

# **Innovative Group Work**

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From the work of Stephen Brookfield

## **Newsprint Dialogue**

### Description

- Small groups summarize their conversations on large sheets of newsprint or chalkboards.
- Individual members of the class are then free to wander about the room reading all the responses & adding comments.

### Instructions for students

- In this activity, you will be working in small groups most of the time. I have prepared some questions for you to consider in these groups, but don't follow them too slavishly. Use them as a jumping off point for ideas you find especially worth exploring.
- You will have 30 minutes in your groups to discuss these questions and to write your answers to these on the newsprint provided.
- You should appoint someone to be recorder but don't start writing immediately.
- Take some time to let your responses emerge from the discussion. Covering all the questions is not important, but you should begin to jot some ideas down on the newsprint provided within 15 or 20 minutes of starting.
- When the 30 minutes is up, post your newsprint sheets around the classroom and tour the answers recorded by other groups. Look especially for common themes that stand out on the sheets and for possible contradictions that arise within or between groups' responses. If possible, write your responses to others' comments on the same sheet of newsprint containing the point you're addressing. Finally, note any questions that were raised for you during the discussion on the separate sheets of newsprint specially provided for this. We will bring the activity to a close with a short debriefing in the large group.

## **Circular Response**

### Description

- Participants are given a topic for discussion. The facilitator/instructor can select this based on the content of that day's session, a reading, etc. The participants should sit in a circle.
- One person begins with his/her thoughts on that topic and has about one minute to share without interruptions.
- The person to his/her left goes next. S/he must build on the previous statements in some way: by expressing disagreement or agreement, by adding to the idea, by pointing out areas that were left undiscussed, etc. This speaker has about one minute without interruptions.
- The process continues until all participants have spoken.
- Once the conversation returns to the first speaker, s/he shares how the conversation has changed, enhanced, or challenged his/her original thoughts.
- The group moves to open discussion and debriefs the process.

## **Snowballing**

One way to illustrate how discussions can be developmental and increasingly inclusive is to use a process called "snowballing" or "pyramiding." Students begin this activity by responding to questions or issues as individuals. They then create progressively larger dialogic groups by doubling the size of these every few minutes until by the end of the activity everyone is reconvened in the large group. At each stage as students move from pairs to quartets, quartets to octets they recap the chief point of difference, or the chief question, that emerged in their previous round of conversation.

### Description

- Participants gather their thoughts individual on a topic assigned to them. It should be the same topic for everyone.
- Students form pairs and share reflections about the topic.
- Pairs form quartets and continue to discuss.
- Quartets form octets; the discussion continues.

- Whole group reconvenes and individuals can volunteer thoughts on how the process enlarged their thinking.

## **Structured Silence**

Encouraging students to both tolerate silence and to find it a valuable component in their own cognition is a critical important step toward developing intellectual maturity for all learners.

### Description

- Periodically during a small group seminar students jot their thoughts about the following on a 3x5 card
  - What seems most important
  - What is most puzzling or confusing
  - A question they'd really like to discuss
  - Something new they learned
- Cards are then handed in.
- The small groups then discuss the responses on the cards and, where appropriate, respond.

## **Quotes to Affirm and Challenge**

### Description

- While completing the week's assigned reading, students identify quotes that they'd like to discuss in class. The quotes can be either
  - Quotes to affirm: those that explain difficult concepts clearly, that add to the student's understanding, that clarify content, or that resonate with the student in some way
  - Quotes to challenge: those that are difficult to understand, may be confusing in their wording, add to frustration or confusion
- Quotes are shared in small groups. Each group discusses all quotes and then chooses one that they'd collectively like to affirm and one to challenge. These are then shared with the large group.
- Large group discusses all small groups' contributions.