



Project on Civic Reflection

CIVIC REFLECTION DISCUSSIONS

A HANDBOOK FOR FACILITATORS



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This short handbook on facilitating civic reflection is intended to help new and experienced facilitators lead engaging, productive, and enjoyable civic reflection discussions. It is a supplement to participation in civic reflection facilitation workshops led regularly by the Project on Civic Reflection, and it provides a general overview of many points treated in more depth and detail in these workshops.

In this supplementary handbook, we summarize what we take to be the most important areas of concern for civic reflection facilitators and offer some brief guidance in negotiating these areas. Our goal throughout is to assist facilitators in making their own thoughtful decisions about the discussions they will lead. We hope this handbook, like the Facilitators' Forum at www.civicreflection.org, helps facilitators prepare for and lead successful civic reflection discussions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What Is Civic Reflection?	1
How Do Civic Reflection Discussions Work? . . .	1
Why Use A Reading? . . .	2
Civic Reflection: Participants, a Reading, and Civic Life . . .	2
Why Do Civic Reflection?	4
Benefits and Outcomes . . .	4
Making it Happen	5
Main Components . . .	5
Logistics . . .	6
<i>Making It Happen</i> Worksheet . . .	8
Planning the Discussion.	10
The Big Questions . . .	10
Selecting the Readings . . .	11
Framing and Using the Readings . . .	15
<i>Planning the Discussion</i> Worksheet . . .	23
Leading the Discussion	25
Orientation . . .	25
Technique . . .	25
Troubleshooting: Dealing with Difficulties . . .	31
Recognizing Success . . .	32
Conclusion	33
Resources.	34
Online Tools . . .	34
Publications . . .	34
One-Time Discussions: Shorter Pieces . . .	35

WHAT IS CIVIC REFLECTION?

- Why do we serve?
- To whom should we give?
- What is community?
- What is good leadership?
- What change do we seek?

Civic reflection in the broadest sense refers to any activity that engages people in thinking carefully about their civic choices and commitments. In this handbook we introduce a specific approach to civic reflection that relies on the practice of group reading and conversation. These “civic reflection discussions” are a unique way for participants to think—and talk—with other people about the beliefs that underlie their public work, using short but resonant readings to add depth and complexity.

Civic reflection discussions can help us talk more comfortably about values, think more deeply about choices, and respond more imaginatively to the needs of our communities. These discussions are now happening all over the country in service programs like AmeriCorps and VISTA, civic engagement programs at colleges and universities, high-school service-learning initiatives, charitable foundations, social service agencies, non-profit boards, and among educators, hospital staff, and other civic leaders.

“Civic reflection is the perfect approach to discussing issues that matter to people engaged in civic activities—i.e., volunteers who need to examine their mission in life and in their work; leaders in community organizations that need to broaden their perspective as to their roles in the community; prospective members of an organization who need insight on the issue of social responsibility.”

How Do Civic Reflection Discussions Work?

In a civic reflection discussion, a group of people with common civic work step back and think about their activities and commitments. Gathering in a hospitable place, they share refreshments and engage in facilitated conversation. The discussion focuses on a short, thought-provoking reading and gradually opens up onto larger questions about civic engagement. *What obligations do we have to others in our community? Why join one association and not another? What do we really expect of those whom we serve?* By reading and talking together about these underlying questions, participants gain a richer connection to one another—and to the important tasks of civic life.

Civic reflection discussions encourage participants to freshly consider the deep principles and commitments on which their own and their colleagues’ actions depend. This kind of discussion is not intended to culminate in consensus, or in immediate action, though it generally builds the connections that help inspire action.

Why Use A Reading?

The reading, as we'll repeat throughout this handbook, is a *tool*, a *means*, but it is an enormously important tool, and central to the entire activity. Readings provoke participants to think about their own beliefs and give everyone in the room something in common. Readings also provide vivid images and narratives that help participants talk in clear ways about complex ideas. And readings are safe—they can be disagreed with, challenged, mocked, and insulted, and yet they cannot be hurt.

“I began to see my own struggles, motivations, and judgments—as well as joys—in the texts, but more importantly, I perceived for the first time, through the sharing of participants, the intimate connection I shared with my co-workers through our joint work.”

Readings provide an anchor that the facilitator can use to focus discussion and return to whenever the discussion strays. Readings can also help participants go more deeply into questions or issues that they might not comfortably share on their own.

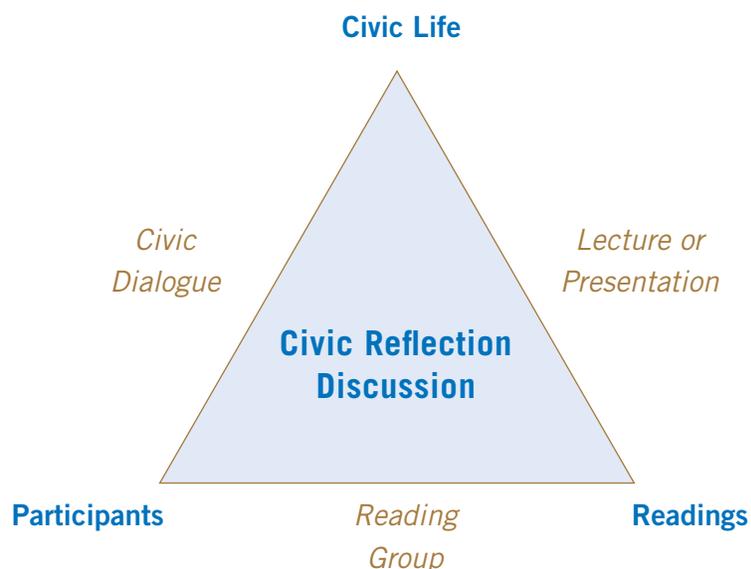
Civic Reflection: Participants, a Reading, and Civic Life

When you facilitate a civic reflection discussion, it may be helpful to think about having three components with which to work: the participants, a reading, and civic life, by which we mean the shared civic experience that brings the group together. These three points form a triangle of sorts.

IMPACT: Dialogue across Difference

“We have a racially diverse board. The Langston Hughes poem provided a safe, yet provocative, vehicle for us to discuss our different experiences with race and racial issues. It was during this discussion that one individual from the community talked about how she had been afraid to join the board and how, after getting to know the individuals on the board, she laughed to think that she had ever been afraid. This was an important and affirming revelation—one that significantly strengthened the sense of community among board members.”

The Civic Reflection Triangle



If you omit any one of the points in the triangle, the activity becomes another legitimate activity (a civic dialogue, a reading group, a lecture), but it is not what we mean here by a civic reflection discussion.

All three points—the participants, the readings, and civic life—are full of complexity, yet we rarely find the time or the space to sit with this complexity, to acknowledge that what we do, what we read, and who we are can sustain a good (and perhaps an infinite) deal of careful, patient thought.

