**Facilitating Learning Conversations and Communities**

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The purpose of a learning circle, conversation, or community is to support the movement from individual intelligence to collective wisdom through reflective dialogue about subjects that attract and have meaning for participants.

## FRAMEWORK

The framework for creating a learning circle includes five areas of attention. They include belief systems, creating an environment, processes, structures, and actions or outcomes that support the development and evolution of a learning conversation.

Belief Systems: Learning conversations emerge out a set of beliefs that both the facilitator and participants bring to the community. These belief systems are listed below.

Environment: Learning conversations require an environment where people feel welcomed, safe to share their thoughts, and where different perspectives, experiences, and ethnicities are appreciated and where it is understood these differences are necessary for generative learning to take place.

Processes: Learning conversations require processes that support the quality of conversation. For example, learning is enhanced when people feel equity and power structures are equalized. Said another way, hierarchy blocks generative learning, and dissemination of learning is not the same as generating new learning. The learning conversations need processes that support the learning goals, the relationships, and the evolution of the learning community.

Structures: Learning conversations also require structures that support the organization and stability of the community. Basic agreements need to be negotiated for how often, when, and where the meetings take place.

Actions and outcomes: Learning conversations always have a tension that exists between being in the present conversation and how the learning of the group can change the work of the participants. The facilitator's role is to optimize this tension so the outcome doesn't truncate the learning process and the learning process doesn't become an end in itself.

| Beliefs | Environment | Process | Structures | Action/Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Diversity – of experience, ideas, perspectives, backgrounds, and orientations add to the development of collective wisdom | Safety – learning Is facilitated when participants feel safe to express their ideas | Uses processes that create a sense of shared power and equity | Set Regular Meeting Times | Applied Learning |
|  | Welcoming emotional environment | Process Review: use processes that provide feedback on the group and its learning | Structure that both holds and frees | Experimentation & learning on multiple levels: *individual *org. *community *field *society |
| Collaborative Wisdom is found when individual intelligence is combined with others | Respect | Spirit of Inquiry: Use processes that reinforce a spirit of curiosity and inquiry.  Ex. Questions worth asking. | Physical space that facilitates interactions | Generates Sustainability of the learning, relationships, and change actions |
| Tensions are a pre-condition for generative learning | Honesty – learning is enhanced when people are honest about what they are thinking and feeling | | Facilitate interaction among members during and outside the conversation | |
| Importance of Relationships – learning is generate through relationships | Appreciate diversity (all kinds) | Meaning making (notice how individuals are connecting the conversation to other topics and making meaning of the conversations) | Dependability Re: follow thru of group agreements generates a sense of stability | Captures learning that occurs in the conversations |
| Abundance (vs. scarcity mentality) | | | Structure that reinforces others ability to take responsibility for the group; its processes, relationships, and outcomes | Energy: positive energy is generated through ongoing connections |
| Passion for inquiry (Participants want  to be there) | | Reflective Process:  reflect on the process as well as the content | | Networking and Meaningful Relationships |
| Common Purpose – Do the participants share a common purpose for gathering? | | Reward Risk-Taking | Rituals can be used to facilitate passages of the group as well as openings and closings; ex. centering | Learning that can be used to create change |
| Shared Respons-ibility | | Celebrate the work and the quality of the relationships | | |
| Confidence in | | | Boundaries on | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| capacity of group (strength-based)<br><br>The knowledge in the participants are exactly what you need to do the work | | | time are respected; ex. Start and end on time<br><br>Recording key learning of each meeting | |

## INDIVIDUAL CAPACITIES

Becoming a learning catalyst for a learning conversation requires more than basic facilitation.  It actually involves a combination of a focus on facilitation and learning.

- Able to facilitate equal voice
- Meaning making/Reflective Practitioner
- Able to have dealt with own need for "power" and "affection" and "need to be liked"
- Skillful at facilitating process
- Self Awareness
- Manage own emotions/emotional intelligence – the facilitator can manage their own emotional hijacks as well as recognize and work through those in others in the learning circle
- Knowledge and ability with group dynamics/group development
- Relationship building
- Knowledge of leadership field and learning process – learning catalysts
- Gut instinct with people/groups

## ROLE OF LEARNING CATALYST

1. Set the framework for meeting
2. Hole the container of the learning community
3. Design/Choose physical space that facilitates the learning purpose
4. Intervene in initial stages of group process to insure purpose and reinforce values/purpose/beliefs
5. Facilitate movement of group development (forming, storming, norming, performing)
6. Negotiating Boundaries
7. Linking/connecting with people outside meetings
8. Captures learning (at least in the initial stages of development of the learning community until the participants of the learning community can do this themselves)
9. Building relationships within the group

10. Facilitate ongoing learning

## PROCESS, STRUCTURE, AND DESIGN THAT SUPPORT A LEARNING CONVERSATION FRAMEWORK

1. Facilitate diverse perspectives/equity of voice
2. Build shared responsibility and accountability
3. Access strengths/assets of learning community
4. Optimizes tensions between stability and chaos . . . et. al.
5. Build groups relationships (trust/team cohesiveness)
6. Build learning loops between group
7. Learning-application-group learning
8. Build shared leadership systems
9. Size> 8-12 tends to facilitate intentional learning best (10-15 on the outside)-if it's bigger, subdivide
10. Practices of Reflection – free writing
11. Attend to the way new people come into the group

