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Bringing Learning to Life Through Reflection

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Last week's lesson ended with, "The lasting lesson for facilitators is to find ways to help participants and group leaders transfer these successes back to day-to-day participation in school work, or other life activities."

Reflection brings learning to life. Educators help learners grow and change and create meaningful and lasting lessons by engaging in reflective practice. The educational philosopher John Dewey (1933) who is known as one of the forefathers of experiential education, believed that in order to truly learn from experience there must be time for reflection. Processing helps learners make connections between educational experiences and real life situations. It helps them recognize skills and strengths by naming them. By recognizing and naming the skills and strengths used in an experience, they become more cognizant of their inner resources and can call on them in future life situations. Processing or reflection helps learners make connections from the skills they use in a "contrived environment" such as a classroom, challenge course, corporate training, or therapeutic group session to real life issues such as resolving conflicts with their peers, co-workers, or family, dealing with frustration, expressing their opinions appropriately, managing stress, and/or setting goals and priorities.

By using a variety of reflective methods—ranging from group dialogue, active reflection methods, artwork and the use of tangible objects, images, or metaphor—we can help participants view reflection as an exciting and dynamic part of group experience instead of "that boring thing you do after the engaging experiential activity." One of the most effective ways I have found to help people create meaning from their experiences is the use of metaphor and symbols as part of reflection.

Creating Meaning With Metaphor

Often people can more easily express themselves through a symbol or picture than through verbal means. Image cards, pictures, artwork, and tangible objects can be used as meaningful and engaging tools for facilitating reflection, goal setting, creating group norms, resolving conflict, and celebrating individual and group strengths and positive attributes. Brain research suggests that using metaphors and symbols helps cement lessons and transfer learning to everyday life (Sousa, 2006; Jensen, 2004).

I was first influenced to use imagery in facilitation by my friend and mentor Pam McPhee many years ago at the University of New Hampshire when she shared her postcard collection with our ropes course management class. At the time I was still focused on mastering what I thought was the more important verbal didactic question and answer method of facilitation. However, it was a struggle to get a group to share more than "buzz words" or get beyond only the most "verbal" group members sharing. Then I came across the Chiji Cards and one of their creator's Steve Simpson, who introduced me to the idea of "participant-centered processing." It was intriguing to think that a facilitator might inspire more in-depth reflection, dialogue, and learning by providing the group with an opportunity to interpret the experience by choosing images.

Over the years, I have learned that the participant-directed approach, using objects and imagery leads to more in-depth discussions and outcomes with my groups. These methods are effective because participants can attach their thoughts to an object that can be touched and shown to a group. Because the participants can talk about the object or image rather than themselves directly, they can express thoughts that would otherwise be left unsaid. When groups use pictures and objects in group discussions, the thoughts, ideas, and connections seem broader and deeper than when using dialogue alone. A visual representation of an experience can be effective long after the experience is over, reminding a group or participant of the key lessons learned.

When groups agree on an object or symbol that represents their collective experience, this symbol can end up carrying a great deal of power for a group (Cain, Cummings, & Stanchfield, 2005, p. 42). A drawing or collaboratively created symbol can become a kind of mascot representing the group's strengths and achievements, or represent a goal to be reached. Younger participants also can benefit from the use of symbols in facilitation; I find that children naturally think in metaphors because they are accustomed to storytelling and using their imaginations.

My positive experiences with the use of objects and metaphor inspired the creation of a collection of postcards, image cards such as Chiji Cards, and interesting objects. These items are invaluable for prompting group discussion and reflection and can be used in a variety of ways—for introducing groups and goal setting at the start of a program, for helping to establish group norms and identify the qualities of a positive group environment, and for resolving difficult group situations. Although both the image and object activities are similar approaches, I find that groups respond differently to using cards or pictures than they do objects. You can present both object and picture activities in a program and they won't be perceived as a repeated activity; they actually will reach people in different ways.

Using Pictures and/or Objects in Reflection

- Ask the group to come to consensus on one card/object that best represents their experience as a group, the strengths of the group, or something they have achieved.
- Have the group pick three objects or images that represent three important skills they used in the activity that they think will be useful in upcoming activities. Have them carry these objects with them to the next activity, and find a way to integrate them into the next activity or refer back to them to illustrate transfer of skills/learning to future situations.

Remember, reflective practice doesn't just have to happen at the end of an activity or lesson. Blending opportunities for reflection on what is happening, while it is happening can be very powerful. Consider ways you might implant objectives or images into an activity itself to stimulate thinking.

- Group members can use cards/objects to relate the "story" of their experience by lining up four or five cards/objects that demonstrate how they progressed through the activity, the day, or the course as a whole.
- Participants can each pick their own card/object and then draw or write about it in their journals.
- Groups respond differently to using cards or pictures than they do to using objects, even though they are similar approaches. When facilitators mix up their methods, they reach different learning styles.
- In some situations, it could be appropriate for group members to choose a symbol/object for another person in the group as a memento or gift representing the strengths or contributions that person lent to the experience.
- If appropriate, consider allowing participants to keep the object or picture that represents their strength or achievement as a memento/reminder.

There are a number of resources for putting together a collection of image cards, artwork, and objects. First, look through your junk drawer or recycle bin at home! I put together a wonderful collection of objects by filling my grandfather's old toolbox with items found in my basement, attic, and local second-hand stores. I started my first postcard collection with a vintage family collection and old cards left over from vacations. Many teachers I work with collect pictures from magazines as reflective prompts. A great no prep approach is to use "found objects" for group processing. Often when working on an outdoor challenge course, I have participants find an object in their environment (with the caveat to respect natural life) that represents their role, goal, or achievement during the day or activity.

The possibilities for this type of activity are endless! We invite you to share your creative ideas with the rest of us.

There are some great resources in the field for this type of processing tools. Here are some links:

- <http://www.chiji.com>
- <http://www.training-wheels.com>
- <http://www.experientialtools.com>

Join in for upcoming segments focused on creating the lasting lessons and connections through reflective practice.

References:

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This lesson is compliments of **Jennifer Stanchfield**, author of *"Tips & Tools: The Art of Experiential Group Facilitation"*.

To find more information and to contact the author, please visit: www.experientialtools.com



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