

A collaborative action learning group

What is a collaborative action learning group?

A collaborative action learning group is when a group of people (typically 3-5 people) come together over a period of time (determined upfront and then reviewed along the way) and learn through reflecting on real current problems or areas of inquiry. This approach must be underpinned by mutual respect and trusting relationships. You may know this type of group and form of learning by another name.

What's behind this form of learning?

The premise behind collaborative action learning is that if we engage genuinely in this form of reflection and learning then we will develop a deeper understanding of our self and others thereby unleashing more creative solutions. There are no "right" or "wrong" responses, rather possibilities to be explored and resolved in light of your local situation.

What can this form of learning look like in practice?

Usually, these groups are facilitated by someone from within or external to the group (eg. an external consultant). Some find setting up an expectation to rotate the facilitation every six to 12 months is helpful to the learning experience because:

- It promotes the idea of wider participation;
- Learning needs and areas of focus of the group evolve and so a facilitator "fit-for-purpose" becomes an important consideration;
- It minimises people pushing the "default" button of perceiving the facilitator as "the expert" and therefore "holder of knowledge" – it moves people away from a dependency model of learning;
- It provides an opportunity for everyone to develop their skills in facilitation and experience the group from this perspective.

Some groups deliberately rotate the venue of the group learning session conscious of promoting a sense of equity.

The group needs to set formal and jointly agreed protocol. For example:

- Each person has their own dedicated "airtime" in the group.
- There will be no interrupting in a colleague's dedicated airtime space.
- We discourage the offering of solutions, as we are trying to explore solutions together through reflection.

Sometimes a key facilitator role is keeping people accountable to the protocols they agreed together.

Each group will come to their own view and practice of what works for them. For example, in a group of 3 people dedicated "airtime" might be created through the use of rotating roles of "teller" (the person who tells the others their problem); "the listener/questioner" (the person who actively listens and notes down questions to ask the teller at the end of their "airtime") and "the reflector" (the person who acts as a time-keeper for the other two colleagues and synthesises the other colleague's exchange). The overall timeframe will vary. Some find 15 minutes for each person is adequate: others find less or more time is needed. Experiment and review as you go.

What processes and skills are used within a collaborative learning group?

This form of learning employs both support and challenge processes. The emphasis of these processes will vary, but participants will need to develop and use the following skills to support and challenge their group members:

- active listening,
 - skills in dialogue rather than debate,
 - questioning for understanding, and
 - critical thinking.
- **Active listening**
Active listening is when you are focussed on who you are listening to, in order to understand thoroughly what he/she is saying.
 - Be “other” directed: focus on the person who is speaking. Follow and understand the speaker, as if you were walking in their shoes. Listen with your ears but also your eyes and other senses. Suspend your other thoughts and emotions and concentrate on the other person who is speaking.
 - Be encouraging: non-verbally acknowledge the points made by the person speaking. Let the presentation run its course. Don’t agree or disagree, but encourage the train of thought.
 - Be involved: use your body position (eg. leaning forward) and an attentive approach to encourage the speaker and signal your interest.

As the listener you should be able to repeat back in your own words what has been said. You may agree or disagree with the speaker, but before you can do either you need to know exactly “what it is”. You need to listen.

- **Skills in engaging in dialogue rather than debate**
A key learning process within a group reflective practice is the use of dialogue. A dialogue differs from a debate in one crucial way – in a debate you seek to win the argument whereas in a dialogue you seek to understand difference in order to build common ground and push thinking along. Below is a list of characteristics about debate versus dialogue.

What is Debate?	What is Dialogue?
Assuming that there is one right answer (and you have it).	Assuming that others have pieces of the answer.
Combative: attempting to prove the other side wrong.	Collaborative: attempting to find common understanding.
About winning.	About finding common ground.
Listening to find flaws.	Listening to understand.
Defending your assumptions.	Bringing up your assumptions for inspection and discussion.
Criticising the other side’s point of view.	Re-examining all points of view.
Defending one’s views against others.	Admitting that others’ thinking can improve one’s own.
Searching for weaknesses and flaws in the other person.	Searching for strengths and value in the other position.
Seeking an outcome that agrees with your position.	Discovering new possibilities and opportunities.

(Source: Canadian Policy Research Networks, Citizens’ Dialogue on Canada’s Future, Mary Pat MacKinnon, 2004, CPRN Social Architecture Papers, Research Report F/42, Family Network)

- **Questioning for understanding**

Sometimes people find the use of “why” questions threatening, particularly if:

- there is a history of mistrust;
- it is a new relationship;
- there is a relationship related to accountability rather than learning;
- there is a lack of confidence.

However, finding out “why” is a key to unlocking our deeper beliefs, values and purposes for different actions. Instead of “why did you do that?”, see what happens if you substitute:

- “What led you to do that?”, or
- “How come you did that?”.

- **Critical thinking**

Critical thinking helps us make the familiar strange. It helps us to debunk phrases, such as, “Well, that’s just the way it is round here”, by surfacing and confronting potentially deep institutional beliefs; structures and processes.

What processes can be used between group “get-togethers”?

Keeping a personal journal is one way of continuing to reflect and learn between group “get-togethers”. Other suggestions used by groups that you might consider are:

- “Learning for action” postcards: A group of teachers had postcards made up for their group. As part of the session they would each write a “learning for action” point(s) and then post it to themselves. A couple of days later when they were back in the mix of busyness this postcard would arrive acting as a prompt and visible symbol to other colleagues about their learning experience and commitment to learning. They also said it was “fun”!
- “Learning buddy”: Participants make a commitment to another person in the group to hold them accountable to their action for learning and to be a peer support in between the group sessions.
- “Gallery of learning”: Participants develop a joint learning portfolio for the group. This is shared around the group for the duration of the group’s focus.

Consider:

- ✓ How does the underpinning concept of collaborative action learning compare to my understanding and practice of it currently?
- ✓ Why might I participate in collaborative action learning at work?
- ✓ Why might I not participate in collaborative action learning at work?
- ✓ Would there be a space and place for this form of learning in an existing practice? If so, how could it be used and for what purpose?