

INTRODUCTION

Energize Your Meetings!



Holding professional meetings at school is one of the most important ways to support staff in raising the quality of their instruction. School and district leaders across the nation work hard to guide staff through productive meetings, with meaningful content and the lively exchange of ideas.

Sometimes, though, our adult meetings fall short of being fully engaging and productive, becoming something to be tolerated rather than welcomed. The familiar lecture-style meeting, where the goal is to “get the information out and get it out quickly,” can leave participants feeling disengaged and facilitators weary. How much learning occurs is an open question.

Just as our students need active and interactive classroom environments to do their best learning, so, too, do adults. They need to be actively engaged with their discussion leader, with one another, and with the content being covered. They need an environment that promotes risk-taking and honest, respectful dialogue.

In your hands, you hold a key resource that will help you make professional development (PD) sessions and staff meetings come alive with learning. From interesting ways to discuss an article to efficient techniques for airing opinions on an issue, the easy-to-use interactive structures in this book will get participants fully engaged. The result: more meaningful and productive gatherings, no matter the purpose or size of your group.

Already experienced at facilitating interactive meetings? You'll find plenty of ideas to add to your repertoire. Just beginning? This guide will get you off to a great start.

Tried and True

For more than three decades, facilitators of *Responsive Classroom*[®] workshops have been using these interactive structures to fully engage adult participants. Some structures were adapted from ones used successfully with children in the classroom; others were devised just for adults. Regardless, they have always been an essential element of *Responsive Classroom* workshops—and critical to their success.

These ideas for interactive learning allow professionals to engage with one another in dynamic but nonthreatening ways. Some structures, such as partners sharing thoughts on a question the group leader poses, are very simple. Others, such as small groups using a step-by-step approach to analyze possible solutions to a shared problem, are more involved. But every idea in this book will enable participants to work together effectively and strengthen their group intelligence while also building their individual knowledge.

Meeting a Wide Range of Goals

The thirty-five interactive learning structures in this book can help you reach a variety of meeting goals. For example, they can help your staff in:

- ▶ **Learning something new.** Suppose you're introducing a new way to teach a skill to students. You could open the meeting by using Mix and Mingle (page 34) to allow teachers to share with a series of partners what they already know about teaching this skill.
- ▶ **Deepening understanding of a topic.** When your team needs to go deeper with a topic, you can use Circle Map (page 14) to guide them in brainstorming ideas about the topic and then graphically categorizing and making sense of them.
- ▶ **Reflecting on learning and developing action steps.** If this is your goal, you could try Walk Around Survey (page 72) to help participants share key takeaways and ensure that everyone leaves the meeting with the same understanding.

- **Fully knowing procedures or protocols.** If you simply need to communicate information, such as new safety protocols, you can use Step-by-Step (page 60) to do so clearly yet interactively.
- **Solving a problem collaboratively.** Sometimes you need to bring a group together to discuss how to address a thorny issue, such as misbehavior in the cafeteria. Using a structure such as Narrowing Choices (page 38) ensures that all voices are heard, which can help the group better understand the problem and efficiently find a solution to try.

Besides thinking about your purpose for the meeting or PD session, consider your comfort level with using a particular structure, your knowledge of the group members, and their comfort level with trying new approaches to collaborative discussions and problem-solving.

Browse through the Learning Structures at a Glance (pages 6–7) to find ideas to try. You might want to start with a fairly straightforward one, such as Mix and Mingle (page 34) or Think, Pair, Share (page 64). Then, try another one for variety and to ensure that your sessions remain lively and your audience fully engaged.

THE FACILITATOR'S ROLE

Right after participants get started with their discussions in pairs or small groups, it's helpful if you make a quick tour around the room to assess whether everyone understood your directions and is getting to the task at hand. This way, you can clarify directions right away and, if needed, stop the whole group and clarify things for everyone.

Also, when circulating, try to be a “guide on the side” rather than the “sage on the stage.” Listen in, nod, clarify misunderstandings, and gently redirect a group if it's off task, but avoid hovering too long or steering a conversation.

Of course, you may decide that it's important for you to participate directly, by talking one-on-one with a partner or as part of a small group. If so, still do the initial “drive-by” of all groups to make sure everyone is on track.