So if civic reflection is a simple activity in some ways—it involves a reading, a group of people, a circle of chairs, and a little food—it is complex in other ways, and perhaps *most complex* for the person or people leading the discussion: the facilitator(s). It calls for *thought*, *flexibility*, and *creativity*, and for attention to the *people in the room*, the *reading on the table*, the *ideas in play*, and the shared work and diverse commitments behind it. It calls, above all, for taking reflection seriously, both for its own sake and for its necessary contribution to action.

“I recommend this style of reflection for the way it brings people together around ideas and values and personal experiences, which is often different than the staff meetings or committees we attend which focus on tasks, projects, grants and deadlines.”

WHY DO CIVIC REFLECTION?

For some people the value of civic reflection is immediately self-evident. Others, however, need to hear why this kind of reflective activity matters. Happily, civic reflection participants have, over the years and across a range of organizations, *consistently identified* three core benefits to the discussions:

Benefits and Outcomes

- **Clarity about self**—People leave civic reflection discussions with increased self-understanding—a better sense of their expectations, limitations, motivations and role.
- **Community with others**—People leave civic reflection discussions feeling a deeper connection with their colleagues and a better understanding of differing beliefs and values.
- **Commitment to civic life**—People leave civic reflection discussions feeling renewed, with a refined and refreshed understanding of why civic work matters.

In short, the more we think and talk with each other about the challenges and successes, the complexity and the questions, of our value-laden work, the more committed and energetic we become.

These early benefits matter because down the road they make an important difference. They can lead to other important outcomes, such as:

- Greater job satisfaction
- Deeper commitment to and engagement in public life
- Improved retention of staff and/or volunteers
- Healthier organizations and teams
- More thoughtful and reflective leaders
- A strengthening of the civic sector itself

“It has made me more committed to giving back and making a difference because it has allowed me to think about why I am doing this.”

MAKING IT HAPPEN

If you are interested in organizing and/or leading civic reflection discussions, it may be useful to think about civic reflection in three stages:

1. What happens **before** the discussion
2. What happens **during** the discussion
3. What happens **after** the discussion

This section of the handbook, on *Making it Happen*, is especially concerned with what happens *before* the discussion. It is intended to help you think about the various kinds of preparations that will make the discussion possible.

Main Components

Each civic reflection discussion (or series) is likely to be its own unique thing, meaning that each discussion will likely differ in significant ways from other discussions and series. But even given the diversity of civic reflection experiences, there are several components that every civic reflection session is likely to require—and all of these elements ought to be considered well in advance of the discussion itself:

- A group of 5–30 **participants**
- One or more **facilitators**
- A comfortable **room** where the conversation will take place
- **Food** to set the table for the conversation
- **Money** if the facilitator needs to be paid, participants' staff time needs to be accounted for, the food needs to be purchased, the room needs to be rented, or readings need to be purchased or copied, etc.
- **An internal advocate**—someone internal to the group or organization who will lead the process of implementing civic reflection discussions. This advocate will need
 - an *understanding* of the *needs* this kind of discussion will meet
 - the *courage* to introduce something new
 - an *awareness* of potential obstacles

Now, this is not as complicated as it might sound on first pass. If there is an internal advocate, or someone who wants to make it happen, the other ingredients or conditions will most likely follow. One person who thinks that reflective discussion will be useful for her organization or group will almost certainly be able to make a case, communicate with participants and other stakeholders, secure a place and time, and get the table set.

Logistics

In setting up a civic reflection discussion or series, it is always important to remember that *logistics matter*. Many people are not used to discussing readings in a group, exploring different opinions about complicated ideas, or talking with colleagues about the motives behind their work. For these and other reasons, the prospect of participating in civic reflection discussions can make people uncomfortable—so it is important that the conditions surrounding the discussions put people at ease. It is therefore extremely worthwhile to:

- **Schedule discussions at a convenient time** of day or night, in an easily accessible and relatively comfortable space.
- If possible, **incorporate the discussions** into days set aside for training, reflection, or professional development—and then indicate by the arrangement of the room, the presence of food, and the tone of the discussion that this isn't exactly training, but a real opportunity to talk openly, patiently, and deeply with colleagues about questions of common concern.
- **Arrange the room** so that everybody can see everybody else—some shape resembling a circle is best.
- Consider **starting the discussion after a meal or provide snacks**. The presence of food conveys hospitality, helps people relax, and signals a transition from action to reflection.
- **Start and finish on time.**
- **Prepare participants** ahead of time. Let them know before the discussion whatever they need to know—whether they will discuss a text that should be read in advance, where that text can be found, whether food will be provided, etc.
- **Ensure that everyone's voice can be heard.** If more than 20 or 25 people will participate, consider splitting into two groups.

IMPACT: Deepening Commitment

“This curriculum has served as the bridge making the link between field experience and serving one’s country and community much more tangible.

And the best part about this process is that during these conversations, members come to that realization on their own without prodding or prompting. They connect what they are doing with what they are reading and discussing.

Whole crews have consistently had that transformational ‘aha’ where their eyes open and their entire experience takes on new, deeper meaning.”

—Program Director,
Civilian Conversation Corps,
Montana

- **Plan more than one discussion.** Keep in mind that it usually takes three or four discussions for participants to become comfortable with one another and the experience. A planned series of five to seven discussions seems to work well, but there is no necessary upper limit to the number of meetings.
- **Schedule discussions reasonably frequently.** To sustain energy and make it easier for participants to refer to previous discussions, it often helps to schedule sessions every few weeks. In civic networks that are widely dispersed, this might not be possible, but an evening and a morning session at a retreat might work well.

Remember that all these different kinds of logistical concerns can strongly impact the discussion—and the more of these you pay attention to beforehand, the more likely it is that the discussions themselves will go well.

Remember: Civic Reflection is Different

Initially, out of habit, people often think of a problem they want to fix. How can we diversify our boards? How can we get people to give more? These are good questions, but civic reflection is not intended to answer them. It will not tell people “how to” do anything. What civic reflection can do is help participants explore the “what” and “why” —the assumptions, struggles and hopes underneath their questions—deepening their own imaginations and mutual understanding in the process.

Making It Happen Worksheet

Name a group that you would like to engage in civic reflection discussion in the coming months.

Who is a likely internal advocate? Who would you need to contact and convince, in order to get a discussion series started with this group?

Do you want to do a stand-alone discussion with this group in a retreat or other one-time setting, or would you like to organize a series of discussions?

If you are considering a series—how often does the group already meet? Do you want to build civic reflection into their regular meeting schedule or create a separate discussion series?

What are the key questions or issues you would like to explore with this group?

Making It Happen Worksheet, continued

Given those issues—are there any readings that you already know you want to use with the group?

Will you serve as the facilitator? Will you bring in an external facilitator? Co-facilitate with someone else in the group?

Where will the discussions be held?

Will there be food? If so, who will provide it?

What kind of follow-up or evaluation would it be important to do to “make the case” for this activity in the future?

