

VI. Productive Conversation

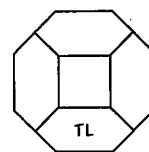
1. Check-In

Carol Kenerson, Micah Fierstein, Janis Dutton

When we ask children to move from class to class to class, rush through a hallway of 200 people, and appear focused and ready to work with us, we are expecting a lot. However, if students enjoy the opportunity to speak upon arrival in a classroom, they may become more present. The process of “check-in” provides time for students to make a very brief statement and focus their attention on the task at hand. It is also powerful when forging relationships and creating an atmosphere of openness and deep listening.

There are many variations, and very few rules. Some will be silent for a minute, focusing inward, and then simply say, “I’m here.” Others will talk about their current problems or triumphs, while others will offer a simple statement about their perspective. It need not be done every day, but to conduct check-ins on Monday and Friday offers a stable frame to the week. Each person has an opportunity to speak. People speak to the whole group. Students who are shy or just don’t feel like talking can say “Pass,” instead of being forced to speak, but they need to acknowledge their passing out loud, so their voices are heard.

Listeners who can focus on what is said without having to worry about making a response develop a deeper appreciation of each person. If class time is tight, a one-word check-in takes a couple of minutes. Go around the circle and let each individual offer a single word: “Purple.” “Running.” “Basketball.” Some students prefer going around in a circle and knowing when their turn will come. Others prefer check-ins where



Purpose and Overview:

Taking a few moments at the beginning of class to give students a chance to be present together.

Participants:

Any group of two or more people. In addition to staff meetings and classrooms, some people use it around the dinner table at home.

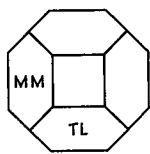
Time:

A few minutes (or less) per person. In fifty-minute classroom periods, check-ins can be useful at the start and end of each week.

each person speaks when the feeling moves him or her, until everyone has spoken. Either process causes stress for someone in the room; this is a great marker for the different needs and styles of individual learners.

As a teacher, you can open by checking-in yourself, talking about a book you have read or something on your mind, to model what it takes to be present. Make check-in absolutely safe. Classroom students should know they can admit, for instance, that, "I woke up late today, and I was rushing and I'm kind of frazzled, so the first five minutes may be a little out of sync," and it will be heard in the spirit in which they mean it.

Check-ins transform a group. One high school teacher, who normally began each class with check-in, had a compressed schedule one week and said, "No check-in today." The students protested vehemently. "I have been waiting all day," said one, "to say what I was thinking."



2. Opening Day

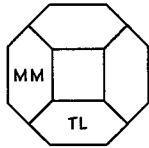
Nelda Cambron-McCabe

See Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), pp. 74-75; reviewed on p. 115.

Introducing mental models in the first session of a course can open up an atmosphere of trust and inquiry throughout the entire course. I've seen this firsthand in the university seminars I teach; my students have taken it back to their high school and grade school classrooms and report the same effect. I start during the first class of a semester. First I encourage students to explore the concept of mental models, the ladder of inference (page 71), the systems thinking iceberg (page 80), and the need to balance inquiry and advocacy (page 219). I explain that the course structure and readings are set up to provide the boundaries for our conversation together during the semester. I quote Parker Palmer on the necessity of a classroom being both bounded and open.

I emphasize that if we are to learn together, this class must be a safe place to raise issues that are hard to talk about elsewhere. In my university, as in most educational institutions, there are often many concerns about culture, race, class, and gender below the surface. In this course, these issues may be laid on the table. I say that the students' role is not to talk to the professor, as they often do, but with one another. My role is not to give them information but to set up a structure in which we can all

elsewhere. Like many good polemics, it is immensely fun to read. But it also transcends being a polemic. — Art Kleiner



3. The \$19,000 Question

The Ladder of Inference in Practice

As told to Micah Fierstein



Micah Fierstein is the director of the Change Institute, a nonprofit organization in Portland, Oregon. He writes: "For more than a decade I have engaged in co-learning projects with teachers and administrators to explore the effectiveness of the learning organization tools when translated into educational settings. The groups I work with begin each session sharing their experiences in applying the tools in their work. One of the most powerful stories is this one, recounted by a director of curriculum at a suburban school district. She taught our group that not only is it important, and possible, to engage the system with information and knowledge, but it can lead to profound results. She taught us that the key themes in this work are courage and trust—the trust to learn from other people, and the courage to believe you can impact the system. Courage also means the willingness to make yourself vulnerable and having a keen awareness of the vulnerability of others."

The director of curriculum who tells this story is anonymous at her request, but has checked and approved the story printed here.

In this study group we've all learned together just how powerful the tools of team learning and mental models can be. Often, educators ask how they, as individuals, can be effective with others who don't have the same exposure to organizational learning. I want to share with you an experience I recently had in my district. It shows how a single educator in a large school system can really make a difference by using these tools, even if he or she is the only person consciously using them.

It all started with a meeting I attended last month. One of the elementary administrators asked me to come and meet with his staff. They had some questions about the new math curriculum. I had no idea what

I was walking into. The teachers' anger toward the district overflowed right at me. "Last year it was a new reading curriculum," they complained. "Next came the new report card, state standards, and now the math series." The first thing I did was jump to a conclusion that this was a setup. They obviously didn't respect me enough to tell me in advance what the meeting was really about; they were clearly out to attack me; and they didn't have a clue how hard we had worked to get the money for the new materials. They were afraid of change, stuck in their ways, and ungrateful.

