



Intentional Facilitation: Guiding Your Student Group

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Facilitating a student group can be tremendously rewarding, particularly when the student interaction is such that you can almost see the light bulbs of understanding pop on over the student's heads as they explore concepts, practice skills, and process new learning through their conversations in the group.

The model I use when I facilitate a group of learners is to intentionally empty myself of my own "ego." In other words, it is not all about me as a teacher. This intentionality takes a great deal of thought prior to the group gathering.

While I believe it is important for group participants to understand the "protocol" of interaction within the group, my role as the facilitator is as a guide to help the group journey through the process of learning together. All of the members of the group will, hopefully, be our teachers. My role is to facilitate engagement in whatever our topic or goal might be. Sometimes it is challenging for teachers used to the lecture format to transition into the role of the facilitator. This is a brief guide to help you begin to make that transition. If you have other suggestions, please share them with me. I would love to hear how you have experienced success as a facilitator.

Create an Atmosphere of Welcome

Each person who comes to the group needs to feel as though their arrival is significant – that their participation is valuable and needed. It is rooted in the concept that our learners have tremendous dignity and value. Each person has something important to bring to the group from their own life experiences.

Creating this kind of atmosphere of welcome begins with the invitation to participate. The invitation should be face-to-face or personal in addition to the written form. An atmosphere of welcome continues with attention to how each person is greeted when they arrive. Personal greetings are important. Make a big deal over every person and then connect them immediately with another person in the group. All of us dislike that awkward moment when we do not know anyone. Icebreakers are very helpful in reducing the discomfort in those early moments of the group coming together each time they gather.

- Brainstorm how you can create an atmosphere of welcome and hospitality for your student group gatherings:

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Create a Consistent Model or Framework For The Group

It is helpful to outline a consistent format for how the group will function. For example, the group may have the first 10 minutes for refreshments, then an icebreaker, followed by an assignment and then group processing. Or, if the group is dealing with conversations, perhaps each week, there will be an opening and closing ritual with the bulk of the time together spent on various aspects of practicing conversation within the group.

The consistency of the format creates a comfort for the group. They know what to expect. You will want to “spice it up” with variations on the topic, a guest speaker every now and then, or perhaps different participants serving as hosts and leaders. This variation within the consistent format keeps things from getting dull. But the consistency is important to help participants feel comfortable with opening up.

- Is your current format consistent?

- What format would be most conducive to the success of your student group?

Develop Group Ground Rules

Part of the consistent model is setting up some group ground rules for interaction. It is helpful if the group develops these rules for interaction together. You may want to give the group ideas for what could be included in their group rules but then let them decide. This could be done through an anonymous voting process or through group discussion. Here are some ideas that are based on active listening strategies (by the way, this is a helpful list to keep in mind as you facilitate the group):

- Focus your attention on the speaker. Whenever someone “has the floor” and is speaking, stop what you are doing and look at the person who is talking.
- Acknowledge that you understand. Not your head or respond briefly (“Uh-huh...Yes...I see) from time to time to let the speaker know that you are listening.
- Try not to interrupt. Interrupting may cause the speaker to lose his or her train of thought.
- Paraphrase when appropriate. Repeat in your own words the speaker’s ideas or message and connect it with your own thoughts. This is called piggy-backing - connecting what has been said to something you have experienced or thought.
- Avoid solving the problem for the speaker, unless you are asked to do so. You can ask questions (What do you think you should do about it?) or simply let the conversation continue until the speaker solves the problem.
- Compliment each other rather than criticize. Make compliments commonplace in our group.
- Agree to disagree. It is ok to have different opinions.

- *What other ground rules could you suggest for your group?*

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Read the Energy of the Group

There is an ebb and flow of energy every time a group of people gather together. It is helpful for the group to be in a circle so that each person (including you as the facilitator) is on an equal level. This communicates that each person is of equal value in the group. There should be high energy and interaction at the beginning of group's gathering. This is encouraged through the use of an icebreaker where each person can share a bit of personal information (perhaps an opinion, a recent experience, a favorite thing, etc.). This can be followed by sharing of some kind of information or question that the group then processes collectively. This is calmer but still needs to engage each participant. What you don't want is for participants to be passive in the experience. Each person must be engaged for the group to be healthy and dynamic. That is what it is not good for the facilitator to do all of the talking as if it were a lecture format. I approach groups with the concept that my role is to "fade out" as the group forms. Early on, I am an active guide but as individuals take on leadership roles and find that the group is a safe place to participate in, my speaking role diminish significantly. Most groups of people need a break every hour to hour and a half. If people begin to fidget, look at the clock, get up and go to the bathroom, you know it is time for a break.

- Describe the energy flow of your group?

Or, if you are planning the group, how can you design the set up and the format so that the energy level is considered?

Closure

Every time a group forms and then separates, it needs some form of closure. I think it is helpful to be consistent, almost ritualistic with this event. Perhaps there is a phrase or quote that the group can read together each week. Perhaps you go around and ask participants for one insight or "ah-hah! Moment" they have had. We all need beginnings and endings and it in group dynamics, it is very helpful for the ending to be quite clear and unambiguous. There is a level of comfort that comes from the predictability of the ending in a ritualistic way.

- What would be good way for your group to close each session?