

River Stories: Building Community Through Sharing

Overview:

This workshop provides a creative and artistic way to build community through the sharing of stories. It sets a foundation for participants to share their own paths (personal and professional), using the metaphor of a river to describe life experiences. This activity is designed to help build context and cohesion in a group, as well as help people practice their communication and listening abilities. A facilitator can modify it further to incorporate broader story-telling (such as collective history or the stories of movements).

Category:

Reflection; visioning; identity development; communication skills

Level:

Suitable for all levels (introductory to advanced)

Type:

Structured activities suitable for a workshop

Focus/Goals:

- Provide individual participants with opportunities to reflect on their personal histories and how they would use the metaphor of a river to describe their lives.
- Deepen interpersonal skills, including the ability to reflect, listen, articulate oneself, and develop relationships.
- Build a feeling of collaboration and sharing among the participants as individuals and as members of different programs and communities.

Brief Outline:

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|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • Introduction | suggested time 5 minutes |
| • Warm Ups (Name Game: I Don't Know) | suggested time 10-15 minutes |
| • Context for River Story | suggested time 5 minutes |
| • Personal Rivers and Sharing | suggested time 30 minutes |
| • Gallery Walk | suggested time 15 minutes |
| • Closing | suggested time 10-15 minutes |

Part 1) Introductions

Suggested time: 5 minutes

Facilitator should introduce:

- Name
- Role
- Why doing this training
- How it connects to the work or purpose of the group
- Where it fits in the process of that work (e.g. what will happen after)

Part 2) Warm Up: I Don't Know

Suggested time: 10-15 minutes

If people don't know each other's names, do a brief name game or introductions.

Then, do the following warm up, illustrating it first. There are three rounds. Use a watch or timer.

I Don't Know

Purpose: This warm up game is a great thing to use with a smaller group of people (or in triads in a large group) when people already know each other a little bit (names, roles, etc.) but haven't taken the next step to learn more.

Materials: A watch. No other materials are needed, but there does need to be sufficient time for each round (roughly 3 minutes per person or 10 minutes total).

Attributes: Works well with a group who has begun to know each other but perhaps not had the opportunity to slow down and learn more. Examples include (1) a group in the middle of a retreat, (2) at the middle of a project for a group that meets only periodically, (3) as a refresher for a group that is stuck. Tone should be inquiring and respectful. Space needs to allow for triads to not be overwhelmed by noise from other groups. This can also be done as a brief warm up for a pair (for example in a meeting), perhaps between project manager and volunteer, two colleagues, or mentor and mentee. Usually is very refreshing and interesting.

How to:

- 1) Explain that the group is going to do a brief warm up activity called "I Don't Know," designed to learn more about each other. Ask the group to break into groups of 3 (2-4 can be done as well). Explain that there are rounds for each member of the group. During each round, the other members of the group will focus on one person. Each person will have time (30-60 seconds, as called by facilitator) to get to know the other person better by alternating with statements beginning with "I don't know..." Give the following example: "I don't know if you have any pets."

“I don’t know what is your favorite color.”
“I don’t know if you like your job.”
“I don’t know what sign you are.”
“I don’t know where you live.”
“I don’t know if you like Chinese food.”
“I don’t know what things you like to celebrate.”

Reassure the group that this isn’t hard - don’t think too much; it’s just a stream of consciousness flow. The person listening doesn’t have to remember everything, just pay attention. Then she or he will have the opportunity to say things back. It doesn’t matter if you can’t remember all of them, just share what you feel comfortable sharing. That would be like:

“I have a dog. I like blue. I love my job, but sometimes I feel tired by it. I live in the south of the city. I like Thai better than Chinese. I love to celebrate my team’s accomplishments, especially over dinner and dessert.”

- 2) As facilitator, you cannot participate, since you need to keep time and make sure that for each person, there is a round of “I don’t know” statements followed by the person’s responses.
- 3) That’s it. Do the rounds. Then, if you’d like, bring the groups’ attention back together and ask for comments (“What did you learn?”).

Part 3) Context Setting for exercise

Suggested time: 5 minutes

- Share quotes below (or others) or otherwise engage people in connecting with the metaphor of a river
- Provide overview of what is to come in the workshop
- Introduce river metaphors through stories
- Set appropriate tone of enjoyment, relaxation, reflection, learning
- Review goals and agenda (if didn’t do earlier)

“There are roads out of the secret places within us along which we all must move as we go to touch others.” ~ Romare Bearden

“A river passes through many countries and each claims for its own. But there is only one river.” ~ A Sufi Master

Part 4) Personal Rivers: Individual and pair sharing

Suggested time: 30 minutes

- I. Facilitator explains the concept of a personal river story, using illustration and example on big flip chart paper

2. Guide people to think especially about their story of involvement in social change/service and where that appears in the river.
3. Each person should have a big flip chart paper and access to markers. Allow people to spread out and do this quietly (music?) for 10 minutes or so.
4. Then have people break into pairs. Give out the attached handout with Guidelines for Partner A and B, regarding sharing. Basically, each person should have the opportunity to share his/her river story and for the partner to “listen back” to the story. Facilitator may note that this exercise functions not only as reflection (in drawing) but also as reflection in communication/listening. Roughly 10-15 minutes.
5. Transition participants to hanging up their River Stories.

Part 5) Large Group Gallery Walk and Insights

Suggested time: 20 minutes

1. Have people take about 10 minutes to roam around the room and read other River Stories posted on the walls. Explain that this should be a silent activity.
2. Bring the group back into a circle and open it up for reflections, insights, and questions.

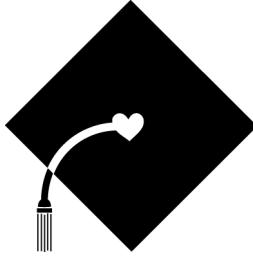
Part 6) Closure or transition into next activity (if there is one)

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Bring the group back together to wrap up. Some suggested closing questions for the group:

- What insights do you have about this group?
- What did you learn about yourself that surprised you?
- Did you learn something about someone else that you didn’t expect to?
- How did it feel to articulate to someone else your story? What effect did that have on you?

This workshop can also be followed by an extended group activity involving creating a larger river that connects the participants and/or the campus, organization or efforts they are involved in.



LISTENING AND SHARING RIVER STORIES

Guidelines

Partner A

1. Give a brief “guided tour” of the whole river, its tributaries and drains.
2. Share one or two affirming and one or two challenging experiences and what you learned from each of them.
3. Reflecting on your river:
 - What patterns do you see?
 - What have been some of your life learnings?
 - What are you happiest about or most proud of?

Partner B

1. What moved or touched me was...
2. What I heard as your values were...
3. What I heard that might relate to your leadership or communication style was...
4. Then, check back in with Partner A to see if your listening resonated.

Switch roles and make sure that each partner has enough time to share.