

Audience

Teachers and other presenters in situations involving audiences who are either new to each other or new to the material being presented. More simply, this is a trust- and community-building exercise that works with adults as well as children, but be prepared for the fact that children will invariably enter into it much more whole heartedly and enthusiastically than adults! In either case, though, the basic premise and the desired results are similar, namely adding a relaxing, kinesthetic introductory step to an otherwise sedentary learning session.

Objective

To provide audience members with an introductory phase, a brief opportunity to become acquainted and interact with others in the group, as well as to set an amicable tone for the presentation.

Rationale

Because the audience is expected to pay attention to a thought provoking presentation demanding their close attention while sitting in an enclosed space, it is important that they experience an introductory interlude where they are guided through a strategy for relaxing with each other -- if only to become familiar with the presenter's voice and manner of speaking.

Detailed Description

The steps of this activity are from Laura Simms' Summer Institute on using storytelling to promote peace and justice, **Becoming the World**, although the concept of providing for group introductions through physical movement is basic to many disciplines and certainly to participatory storytelling.

Our mandate was a ninety-minute slide presentation on Hutterite History with a focus on how that has shaped our beliefs and our particular perspective on end of life care, concluding with a half-hour for questions and discussion. Our audience is a group of 60+ health care workers at the 17th annual Hospice and Palliative Care Conference in Winnipeg in September 2007.

The focus of Hutterite life is community, so I decide to include an introductory/ grounding/icebreaker activity to that end, because together, these three afford an explicit trust-building element. In hospice and palliative care, as in so many other aspects of life, including education, trust is a precious commodity. Not only are the patients at their mercy, it is a highly stressful profession, so these conference delegates would surely benefit from engaging in a trust-building activity.

Because prayer and singing are staples of how Hutterites seek to comfort the sick, we plan to conclude with a participatory song and prayer just prior to the start of our actual presentation.

For our grounding activity, we need space for the whole group to stand in a circle; this was requested, but the organizers forgot, so we stacked the chairs against the sidewalls ourselves, before people started arriving. (I mention this only as a reminder to be prepared for such eventualities; it could have been cumbersome to have to ask people to help us move the chairs, though perhaps that would also have had an icebreaker effect -- certainly I would have no compunctions about doing that -- should there ever be a need for it -- now that I effectively used this strategy.)

My Large Group Icebreaker: Plan

Grounding Activity

Inviting participants to stand in a circle with me, and focus on their feet for a minute, placing/balancing their body weight firmly on both feet (grounding themselves). I continue a running commentary, instructing them to relax by placing their hands at their sides, standing straight and concentrating on their “inner peace” in an effort to connect with it.

Deep breathing

Using my personal method of breathing in to the count of twelve and out to the count of twenty-one, I guide them through three deeeeep breaths. Participants listen and follow instructions satisfyingly well. It adds some levity -- people are puffing and laughing -- already more relaxed!

Seeing Activity

At this point, I announce the seeing activity. “Slowly moving your head in a clockwise direction, look at your surroundings, taking time to focus on every detail in your sphere of vision, including people, but do not make eye contact, just look and see what’s there.”

Pair-Share Greeting and Bow of Appreciation

Next, I instruct them to think of their favourite animal, then on an individual basis, enter the circle, walk to the center and invite someone via eye contact, to join you in the circle, where you alternately exchange first names and favourite animals, before offering each other a bow of acknowledgement and appreciation before exchanging places in the circle. After I demonstrate, it proceeds slowly and steadily because the group is so large. Still, I’m pleased with people’s good sportsmanship and enthusiasm, as well as the interesting animals they mention.

Please take a chair and sit for the slide presentation

Handouts are circulated and together we sing, to the melody of the doxology, a simple two-stanza song, “Father, we thank thee for the light” which is on the handout. Then my co-presenter, who is a Hutterite minister, offers a brief prayer, concluding with Our Lord’s Prayer in unison.

I find this whole exercise very exhilarating for several reasons. First, my decision to do it is based primarily on a gut feeling that if it worked when Laura Simms did it with a group of over 40+ teachers, it should work with 60+ palliative care workers and surely they stand to benefit from it even more than teachers. Still, I am anxious because these are ALL strangers to me and it is tremendously gratifying to note how warmly the majority responds to it and it has the desired effect of creating a more relaxed atmosphere.

Evaluation

Comments were highly positive (only one person suggested eliminating the circle exercise). All expressed enthusiasm for our presentation, appreciation for the interesting format, the singing, prayer and informative dialogue.