

Hello, My Name Is ...

Ellen Sarkisian

Opening activities at meetings should provide opportunities for people to get acquainted, but meaningless gimmicks won't do.

"I don't want to ask you to play games pretending you're a zucchini," said the leader at the opening of a recent inservice session, "but I must have something to call you." I relaxed. We all introduced ourselves to one another, and that was that.

In many courses, inservice sessions, and other group endeavors, participants are led through activities characterized as ice-breakers or warm-ups, which reflect the influence of the humanistic education movement. Every time I go to a gathering of educators I ask myself, with some apprehension, what the first half hour will be like. Coffee and Danish, and then what?

As many psychologists and writers in the field of adult education have made clear, the value of establishing a climate inviting easy communication and a sense of openness to new experiences cannot be overestimated. Recognizing the importance of that climate is especially critical for those of us who are too task-oriented. But self-conscious climate setting can produce negative effects when group leaders merely pull an activity from a book or from personal

experience, then routinely apply the activity to an opening session without regard to the purpose of the exercise or its relationship to subsequent activities.

I recall attending an inservice session in western Massachusetts on a snowy day a few years ago. People straggled into an elementary classroom in the late afternoon. Since the storm had delayed many people, the group leader decided to wait before starting. None of the participants knew each other, so I suggested that we introduce ourselves. "No!" said the leader, "I have an exercise for that later." So we sat at our tiny desks, nailed in place, staring at the floor in silence waiting for the others to arrive.

Exercises can become mechanical for participants as well. Many educators are so saturated with commonly used "getting-to-know you" activities that the activities have become a meaningless exercise rather than a vehicle for getting to know people. While I have not ever been a zucchini, I have been asked on repeated occasions to make a personal coat-of-arms emblazoned with my name, significant events, and zodiac sign. The

process seemed stale after the first few times, and the information about myself that I shared with the stranger next to me seemed unrelated to the content or processes that followed.

If a gimmick is just a gimmick, it fails to create the desired atmosphere. This is not a failing of psychologists, advocates of climate setting, or humanistic educators. It is one of our own making when we choose an exercise randomly and use it mechanically.

Nothing can replace an attitude of genuine respect and collegiality on the part of a group leader. But how is this attitude communicated quickly to the group? How does one rapidly break down barriers between group members to bring them quickly to a sense of community? What kind of group experience can pave the way to new learning?

In a recent discussion among directors of innovative educational projects, I was interested to learn that many of my colleagues often dislike participating in exercises intended to achieve these ends. They not only resent contrived activities when they come to a meeting expecting to accomplish a serious task, but several also feel self-conscious participating in the familiar opening activities of "break up into groups of two and . . ."

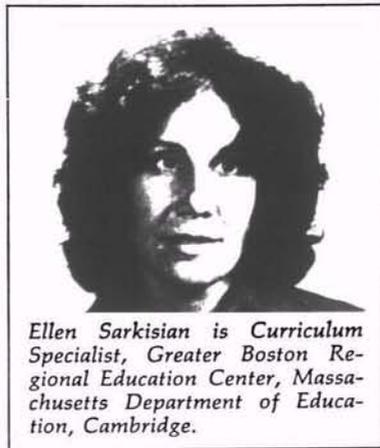
Doubtless every approach has something to recommend it, and no one has all the answers. The leader must design an opening suited to his or her own style, remaining as aware as possible of its effect on others. But the criticisms voiced by the project directors suggest several guiding ideas, listed here with examples of different approaches that have worked.

Opportunities to Interact

Opening activities should provide opportunities to interact in an interesting and nonthreatening way

with a few other people, not necessarily with everyone. As much as possible, the leader should participate as a group member.

Moving around, and often moving to and from a table with food and drink, is a traditional social interaction that lends itself naturally to informal conversation in which people can get to know one another a little better. One inservice director in a suburban university town typically creates the atmosphere of a friendly social gathering at initial meetings. Be-



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cause of her confessed aversion for wearing name tags, she simply acts as a hostess at inservice sessions. She introduces herself to people as they come in and introduces them to each other so they can chat informally before getting down to business. She is not concerned that everyone does not know everyone else's name—that problem can be solved later. When people sit down they can make place cards with their names in large letters, or the leader can later distribute a list of names and addresses.

Real Tasks

Opening events should engage people in a real task related to the content or purpose of the session. If information is gathered about people, it should be relevant, so

that strengths and experiences of group members become a learning resource for others.

