	Map context, capacity, and stakeholders (Step 1).	Context and stakeholder analysis
2. Design	Set scope, type, and roles; build the course (Steps 2-3).	Program scope and syllabus
3. Deliver	Train facilitators; secure practice sites and partnerships (Steps 4-5).	Facilitator pool and partnership agreements
4. Sustain	Evaluate, institutionalize, and build the next cohort (Step 6).	Assessment instrument; M&E framework

Using the programming examples:

The documents provided are working models, intended to be adapted and used rather than read and filed.

- **Restorative Practices Sample Syllabus** supports Steps 2 and 3, offering a reusable model for a graduate course that teaches Restorative Practices as structural content with experiential facilitation.
- **Restorative Practices Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)/ Partnership Template** supports Step 4, providing an adaptable agreement for the practice-site partnerships a university program depends on.
- **Restorative Practices Program Design Framework** supports the whole sequence, setting out the four phases and the artifact each should produce.
- **Restorative Practices Participant Assessment Instrument** supports Steps 3 and 6, providing a pre, post, three-month, and six-month measure of what participants learned and whether it held.
- **Restorative Practices Monitoring & Evaluation Framework** supports Steps 1 and 6, providing a program-level results chain that reports outcomes rather than activity, anchored in a baseline taken during assessment.
- **Restorative Practices Field-Engagement Sign-Up and Verification** supports Step 5, providing a reusable form for students to arrange and verify regular facilitation in a local school or community setting.

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Conclusion

Integrating Restorative Practices into university programming is less a matter of choosing the right readings than of getting the structure right: assessing before designing, locating the content as core rather than supplemental, building the course around experiential practice, formalizing the partnerships that extend the practice beyond the classroom, creating a facilitator pool, and planning for sustainability from the first day. Followed in order, these steps produce a program that does what a Restorative Practices course promises, rather than one that uses the language while leaving its own practice unchanged. The appendices that follow supply the models to begin.

Programming Examples:

- Restorative practices sample syllabus
- Restorative practices Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)/ Partnership template,
- Restorative practices designing a program
- Restorative practices participant assessment instrument
- Restorative practices monitoring & evaluation framework
- Restorative practices field-engagement sign-up and verification

References

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