

Professional Development Tools
Facilitating Student Groups In Your Adult Basic Education Program



Conversation Café's

By: Laura Beach, LauraBBeach@insightbb.com

Many adult education programs have experienced student group success by meeting in public places. For example, The Volunteer English Program in Chester, Pennsylvania has held English conversation groups in a local bookstore, a restaurant (owned by volunteer tutors), and in their local library.

Student groups that meet in public spaces are excellent ways to nurture social skills. In addition, the atmosphere is conducive to reducing stigmas students sometimes associate with adult basic education. One facilitation technique that has been adapted for these kinds of student group venues is called *Conversation Café's*. The design of this kind of facilitation is grounded in the Collective Inquiry Model of learning which uses questioning and an informal process for the engagement of participants in their responses. This strategy offers “a facilitated process and dialogue with agreements that encourage a meaningful exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings” (IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation, p. 219).

The following process for the conversation café was excerpted from the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. You can find more information on this at www.conversationcafe.org plus a whole host of other wonderful resources to stimulate dialogue in your student group.

Conversation Café Process

Excerpted from Conversation Café and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, www.conversationcafe.org.



Preparation

Conversation Café hosts provide nametags, paper and pencil (for note taking) a centerpiece (candle, flower,) and a talking object) something symbolic or just handy) that is held by the person speaking.

Welcome

The host welcomes everyone, states the theme...reads the agreements, sets an ending time and calls for a moment of silence to relax, reflect and become open.

Round One

Each person speaks in turn, going around the circle once. Each person holds the talking object while they speak. During this round, everyone says their name and speaks briefly about what is on their minds regarding the theme. Anyone may pass if they don't want to speak. Everyone is asked to express themselves fully yet succinctly, allowing time for others to speak. No feedback or response.

Round Two

Now that everyone has been introduced, the group goes around the circle again. If someone wants to respond to another's remarks, they can do so in their own turn. Each person holds the talking object. To allow more time for conversation, keep remarks brief, possibly just naming the theme or subjects you want to delve into more deeply. Again, no feedback or response.

Spirited Dialogue

Now the conversation opens up and people can speak in no particular order. This conversation will take up most of the time. If there is domination, contention, or lack of focus, the host may suggest that the group again use the talking object. Keep in mind the agreements.

Closing

A few minutes before the end of the Café, the host will ask everyone to go around the circle again, giving each a chance to say briefly what they are taking away from the conversation.