

# Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

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## **CLASSROOM MEETINGS**

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A learning community is a place where students *and* teachers learn. Most of us entered the teaching profession to work with young people and because we enjoy learning. An excellent way to pursue both is through the use of classroom meetings. But even more importantly, these meetings provide excellent opportunities for students to practice communication and socialization skills mandated in the curriculum. These skills are difficult to develop unless students actually practice them. Classroom meetings provide the perfect forum.

## **CRITICAL COMPONENT OF COMMUNITY**

How people relate to each other is a critical component to the success of a learning community. Classroom meetings facilitate necessary positive relationships because they provide the opportunity towards building trust and respect—which in turn lead to the sense of a warm and caring environment. Creating such an environment of mutual respect is necessary in order for each class member to develop the confidence to make a statement or voice an opinion while still feeling safe.

Self-esteem is raised because the setting provides an opportunity for students to recognize abilities, describe activities, and even admit mistakes without feeling vulnerable. Self-empowerment is increased when opinions are listened to with respect and when it is seen that an individual's particular contribution has led to a worthwhile solution to a problem or has been of interest to other people.

Teachers who use class meetings develop a closer relationship with their students. The relaxed conversation often reveals things about students, their families, and their circumstances which teachers might never have found out otherwise. An “unmanageable class” can become a learning and caring community because meetings provide a support that calls forth students' best moral selves.

Classroom meetings differ from usual class discussions in that, to some extent, *the process is the point*. As suggested, these meetings not only give ownership of the class to the students, they facilitate the development of skills. In addition, classroom meetings provide a venue to gain understanding of how other people think and feel—two necessary aspects of getting along with others.

## **Development of Skills**

The ability to listen attentively and with real understanding is a vital skill for students to acquire. This venue provides a wonderful opportunity for students to appreciate the value of listening to each other as they learn that respect is earned and reciprocated. Also, students soon realize that if they let their attention wander, they miss some key interesting points, lose track of the conversation, and even miss some of the fun arising from humorous contributions.

Students learn the art of *reflective* listening. Teachers model the skills of paraphrasing and asking clarifying questions, e.g., “Sheldon, before you give your idea, would you please tell us what you heard Sandy’s idea to be.” This type of reflective dialogue also helps listening with understanding.

Students gain needed experiences in skills of reading nonverbal clues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. Clear and concise speech is another important skill that is developed. It does not take long for students to learn that if their speech is unclear or disjointed, they will be unable to make their point of view known.

An increasing number of students have no sense of cause and effect, no sense of the consequences of their actions to themselves or to other people. Empathy is fostered by asking questions such as, “Would you want to be treated like that?” and “Would you want all persons to act that way in a similar situation?” In fostering empathy, students learn to set aside their own desires, views, and values as they *hear* another person’s. Sensitivity to others’ feelings makes it less likely that students will hurt, taunt, or isolate others. This is especially pertinent in certain grades such as fourth and fifth where teasing is so prevalent. Students begin to realize that when they bother others, their choice of behavior is not appropriate. As Robert Fulghum so aptly stated,

*Sticks and stones may break our bones,  
but words will break our hearts.* (Fulghum, p. 20)

In addition to empathy, values basic to our democratic system such as fairness, tolerance, respect, and helpfulness are nurtured. Students learn civil and peaceful ways to deal with different points of view, that there is more than a singular way to deal with challenges, and that *being different is not synonymous with being wrong*.

Outside the world of school, academic information is not nearly so important as being able to succeed in human relations situations. In the modern world of work, few people work only by themselves. The downward trend of working in isolation will continue as the workplace becomes more interactive. Almost all of us interact with others—continually initiating, responding, and negotiating. Much work gets done by informal and formal teams of workers.

Interdependence—rather than dependence and independence—is a prime requirement today. Working with others is of paramount concern to employers, and the more socializing skills young people have, the more successful they will be in school and in the workplace. Employers want employees who are team players, who can understand the culture within a group and can work successfully with others. This means being able to communicate by articulating one’s thoughts, listening to others, thinking critically, and solving problems. The U.S. Secretary of Labor published a widely quoted report referred to as the SCANS competencies (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills - Teaching the SCANS Competencies, 1993). The report lists competencies of skills and personal qualities which are identified as necessary in the workplace. High on the list were interpersonal skills: working on teams, teaching others, serving customers, leading, negotiating, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Classroom meetings provide excellent opportunities to practice these necessary skills and gain required understandings.

