

LEARNING TO LEARN

HOW TO DEVELOP PROCESS LEARNING CIRCLES FIRST STEPS

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Further information: www.cainelearning.com

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1. Successful professional development

Professional development programs work when they

- make sense to participants;
- are useful and practical;
- are interesting;
- are sustained;
- are supported;
- are real.

Educators need to know that the most powerful learning for students occurs when students become aware of how a concept or skill works in the real world.

Educators need to know that constructivist learning and teaching produce students who know their subjects really well AND who can score well on tests.

We need to use a process that is personally interesting and enjoyable and provides adequate support.

2. Process learning circles

One way to support professional development that is compatible with the brain/mind principles is the use of small groups.

The groups are suitable for any adult working in or with a school or larger educational unit. Most commonly participants are teachers and administrators. However, you can invite the participation of special resource personnel, librarians, psychologists, secretaries, custodians and teacher aids.

The reason for including all adults is that every adult contributes to the community that is created for

children, and children learn from every adult. Ideally, all adults should have a common mental model of how people learn, and their roles and functions should be mutually reinforcing. For instance, a positive and pleasant atmosphere in the school office and on the play ground indirectly helps all teachers maintain orderliness and build a good learning environment in their classrooms

3. Process learning circle format

The process learning circles should adapt to suit themselves.. In the initial stage, we suggest that Ideally each meeting of the group will contain all four of the following elements and phases. However, each element can also be really useful as a process that stands alone and that can be used in a variety of situations.

i. Phase 1: Ordered Sharing

The purpose is to make it easier for people to learn together.

ii. Phase 2: Reflective study of important material.

The best way to make sense of new material is to both analyze it and personalize it through reflection on personal experience.

iii. Phase 3: Examine practical applications and implications.

Nothing works until it is tried. New skills are built by experiment, feedback, practice and reflection.

iv. Phase 4: Regrouping.

The way to fully benefit from a group session (and any other experience) is to regroup it by reflecting on what happened and what was learned.

PHASE 1: ORDERED SHARING

1. Sit in a closed circle.
2. Examine your core material. This should be some issue or pithy saying or topic with a very large number of legitimate points of view.
3. Each person says something about the chosen subject, with a time limit of, perhaps, one or two minutes. People can share personal experiences or wax philosophical. The person on the left goes next. The direction of sharing continues around the circle.
4. No one makes any comment whatsoever about what another says. There is no opposition nor is there verbal support. However every silent member pays full attention to what is being said.
5. The group leader monitors timing and participation. No one needs to speak for their full allotted time, and no one should exceed their allotted time. Ideally, everyone should say something and not just "pass."
6. If people pass, go back to them (continuing to the left) after everyone else has shared.

Key: Deep listening

This is the art of listening to oneself and others at the level of mental models and hidden assumptions. One essential key here is to recognize that whenever a person has a strong emotional response to an idea or behavior, that reflects a deep belief, often unarticulated belief that the person has.

Skills: Non-judgmental listening to oneself and others.
 Patience.
 Beginner's mind.

PHASE 2: REFLECTIVE STUDY

Select the material to study ahead of time. Those who are becoming brain/mind constructivists would begin with the brain/mind learning principles, and examine one principle each group meeting. Ideally group participants would read a little before the group meeting. Because there may not be much time for this, the facilitator should have some essential material available for participants to read during this phase of the group process.

Once the material has been read, participants should spend time discussing and personalizing it.

In part the discussions are used to analyze and think about what the material means. In addition, every participant should think and talk about some personal experience related to the material.

For example, if you are learning about the fact that the brain/mind is social, you would discuss times when you worked well in groups and when you worked better alone, what the differences were, and so on. The goal is to see how the principle operates in your own life and in your own learning.

A very powerful further step is to use some activities such as role playing to experiment with the idea or skill being studied. Again, after the activity, participants should reflect on and share their personal experiences and reactions.

Key: Active listening

This is the art of paying full attention and of asking questions that enable the speaker to clarify his or her own thoughts.

Skills: Asking clarifying questions.
 Reflecting on one's own experience.
 Tolerating confusion and ambiguity.