The Project on Civic Reflection wants to help you make this happen. Please contact us for assistance with:

- Providing materials about civic reflection to help you make the case
- Finding a facilitator
- Getting feedback or debriefing your own facilitation experience
- Selecting readings
- Locating or making copies of readings
- Evaluating your series

PLANNING THE DISCUSSION

This section of the handbook, on *Planning the Discussion*, speaks to the planning you will do after the participants have been invited and the table has been set. Now that you know *who* will participate and *when* and *where* the discussion will happen, you have to decide what large questions the discussion will address and how you will get the group to explore these questions.

“Civic reflection challenges me to try to connect my day-to-day work to a larger context in new ways. I am more inclined to dig deeper to find the universal, fundamental questions behind the specific circumstantial case I am wrestling with.”

The Big Questions

As you consider what you will do and the overall shape of the session, it is useful to think *first* about the big questions, or issues, you want to help this group explore or reflect on. Once you know what you would like the group to discuss, then you can decide on the reading or readings that will help this discussion happen. And once you have selected the readings, then you can plan in a more detailed way how to structure the conversation.

Some of the most troubling dilemmas we encounter in associating, serving, giving, and leading are really enduring human questions—questions not unique to one organization or profession, time or place, but arising in a variety of times, places, and circumstances. These are age-old questions like: *Who makes up my community? What should we expect from those we serve? What difference do I hope to make? What is a good gift?*

In our experience, one of the greatest gifts of these discussions is the gift of one's own deeper questions—and the discovery that these deeper questions have been asked by other persons in other times and places.

“We all learned so much about ourselves and each other. There were tough questions, no easy answers, and tons of synergy. It gave me new meaning for a favorite quote: ‘Diversity: the art of thinking independently together.’”

What kinds of questions would you most like to have an opportunity to explore with colleagues? What questions are rumbling underneath your group's common activity that often get overlooked in regular discussions?

Examples

1. Let's say you are working with a group of AmeriCorps members who work with kids in after school programs. You want them to think about some of the difficulties inherent in their attempts to educate young people. You may decide to use Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Lesson" because it portrays a woman's efforts to teach a group of neighborhood children, with some unorthodox methods and some complicated responses from the group.
2. To take another example, let's say you want to help non-profit staff at a mid-year retreat think about different styles of leadership and their likely results. You may decide to lead a discussion using Franz Kafka's short parable "The Helmsman" because it raises questions about how leadership is created, assumed, and maintained.

In both cases, you will begin with a general sense of the one big question you want participants to contemplate.

Now, how do you get them to go there and to dwell there? How do you select a reading that will help participants explore this big question?

Selecting the Readings

Richness and Accessibility

The most important thing to remember as you select readings is that *the reading is for the discussion, and the discussion is for the people in the room*. The reading is a tool to help get people thinking and talking with each other about the large questions underlying their work. A civic reflection discussion is *not* a book group or a class, and the reading for these discussions is *a means rather than an end*.

When selecting a particular reading, then, the first question we should ask ourselves is: what will this reading help these folks discuss?

Let's say you are leading a discussion with staff members of a neighborhood organization that works with various immigrant populations. You might want to help them talk about inclusion and exclusion, similarity and difference. Kafka's parable "Fellowship" would be a good choice here because it explores questions of group formation, with one person left on the outside. Imtiaz Dharker's poem "They'll Say, 'She must be from another country,'" is another

IMPACT: Renewed Connections

"Fellowship" was intended to raise questions of how we work together as a board, and yet the most exciting part of the discussion was the way in which the text allowed individuals to talk about their own sense of belonging (or lack thereof) in a more general sense.

In a particularly poignant moment, one of the teen members of the board referred to himself as "The Sixth" in relation to his peers. We ended this conversation believing we had new insights into one another."

good choice because it questions difference of many kinds—race and ethnicity, sexual identity, citizenship, and country.

Both readings raise questions that likely matter for people doing this kind of work—questions that illuminate the work and the principles beneath it.

“We read a list of virtues Benjamin Franklin tried to adopt, weighed the complications of giving through the eyes of Jean Jacques Rousseau, and came up against the harsh realities of poverty and privilege in Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry. I saw prominent thinkers and great minds puzzled, as I was, by the nature of service. What soon became clear, as we talked, was that these were our experiences, too.”

Resonance vs. Relevance

Here it’s worth distinguishing between *resonance* and *relevance*. The current hot article or self-help book may be completely *relevant* to the work of the group, but this kind of reading can be difficult to discuss simply because it is current; strong opinions and emotions may already have been established before the conversation begins. Similarly, policy papers can be difficult to discuss because the expertise of the author seems to settle things in an authoritative way.

It pays to be cautious about texts that at first glance seem to be “natural” choices.

- **Inspirational texts**—readings that have an uplifting message (“lessons about life”) or present a particular model of leadership (“seven habits,” “six steps,” etc.)—may not leave room for disagreement or provide opportunities for differences in interpretation. A good text will be complex, unsentimental, invite controversy and even elicit discomfort.
- **Popular texts** (i.e., current bestsellers) may initially attract folks, too, but because interpretations and meanings of these texts are “out there” in the culture already, it may be more difficult for people to have fresh, imaginative responses to them. In our experience, literature and essays that are less well known often surprise people, and because of their unfamiliarity, are more likely to invite a wide range of interpretations.
- **Professional literature is also tempting.** Why not use this precious reading time to catch up on the latest study, technique or theory? Nonprofit executives, philanthropic leaders and social service providers all have literature that is highly specific to their respective fields of work—a literature that is useful and with which people are familiar. But in civic reflection, the aim is to provide opportunities for colleagues to pay *a different kind of attention* to familiar work, a kind of attention that imaginative literature, philosophy, history, and religious writing elicits more easily.

The meaning of a story, poem, or passage of philosophy from another place, time, or perspective is not so easily settled. As a result, this kind of reading is likely to generate more fruitful discussions. In short, something a bit distant or strange—though thematically *resonant*—may lead to fresh consideration of the issues at hand.

Good readings help conversation go deep quickly, and they help deep conversation stay safe.

But even after you have identified readings that are thematically resonant, there are still other questions that should be taken into account. Using the examples we just discussed, we should ask: is the Kafka parable too abstract? Are there characters or a vivid narrative that will draw participants into the discussion? Is the Dharker poem too obvious, will it result in too much agreement? Is the Kafka piece too short, or the Dharker poem too long?

If this discussion happens to be the third discussion in a series of six, then one would have to take previous and subsequent reading choices into account. Is the Dharker piece the third straight reading by a contemporary female author? The third straight poem? Will it lead us to re-visit the same questions in the same way, or will it open up new perspectives?

The second thing to remember is that readings should open up rather than close off vigorous discussions. They should be challenging and provocative—and also accessible to any participant willing to read carefully and think patiently. And they should be rich or complex enough to exceed the capacity of any single interpretation to ‘get it right’ in some definitive way.

