

Constructivist Zone

Tools and techniques can build democratic learning from the material of individual ideas and personalities

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I attended a workshop recently as a member of the workshop group, not my usual role. The facilitator, confusing the "wisdom of the group" with the notion that a newly formed group could think as one, kept calling for our group to "take ownership over its own learning."

Nothing could have made us more miserable. We surely wanted to take ownership of our own learning. But that didn't mean that we could design an intelligent learning experience for ourselves. We needed someone who could take input from each of us and craft it into a design for learning that met our collective needs, while providing elbow room for our individuality. Without this, in our discomfort, we were ready to go along with anyone's half-reasonable suggestion for what to do, because we wanted to get on with it. This experience reminded me that it takes strong, not passive, leadership to ensure democratic learning.

I also was reminded that workshop facilitators face another major obstacle: The dominant voice in a group — whether that dominance is determined by culture, race, gender, or other criteria — is likely to say, in effect: "We don't need artificial structures to manage our discussion. We don't even need a discussion leader."

The dominant group will always be heard in the traditional, competitive discussion model, and members of that group genuinely don't see the need to share the stage with others. Often, they are not good listeners either, because they haven't seen discussion as a listening activity.

These conditions create a tremendous challenge for staff developers: How can they be responsive to the voices and needs expressed by all members of a group, and at the same time set a strong, proactive agenda, an agenda which may not be the first choice of some of the more vocal group members?

The years I've spent designing and leading staff development experiences have taught me that this challenge can best be met within a constructivist learning environment. By establishing some constructivist norms and applying constructivist tools and techniques to the group process, a staff developer can help group members share their collective knowledge, while at the same time stretch their thinking about teaching in ways that will make a difference in their practice. The group facilitator can set and follow a strong agenda while nevertheless ensuring that every voice within a group is heard.

Constructivist learning environment

Lambert (1995) defines constructivist leadership as "the reciprocal processes that enable . . . participants in an educational community to construct meanings . . . that lead toward a common purpose of schooling." To make this happen, a group leader or facilitator must learn to listen to group members, learn what's on their minds, and avoid making a rigid agenda and plowing through it no matter what. At the same time, the leader must have a feel for the other extreme: He or she can't grow defensive if someone says: "You claim to be constructivist, and yet you tell us that time is up when we're talking in our small group and we're not finished." Or, "If you're listening to us, why aren't you doing everything we say?"

Staff developers can address this paradox by leading the group in establishing some explicit norms and beliefs about a constructivist learning environment. Here are some to start with:

- * All group members bring wisdom and knowledge to the table, and it's our collective job to build on that. The more diverse the group, the more wisdom and knowledge we have to share.

- * Group members learn more by reflecting on their own learning than by concentrating on getting others to change their ideas.

- * Until the group has developed deep trust and respect for each member, it must act as if there is trust and respect. Only then can true trust begin to take root.

- * The group needs to authorize a leader. It's not undemocratic to have a directive leader:

Every group needs someone to collect its voice, gauge its needs, and ensure that agreed-upon procedures and structures are followed.

Getting all voices heard requires a good design and a firm hand. Norms should be stated, and everyone should agree to them.

If anyone objects, the group should work together to examine the norms and/or modify them.

What makes these constructivist tools?

In working with groups, I've noticed an odd thing. By being more directive, I'm actually being more democratic. Being directive means designating leaders, insisting upon structures, and consciously building good habits in groups. This means engaging all group members in learning, in a way that provides the group with more information, which it can use to build better answers. Passive facilitation, on the other hand, allows group members to disengage. It also allows an unfair distribution of power in the group: Those already best able to speak their mind will get their way.

A good facilitator values a group's knowledge, but also values his or her own knowledge about how group members will do their best work. The facilitators are expert at design, but other group members are the experts at what they know and need to know. Facilitators are process; members are content. Facilitators are the teachers; we all are the students. Together, we can all learn more.

Constructivist toolbox

Once constructivist norms are established, staff developers can use a number of tools and techniques that have proven effective for teaching groups of teachers and leaders. Without the undergirding of a constructivist belief system, these tools could become a bag of tricks: They'd be fun, get groups going, and keep them talking, but they'd have no lingering effect. When used in conjunction with constructivist beliefs, on the other hand, these techniques can bring about real change.

