

HOSTING A CONVERSATION CAFÉ FOR A 7TH GRADE SUNDAY SCHOOL



By Leslie Schneider

In the fall of 2002 I made a leap of faith and joined the religious education team at my *Unitarian Universalist Church (UUC)*. I did not want to see yet more kids my son's age (kindergarten) or younger so I chose a 7th grade class. I had an experienced co-teacher as my partner; he had even taught this same group of kids the year before in 6th grade. "I'll just watch, help, and learn" was my attitude in September.

Then I began to see why middle school has its reputation. Most of the kids were not interested in our ideas or our curriculum. They were not interested in arts and crafts (except for one amazingly talented cartoonist). They were not interested even in listening to each other. All they wanted was to pounce on the next opportunity to grab the spotlight, be outrageous, and get a reaction. And the few quiet kids seemed totally left out.

I liked these kids a lot. They were smart, energetic, and sometimes devastatingly funny. They were also very successful at thwarting most of our attempts to create a thoughtful, juicy, intellectually challenging experience. We got a lot of "let's just hang out, talk, and not be bothered with learning stuff--we have to do that all week." When we let them, they were happy and it was somewhat entertaining to watch the show. But I had expected more from this year than babysitting a bunch of kids as old as I was when I started getting paid to babysit. Around January, I hit the wall with this class and considered quitting.

Also back in in September I had started a job with the New Road Map Foundation building resources for and coordinating "Conversation Cafés." The goal of this project was to foster a change in our society around the culture of conversation by providing the minimal structure needed to get people in public places talking about things that matter. By January, I had attended a number of these conversations and was preparing to start as a host of my own gathering. And because of my position, I was hearing incredible stories of how rewarding this was for many folks trying out this new way of connecting with strangers. With nothing much to lose, I decided to see if the magic worked in middle school too. I brought my partner up to speed on what I was planning; he was very enthusiastic.

Just minutes before class started I brainstormed onto index cards the various roles that a host can play during a conversation. I came up with the *Reminder*, the *Inviter*, the *Focuser*, and the *Devil's Advocate*. I also wrote a card that just said "Host" to cover the minimal logistic necessities (which I have since broken out into the *Convener* and the *Welcomer*).

As the kids and my co-teacher convened in our very spread-out circle (these kids liked space!), I passed out the little folded wallet cards that contain the official "Process & Agreements" of a *Conversation Café*.

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I explained that every *Conversation Café* has a host to welcome the participants and to communicate the "ground rules." Minimally, the host sets the time and place, shows up, reads through the agreements, explains the process, and sets an end time. The rest of the conversation can usually facilitate itself, and the host participates fully in the discussion along with everyone else. The host can suggest a topic, or leave it up to the group to come up with one. Both methods work well, and though I love the host's prerogative of bringing the topic, I'm also beginning to see the advantages of letting a group decide.

I read the first agreement on the card, and then we went around the circle to read the rest. As I further discussed the agreements, I introduced the role of *Reminder* and explained how the host can get a conversation back on track by interrupting someone who is breaking the agreements, such as when they start being argumentative or "going on and on".

I then explained the sequence of the conversation "parts," with two rounds of using a talking object to create the practice of listening and the invitation to everyone to speak. After two rounds, the talking object is given a rest and the discussion flows as it will. During this time, anyone can take on the hosting role of *Inviter* by noticing that someone is reluctant to break in. Helping out with an active invitation such as "*did you have some thoughts you would like to add?*" is often what it takes for some people to get a word in edgewise.

Also in this open, spirited stage of the conversation, someone, or the group as a whole, may start to drift into areas that are not relevant to the original topic or theme. Maybe this is a needed change, and the conversation improves. But if it doesn't, and starts to feel scattered, someone could take on the role of *Focuser* by suggesting a return to the original subject. "*I was really enjoying where we were going with 'x'. Does anyone have a response to the question/idea that Julie mentioned a bit ago...?*"

And the last of the roles that I had spontaneously distinguished that morning was *Devil's Advocate*. This became the kids' favorite role, probably for obvious implied-rebel reasons, and one quite apropos to a bunch of *UUC* offspring. I discussed the likely possibility that we might find ourselves so in agreement during the conversation that it becomes boring or starts to sound like a bunch of harmonized whining. Faced with a lack of true opinion diversity, a quick fix is to introduce other points of view not necessarily held by the person offering them. Then, asking why someone might be attached to this opinion might be more interesting than just refuting its logic. The kids however usually took it on as if it was their opinion, enjoying the chance to play the "bad guy."

The last specific task for the host is to stop the conversation with enough time to spare so that one final round with the talking object collects what people found meaningful and are taking away from the conversation. It's a "lite" ritual closing and a soft way to bring the conversation to an end on time.

