

# ICEBREAKING

## **Background and Context**

Beginnings matter! Each time a group of people gather they have the opportunity to create a culture. That culture can be grounded in suspicion, fear, manipulation, and judgment—often the case for classroom cultures. And yet it is possible to seed a culture with values like acceptance, trust, understanding, equality and compassion.

The explorations that we invite you to partake in this manual will only be possible in a classroom environment characterized by care and mutual respect. In this opening section, we present some approaches we use in building a sense of community in the classroom.

## **The Circle**

Before students arrive, the facilitator arranges the chairs into a neat circle—large enough to be comfortable and symmetrical enough that we will be able to see the faces of all who are present here.

### ***Discussion***

The theme running through all the explorations that comprise this course is **relationship**. Compare how the seats were arranged when you first came in to how they are most often arranged in classrooms. What can you say about relationship and flow in these two seating models? The relationship and flow of power ... of knowledge ... of respect ... of presence ... of focus?

### ***Central Point***

Henry David Thoreau, a human who roamed a small portion of Massachusetts fields and woods 150 years ago, once exclaimed, "I am self-educated; that is, I attended Harvard College." Get that into your head: "I'm self-educated, I went to Penn State." Your education, if you have any, will be a self-education. In your four years here, the best answers you will ever give will be those which cap the journey into your own questions—the questions YOU asked, not those of some professor. This is why we sit in a circle, because if there's anyone here who's going to stand up and ask the rest of us questions, it's not going to be the professor, it's going to be you. If there's anyone here who's going to expound at length until they're hot and hoarse, there's no professor here, so it's got to be you. If we're going to learn anything here in our weekly gatherings, we are dependent upon each other—and you must depend upon yourself—to make that happen.

## **Circles Invite Relationship**

Christina Baldwin, author of Calling the Circle reminds us of the power and significance of gathering in circle:

*Many, many thousands of years ago, when we captured the spark of fire and began to carry the embers of warmth and cooking and light along with us from site to site, the fire brought a new experience into being. . . The fire warded off predators, roasted the roots and nuts that*

*were the staples of our diet, and cooked our meats. With the flame, we could provide more food and sustain more people.*

*We came into circle because the fire led us there. Struggling to keep warm, struggling to keep safe, it made sense to put fire in the center. A circle allowed space for each person to face the flame, and as a member of a fire circle, we each could claim a place of warmth and a piece of food. Out of this instinctive taking of place, community developed.*

*When we see someone again and again in firelight, the fire becomes symbolic of our connection. . . Around the campfire, a mythology arose about our creation and our reasons for being. . . And when we fell asleep around the fire's coals, we dreamed. . . I remember. And so do you. Our cells recall another way to lead our lives.*

*And now, when we stand on asphalt, lost in the forest of skyscrapers, barraged with distractions and harried by the pace of modern life, our cells lead us in a process of reclamation. The circle is calling. Listen! (pg. 27)*

As I sit in a circle with students for the first time, I suggest the mental image, not of a ring, but rather of a sphere. With our breath we are linked to the air around and above us; and through the act of taking our daily bread we are tethered to the land that supports us. This sphere—our sphere—remains whole and healthy through our collective presence—our joined energy and intention.

## **A Name Tag**

The first requirement for us to come into genuine “circle” is to know who it is that we are in the circle with. This will take time—really, it will take a lifetime—but let us begin by simply learning each other's name.

1. Fold an index card in half so that you have a “table tent” that will stand on its own.
2. On the front side, do two things:
  - a. Decorate the card in a way that reveals something of who you are, yet use no words to do this.
  - b. Write/draw the text of your name—large enough for all to read.
3. Place your card face down before you, so that we cannot see it.

## **Check In**

Like any place that you visit often enough, this place will gain a gravity of memory and atmosphere. To walk into the room will be like a homecoming. Each week we will normally begin with a “Check In.” It is a way to close the door to the hours in the day that came before this one, and to turn our attention to ourselves—not necessarily our worries or our concerns—so that we can each be fully present to each other and this class. Most often, the check-in will be a question that each of us will answer, one-by-one around the circle. So, today, the Check In:

1) There is a cake before you with a candle burning. You have one wish; it's there deep inside you. Find this wish of yours. When it is your turn, you may make the wish and blow out the candle—you can do this in your head, you can do this simply with the exhalation of a deep breath, you can do this with an embarrassing amount of spittle. You can do this however you like, but make your wish—silently—and blow out that candle.

2) Show us your card—stand it up—and speak your name for us. Make sure we have the chance to really see your card.

### **Option One: A Collaborative Text** (inspired by Mitchell Thomashow)

Wisdom is shared throughout the world through words. Whether it is town to town, state to state, nation to nation, it is often words which share insights between people. In this initial meeting, you bring to the group a unique quote that *will*—believe it—inspire a series of insights to emerge from our learning community. Thus do we add to the group's collective wisdom. Have you heard of the Talmud? ... The long, long record of Jewish discussion regarding the essence of their essence?