Several years ago, a statement was made to me that articulated a point of view applicable to classrooms and to our society in this regard. I was in a one-person store standing in line to pay for my purchase. Six people were in front of me. Gary was the only employee in the store. He answered the phone and helped customers with their questions while at the same time operating the cash register. When I finally became first in line, he greeted me and I complimented him on his skill in handling the stress of his job so well. Gary said, “I realized no one else was going to be hired; I’m

it. We're all in this boat together." What better way for students to understand the importance of getting along with classmates than to articulate the idea, "We are all in this classroom together!" Classroom meetings convey this message and focus on this reality.

## Modeling Civility

A prime reason why class meetings assist in the development of social skills is that they use procedures of civility. Put-downs, snide remarks, or untimely giggles are not appropriate or acceptable. Primary students can use cardboard slips with sad faces on them to keep students aware when a civility has not been followed. Courtesies that are used include respect for the opinions of others whether or not you agree with them, acknowledging others' positions, listening attentively, making constructive rather than destructive contributions, taking turns, and not interrupting others when they are speaking. Although these procedures are reviewed at the beginning of each meeting, once they have become thoroughly internalized and are regularly observed, it is only necessary to mention them periodically or when there is an infringement.

## Purposes and Objectives

Some meetings have specific purposes such as instructional reflection, discussing pertinent items, articulating and applying the values that schools engender toward civility and character development, and solving problems.

Specific objectives for classroom meetings include the following:

- Improving communication skills of listening and speaking
- Providing opportunities for insightful, creative, and critical thinking
- Learning the process of respectful interaction and promoting teamwork
- Increasing social intelligence such as empathy
- Fostering social skills such as reducing shyness
- Enhancing aspects of character education such as being trustworthy and fair
- Reducing anonymity and promoting feelings of acceptance and being worthwhile
- Building a trusting and caring relationship between teacher and student and among students themselves
- Creating and maintaining an open, trusting atmosphere for risk-taking in learning
- Creating a sense of community by increasing class cohesiveness
- Providing a channel for relevancy where students talk about subjects which interest, affect, or concern them

## Three Parts

Most meetings should have three parts in addition to rehearsing the procedures at the beginning and, on some occasions, summarizing at the end. The first part is *defining the topic* to be sure that everyone understands the issue or topic so that everyone talks about the same thing. The second part, *personalizing*, gives participants the opportunity to relate the topic to their own knowledge and experiences. The third part has to do with *challenging*, which provides an opportunity for the teacher to stretch the students' minds by applying the ideas through hypothetical questions or situations. In problem-solving meetings, the third part, *challenging*, should be designed to facilitate a solution to the problem.

## Challenging Situations

As meetings are held, skills in conducting them increase and the teacher learns to deal with specific types of behaviors. Here are some starters. With students who tend to monopolize a discussion, after a reasonable period of time, gently intervene, and/or talk to them individually at a time removed from the class meeting. Suggest that they limit themselves to three contributions per meeting. For students who create disturbances, sit next to them or directly across from them where you are easily visible. Arrange a special signal for them so that the prearranged cue can help them refocus. An example would be lowering both outstretched hands to signal, "Bring down the energy level a notch or two." Little by little, from the building of the group's cohesion, changes will begin to appear in these students.