PHASE 3: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Participants should take some time to think about some aspect of the material that has direct application to their work. That is the basis for deciding what to try out the following week.

This aspect of the process can be carried out in different ways. Participants might like to work alone or in pairs and small groups. They can decide to try out different processes or to each experiment with the same process. The facilitator should prepare some questions that set the stage for what participants will work on during the following week.

For example:

Does the material studied seem to apply most to some aspect of teaching, discipline or assessment?
 What should I experiment with next week?
 How will I do it?
 What do I expect to happen?
 What responses or outcomes should I look for?

Key: Making material practical

This is the art of translating abstract ideas and suggestions into real-world applications.

Skills: Developing a systematic approach to practice.
 Action research.
 Peer coaching.

PHASE 4: REGROUPING

Every group meeting works at two levels. There is the content of subject matter that participants work on, such as a brain/mind learning principles. And there are also the skills that the group process is teaching, such as the art of listening without judgment or of asking good questions.

The process itself is designed to help participants master the content. The final regrouping phase helps participants with skill development. In this phase, the facilitator should provide at least one or two questions that participants can think about privately or discuss with others. Questions can be general or specific and on many topics. For example:

What did you learn during this group session? And/or
 What did you learn about listening during this group sessions? And/or
 Did you become aware of any assumption that you have about learning or teaching that you want to reexamine? And/or
 What aspect of asking questions is easiest and what aspect of asking questions is most difficult for you? And so on.

We suggest that participants use the ordered sharing process to give their responses to this question. In that way, every body shares what they are learning, everybody hears what others are learning, and the practice of listening to everyone fully is reinforced.

Key: Learning to learn

This is the art of developing insight and skills by capitalizing on experience.

Skills: Active processing of experience.
 Sharing with others.
 Learning together.

GETTING STARTED

Volunteers

It is absolutely essential that group participants be volunteers because that is the first element of safety.

Group size

The ideal number of participants is about 7 to 12.

Forming groups

Adapt to your own circumstances

Location

Wherever possible, meet away from your normal place of work.

Time and duration

Ideally, meet once a week for one and a half hours at a time.

Facilitators

The goal is for everyone to be both a leader and a follower.

PROCESS PRINCIPLES

1. Have a degree of routine and ceremony with beginnings and endings
2. Be aware of the energy and focus of the group.
3. Stay or go, but don't come and go.
4. Safety
5. Slow down to speed up
6. There are no prescribed outcomes!
7. Individual Differences
8. Do not give each other advice.
9. Maintain the process.

CAUTIONS

The Mindshifts process is a way to learn about ourselves and others. Thus, it may become quite personal.

1. Conflict resolution.

People sometimes find themselves in conflict. Our primary suggestion is that those who do not subscribe to the philosophy of the process do not participate. We also suggest that, should the need arise, you

invest some time (including group time) in developing skills and procedures for conflict resolution.

2. Relevance for children and students.

The process developed here is for adult volunteers. It can provide the foundation for working children very effectively, but needs to be modified based on your professional skill and judgment. In particular, children are not volunteers and they have limited abilities to protect themselves, so care should be taken to avoid personal disclosures that can be embarrassing or hurtful. A modified approach to the ordered sharing for use with children is available.

A FINAL WORD

There is always more. Professional development and group building is a complex process and many questions will arise. For example:

- * How long does the group continue?
- * When do groups change membership and focus?
- * How do new groups form?
- * What patterns tend to occur in group dynamics?
- * Do cliques ever form?
- * What is the best way to combine individual group processes with the larger community that is forming in the entire organization?

The answers to these and other questions are partly a matter of experience and partly a matter of learning from others.

They require leaders to develop additional facilitation and processing skills, such as:

Identifying, and helping participants to identify, their learning and perceptual styles;
 Building rapport and adapting to the actual competencies and beliefs of participants;
 Using questions and feedback to help people process their experience and guide them in their learning;
 Creating a safe, orderly and supporting environment for learning.

For assistance in these areas, consult a good facilitator or colleague, or contact us at **www.Cainelearning.com**.