

Building Learning Communities

Workshop Handout

Roland Barth, school reformer and author of Learning by Heart, defines a learning community as one whose defining, underlying culture is one of learning. The condition for membership in the community is that one learn, continue to learn, and support the learning of others. Everyone. So it is a collection of youngsters and grownups working together to provide and sustain their own and one another's learning

ORGANIZE YOURSELVES

Students/participants are told that they are going to be given 30 seconds to line up against a wall in the room in a particular order, and they must do so non-verbally. For instance, "I want you to line up against that wall in order of birth date, not counting the year you were born, just the month and date. So, January people will be down here, December people will be over there. You may communicate, but not talk. You have 30 seconds – go." Participants are coached to be aware of the group, make room for others, and help each other. After they have finished, go down the line and hear the birth dates in order.

Other organizational ideas: alphabetical order by first or last name, age, or in groups around the room according to what pets each person has. (Instruct participants to non-verbally find other people in the room who have the same pets that they do. There should be a cluster of people who have dogs, a group with cats, a group with cats and dogs, a group with no pets, etc.) Ask participants to do one or more of the prompts with no communication, reacting intuitively.

Think about your classroom or school, the artificial groupings and relationships based upon arbitrary information like names. These exercises show that in a community there are relationships and intuitive knowledge always at work underneath the surface. And we are organizing ourselves and making decisions based upon these underlying currents, sometimes correctly, and other times incorrectly.

SOCIOGRAM

This is a non-verbal exercise. In an open space, participants are instructed to silently place their right hand on the shoulder of the person in the room they have known the longest. Then they are asked to put their right hand on the shoulder of the person in the group they would choose to take sandwich orders from everyone else in the room, go to the store, and come back with the right sandwiches and the right change. The exercise continues in this way, with students asked to place their right hands on the shoulder of the person they would go to for support in doing something courageous, for advice about a family problem, for a creative idea, etc.

This exercise is called a Sociogram, and it is an exercise used in Sociometry, which is Latin for 'social measure'. It was developed by Jacob Levy Moreno and is used to measure our degree of relatedness. It points up some of the various strengths in the group. Those people on the outside may be isolated. Who are the major hubs? The people with the most hands on their shoulders are known as "sociometric stars," and they can be very influential over the group.

Other ideas:

- Person you've known longest.
- Person you interact with the most in your daily work. Not necessarily your best friend or person you like the most, though it could be.
- Person in this group you would choose to take sandwich orders from everyone else in this room, go to the store, and come back with the right sandwiches and the right change.
- Person for generating creative ideas.
- Person you would go to for support in taking a risk.
- Person you would go to for help in dealing with a difficult parent.

“The relationship among the adults in a school has more impact on the quality and character of the school and the accomplishment of youngsters than any other factor.”

– Roland Barth

HAVE YOU EVER

All participants except one, who is in the center, sit in chairs in a circle. Person in the center asks, “Have you ever...” and finishes the sentence with a question that he/she can answer “yes” to. For instance, “Have you ever dyed your hair?” or “Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon?” Anyone in the circle who can answer “yes” to the question must rise and find a new chair to sit in, including the person in the center. This will leave one student standing in the middle to ask the next question.

Education Focus

Adjust chairs so that there are enough for each person in the circle, as facilitator reads questions:

- Chosen to do something that really frightened you.
- Felt like your ideas weren’t listened to by your peers.
- Felt like you were part of the solution at this school.
- Made a difference in a student’s life.
- Fought for a change you believed in at the school.
- Felt like you were treated unfairly by a boss.
- Felt like you treated a student unfairly.
- Failed to stand up for what you believe in.
- Felt that you cared too much about a student’s situation at home.
- Felt like you needed a mentor.
- Been a mentor for another teacher.
- Ever had a student come back and say thank you.
- Considered leaving education.
- Ever said thank you to a teacher.
- Had moments where you felt like you were working at your maximum full potential as an educator.

This exercise can be used with students with a few adjustments to the questions. It steps beyond objectively looking at our community and begins to share information about our experiences. Sharing our success and failures with others, requires a vulnerability that can feel scary at times. But we have to ask ourselves, “What is the cost of not sharing?”

GIVE AND TAKE

All walk around the room randomly and silently, while instructor explains, “In a moment I am going to take the focus by clapping my hands. When I do, everyone must freeze and be silent while I continue to walk and talk. I will have the focus until someone else takes the focus by clapping their hands and immediately beginning to walk and talk, at which time I will give the focus graciously by freezing and becoming silent.” Instructor urges participants to take boldly without hesitation, and give graciously when someone else takes the focus.