To reduce teacher intervention and obtain maximum student participation, some primary teachers use an index card or some object to pass around or across the circle to the next person who wants to speak. Another technique for very young students is to use a yarn ball, which can be tossed (underhanded) to the next speaker. For students who do not participate when a discussion is free flowing, emphasize the importance of their contribution. Encourage them to talk by saying, "For the next five minutes I'd like to hear from people who haven't had a chance to contribute yet." Or at the start of the meeting say something like, "I'd like to encourage everyone to contribute at least once. So if you notice that there are some members of the group who haven't spoken yet and you've already spoken two or three times, you can encourage others to share their thoughts by not taking another turn yourself." Invite reluctant members to contribute such as "Evelyn, what are your thoughts about this?" or "Since you have been listening attentively, I wonder if you would share some of your ideas?" or "I'm sure you have an idea about this, and I would like to hear it." Making a special effort to be involved with them during other parts of the day and acknowledging some positive thing they do will assist in their willingness to participate during the meetings.

If particular students are the cause of constant irritation either in or out of class, or who are friendless because of their behavior or poor social skills, or repeatedly violate expected standards such as arriving to class late or without materials, the situation can be a topic of discussion. In these situations, the student under discussion must be present to hear what is being said. When peers, in the safety of a class meeting, sensitively explain to a fellow student their specific feelings and how particular behaviors affect them, the student is more likely to internalize the message than when an adult tries to say the same thing. Peers can explain in ways that are more meaningful to their age group than adults. It is most important that, at all times, *the discussion focuses on the action rather than on the person*—to focus on the deed rather than the doer. Blame is not attached because the emphasis is always on what the student can do to help improve the situation.

To discourage putting inappropriate or unnecessary problems on the agenda, some teachers use the following "Ground Rule": You can make a complaint about a problem, but you must also have a recommendation for solving it.

A cautionary note needs to be made about problem-solving meetings because their over use may adversely affect students' attitude to class meetings in general. This is especially the case if such meetings are used to solve peoples' problems. It is the open-ended and evaluative types of meeting which stimulate students, which are challenging and enjoyable and which are largely responsible for the development of the range of skills referred to earlier.

## **Length, Time, and Frequency**

Plan on meetings of ten minutes for young children. The meetings can be expanded to twenty minutes with older students—depending on their age, the nature of the group, their interest level during the meeting, the complexity of the topic, and experience with class meetings. The meetings should be planned at the same time in the schedule. Many teachers hold meetings before a mandatory dismissal time such as before lunch, the end of the period, or end of the day. Others, especially middle and high school teachers, begin every class with a classroom meeting where students talk for a few minutes about how the class is going and how individual and group projects are progressing. Students discuss topics such as whether they think it makes more sense to review the homework in teams or as a whole class. Because learning is more effective when students are part of the planning process, learning increases even though fewer minutes are devoted to formal instruction. Also, if a class is a particularly difficult one, a class meeting at the very beginning of the period can set the tone for learning.

Elementary classrooms should hold class meetings daily. Middle and high school classes deprive themselves of the many advantages of class meetings if not held regularly.

## **Creating the Physical Environment**

A tight circle is by far the most satisfactory arrangement. Teachers who try the circle format for the first time are often surprised at the difference this face-to-face arrangement makes in the amount and quality of discussion. A circle format ensures that everyone can read the body language as well as hear the spoken word. In fact, it is easier to hear all speakers when they are facing the center. Rows of people usually result in some comment from the back being misheard or not heard at all. When a funny, witty, or particularly interesting remark is made during the discussion, many of the people sitting in rows will squirm around to see who was responsible for the contribution. In this situation it may be difficult to maintain concentration for the full time of the discussion.

## **Furniture**

Desks often form a barrier to open communications. Stacked or desk chairs can be used to form a circle and desks moved in a very short period of time. Practicing moving them should precede any meeting. It will take students a few times to move away desks and take chairs quickly and quietly into a circle formation. As with any procedure, explanation and practice is essential for smooth and successful implementation. Also, if chairs are used they should all be the same height, thus making it less likely that the teacher is seen as being too overbearing. For younger grades, sitting on the floor often means that there has to be less movement of furniture and less loss of time both before and after the meeting.

## **The Teacher as Facilitator**

A major role of the teacher is to facilitate the discussion. This includes reviewing the procedures, posing the questions, monitoring participation, avoiding judgment, and concluding the session. When first starting, there is often a tendency for the teacher to over contribute. A helpful strategy to avoid falling into this trap is to audiotape a few sessions. Listening to the ebb and flow of discussions leads to improve skills.