Readings, particularly at the beginning of a series, should be short—even short enough to read on-the-spot (and out loud) at the start of the whole-group discussion. On one hand, short readings are less likely to intimidate or to remind people of homework or other onerous assignments, and, on the other hand, patient and careful attention to a short piece that everyone reads together shows that the most important thing is what is happening in the room at that time (rather than expert knowledge brought in from somewhere else).

As a series progresses, it’s worth checking in with participants in advance of a scheduled discussion to see whether they want to read longer pieces beforehand, or whether they would prefer to continue with on-the-spot readings. It is also worth giving some thought to the arc of readings selected for a series of discussions.

Examples

1. Maybe you are working with a service organization focused on education. You might begin with readings that raise questions about service in general and then conclude with readings that address education more directly (yet still with the aim of raising questions rather than answering them).
2. Maybe you are facilitating a series with community activists, in which case you might begin with a reading that challenges participants to define injustice, then to move toward justice in a broad sense, and then perhaps to the limits of justice and the relation between justice and power.

These are only examples, of course, and sketchily presented, but they are meant to illustrate the point that readings for individual discussions are often best selected when considered in relation to the whole series.

In addition to thinking about the thematic relation between readings in a series, it is also important to consider the range of authorial perspectives represented. In general, some variety is helpful here, for several reasons. Participants tend to pay attention to where and when the authors of their readings are from, and to their age, gender, class and ethnicity. If, as you choose resonant, rich readings, you can also make sure that the authors of these readings come from several cultures and from different places within their cultures, then you will help participants recognize different parts of themselves and their work, often in places they did not expect.

Examples

- A retired white philanthropist may be surprised to find himself identifying not only with Andrew Carnegie but also with Langston Hughes and Anna Swir, people (authors, in this case) from circumstances very different from his own.
- An eighteen-year old African-American AmeriCorps member may find herself identifying with the concerns of Jean-Jacques Rousseau *and* Toni Cade Bambara, Rhina Espaillat and Mahatma Ghandi.

By presenting a diverse collection of authors for a civic reflection series, you offer to participants the opportunity to see their own concerns through fresh eyes and to recognize themselves in fresh ways.

There is no set canon of readings or ideal combinations of readings appropriate for civic reflection, but the Project on Civic Reflection has put together a few helpful resources in this regard, all of which can be found by going to our website, www.civicreflection.org. See Appendix A for a full list of our available publications and resources.

Finally, there are real live people at the Project on Civic Reflection who answer phone calls and respond to emails, and we are always glad to talk about what readings might work for the group you have in mind.

Remember

You do not need to be an expert on an author or a particular text in order to choose and use it for a civic reflection discussion. In fact, expertise can sometimes interfere with your capacity to help participants talk openly with each other about the different ways they see the reading and the questions it raises. You do not have to know everything there is to know about the reading or its author. You should, though, be very familiar with the reading and confident about how it connects to the larger question you want to help your group explore.

One-Time Discussions

In some cases, you may be asked to lead a one-time discussion—either to demonstrate the activity, so that a group can decide whether to commit to a series, or to fit into a one-day event like a conference, retreat or meeting. When planning a one-time discussion, it is very important to select a reading that is short enough to read aloud, rich enough to generate multiple interpretations, and engaging enough to bring people in. The Resources section includes a short list of readings that work well in one-time discussions.

Framing and Using the Readings

Opening Exercises

One simple and effective way to start getting at ‘the big question’ is to begin the conversation—even before turning to the reading—by asking people to pair or triple up and discuss this big question as it relates to their own experience. (You could also encourage participants to write or to sit and think for a moment about this opening question, but pairing people up has the enormous added benefit of getting them comfortable talking.)

Examples

- A group of foundation board members will be exploring the question of what makes a good gift by reading, together, Pablo Neruda’s ‘The Lamb and the Pinecone.’ The facilitator might start by asking participants to pair up and discuss the most meaningful gift they have ever given, or the most meaningful gift they have received.
- A group of AmeriCorps members will be reflecting on the challenges of service through a discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘The Lovers of the Poor.’ The facilitator might encour-

age participants to pair up and talk about a situation in which they did not follow through on service they had hoped to perform.

In both instances, the opening exercise revolves around an experience that everyone in the room will almost certainly have had—and an experience that is rarely as simple as it may first appear.

In both instances, too, the opening exercise will help participants identify with the characters in the reading, and it will gently indicate to participants that the discussion will push deeper into their understanding of their own reasons to serve others.

“It truly brought the meaning of service out into the bright light of day.”

More Examples

Here are a few other examples of potential opening exercises, all of which could be discussed in pairs or triads before the discussion begins.

- Think about someone you have heard of who has made a significant community change. How did you hear of this person? What strikes you as significant about what he or she has done?
- Recall an instance when you were part of a group that kept out someone who wanted in. What was the rationale for excluding this person, and how was the message delivered? [Consider reversing this exercise as well: consider a time when you wanted to join a group that wouldn't have you...]
- Think of a time when you tried to provide service and it didn't feel right, or it didn't go as you had hoped. What happened? What got in the way?
- Recall an informal teacher from your childhood—not a classroom teacher, but someone who made it his or her business to teach you in some way. What justified this person's intervention in your life, and how did you react to it?

IMPACT: Skill-Building

“The readings have sparked discussion among our AmeriCorps members in ways that are different from any prior program year. The formal structure of the sessions has been helpful in framing the discussion and in engaging all participants to contribute.

“With communication and public speaking such important growth areas for members, the discussions contribute to the development of both objectives nicely.”

Short opening exercises like these can go a long way toward helping participants feel comfortable in the room, ready to consider difficult questions, and open to a meaningful link between the reading in front of them and their own experience. And participants are often grateful for the opportunity to have these kinds of substantive, open, and informal exchanges with colleagues.

Careful thought should go into the question or prompt for the exercise—how will this opening question help participants open themselves to the reading, their colleagues, and the larger ideas at hand? Careful thought should also go into whether this opening exercise will be brought back in as the discussion runs its course—and if so, how. Will you ask people to reconsider their answers during the discussion or at the end? Will you ask some participants to share out loud?

Finally, it is worth noting that these opening exercises, which often revolve around personal questions, may inspire deeply personal thoughts and emotions. If you decide to ask some participants to share with the whole group what they had discussed in their small group, you should leave space for participants to decline to share their responses with the whole group. You should also be ready to move participants back from the personal and subjective to the shared.

One time-tested way to do this is, at the conclusion of the opening exercise, to turn to the reading itself and have participants read it or a specific part aloud. Or you could start by asking a question about a very specific moment in the reading. These are gentle ways to move people toward the shared experience and away from the purely personal.

Kinds of Questions

As we said earlier, good readings help discussion go deep quickly, and they help deep conversation stay safe. In planning a specific discussion about a reading you have chosen, we recommend that you do two things:

I: Identify the Challenges

First, think about this reading and this group of people. What are the likely challenges that this group of participants might have in being able to *receive*—listen to, attend to, hear from—the reading before they begin to argue with it, or with one another? How might you help the group overcome these challenges?