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Hoping to keep these roles present during our conversation, I passed out the index cards and asked the taker of each card to keep that specific role in mind throughout the conversation, and act on it if so moved. *Note to Self: Ffor larger groups, I could just duplicate some of the roles so that everyone got one. There's no harm in having more than one Focuser on guard during a conversation!*

It just so happens that on that Sunday morning we were all still stunned by the shuttle disaster a couple of days before. Discovery had not reappeared as it was supposed to after entering the earth's atmosphere. There was the horror of bits and pieces raining down on Texas and other southern states. My partner, a Boeing engineer, suggested the topic for our *Conversation Café* as "*what role should manned flights play in space exploration today?*"

I was expecting uniformly enthusiastic support for "people in space" despite the horrible disasters of two shuttles in two decades. I was shocked to hear two or three of the kids saying that manned spaceflight didn't make sense when we could learn just as much from robotic expeditions. The cost in human life and dollars just wasn't worth it anymore. These were not *Devil's Advocate* positions. They were speaking from the heart. It took me a couple of days and several casual discussions in other areas of my life to finally get that my generation had probably been brainwashed into accepting that the "extreme" sport of putting people into space was unquestionably worth it. A *Conversation Café* surprise strikes again, followed by some bit of new understanding.

The kids left that day asking if we could do this again next week. We did, many more times, more than half of the remaining weeks before summer. Kids that had never listened before came around to accepting the rituals and were finally listening (most of the time). Kids that almost never said anything started out by invoking their right to "pass" in the first two rounds, but in later weeks were comfortably taking their place in the conversation and making thoughtful contributions.

Towards the end of the year, even the *Conversation Café* format seemed too much structure for kids yearning the freedom of summer. On Mother's Day Sunday, I was preparing to introduce a maternal topic, but was cut off by their pleas to continue pre-class patter about Mutant Ninja Turtles and X-Men. So I suggested that we stick with the *Process & Agreements*, but decide the topic from the first two rounds. The topic "*which is cooler, the Turtles or XMen?*" gathered a lot of support in our mostly male gathering that day. So we the teachers backed off from imposing our values and went along for the ride.

By asking questions about "*what makes something cool?*", I was amazed by what I learned that day. A compare and contrast of *Superman* vs. *Batman*, for instance, revealed that *Batman* was way cooler because he was ultimately vulnerable even as he had many advantages over a regular guy (ultra smart,

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lots of money, great gadgets, etc.). *Superman* on the other hand couldn't help but win every match and you knew at the start that nothing (well, almost nothing) could faze him.

I also heard the kids--on their own--bring up sexism as an argument for uncoolness (the X-Men's name, for instance). But the other side turned it around to show that at least X-Men were not all men, whereas the Ninja Turtles were most definitely all male. OK, there was quite a bit of lighthearted rivalry with attempt to persuade rather than understand, but I found myself getting an amazing glimpse into the adolescent mindset of the new millennium. And I gained a new appreciation for the random "Dadaist approach" to picking the perfect topic.

Here is an overview of the host roles as I described them to my class:

Convener: Set the time and place. Read the *Agreements* and explain the *Process*. Create the space and hold the structure.

Welcomer: Think of being a host in your home: welcoming, making people feel comfortable, etc. Quickly orient the late-comers. A host is a participant, not a facilitator. No need to be neutral like a professional facilitator.

Reminder: You can gently interrupt someone who is not following the agreements. You can ask for a moment of silence and/or offer to re-read the *Agreements* if the conversation is no longer respecting the *Agreements*.

Inviter: You can invite those who have been quiet to speak. You can encourage others to be co-hosts with you. And as a host you are empowered to invite someone to NOT return if you feel it is unsafe.

Focuser: As host you can redirect the conversation. You can deepen and expand the conversation by naming themes in the discussion. You can include conversation assists, questions that can keep the conversation lively, such as "*Tell me more.*"

Devil's Advocate: If there is a lack of diversity of opinion, you can bring in points of view not already represented at the table.

September is rolling around again as I write this. I've signed on for another year, and I have the Religious Education Director's blessing to base the entire class on *Conversation Cafés*. It's good preparation for the 8th grade "Coming of Age" curriculum, she said, by giving the kids the skills of compassionate listening. She also liked the idea of having a mid-year all-church event in which the 7th graders would act as hosts, one at each table, to guide conversations on a yet-to-be determined topic of community importance.

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Here are some notes I am planning to use as a guide for introducing the roles in a more leisurely way:

Have a Conversation Café every week or at least every other week. Spread out the introduction of the hosting roles over many weeks so that more attention can be focused on each one, and the sense of the meta discussion is given a chance to grow. Idea: Chalk up "points" when anyone in the conversation actively takes on a hosting "meta" role to shape the conversation.

Week 1: Introduce the *Process & Agreements* and "impose" a fun get-to-know-you topic.

Week 2: Talk about the roles of a host and/or participants. Assign the roles of *Welcomer* and *Convener*. Let a topic emerge.

Week 3: Assign new *Welcomer* and *Convener*. Have everyone try out the role of *Inviter*.

Week 4: Assign new *Welcomer* and *Convener*. Have everyone try out the role of *Reminder* (and *Inviter*)

Week 5: Assign new *Welcomer* and *Convener*. Have everyone try out the role of *focuser* (and *Inviter* and *Reminder*).

Week 6: Assign new *Welcomer* and *Convener*. Have everyone try out the role of *Devil's Advocate* (and all other roles).

Week 7: Deal out role cards secretly, and have people guess at the end "who was which role".

Conversation Café is of course just a process. The content can come from anywhere, including the published curriculum. My plan is to examine the values and new ideas of civic engagement in what is sure to be a highly charged political season. I'm expecting a thoughtful, juicy, intellectually challenging experience.