GET ON BOARD aka YES, AND...GIVE AND TAKE

One person starts by making a statement about a particular topic. The person will have the focus until someone else takes the focus by clapping their hands and immediately beginning to walk and talk. That person will begin their comments with “Yes, and...”

Each successive person enters the conversation the same way, and always with the words “Yes, and” whether the statement is in agreement or not. (“Yes, and...” creates possibilities, while “yes, but...” inhibits communication and destroys possibilities. “Yes, and...” says “I hear what you are saying, and here’s what I think...”)

How does it feel to put yourself out there and then be supported? How does it feel for that length of time you’re waiting for someone to get behind you? The truth is, we all want others to support us, and most of us feel great when we support someone else’s success.

SPEED SHARING

Participants sit in two lines, facing each other, so that everyone has a partner. Everyone receives a blank nametag and is asked to write a playful, positive, descriptive nickname for their partner on it, such as “Smiley” or “Listener.” Everyone hands their partner his/her nametag, and each person is asked to write below their new nickname a new last name, which should be the last name of the most challenging student they’ve taught. Now everyone has a new name for the remainder of the game. This creates another opportunity for discussion and recognition of shared experience, as well as, pairs a positive quality to a student desperately in need of one. How we think about someone can influence the way we treat them and ultimately the way they choose to behave.

Participants are given 3 minutes to exchange the following information with their partner.

- What is the one piece of advice you’d give to a group of new teachers?
- What is your best practice, something you do in your classroom that is really successful? (Be specific!)
- What is something you’d like to learn more about or how to do? (Doesn’t have to be education related – play the harmonica, learn how to fix my car, etc.)

When time is up, the facilitator rings a bell, everyone shifts seats to the right, and participants share with their new partner. Do as many rounds as makes sense for the time and enthusiasm of the participants.

“How many students’ lives could be saved if teachers told each other what they know?”

– Roland Barth

In most learning communities, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of years of educational experience. The group is probably equipped to solve any problem that could arise in the educational setting. But it requires two things: a willingness to ask; and a willingness to share.

SOMETHING I LOVE

Pairs are given 4 minutes to teach their partner something that they love to do. It could be shooting a free throw, saying a phrase in another language, a dance step, etc. It is okay if your partner already knows how to do the thing you are teaching. During this exercise, you will note there is normally lots of laughter because we were talking about things we know a lot about and feel relaxed. And it is easy to learn from the other person because it is dynamic, and the other person is really passionate. Of course, not everything you teach can be that much fun, but what if we tried? It’s not what, but how.

“Learning is what you do when you’re not being graded for it.” – Roland Barth

Bart says, “Kids want to be like adults! So if we want kids to be learners, we have to ask ourselves, are we learn-ed or learners?” He also recommends a 15% to 85% balance. 15% lecturing and 85% something else. Right now, in schools, those percentages are flipped.

SMALL GROUP SHARE

Give the group space and opportunity to talk with each other. Get into small groups and take the next few minutes to talk. Not about your social life, and not to have a grumble session, but to simply talk with one another, in a collegial way, about some important topics. Be aware of your contributions. Are you “yes, and” ing? Making connections? Bridging conflict? Some ideas to discuss):

- What’s keeping you from really connecting with kids?
- What change would you make in your classroom, school, or education if you knew you could get away with it?”
- What is one large or small thing you could commit to doing that would improve the outcome of your teaching this year?

An important aspect of learning is reflection. The Kolb learning cycle, based on David Kolb's theory of experiential learning, identifies the four phases of learning as experience, processing (or reflection), hypothesis, and test/use. Reflecting on an experience helps us to form a hypothesis that can be tested or used.

NETWORKS

University of Notre Dame professor, Albert Laszlo Barabasi, wrote a book on networks called Linked: The Power of Networks - How everything is linked to everything else and what it means for science, business and everyday life.

In it, he describes the power of networks. The power comes from the links every node on the network has to every other node. One important discovery is that when it comes to networking, it is not the strong links we have in our lives – our best friends or immediate families – that hold the real power, rather it is our weak links – our sister-in-law's cousin or your dog walker's mother. If we need a job, it's not our immediate circle that can help us most; it's our acquaintances and their contacts.

Think about all the people you are connected to all over the planet via the people in this room. We want to encourage you to exploit the hidden potential of this valuable resource.