Examples

- Let's say, that the reading is a piece of scripture. Some participants may know it by heart and have long ago decided its meaning; others may be unfamiliar with it but equally closed to its complexity. What can you do to help participants approach this reading afresh, as something new—and meaningful—to all of them?
- Let's say that the reading is a historic speech, like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech. Some participants may have actually "been there" at the Lincoln

Memorial in Washington, DC when King spoke and have a deep and lasting impression of the experience. Others may have only heard it—and too many times—forced upon them in high school assemblies. Everyone thinks (but for different reasons) that they already understand what it is all about. What can you do to help all in the room read or hear this speech with an ear for what they do not understand in it?

II. Prepare Your Questions

We recommend that you prepare a set of questions to draw upon as you lead the discussion. What questions would you like to ask about this reading? Where, as you move through the reading, do you have questions? Where does the mind stop, even briefly, to seek more? Where should it stop? Where does your mind get caught, or snagged, as you read? As you ask questions, what themes emerge?

3 Kinds of Questions

In coming up with a list of questions, it might be useful to consider three *kinds* of questions:

1. Questions of **clarification**—What does it say?
2. Questions of **interpretation**—What does it mean?
3. Questions of **implication**—So what?

You may want to start with **questions of clarification**: *What does it say?* In the case of a story, it might help to find a point in the plot that seems to have a deeper meaning or makes a significant impact on one of the characters. For a poem, it might be a specific image or metaphor that jumps out at you. For an essay, it might be some statement that genuinely catches or puzzles you. In each case, you can ask, what is going on here? Can one *literally* make sense of what is being said or done here?

Good questions of clarification are open to an answer from anyone who pays attention to the reading. In other words, they do not require any special expertise or experience in order to be answered.

Just as there are good questions, there are also opening questions that are best avoided.

CHALLENGE AND SOLUTION

A Challenge:

You have chosen to use Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, 'The Lovers of the Poor,' with a group of aspiring young teachers. You are concerned that these young people will look at the members of Brooks' Ladies Betterment League and condemn them too quickly for their well-appointed suburban homes, their dated understanding of service. You suspect that your participants will dismiss these characters and distance themselves from the complexities of service Brooks' poem exposes.

A Solution:

Ask participants, during the opening exercise, to think about a time when they engaged in an act of service that did not feel right. Then, once the whole group has turned to Brooks' poem, push participants to consider why the Ladies from the Betterment League are in the home—encourage them to think about the Ladies' motives rather than simply their flawed execution. Both of these steps—in the opening exercise and in the whole-group discussion—will help participants see themselves in the Ladies from whom they might otherwise have felt quite distant.

Avoid questions that:

- Invite opinion without interpretation of the text (*e.g.*, Do you like this story?)
- Assert debatable propositions (Why is the concept of social capital so useful?)
- Put people on the defensive (What percentage of your income do you give to charity?).

After you have helped participants clarify what the text says, you will soon be ready to move on to a **question of interpretation**: *What does it mean?*

For instance, in Bertolt Brecht's poem "A Bed for the Night," several folks in the room seem to think that the man on the corner' is asking passersby to take homeless folks into their houses for the night. Now the question is, what do you make of the cornerman's request? And why does the poem move from a description of this man's action to the announcement that "it will not change the world"?

These questions of interpretation encourage participants to evaluate the reading, to praise or blame characters, and to talk about values— but to do so using the shared terms provided by the reading everyone has in front of them. At this point, the discussion consists in an exchange of personal opinions, but these opinions are filtered through the shared object of the text, which keeps the discussion from turning personal or subjective in a way that might shut some participants out.

As participants get more involved in answering questions of interpretation, there will most likely be a natural push from the reading to the activity they share. That is, participants will move from talking about Brooks' Ladies Betterment League to their service experience in City Year, or from Bambara's Miss Moore to their own kind of teaching, or from Neruda's lamb to the gift they try to pass on.

This motion—from the reading back to civic life—characterizes the best civic reflection discussions, especially when participants have come to see their work anew by looking carefully at the reading before them and thinking patiently about their opinions and beliefs.

In closing, then, you will almost certainly want to move toward **questions of implication**: *So what?*

What do we take away from this reading or discussion as we leave, what do we think about our own activity, our own work, in light of what we have heard or said? These questions simply try to help connect the reading to the experiences of people in the group. Often participants make these connections themselves, but you should still have these kinds of questions ready.

Examples

Here are a few examples of effective "connecting" questions:

- Is Tocqueville describing the kinds of associations in which you participate?
- Do you recognize these characters/dilemmas? Have you experienced them in your own life?

- Is this the kind of leadership your organization has been called upon to provide?
- Are these the kinds of choices we are confronted with in our community?
- Why do these ideas matter? What are some implications of what we have said for your work, organization or community?

The discussion will almost certainly move fluidly between the three kinds of questions we have just mentioned, and this kind of fluid discussion is desirable—it is in large part what civic reflection helps to create. But facilitators should still be ready to ask the apparently obvious questions and the questions that help participants see complexities that only emerge on a second or third pass.

The more you can help people look closely and patiently at the reading before them, the more likely it is that when they return to their own work, they will see that work with fresh eyes. So in planning the conversation, it pays to think as carefully as possible about where you can point in the reading in order to get people thinking in a fresh way about something they may have thought they already knew.

Finally, no matter what kind of question you're asking, the question itself should be short and clear. Here are some examples of short, clear questions that can be easily understood but may be very difficult to answer:

- Why is this guy giving change to this kid (in Rousseau's "Reveries of the Solitary Walker")?
- Why does this girl want to live in a large house among a bunch of horrid little houses (in Addams' "Earliest Impressions")?
- What does this term "loathlove" mean (in Brooks' "Lovers of the Poor")?
- What is the speaker's tone when he says, 'That's America' (in Hughes' "Theme for English B")?
- Do you think it's helpful to elicit shame in those you are trying to educate (in Bambara's "The Lesson")?
- Why does the narrator kiss Bob Saunders? What's in it for her (in Beatty's "Saving the Crippled Boy")?
- How do you change an organization that is likely to resist (in Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth")?

In each case, the question is short and clear, so participants can give their full attention not to the meaning of the question itself but to the large and complex issues toward which the question points.

"The questions that were raised were ones I never thought about before. They really got me thinking and they were interesting."

Closing Exercises

Toward the end of a civic reflection discussion, it is common to yearn for some sense of closure. This might seem too difficult to achieve in a discussion which explicitly avoids bringing people to consensus or common action. How then do you end collective inquiry?

There are several useful methods here, and the facilitator may find that certain approaches work better for some groups and less well for others, but the overall guiding principle is, again, that it is important to be intentional about how you will end.