#### ***Instructions***

- 1) Come to class with a quote: it may be a profound interpretation of your feelings for the environment, it can address your sense of the world, it can be anything of great significance to you. If you can, have it printed-out or very legibly written at the top of a page of paper with plenty of open space below it. Keep it ANONYMOUS.
- 2) Hand in your quote to the facilitator/guide; s/he will redistribute them. You are supposed to get someone else's quote, but if you get yours, it's no problem. Just continue with it.
- 3) Read, reflect, and respond to the paper you receive. React to the quote in an honest and open fashion. What thoughts and feelings does the quote stir up for you?
- 4) After you have all engaged with the first quote, hand your sheet back to the guide; s/he will shuffle and re-circulate the papers again.
- 5) When you receive the new paper, read the quote and what the previous person wrote, and then add your own thoughts and feelings—i.e., collaborate with the text.
- 6) We will do this 4-6 times, depending on the time that we have.
- 7) When we're done, you may have your original sheet back, as well as a few minutes to read through it.

#### ***Discussion***

\* Did you receive any interpretations of the quote that were different from your own, or that you simply liked? Remember, no one interpretation is better or more correct, just different.

\* Has anyone opened up to a new way of thinking about their passage? In other words has a new, diverse opinion or point of view made you examine your stance more intensely OR made you reflect upon the new position of your unknown colleague?

\* Do you have any feelings or thoughts you would like to share—e.g., certain interpretations, unusual reactions, the direction that the responses took...?

#### ***Central Message***

Notice how much we relied on each other for this lab. Will anyone leave today with an insight they didn't have when they walked in? What we got out of this lab depended on how we collaborated with one another. As we work together in this course, remember that each person in our learning community adds to our collective wisdom. The same holds true for the rest of life—in the present and in the future—when we work with those within and without our community.

## **Option Two: Group Snapshot**

What makes a group really interesting and powerful is the breadth of interests, worldviews, and experiences of the participating members. Through the check-in and collaborative text the richness of the group begins to reveal itself. Now it's time to go a step further by pushing the chairs to the side and then forming a single file line down the center of the room.

Once everyone is lined up proceed to give out paired words such as pessimist vs. optimist, spicy vs. bland, idealist vs. pragmatist, vegetarian vs. carnivore, aggressive vs. passive, socialite vs. loner, tree hugger vs. tree cutter, etc. For each pair of words, ask students to characterize themselves on a scale from 1→10 and to move accordingly. For example, an extreme optimist would move to the right wall while someone who was neither highly optimistic nor pessimistic would remain in the middle while someone who tilted toward pessimism might move a step or two to the left of the center line. This exercise allows the group to literally create "graphs" as they physically place themselves along continua.

After giving a few examples, the guide invites the students themselves to suggest paired words and for each pair the students separate themselves accordingly from along a continuum from 1→10. The result is a series of snapshots of differences among the newly assembled group members.

Go SLOW with this. Where there is a big spread for where students place themselves on a certain pairing, perhaps ask: What do you make of this big spread? What might we learn from it? In part, what a big spread shows is the degree of "otherness" in the group for that particular pairing.

In sum, the message that comes through in this exercise is: We come from different backgrounds and possess distinct opinions, biases, and values. Rather than seeing these differences as roadblocks, they are the spice that flavors a group. Indeed, we are all each other's teachers if we are willing to open up and allow this.

## **Option Three: The Labeling Game**

1. This "labeling game" explores the gravity of impact that our beliefs about and judgments upon those with whom we interact have upon that interaction. This exercise requires approximately five engaged participants, while the remainder act as witnesses to the five.

2. Those volunteering will need to exercise *patience*. At first the purpose of the exercise will not be obvious.... but with time, it will clarify. Thus, before you volunteer, ask yourself if you are willing to be patient. If you are, then volunteer.

3. Our five volunteers will begin by initiating a "normal" conversation on a given topic. One workable example could be, "The purpose of a college education is ..." You all may choose. The remainder of the group will carefully observe this conversation as it continues for several minutes (3-5). At a point when everyone has had the chance to speak, and self-consciousness is not especially evident, we will add a little spice.

4. The five volunteers in the center will close their eyes, and while their eyes are closed, the guide will silently place a label on each of their foreheads. The labels will read as follows: Praise me; criticize me; ignore me; make fun of me; interrupt me. The volunteers will not know what the labels say and the observers are asked not to react when they read these labels, yet they are free to move so that they can see all the labels. After the labels are affixed, those in the center

will resume their conversation upon the same topic. This time, however, they *heed* the labels on the foreheads of their partners.