One experienced trainer I have observed is a very busy man on a university faculty as well as consultant to several school systems. However, he invests a great deal of time and care in establishing a climate for openness, participant commitment, and responsiveness to needs before the inservice course ever begins. In addition to finding out as much as possible about the group ahead of time, he tries to establish personal contact with some individual participants in order to learn not only their concerns, but also their potential contributions. He will often ask people to bring samples of their work (say, a reading lesson they have developed or a project their class produced) to share with the group. Setting the tone in advance by displaying a genuine interest in people, their problems, and their accomplishments ensures a more committed and potentially productive group from the outset. Furthermore, finding out "where people are at" allows the leader to put himself in their position and to start there, rather than forging ahead with his own assumptions and point of view.

A more structured opening activity sometimes used by this same trainer consists of individuals interviewing each other in small groups, recording the strengths and needs of individuals as they relate to the subject at hand. These lists, once they are posted or shared with the group, provide information for the leader as well as becoming a general resource for the entire group and an explicit reference point from which to measure later progress.

Interviewing techniques can be tied to specific subject matter as well. The leader of a nutrition project began an inservice program by asking people to interview one another using a simple question-

naire about what participants had eaten so far that day. Then, in teams, they interviewed other non-participants who happened to be in the building. The teams got to know each other while doing the survey; the information gathered became the basis for later discussions about nutrition.

Related to Purpose

Whatever the activity, it should relate to later work of the group. If a product results, it should be used later.

A lively metrics workshop I attended last year started amusingly as parents and teachers plunged right in, measuring and recording the length of each others' fingernails, hands, and arms with a metric tape measure. The unexpected humor and interaction in a mathematics workshop not only got people talking and laughing together, but also immediately demystified centimeters and meters. Participants rather quickly learned to estimate metric measures, one of the workshop goals.

Unusual works of art created by teachers at the beginning of a museum-sponsored history of art course paved the way to discovery and discussion of the dependence of any culture's art on the availability of materials. Participants working in small groups were asked to produce a drawing or any other product using only materials they had with them when they arrived at the session.

These different approaches to climate setting were designed with particular groups and particular content areas in mind. All of them are potential gimmicks if they are used without careful thought tailoring them to other specific purposes. Each will have shortcomings for different leaders and different groups.

The time and care devoted to the opening activities of a training session will help the leader get off

to a good start. The tone of the beginning will shape the entire group process that follows, and the underlying logic of the beginning can lead naturally into the content that follows. However, creating a climate of mutual respect to foster learning, open discussion, and productive work is not merely a trick. And it is not accomplished with an opening activity alone. After every successful beginning, group leaders must ask themselves how to best sustain an environment hospitable to learning, productivity, and an open exchange of ideas.

A Response to Bennett

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These materials can and do range from strongly "pro" to strongly "anti" on any given topic. Other special interest groups have chosen to expend their resources in promoting and supporting large public rallies that espouse a particular point of view. These groups attempt to influence the public through the resulting publicity in the mass media. Teachers have little control over that which students read and observe when outside the immediate classroom environment. Teachers do, however, have a high degree of control over the films and filmstrips used in the classroom. Teachers desiring to help students handle controversial issues will make use of all possible sources representing conflicting points of view. Students must learn to make their own decisions, based upon the evidence available and presented, regardless of the emotionalism involved. Such a teacher will bring into the class newspaper clippings, videotape recordings of newscasts, films and filmstrips, as well as free (sponsored) print materials representing all sides of an issue. The preponderance of business-industry-government films and filmstrips represented in the *Educators Guides* referenced may

well be the result of decisions made regarding resource expenditure by selected special interest groups, rather than overt editorial bias.

The importance of the individual teacher in making curricular decisions cannot be overemphasized. All such decisions must be related to the instructional objectives of a particular topic or unit of study. In using catalogs of free materials, or catalogs of commercially produced instructional materials to be purchased with public funds, the teacher makes a preliminary assessment of the curricular worth or applicability, based upon the description provided. Upon receipt, the teacher then examines (previews) the piece of material or views the film or filmstrip with the objective of determining its instructional suitability. It is at this point that the teacher makes a decision concerning bias, that is, whether that bias detracts sufficiently from its instructional usefulness to warrant rejection of the material. Additional materials representing other points of view might be needed. Following use with the class, the teacher should conduct a post-use assessment of the value of the material as related to instructional objectives. The teacher may decide to reuse the material, to modify its use, or not to use it again. This decision must be based upon the teacher's judgment of the data collected regarding the attainment of the instructional objectives.

It is our belief that many excellent free films and other materials are available to teachers. The important decision regarding their use resides with the teacher, not with a source editor. The teacher has the responsibility of surveying all possible sources and determining the appropriate instructional use of these materials. Evaluation of instructional effectiveness is necessary when considering the use of any materials brought into the classroom.

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