Another tendency is to insert judgment. By making a simple statement about one student's comment—regardless of how affirmative it may be—judgment is implied. This is especially the case if a comment is made about one student's comment and not another's. A judgmental statement

may be very subtle and unintended but can have a detrimental effect on the reluctant participant who does not receive this affirmation. That student makes his own interpretation that his contribution may not have been worthwhile. Examples of such statements are, “I like that,” “What a good idea,” or “I agree.” Comments such as, “Do you think so?” or “Not really” have a negative effect and can be equally damaging. Class meetings should provide a supportive, encouraging environment which develops students’ confidence to speak and make comments. Passing judgment destroys this environment. Most teachers find refraining from judgment very challenging, but it is extremely important that continuing effort be made to create a non-judgmental environment. A mental strategy to help in this regard is to fully concentrate on what each student is saying, rather than think about what to do or say next. One technique to accomplish this is by waiting two seconds after a student is finished talking before doing or saying anything. The procedure sends the message that you care about what the student is saying—merely by the fact that your full attention is with that student. It also models good listening for the other students and emphasizes the importance of reflection.

## **Agenda**

The agenda for meetings can be kept in a folder with easy access to both the teacher and students since both can submit agenda items. On the primary level, the teacher can take dictation from very young students to submit an item. Oftentimes when the classroom meeting convenes, a young student has forgotten the problem. Discuss it nevertheless because it is in the process of thinking, problem solving, expressing oneself clearly, listening and respecting others where important growth takes place.

Primary teachers find classroom meetings not only helpful in resolving conflicts but in handling minor nuisances. Comments such as, “Someone is touching me” or “He is making fun of me” can be handled by the teacher’s saying, “Put it in the classroom meeting folder.” Similarly, when students raise issues for discussion about some aspect of the classroom operation, the teacher does not feel personally threatened. Merely raising the issue is a confirmation that students have developed confidence to share because the teacher has demonstrated a willingness to listen. Similarly, the teacher can use a meeting for instructional reflection by simply stating, “Folks, how can we make this lesson better for the next time I teach it?” This is also a very successful technique for challenging those kids who are tuned out or turned off.

## **Formulating Questions**

The goal of the meeting needs to be clearly established in the teacher’s mind in order to formulate questions that will achieve this end. Questions should be open-ended to elicit more than one-word answers. Closed-ended questions—those which require only a one word answer—usually bring a conversation or discussion to an abrupt halt. Unless it is a reflective-type question, closed-ended questions rarely show that any thinking has been employed in arriving at an answer. If a question requiring a one-word answer is desirable, it should incorporate a second part, which starts with “Why?” or “How?” This corollary to the prime question seeks a justification for the one word answer.

When a discussion relates to a problem-solving situation, the best procedure is to pose it as a question. For example, “Several people have said there was lot of name-calling on the playground lately. Is name calling acceptable?” “Why?” Then follow up with, “What should we do if it starts again?” This could then be followed up with a commitment question such as, “Now that we know what *should* be done, who are willing to say they will do it?”

A list of sample questions concludes this chapter, but here are some suggestions for question development and facilitation of discussions:

- Start with personalizing the question and relate it to the students' world.
- Ask questions which search for: Why? What if? Could we? Should we?
- Request clarification.
- Look for relationships.
- Encourage examination of assumptions.
- Guide discussions to encourage extension, application, and evaluation of ideas.
- Help toward transfer of generalizations and underlying principles.
- Push questions to depth rather than skimming across the surface.
- Play the role of "devil's advocate" on occasion.
- Defer judgment, and encourage explanation of both conventional and "way out" answers.
- Search for unusual ways of doing or looking at something.
- Encourage students to question opinions.
- Use interesting ideas students present and follow these ideas with a new *define-personalize-challenge* sequence discussed earlier under "Three Parts."

## Closing the Meeting

A final aspect of the leader's role is to use reflection to bring the discussion to a positive close. Sometimes it will be necessary to summarize the discussion, draw out the consensus, or clearly state the final agreed solution in a problem solving discussion. Examples are, "The main ideas expressed today are. . . ." "It seems that most people think. . . ." "Have we agreed that. . . ?" "I think we will have to disagree because there are so many different ideas."