Thanks to the things we have been learning in this group, I recognized I had skipped a few rungs of my ladder of inference, and decided to suspend my assumptions and practice some dialogue and inquiry. I decided to ask questions and listen with a beginner's mind. The teachers expressed a deep commitment to their students and a frustration over their inability to bring new curriculum alive as quickly as they desired. Their frustration centered on integrating new instruction strategies at several levels simultaneously. I began to understand better the unrelenting changes that we had been asking teachers to make these past three years. The new demands of state standards, a new report card, curricula, and more seemed to be triggering feelings of incompetence. No wonder they were angry.

}} See the ladder of inference on page 68.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. This question seemed to catch them off guard. They took a big breath and sat back. "We don't want you to do anything," they said. "We just want you to listen."

Returning to my office, I reflected on what I heard. My initial conclusions regarding the teachers' anger were incorrect. Perhaps they were more flexible than I had been led to believe. I had never stepped back and looked at the total number of changes we were working on. The district had never acknowledged the complex and excellent work that teachers did. I sat down and wrote a letter to them, thanking them and acknowledging all their contributions to our new curriculum initiatives.

The teachers' union reprinted my letter (without my knowledge) in their newsletter. The response I got was interesting. A dozen teachers contacted me directly. They told me how meaningful the letter was for them and that it was the first time in a long time that anyone from central administration showed they were listening. But at the next administrative meeting with the principals I was soundly criticized for kissing up to the union.

The Change Institute works with consultants and corporations to adapt their tools of learning organization practice to educational settings. For more information, see <http://www.changeinstitute.org>.

That was an uncomfortable experience. I could have backed down, yet for the students' sake I wanted to ensure the long-range success of the new math program. I knew this depended on the teachers harnessing the new learning opportunities that the curriculum provided. The questions that the teachers raised were significant; they came from their daily interaction with the curriculum and students. The teachers also would have to explain it to parents. I felt we had a unique window of opportunity to alleviate their frustration and strengthen student learning, by dealing directly and coherently with the inevitable questions that arise from any innovation.

I decided the teachers needed release time for an in-service opportunity to learn more about the program. The cost of hiring substitutes and other expenses was \$19,000. The only problem was that I didn't have that money allocated in my budget. I had to ask the superintendent for additional money.

I knew I was putting myself in a vulnerable position. The superintendent was new to the district. He might think I was incapable of assessing the needs of the district or that I lacked budget-planning skills. I was also surfacing the undiscussable issue of teacher resentment toward the district. In other words, he could infer that I was a bad administrator. I was opening myself up for another round of criticism—this time from the boss.

When I had asked for money in the past, I had never had to talk through the assumptions underlying my reasoning. This time I knew if I didn't, the superintendent would have an easy time leaping up his own ladder of inference. With this in mind, I decided to walk him up the rungs one at a time.

I told him about the teacher meeting I had attended and the anger and frustration I observed. I told him about the response I had received to the letter I had written. Then I said, "I think their anger and frustration is a sign they are concerned, not inflexible. I am assuming that their concern arises from a desire to be successful teachers and a willingness to try new things in their classrooms, yet they have too many questions about the program. I think that too many curriculum innovations fail because building frustration prevents teachers from taking ownership in implementing changes. I believe we have a unique window of opportunity here to alleviate their frustration by harvesting the inevitable questions that arise in any new program. Therefore I am requesting \$19,000 for release time for an in-service opportunity."

I half expected him to be resistant, and braced myself to suspend my "noble certainties" to listen with a beginner's mind. I thought I would

have to listen to his concerns and engage in skillful discussion. Imagine my surprise when very quickly he told me my explanation was solid, the plan was responsible, and it was something the district needed to do.

Learning journals Michah Fierstein

Working in teams is an inherently difficult process. One has to balance individual needs and the needs of the larger community. Often there is a compelling desire to complete the business at hand and move on. The learning journal establishes reflection on these critical questions: How do we learn together? How do we inhibit or encourage our learning? What new skills, behaviors, and relationships might we want to develop to harness the intelligence we have in our team?

1. **Team Learning Journals** begin as an individual process. After each session, every member responds on paper to a set of learning questions. This gives them an opportunity to reflect on, and provide feedback for, the next session. Start with these questions: What new insights or awareness arose for me from our meeting? What questions or puzzlements did today's meeting trigger for me? How might we as a group improve our learning and the quality of our decisions next time?

After collecting these journal entries, a verbatim group transcript (not including names) is created by a designated and trusted facilitator, and distributed to the team before the next meeting. The collective journal shows the team members how they bring their own insights and interpretations to conversations and experiences. People are often surprised by one another's viewpoints. These pages are filled out after each meeting, or periodically, and then shared whenever team members need to reflect or take stock on where they've been and where they are going.

Awareness Exercise: Invite team members to write down the trends and patterns that they see in this team learning journal. Facilitate a discussion around the question: "How can we use our awareness of these patterns or trends to change our behavior in future meetings, so that our meetings lead to deeper conversations and decisions that increase student learning?"

2. **Cumulative Learning Journal:** This tool is used at the end of a special project or the conclusion of the school year. Draw a line down the



Purpose:

To capture and document individual and collective learning, to surface insights, examine assumptions, identify learning questions, build collective intelligence, and mentor progress.

Materials:

Prepared handouts with questions.