Here are a few methods that provide a sense of closure without shutting down the open thought the discussion has stirred up:

- **The go-round.** This technique does what it says—the facilitator asks a final question on which s/he would like participants to reflect, and each participant is asked to share their thoughts with the group. Go-round questions should not aim to wrap up the discussion with a tidy moral or a “how-to” question. On the contrary, the best go-round questions are those that will leave the discussion to resonate in the minds of the participants. For this reason, questions that require participants to consider and weigh in on difficult dilemmas or to think creatively, transposing characters from the readings into contemporary times or putting themselves in other people’s shoes, can create the feeling that everyone has shared in a meaningful discussion which, while formally concluded, invites the participants to keep thinking on the topics that have come up during the course of discussion.
- **The summation of themes.** This technique is nice in a pinch. If you don’t have enough time left to do a go-round, the facilitator may want to summarize the themes of the discussion. Here you might carefully recite the lines of inquiry that were most fruitful during the group’s time together, or you might grant some time for a question that the group touched on, but did not get a chance to fully explore. When using this technique, the facilitator should always ask the group if anyone has last thoughts on those or any other themes relevant to the discussion. Remember, this is not a time for the facilitator to wax philosophical; instead, the summation of themes is a report back to the group about what areas you as the facilitator have heard the discussion touch on. And it may be best to summarize questions you have heard rather than conclusions that have been reached.
- **One-minute reflection.** You might ask participants to write down their answers to two questions at the end of each conversation. For example, *What was **useful** (or interesting) about this conversation? As you leave, what is **your** question?* This quiet activity

of responding in writing brings closure to the conversation. Also, planners have a rich source of data on the conversation that can inform planning for the next event.

- **The statement of no closure.** If you're committed to leaving things as open as possible and to avoiding any semblance of closure, it is nonetheless important to let participants know that the lack of resolution is intended. Here again, naming the tension ('that's right, there is no answer; keep chewing') will go a good way toward making participants more comfortable.

Planning the Discussion Worksheet

1. What is the big question you want participants to explore? What themes do you want to explore?

2. What reading will you use to get at this question, and why will you use this reading?

3. What are some challenges in helping participants *receive* and *discuss* this text or set of texts?

4. How might you help the group *overcome* these challenges?

5. Will you begin with an *opening exercise*? How will you structure it?

Planning the Discussion Worksheet, continued

6. What *questions* would you like to ask about this reading?

- Questions of clarification: What does it say?
- Questions of interpretation: What does it say to us?
- Questions of implication: So what? How does this reading connect to our shared civic experience?

7. What kind of *closing exercise*, if any, will you employ?

LEADING THE DISCUSSION

This section addresses what you do once you're actually in the room trying to get a group of people to have a lively, deep, thoughtful conversation.

No two people will lead a discussion in exactly the same way; how you facilitate reflects your own ways of thinking and of relating to others. Still, no matter how different each facilitator's personal style may be, we feel strongly that a particular kind of *orientation* and a particular set of *techniques* will help make these discussions productive, meaningful, and enjoyable.

Orientation

By *orientation*, we mean the way a facilitator thinks about what she is doing and how she feels in the room. Does she listen well? Does he create a sense of calm and openness? The purpose of a civic reflection discussion, as we said earlier, is to help participants think deeply and talk thoughtfully with one another about their civic choices and commitments. A facilitator is therefore not a teacher, nor even a moderator, so much as a guide to and through this unique kind of conversation by way of a text.

If the facilitator thinks that the discussion should be open, participatory, welcoming, fresh, perplexing, alive, and important. . . well, that sounds like the kind of orientation we have in mind.

If the facilitator wants to impart information, or to move participants toward firm consensus on an issue, or to create an untelevised version of 'Crossfire,' or to demand deeply personal confessions from one participant after another... well, this orientation is not quite what we have in mind, and civic reflection is most likely not the best method for her to use.

“The sessions were illuminating, thought-provoking, enlightening, intellectually stimulating and controversial. In addition to learning more about myself, it gave me insights into my fellow team members that I otherwise would never have guessed.”

Technique

If the orientation is there—if the facilitator wants to get everyone in the room more comfortable talking and listening and thinking with each other—then we're on to the techniques: how do you start doing this? How do you get people who don't know each other, or who think they know each other too well, to engage afresh in open conversation about the principles underlying their shared work? How do you get people who may already have decided what they think about a reading (or an issue) to see the reading (or the issue) as fully alive before them?

And how, especially, do you help folks who are generally worried about getting things done to take a deep breath, step back and think about why they are doing what they are doing in the first place?

Here is one thing you can do: *make everything as comfortable as possible for participants so that they can do something that may be difficult and even uncomfortable*. Make it possible and even desirable for them to dwell. Find moments of humor to keep the energy from getting too heavy. Employ open-ended questions, questions that lead to yet more questions, questions that matter for the commitment behind the work.

Here is a second thing you can do, and it also happens to be the most important technique to employ in almost every civic reflection situation: *pay attention to the people in the room*. Now that you're actually leading the conversation, there is nothing more worthy of your attention than the people around the circle. What are they thinking or feeling, and what might you do to help them talk with each other about important questions they are likely to share?

“I feel as if I have learned the skill of listening. I still need to work on it but am really thankful for this opportunity to reach out to my community and to grow as an individual.”

Here is a third thing you can do: *Consider some kind of statement of expectations* (in some circles these are referred to formally as ground rules). The need to lay out ground rules at the start of a civic reflection series or one-time discussion will vary according to the group you are working with, but it will almost always be useful to convey some *basic expectations*. Here are a few of the things it may be worth naming up front, in as formal or informal a way as you think your group requires:

Sample Ground Rules

- Since one goal of civic reflection is to get everyone involved, it's worth encouraging people to **be aware of how much they are talking**—and how they might get others involved in the discussion as well.
- Since the reading serves the discussion rather than the other way around, it's worth letting people know that this **will be a different kind of text-based discussion** than those they've participated in before, in classrooms or book clubs. You might tell participants that whatever they know or don't know about literature or the specific author in question, they should try to leave that stuff aside and to take the reading fresh—to work with the group in the room on what the reading means and why it matters, if it matters, for the work they have in common.

- Since one goal of civic reflection is to get people to see each other as individuals, it may be worthwhile to encourage participants to **use other participants' names** and to try to **respond to their comments directly and respectfully**.
- Since these discussions can quickly go deep and personal, it may be worth letting participants know that this is a reflective and exploratory space, so provocative comments may be made and deeply personal matters may be touched on, but the **space is meant to be safe**.
- Since we are rarely encouraged to leave a room more perplexed than we entered it, it may be worth letting participants know that we aren't after consensus or an action plan here, and **we are likely to leave with more questions than answers**.

These suggested expectations or ground rules point toward a technique that is useful at any point in the discussion: **name the tension—or the anticipated tension—in the room**. Naming the tension—whether the tension is caused by discomfort with the author's perspective, or an apparently offensive comment by a participant, or an external pressure that is affecting things, or discomfort with open-ended, unresolved questions—almost always goes a good way toward making participants comfortable where they are.

CLASS DISMISSED: Exorcise the academic ghosts in the room, don't exercise them!

