

Exercises for Facilitating Learning Groups

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The facilitation of learning is a critical set of skills in leadership development. Non-traditional ventures in theological education/leadership development often fail precisely at this point. What follows are several simple tasks that a facilitator can use with groups that are learning how to be learners in community.

Facilitating dialogue (perspective taking). Part of the educational task is to plan for diversity at many levels. Participants should expect that others hold views that differ from their own. However, it is not sufficient to recognize difference; the more important task is to engage responsibly with those who have different perspectives.

Task: Each group member writes a *one sentence summary* of a position or perspective presented in the seminar and shares the sentences with the group. In conversation, identify and probe areas of agreement and disagreement with the various perspectives.

Facilitating dialogue (critical thinking in conversation). Participants in a substantive discussion tend to short circuit the critical thinking process by coming to closure too quickly. The result can be sterile ideas and unproductive, if not irresponsible, perspectives on an issue. Critical thinking requires several vital elements which include: suspending judgment, questioning of one's own and others' assumptions, exploring alternative questions or solutions, tolerance of wandering around in conversational "fog."

Task: Each group member is given 1-2 pages from a text used in the seminar. Participants are to read the selection without underlining or highlighting. Rather, each participant writes notes in the margins. *Why* is the sentence important (why would you have wanted to underline it)? In other words, rather than simply highlighting, engage the author in "dialogue." Then, in conversation, identify themes or issues that emerge from the margin notes. Explore these themes, resisting the temptation to come to closure or to form a judgment too quickly.

Problem identification. One of the more critical responsibilities of a leader is the capacity to both "see" and "name" problems. Only when a problem is identified responsibly can a group be led effectively to deal with that problem.

Task: As a group, identify a significant problem implicit within the seminar content or process. The problem should reflect reality in that no one solution is readily apparent. Once a problem is identified, discuss the validity of the problem statement itself. Does the problem hold up as a worthy problem? Then, discuss different alternatives to the "solution" of the problem. Challenge one another's assumptions and modes of approach to the problem. Finally, examine the process itself. How was the problem identified? Was it an effective process? What would you do differently next time? How did the group do in confronting one another's assumptions? How was dialogue fostered in the context of challenging one another's assumptions—or even belief systems? Was the interaction sufficiently genuine to lead to honest exposure of productive or unproductive positions? What would it take to promote effective problem identification and dialogue in your organization?

Problem development. One of the essential tasks of an educator is the articulation of good problems, examination of which will be driven by productive questions. (One of the reasons why timed examinations are unproductive for learning is that they seldom produce sustained thinking about a significant problem.)

Task: As you reflect on the substance of the seminar, propose a significant problem that would have to be addressed by a group if the seminar material were taken seriously. Once the problem has been articulated clearly, each member is to find in the library one current article that speaks to the problem. Each person brings back to the cohort an insight from the article. As the problem is discussed, insights are shared.

Task: Members of the group will interview one another (in pairs before the rest of the group) concerning their project for the seminar. The following questions, among others, can be used to guide the interview: What is the problem, issue, or question that your project/paper will address? Why is this a significant question or issue? What tentative strategy are you thinking of for this project/paper? What difficulties do you anticipate as you work on this project/paper?

Writing. The goal of writing is not simply clarity of expression. Writing reflects critical thinking and engagement with ideas. The skill of interacting with ideas expressed in literature and the ideas of colleagues is fundamental to good academic writing. Good writing seldom emerges at “one take.” The act of writing requires several exploratory drafts and discards. In this process, colleagues can serve as dialogue partners for one’s emerging ideas.

Task: Each member of the group captures an idea from the seminar and expresses it in one paragraph. Share your paragraph with the whole group or with 2-3 from the group. As a group, discuss the validity of the idea, the cogency of the written expression, and determine areas for improvement. What consistent difficulties emerge in relation to identifying an idea and writing about it?

Critical thinking. Developing the skill *and* the disposition of critical thinking is one capacity that can be tested and refined in this seminar cohort. One aspect of learning to think critically is learning to form effective questions.

Task: As a group, identify one theme from the seminar. One person begins by posing a significant question in relation to that theme. Another person follows this question with another question, followed by another. After at least four people have had a turn, stop and consider the process. What was the nature of the questions? What level of thinking and interaction would be stimulated by the questions posed in this exercise? How effectively were the questions connected? In what ways did the questions reflect underlying, unstated, assumptions?

Task: Formulate a question from the subject matter of the seminar that would be answered in one way by one authority and in a different way by another authority.

Task: Using subject matter relevant to the seminar, complete at least three of the following: (1) Design a question that calls for factual information. (2) Design a question that requires participants to put facts together in a way that allows the facts to be compared or contrasted with one another. (3) Design a question that would lead people to consider the material with some originality—to see beyond and beneath the facts, to make

predictions, to draw conclusions, to grapple with an event in a creative way. (4) Design a question that requires people to take a stand, or to formulate an opinion about the subject matter. (5) Design a question that requires people to consider some personal response to this subject matter, or some application to everyday life.

Discuss the different dynamics in thinking and dialogue that would be created by the use of the different types of questions. Select one or two questions and critique them for clarity and substance.

Concept formation. A neglected task in critical thinking is the intentional linking of ideas to other ideas. In this exercise, the cohort will need a large sheet of paper or access to the whiteboard. Conceptual mapping is a commonly used exercise to help sharpen this skill. Identify a central concept from the seminar. Using this concept as the starting point, create a conceptual map in a form that shows graphically how the starting concept links to other concepts. (Your graphic can take a hub and spokes form, a web, a spiral, and so on.) Once you have completed your conceptual map, examine it for inconsistencies, implications, gaps, insights, and so on. What has your conceptual map added to your understanding of the subject matter of the seminar?

Listening. One of the more essential and difficult to master skills in leadership is listening. Good listeners hear meaning and nuance and not just words. As they listen, they assess the nature of their response, consciously or unconsciously, at several levels: whether or not silence would be the best response, or a question, or a challenge, or information that would add to the knowledge base in the dialogue, and so on. Agreement, or even disagreement, isn't necessary but good listeners acknowledge in some fashion that they have heard. Listening is vital to effective dialogue because it allows participants to *build on* the comments and responses of others.

Task. Engage in a focused listening exercise. Identify an important theme or concept from the seminar thus far. Each participant lists, on a single sheet of paper, as many words or phrases as possible that reflect what has been "heard" in relation to the theme or concept. Talk through your respective lists to identify gaps in what was heard. Engage one another in conversation about the topic, probing for points of clarification, implications, or next steps. Listen to one another's perceptions and respond accordingly.

Task. Using one or more index cards, each member writes a response to the statement, "The least clear point in _____ is _____." As you listen to the completed statement in the group, respond in what you believe are appropriate ways. At the end of your interaction, talk about the process itself. When was listening and response most effective? What categories of improvement were revealed by your interaction?