1. Ground rules.

At first, many people think this step is silly and unnecessary. Then they begin to realize it's essential. When a group forms, lead the members in identifying the ground rules, developing a list, and agreeing to them. This is important because if the rules come from the group, then they aren't "your" rules.

Rules are more than restrictions. They are, inevitably, permission to speak up and feel safe. At a workshop I attended recently in Florida, group members spent only about 10 minutes on ground rules. At the end of two days together, however, many participants said those rules set the tone for the whole workshop, and provided the feeling of safety which made the experience work. This is another example of why, as leader, you must be assertive. If you ask the group, "Do we need ground rules?" they will almost certainly say no. And if you wait until there's a problem, you've waited too long.

2. Transparent facilitation. Share your thinking about the design of the agenda, the reasoning behind decisions made beforehand, and the thinking which goes on as agendas are changed mid-session. This keeps your role from becoming too top-down: "I am the omniscient facilitator, I have created the agenda, it is written in stone." Or too bottom-up: "What do you folks want to do next?" The group will trust you when they realize there are good reasons behind your decisions. Group members will feel respected when they're addressed as people who have a legitimate need for this information. You're saying: "We are not creating the agenda together from scratch. That's my job. But by sharing my thinking with you, I'm leveling the playing field." Groups are grateful to know why they are doing things a certain way, and group members appreciate that their time is being used wisely and you've done this work for them.

3. Problem-based learning.

Instead of giving directions to be followed, present problems to be solved. This generates better conversation and thinking, just as good scientific inquiry engages students in exploring questions and poor lesson plans ask them to follow recipes and reproduce results.

For example, a group member could present a problem she is working on. She may be a teacher, for example, who is having a hard time keeping control of her class. Group members first take turns reflecting on the problem. "I hear her saying" Once the problem is well-understood, a round of suggestions follows. "What if you" There is no need to construct fictional scenarios. With good facilitation, group members can feel safe enough to use their real problems. This changes the dynamic from one in which stakes are low — the problems are fictitious, so no one is taking them seriously — to one which has real-life ramifications.

You must make sure the group stays on task during this process, and that members listen when others talk. This is essential to getting a group past defensiveness and moving toward constructing meaningful solutions together.

4. Text-based dialogue. Choose written text for the group to study and discuss. For example, the group might read Plato's *The Cave*. After the group has reading time, remind members of the norms: Stick to the text. Build on one another's thinking. Share "air-time." Then you might ask: "In our schools, who is in the cave?"

Once you pose the initial question, you need to work hard at staying "out of the way" during the discussion. It's important that group members see that while you will keep them on track, you aren't going to direct the conversation. Don't look at the speakers, for example. It's instructive to see what happens when you look at a speaker and when you don't. Use body language to get the conversation going back and forth across the group. It's like leading an orchestra without using your hands. At first, group members may be wary. This is a time to hold steady and look pleasantly at everyone, expecting that they will come through. If you're patient, they will.

5. Non-text-based dialogue. Senge (1994) talks about dialogue as the way groups learn: "A team of people sits in a circle . . . they are arguing . . . they listen intently to each other's language, rhythms and sounds As the people in the circle continue to talk, the sense of meaning they share grows larger and sharper. They begin to gain unprecedented insight into their fundamental views." (p. 358).

A genuine dialogue is very different from a traditional discussion. In a dialogue, the group begins with its collective mind open, and members look to build solutions together. The group seeks to build the dialogue, not to make individual points. Members care more about learning than being right. "Why,

then, is a facilitator necessary at all?" asks Senge. "Because the process . . . is unfamiliar . . . and because skilled facilitators know how to anticipate and help people . . ." (p. 376). A Quaker meeting is an example of dialogue in practice.

6. Reflection. Groups which meet more than once do well to reflect at the end of each meeting, in writing. Then you can select excerpts to read at the beginning of the next meeting. The excerpts should include some of the more positive reactions and all of the negative reactions. This ensures credibility, and helps group members feel they know what others are thinking about the group and its meetings.