Following are additional reflective techniques:

- Keepers - "Name one thing you want to *keep* from the meeting." or "Restate something that was said that you thought was a good point—even if you didn't agree with it?" Have students share with a partner or share it in the circle.
- Complete a sentence - Invite all to complete a sentence, e.g., "At the end of this meeting, I hope. . . ."
- Silence - "Take a minute to think about today's meeting such as a new idea or something you will do differently as a result of our discussion. If you would like, take a moment to write it down."
- Post Mortem - Share a few comments asking, "What did you like about today's meeting?" "What made it a good discussion?" "What could or should we do differently next time?"

## Evaluation

After each class meeting, the teacher should evaluate or reflect on the meeting in order for skills (both of students and teacher) to be continually improved. Some considerations are:

- Am I becoming more comfortable and skillful at questioning and leading/facilitating discussions?
- Are the students expressing and supporting their own opinions?

- Are the students willing to challenge others' opinions?
- Is there evidence of insightful thinking?
- Are students talking to each other rather than speaking to the leader?
- Am I using class meetings for one purpose only, or am I using them for a variety of purposes, such as discussing pertinent items and for instructional reflection?

After experiencing many class meetings, further items of evaluation can be considered:

- Achievement towards the goal of each meeting
- Assessment of the level of participation, such as (a) whether everyone had an opportunity to express an opinion, (b) whether anyone dominated the meeting, and, if so, to plan for intervention approaches, and (c) whether anyone consistently avoided participation
- Whether changes from one aspect of a topic to another (the segues) were at appropriate points

## **Suggested Topics and Sources**

Thirty suggested topics are listed which foster the development of skills listed at the beginning of the chapter. Additional topics come from students, the teacher, or are raised from current affairs, television, radio programs, newspapers, and magazines. Community and social issues are also natural sources for topics. In some cases, advance notice of a topic can be given so students can research it. This approach often brings the home into the school by engaging the family into the discussion.

After students become comfortable with the meetings, an opener like the following may be considered: "Let's take a couple of minutes to find out what has been going on since last time we met. Any highs or lows going on in your life?" The ensuing discussion brings forth ways of handling fears and loneliness because it fosters coping skills related to the items shared. Positive ideas for handling painful situations are discussed, rather than handling emotional pain in unhealthy ways.

Following are some questions for use in conducting classroom meetings which foster communication, social, and other curriculum skills.

1. Why do people come to school?
2. Why do schools have report cards?
3. What would you do if you found out at lunch time that you lost your lunch?
4. How can you tell if a person is healthy?
5. What is peer pressure?
6. What would happen if people have rights without responsibilities?
7. What would you do if you found a \$5.00 bill on the playground and why?
8. Would you rather be little again or just like you are now and why?
9. Why do we call each other names?
10. If you could change our classroom, how would you make it different?
11. Why are people your age given chores to do at home or at school?
12. Does having a reason for doing something make it o.k. to do?
13. What is prejudice?
14. What is discrimination?
15. How do you deal with anger?

16. How do you deal with frustration?
17. What does thinking like a victim mean?
18. What does being bored mean?
19. What does honesty mean?
20. What does having fun mean? How is it different from being happy?
21. What does being grateful mean?
22. How do you deal with jealousy?
23. If you could watch only one TV program what would it be? Why?
24. What is learning?
25. What are things that trouble people of your age?
26. Is it worth undergoing short-term *pain* for long-term *gain*? If no, why not? If yes, what are some examples?
27. What is the difference between being influenced and being made to do something?
28. How do you control your reaction to impulses and urges?
29. What is the difference between something that is appropriate and something acceptable?
30. What are some things that you learn at school which will be helpful to you later in life?

## A Concluding Thought

Classroom meetings—more than any other instructional strategy—create community. Perhaps, the poet stated it best:

He drew a circle that shut me out  
 Heretic, rebel—a thing to flout.  
 But love and I had the wit to win:  
 We drew a circle that took him in.  
 Edwin Markham

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