Civic reflection conversations are not intended to be replays of happy college experiences for the good students among us. They are intended to create *a needed meaningful conversation among citizens about the challenges before us in trying to improve our common life*. Participants' previous academic experiences, good or bad, are powerful ghosts in these discussions. Discussion leaders need to be especially wise to do things that will exorcise these ghosts—or at the very least not exercise them—and get people engaged.

Things that may help:

- **Invite participants to read aloud** a phrase of the reading that stood out to them, or talk with a neighbor about a passage that struck them.
- **Begin with a question that is easy to respond to**—something small and concrete.
- **Start with a short writing assignment**. Ask everyone to identify a question they have about the text. Or, ask people to write in response to a question or two about their own experience. If you will be asking them to share their responses with a neighbor or with the group, tell them so ahead of time.
- If working with a mixed group of academics and non-academics, **direct first questions to the non-academics**.

Tips and Techniques

Finally, here are a number of other useful tips and techniques, collected from our growing corps of civic reflection facilitators:

- **Be deliberate.** The decisions you make about your arrangements matter less than the fact that you make them. How will you set up the room so everyone can participate? How will you begin? How will you call upon people? How will you manage time? How will you manage the people who want to speak—and those who do not? How will you end the conversation?
- **Honor preparation.** When you ask participants to read or think about something in advance or in a small group, always honor that preparation during the meeting. Don't assign three readings with the intention of only discussing one. Don't tell participants to come prepared to answer a question and never ask it.
- **Listen, don't lecture.** Participants should do most of the talking. Use your familiarity with the texts and contexts to ask open questions. Listen to what participants are saying and help them articulate the insights, assumptions, and uncertainties underneath their words.
- **Encourage and affirm.** Encourage participants along the way, because the way will likely feel uncertain.
- **Learn and use names** and encourage participants to do the same.
- **Allow differences to emerge.** Any group of people has important differences, even if at first it seems like a homogenous group. As participants respond to a complex reading, these differences will emerge. Help people perceive and explore them. Recognize and honor disagreement and pluralities of interpretation.
- **Help the group understand the narrator's perspective in the piece before they begin to argue with it.** It is important to establish some empathy for the voice of the text before you move to argue with it. Ask a question that invites participants to explain and defend the narrator's point of view first. Trust that more critical views will emerge as the discussion continues and deepens. At the same time, as facilitator, resist the temptation to defend the text. You are not the voice of the author, but only a steward of the words and ideas contained within the text. It is not essential that the participants like or agree with the text, only that they get something out of it that keeps them engaged in the discussion.
- **Help the group examine the reading from many points of view.** Good texts invite a variety of interpretations. Try to elicit that variety. One way to do this is to point to places that

puzzle you and ask for help in understanding (*just what does Gwendolyn Brooks mean by 'mercy and murder hinting' in the faces of the women in "The Lovers of the Poor?"*).

- **Return to the richness of the text whenever participants begin to polarize into camps of opinion or settle into a single, simple answer.** For example, if people seem to condemn a particular character, retrace that character's actions. *Why did she behave that way? What motivated him? Could there be alternative explanations?*
- **You may want to invite quieter participants to speak,** though you should be careful to do this in a way that makes them more rather than less likely to speak. (*Ricky, you look like you have a thought. What are you thinking?*) If one person dominates the conversation, you might say, *I wonder what other people have to say about this?* If necessary, ask the question (or a new one) directly of another person.
- **Don't be afraid to repeat yourself.** You may find it fruitful to ask the same question again and again. This helps people speak up who may feel shy about expressing themselves, and brings out more and richer perspectives on a question or situation in the text. This technique can help people think more deeply and express themselves more fully, especially on topics that are sensitive or difficult to approach for the group.
- **Be "voluptuous" in your facilitation.** Think of facilitation as having two axes—one vertical and one horizontal. The vertical axis is your plan in advance. The horizontal axis is the group's own responses in the conversation. You want to let the discussion widen out to include the group's own questions, but then bring it back to the line of inquiry. This pattern of approach makes for shapely, or voluptuous, facilitation.
- **Beware of your own agenda.** Discussion leaders sometimes become determined to have a group think about the reading in a particular way which the group for whatever reason resists. *Let go of your agenda.* There may be a variety of reasons why people are silent, "don't get it," or resist taking the conversation in the direction a discussion leader wants to go. Relax and let it go! Listen to where the group is; forget about where you think they should be. Remember, the discussion belongs to the group, not the discussion leader—we are there helping them do their reflective work, not teaching a seminar on the text or pushing a particular point of view.
- **Always ask, never tell.** Avoid contributing perspectives as a participant. In particular, resist the temptation to answer peoples' questions about "right" interpretations of the text or responding to their inquiries about your personal opinions. Turn questions back to the group. *What do you think?*
- **Remember that the discussion itself is important—not the number of questions asked.** If you've got a good discussion going, don't cut it short to "get to the next question." Your next

question is only a tool—if the discussion is chugging along already, there’s nothing to fix; keep that question in your toolbox for future reference.

- **Consider small group work.** Find as many ways as possible to connect personal experience to the text and participants to one another. One way to make both kinds of connections is to ask one or two key questions in the form of reflective exercises in small groups. Small groups provide more opportunities for individual participation and generate more perspectives on a question than a large group discussion can in the same amount of time.
- **To queue or not to queue.** In a large group, be deliberate and consistent about how you will respond to people who want to speak at the same time. Some groups use a signal—holding up one finger—to indicate when someone wants to make a point on the topic under discussion, and facilitators call on them in turn. However, queues can play to the talkers in a group. You may want to pause a moment when people are in queue and say, before we proceed I want to make sure everyone has had a chance to speak. Solicit a comment from someone who has not spoken much.
- **Pay attention to time.** Managing the time is very important for putting people at ease (though it’s best when you can manage the time without referring to it repeatedly). It is worth letting people know how much time they have for the opening exercises and alerting them when that time is almost up, but otherwise you should probably pay attention to time as inconspicuously as possible. It almost goes without saying that you should begin and end the discussion on time. If you are good at managing time, participants will be more likely to stop paying attention to time and thereby pay more attention to the content of the discussion.
- **Keep the energy going.** Be observant about the energy level of the group. You want to pursue questions that contribute to keeping the energy level up. Don’t be afraid to end the discussion on a question whose potential to stimulate participants has not been exhausted. It is always better to leave the group wanting more.
- **And remember: Facilitating is hard.** Every discussion you facilitate is an opportunity to learn something new. If you meant to be quiet and talked, forgot to ask that really good question, missed a great opportunity to tie remarks together, let the loud guy dominate and didn’t attend closely enough to the quiet woman in the back of the room... forgive yourself. You will be more ready to meet the challenge next time!

“This was the only activity all year which was designed specifically to elicit conversations and reflection about the work our site did.”

Troubleshooting: Dealing with Difficulties

Two general points about shooting troubles: first, the more you do to create a safe, respectful space in the room from the get-go, the less likely it is that you will run into serious difficulties. Second, in almost every case, it is best to *name the tension or the difficulty* when it arises rather than to let it fester.