5. After several minutes, the guide calls for an end to the conversation and invites the volunteers to return to their seats in the larger circle.

### ***Discussion***

1. In prior exercises, what has been clear is that, try as they might, the five volunteers have not been able to conduct a genuine conversation once the labels were placed on their foreheads (i.e., judgments cripple relationship). After a few minutes, each of the volunteers often have a very good idea of what their “label” is. Indeed, we all know what it feels like to be ignored, made fun of, interrupted (repeatedly), criticized or praised. That is, we all know what it is like to be labeled. For the five who volunteered, what was your experience like after you received your label? Before you remove your label, one at a time, tell us all what you think it says.

2. Why did we do this exercise? What’s the point of it? What might it have to do with our shared work in our weekly gatherings.

3. To the five volunteers: Share with us how you felt during the first part of the conversation (before the labels were affixed). Specifically, were you aware of subtle ways in which you were already judging yourself and the other four in the circle with you? Be honest with yourself, first, and then honest with us, second.

4. To the entire class: What did you “see” when/after the labels were placed on the foreheads of the five volunteers?

5. What invisible labels/messages do you all put on the foreheads of the people in your lives? Take your time with this question, really think about this.

6. If you could, what message, would you like to have affixed to your own forehead. In other words, how do you want people to respond to you? Write this down; then we’ll share. Note: Most people will say they want their message to be something like: Listen to me! See me! Pay attention to me! This makes sense. We all want to be seen!

### ***Take-home Message***

Our judgments undermine our capacity for friendship and genuine communication. In the case of our weekly explorations, our judgments, to the extent that we allow them, limit our ability to learn from each other. Of great import, recognize that our judgments exist in our minds; we think they are real but they are simply mental constructs—constructs that often cripple our relationships with each other.

#### **Judgments as Tragic Expressions of Unmet Needs**

All of us—teachers, students, and society at large—need to understand that all our judgments, both individual and collective, are misdirected expressions of our unmet needs (M. Rosenberg, *Non-Violent Communication*, 1999). This bears repeating: **Each time you judge someone, it points back to you—back to some unmet need that you have.** For example, imagine that your Dad is upset over the condition of your neighbor’s yard...i.e., judging your neighbor as a slob because his lawn doesn’t adhere to his standards. In this instance your Dad’s judgment points directly to a need he has for something he calls a “tidy” lawn. Once he is able to get clear that he has a need for tidiness, he could talk to his neighbor about this need. If he does talk, he’d be talking about himself, about his obsession with tidiness, not about his judgment of

his neighbor. In this and all other cases involving judgments, our judgments of others are our teachers; they teach us about ourselves. Can you come up with an example from your own life of a judgment you have recently made, and how this judgment is *about* you?

There is a second take home message to this labeling exercise, namely: Though we all want other people to see us/listen to us/pay attention to us, etc., try as they might, unless we give the 'others' in our lives something to see (i.e., unless we are willing to take the risk of being REAL with others), they will not be able to see us. So, it all starts with us.... our willingness to be real and honest with ourselves and each other. Once we 'come out' and allow others to see us, we will have our desire to be seen met.

### **Option 4: The Systems Game**

1. Look around the circle and pick two people, any two. Do this, without giving away the choices you have made.

2. When I give the signal, we will begin walking around the room in such a way that our bodies are only positioned so that they are equidistant from the two people we have chosen. It is not necessary that you be directly between the two people—i.e., forming a line—only that you be equidistant from them. Thus, there are many possible ways to position yourself in any given moment.

3. After a time, I will remove certain people from the action simply by tapping them on the shoulder ... at which point they will freeze in place.

4. Finally, I will give the instruction to maintain you position of equidistance only by positioning yourself in two-dimensional alignment with you two partners—i.e., in a line.

### ***Discussion***

1. Tell us your experience.

2. Recognize that the complexity would be unfathomable had I instructed you to be in relationship with four, or eight people, or sixteen people and to move with varying degrees of relational intensity to all 16. Yet this is the nature of our relational lives, though we may be only dimly aware of it. Clearly we've all heard the phrase, "Group Dynamic." Can anyone quickly clarify it with an example from their own life? No answer you give will be considered, "stupid," or, "dull." We just want to see the phrase as it exists in real life.

3. It is time to take this system teaching into the wild world of nature. In this course we will do more than just consider the natural ecosystems upon which we all depend. When species are driven to extinction (analogous to freezing one of the participants), the entire ecosystem is affected, losing, in some measure, its vitality. Does anyone here have any experience or knowledge of "Group Dynamics" in natural systems?

### **Check Out**

The weekend is ahead of you. There are a million things you could do. Think of something that you would not have thought to do if you weren't given this prompt now. Like: get an ice cream cone, explore the library stacks, go for a run, watch the sunrise, etc. Now, tell us, what are you going to do this weekend that you had not thought to do until just now?