Groups also can benefit from open reflections at the end of a session. Asking participants to call out the pluses and minuses of the session, while you list of them, helps group members get beyond just writing their feelings anonymously, and legitimizes the process of giving feedback.

Both of these uses of reflection are important in holding the facilitator accountable. The group must have a way to make its wishes known, and to let you know if you're succeeding at reading their needs and capturing their collective voice. This can be scary — especially when you're asking for verbal feedback. But, if you can listen to what is said without appearing defensive, this will strengthen the group, and make it possible for other members to begin being more open with one another.

7. Relationship-building. There is power in having a relationship with a group over time rather than having many one-night stands. In fact, without good relationships, not much will happen. That's why many speakers start their speeches with jokes: The joke says, I want you to laugh with me and like me.

Good facilitators don't have to tell jokes, but they do spend an extraordinary amount of time building relationships within a group. As a rule of thumb, you should spend a third of your time with a group on activities that help build relationships. This doesn't mean putting the staff development agenda on hold. Exercises such as writing and sharing personal stories about teaching, for example, can advance the group's agenda while helping group members get to know each other, learn how to work and learn together, and "be real" together. This in turn leads to the development of shared context.

8. Flexible agenda design. What's wrong with a good plan? If we've spent a lot of time making that plan and we all think it's really good, it can be hard to deviate from it. Instead of a plan — which often turns into a simple "laundry list" of items to deal with — you should strive to develop a design. This means adopting a more flexible approach, in which you rely on a large repertoire of ideas and techniques to continually gauge where the group needs to go — what the participants want/need to learn, how they will best do that, what knowledge and baggage they bring with them — and how to get there.

9. Explicit leadership. You need to feel comfortable being the facilitator. The group needs a leader who can say: "Now we're going to do this potentially silly activity, but trust me, you'll like it." If you ask people if they want to do something silly, something hard, something uncomfortable, they will generally say no. Groups want someone to be in control and yes, sometimes make them do what they don't feel like doing.

At one recent meeting I attended, there was something on the agenda called "metaphor making." Time was running out and the facilitator said to the group: "Shall we do metaphor making or just go on to the next thing?" And everyone started to say: "Go on to the next thing." Thankfully, someone got up and said: "Listen, I know we don't feel like doing this right now, but we know in our hearts we'll be glad if we do, so let's see what it is." In the end the group found that making metaphors — such as, "How is your job a dance?" — was a very powerful experience. To get there, the group needed to be pushed, but not shoved. This is a balancing act which all teachers know first-hand.

10. Facilitator membership. Constructivist facilitators are not only designers, but also members of the groups they lead. They are full participants who do all of the activities and learn along with their colleagues. Yes, this can be confusing. Things were clearer when we stuck to separate roles. But we've come to appreciate ambiguity as part of complex learning, and the ambiguity of the leader's role is part of that.

As the leader, you need to teach good membership. Group members need to agree to speak up, for example, but not to use the meeting as a forum, give the leader a hard time, or just sit back and say, "Show me." Laying out these rules can make you quite uncomfortable at first. You can feel very self-centered talking about the leader's role and the relationship between leader roles and member roles. But what may feel egotistical to you can feel empowering to the group. Being able to talk about this relationship feels important to them, and may be the only way to sort out all the inherent complexities.

11. Story-telling. Using stories as the basis for teasing out issues, making meaning, and connecting with each other has historically been basic to learning. Out of our stories come our issues. Writing our stories is a powerful way of getting at what matters. Telling them orally is a wonderful way of building community. Sometimes all you need to do is ask group members to share stories, and out they come. In this way, you can establish deep, moving connections among people in a short time. And we can all play: We all have stories to tell.

12. Right-brain activities. You can lead a group in constructing villages with craft supplies and other odds and ends, you can draw pictures (for example, a metaphorical picture of yourself as a teacher), or you can make costumes and act out something. This does take a bit of courage to pull off. These types of activities make facilitators — as well as many participants — uncomfortable,

perhaps because they tap the child in each of us. But the discomfort only lasts a while. and the results can be dramatic. Generally, the more dignified the participant, the greater the response to right-brain activities. Even groups of superintendents get into it. These types of activities get people thinking, and frequently have a profound impact on the quality of a workshop.

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