If participants seem to be resisting the activity, it might be worth saying to the group, it feels to me like there's some resistance to this in here—is that right, and if so, what's going on? If one participant makes a remark that others might construe as offensive, it might make sense to say, it feels to me like some folks found that last comment offensive in some way—is that right, and if so, what was offensive about it? These are only two examples of 'naming the tension,' but this technique can be successful in innumerable situations, particularly when it is employed with gentle humor and real openness to what the group is experiencing.

Here are a few other examples of difficulties that may arise along with very brief suggestions about how to work through them:

- ***When you run into awkwardness, crushing (rather than pregnant) silence, or resistance...***
one approach is to be patient and to name the tension, not in an accusing way but in an inquisitive way (it seems like folks are reluctant to talk about this—am I right to sense that, and if so, where does the reluctance come from?).
- ***When you yourself don't feel comfortable with, connected to, or sufficiently familiar with the text...***you might find a co-planner or two and really hash it out, or pick a different text, or use your own questions as the key questions to move the civic reflection discussion. Remember, your role is not to be the expert, but rather to find the questions and themes that will spark discussion. If you have questions about the text, open it up to the group.
- ***When half the room isn't talking...***you might find ways to break the group up into triads or pairs, or ask the silent folks what they're thinking, or restate your hope to get everyone involved, or share your observation about collective silence with the group.
- ***When one person is talking too much...***you might handle it by using your body language to encourage this person to stop talking (turn away, lean forward towards other folks, break eye contact, etc.), or you might note at the start of the next session that one goal here is to get everyone involved. You might also talk with the big talker after or before a discussion to say that they have contributed a lot to the group and so you would like to ask that they serve as a kind of covert co-facilitator, helping others talk rather than talking very much themselves.
- ***When the whole group of participants quickly arrives at what feels to you like shallow consensus...***you might register disbelief and say, 'really? you all agree that service should be

entirely altruistic?’ That is, you might present the perspective that they agree about in such a way that someone will almost have to disagree. Here, too, you can use points in the reading to generate disagreement. What is going on with this character in this place? Does this align with what all of you just seemed to say?

TIP: When people pose “how to” questions (How can we lead the community through change?), listen for the “what” and “why” questions underneath (What leads us to change? Why do we fear change?).

Recognizing Success

Having discussed the difficulties and challenges of leading civic reflection discussions, we want to turn now to successes: how do you know when you’re doing this well?

- The discussion—or several smaller discussions—continues after the formal end to the session.
- The thinking continues after the formal end to the session—even years after the session.
- There are smiles in the room, and palpable energy, even if some of this energy appears in silence.
- People thank you for helping them have the experience they have just had.
- People are talking with each other more than they were before the discussion occurred.
- People are talking with people other than the usual folks they talk with.
- People say that they are looking forward to the next session.
- It just feels right.

“This project was the most meaningful civic engagement (or service-learning) endeavor that I have ever undertaken. Each passing week I very much looked forward to our next session date. I believe that not only did the participants make lifelong connections with one another, but I too was fortunate to forge my own connections with them. The readings were exciting to everyone, and the sessions were lively and full of positive vibes and discussion.”

CONCLUSION

Facilitating civic reflection discussions is rarely easy, but it is often rewarding and enjoyable. When you lead this activity, you are helping people get to know each other, their work, and themselves better than they did before. You are also helping build a stronger, deeper community. And for facilitators, the practice of leading a discussion deepens skills in critical thinking, communication, and leadership.

We hope this handbook will make you more ready to help people do some important talking and thinking about the meaningful things they are doing in the world, and we hope, too, that you will communicate with us about your challenges and your successes in this work.

RESOURCES

Online Tools

The Project on Civic Reflection offers an extensive resource center at www.civicreflection.org. Here you will find two online tools that can be useful in helping to select the right text for the discussion you've planned: the Resource Library and the Facilitator's Forum.

The Resource Library is an extensive collection of introductions to readings and associated questions designed to help spur reflection on civic activity. Many of the readings listed on the website are also linked to the full electronic text if it is available. The Resource Library also includes sample basic questions relating to the works which you may either use or use for inspiration.

The Facilitator's Forum is designed to help people who are leading civic reflection discussions share their learning with others. In the Forum you may view discussion summaries, share your own experiences with using a particular piece or suggest a reading (or link) that is not yet included in the resource list. And here's a tip: these two tools are probably most helpful when used together!

Publications

The Project on Civic Reflection also provides publications that can help you find the right reading for your discussion:

- ***The Civically Engaged Reader*** (Great Books Foundation, 2006) is an anthology that contains 47 short, provocative readings on associating, serving, giving, and leading, as well as discussion questions for each reading.
- ***Hearing the Call across Traditions: Readings on Faith and Service*** (SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2009) contains 51 readings that bear on the questions *Why do I serve?*, *Whom do I serve?*, and *How do I serve?*
- ***The Perfect Gift*** (Indiana University Press, 2002) is a collection of classic short texts about giving and receiving. These pieces are rich and dense, having the "excess of meaning" that we find stimulates consequential discussion.
- ***Talking Service: Readings for Reflection*** (Great Books Foundation, 2008) is a booklet of seven short readings accompanied by discussion questions and suggested opening exercises. Each selection is short enough to read aloud at the start of a discussion, and all the selections are accessible to wide range of readers.
- ***Talking Giving*** is a booklet of six short readings accompanied by discussion questions and suggested opening exercises. It is intended chiefly for philanthropic organizations and associations.

One-Time Discussions: Shorter Pieces

Here is a short list of readings that work well in one-time discussions:

- Bertolt Brecht, “A Bed for the Night” (CER)
- Langston Hughes, “Theme for English B” (CER)
- Pablo Neruda, “The Lamb and the Pinecone” (CER)
- Anna Swir, “The Same Inside” (HCAT)
- Franz Kafka, “Fellowship” (CER)
- Robert Frost, “Mending Wall” (CER)
- Jane Addams, “Earliest Impressions” (TS)
- Gwendolyn Brooks, “Lovers of the Poor” (CER)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selection from “Self-Reliance” (TG and CER)
- Maya Angelou, “The Sweetness of Charity” (TG and CER)
- Sogyal Rinpoche, “Compassion: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel” (CER)
- Moses Maimonides, “Levels of Giving” (CER and HCAT)
- Henri Barbusse, “The Eleventh” (CER)
- Rabindranath Tagore, Section 50 from “Gitanjali” (HCAT)
- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, “The Walk” (HCAT)
- Mahatma Gandhi, “Yajna, Welfare, and Service” (HCAT)
- George Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi” (HCAT)
- Mary Oliver, “The Buddha’s Last Instruction” (HCAT)
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Selection from “The Reveries of the Solitary Walker” (CER)
- Franz Kafka, “The Helmsman” (CER)
- II Samuel, 11-12:7 (CER)