## THE NATURE OF THE LEARNING CATALYST

Individual Capacities
    *Comfort with tensions
    *Capacity building in individual and groups

Role
    *Facilitator
    *Coach
    *Learner

Facilitation
    *Process and Structure

## TENSIONS

The importance of optimizing tensions: the evolution of a group and its learning occurs at the intersection of opposing tensions. For example, growth occurs at the boundary between challenge and support, learning at the boundary between anxiety and boredom, and evolution between the tensions between control and chaos. The learning catalyst

develops an intuition over time of which end of the continuum between tensions needs to be supported to optimize the balance.  Some possible tensions that exist in learning communities are listed below:

| | |
|---|---|
| Structure | Flexibility |
| Stability | Chaos |
| Process | Action |
| Organized | Self-organized |
| Reflection | Praxis |
| Individual knowledge | Shared/Generation of Knowledge |
| Scarcity | Abundance |
| Questions | Answers |
| Open/Membership | Closed |
| Group Initiation | Individual Initiation |
| Boundaries Totally Closed | Totally Permeable |
| Peace/harmony | Conflict/Tension |

*This content was generated in part by a think-tank on learning circles.  Participants included Ceasar McDowell, Lisa Nashua, Deborah Meehan, Heather McLeod, Dorothy Meehan, Sue Vandiver, Laurien Alexandre, Bong Wan Kim and Bella Celnik, our recorder.

## THE POWER OF GREAT QUESTIONS

There are basic questions that align with various stages of an individual meeting as well as a larger cycle of a learning community.  Here are three different ways of framing the power of questions:

The learning cycle:  Experience, sharing reactions to the experience, meaning making, generalizing the meaning to other situations, actions / applications, evaluation

The art of focused conversation:  opening, objective questions, reflective questions, interpretive questions, decisional questions, closing

- Opening
  - Before we start our conversation today, what have you been reflecting on since we last met?
  - What have you been experiencing since we last met?
- Objective questions
  - What is the problem you are dealing with?
  - What is your own role?

- - What have been some key events for you since our last meeting?
  - Is there any experience or learning that have been key for you since our last meeting?
- Reflective questions
  - Describe the dynamics of this experience – what was it like for you?
  - What was the big surprise?
  - When were you most frustrated?
  - What struggle did you have to deal with?
  - What situations were you reminded of?
  - What is the mood or emotions you were experiencing?
- Interpretive questions
  - What were key elements in this process:
  - What relationships do you see between various parts of the conversation?
  - What are the main themes in our discussion today?
  - What are the implications (if any) for how we do our work?
  - What work needs to be done before we choose to act?
  - Where is a breakthrough needed?
  - What will enable our learning to move forward?
  - What other things might we try?
  - What did we learn from the things that went well?
  - What did we learn from the times were we struggled?
  - As you reflect on all of this, how would you talk about what we have learned?
- Decisional questions
  - How will our experience and learning affect what we do?
  - What are we saying we want to do differently?
  - What are you going to do next?
  - What are our next steps in using what we have learned?
  - How will we implement the changes we have discovered from our learning?
- Closing
  - Reflections like this can make the events of our lives special and more meaningful.  Thank you for your time and contributions.
  - I will get this learning typed up and circulated to everyone.

For more information check out the book: *The Art of Focused Conversation*, one of the Intercultural Affairs (ICA) publications.

Story telling:  surface the topic, reflect, share stories, dialogue, closing
- Surfacing the topic
  - What are the deepest questions occurring to you now?
  - What are you wondering about?
  - What doesn't make sense?
  - The common themes seems to be _____ shall we explore that as a topic?
- Reflect
  - What does this topic bring to mind?

- o What experiences in your life have informed your beliefs about this topic?
- Share stories
  - o In the next 3-5 minutes share an experience that has meaning and connection to this topic.
  - o Focus on telling the story through the 5 senses.
  - o Listeners focus their undivided attention on the story teller – don't interrupt
- Dialogue
  - o What did you notice?
  - o What themes or insights did the stories bring up?
- Closing
  - o What questions come to mind now?
  - o What is attracting your curiosity?
  - o What actions or commitments might make sense for you based on what we've learned today?
  - o What topics or questions would you like to explore next time?

For more information check out the storytellers website: www.bizstorytellers.org

## STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Stephen Dent has written a book called *Partnering Intelligence*.  In it he discusses the emotional skills and capacities that individuals engaged in a partnership need to work through.  These emotions are connected to the stages of group development.

- Forming
  - o Self disclosure and feedback
- Storm
  - o Self disclosure and feedback
  - o Ability to trust
  - o Win/win orientation
- Norm
  - o Self disclosure and feedback
  - o Ability to trust
  - o Win/win orientation
  - o Future orientation
  - o Comfort with change
- Perform
  - o Self disclosure and feedback
  - o Ability to trust
  - o Win/win orientation
  - o Future orientation
  - o Comfort with change
  - o Comfort with interdependence