

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Suzanne and Jim Burns

Thursday, July 13, 2000

(Transcript of the instructional seminar)

Jim Burns: I want to welcome you to this session. As we've been here this week we've been impressed with the quality of interaction that has been going on. The inquiring spirit each of you have had. I hope that continues through the next two sessions. As we progress, feel free to make comments, to ask questions, and to interact with us as we present.

Look at page 2 of your activity packet. We're going to deal with the first two items this morning. We're going to talk about forming learning communities and how to get started. This afternoon we're going to ask you to pose critical questions about the way we do business in our university. We will also share with you some data from our faculty development process at MidAmerica. We think that it is important that you learn to reflect and apply the concepts that we are talking about to your practice so the fourth segment this afternoon, is how does this apply in my setting? What difference does this make in my setting?

First we're going to talk about learning communities. You may say, "What are learning communities? We have learning communities, everybody's learning. That's what schools are all about."

Learning communities is a fairly new concept emerging in organizational theory. We've had strategic planning where leaders got all excited because the idea was to increase the participation

of stakeholders. We were asking them to get involved in setting the direction of the organization. For a while that seemed very empowering, very exciting.

In the mid-80's or so, participatory management was another idea that moved onto the theoretical front. Here we asked you to shape the direction of the organization and to embrace the mission of the organization but we also asked you to become involved in the management. For a while that felt very empowering and people were excited because it increased the quality of the decisions occurring in organizations. Organizations were improving because of this process.

The new idea emerging, and becoming fairly standard in the literature, is the idea of learning communities. In the educational setting, learning communities are communities of faculty and administrators on a level playing field, having a spirit of inquiry, asking critical questions. This format of thinking moves beyond just asking you to embrace the mission and to own it. We've moved beyond asking you to participate in the management of the organization. We've moved to a place where we are asking you to think about the critical questions that will define the dilemmas that we have in our organization and share the direction. We've stepped back one step. We stepped back to what are the issues that are important in my area, in my school, in my teaching, in my experience. How can I learn from working with my colleagues and improve myself and our organization to do a better job.

Peter Senge suggest that we begin to embrace the intellectual capital in our organizations. In fact, Senge would take it one step further. He would say that we not only embrace it but that we expect a spirit of inquiry in our organization. Intellectual capital, he says, is probably the most critical component for the existence of an organization in the next century. We need to create organizations that ask questions, learn quickly, adjust and pose questions which lead to solutions to the most difficult issues. It can't just be business as usual.

I'd like you to get into groups where there are four different regions in your group. Now our Spanish folks are going to work in pairs so that they have a translator with them. So in that setting you may only have three different regions in your group. But as much as possible get four different regions in your group. Be sure to introduce yourself to the people if you don't know them or reacquaint yourself with them.

The first activity we want you to do is think about is a young teacher named Esne (refer to handout). Esne is from this region. She has a dilemma. In a minute I'm going to give you about 5 minutes to read the scenerio in your packet. As you read that scenario, I want you to highlight two or three things you think are interesting. Just underline it or just underline the item if you have a highlighter with you. Now when we get done reading it select a person who shares one of their items of interest. They are not allowed to comment on that item or to editorialize. The person to their left can comment about the shared item. Then the third person, makes a comment about the item. After everybody at the table has made a comment about the item, the first person can comment and, thus, they get the final word about the item. Then we are going to move to the person and repeat the process.

(Participants carry out small group task.)

Suzanne Burns: I want you to take a moment and just think about some observations. First of all, process the content itself. What are some observations that you have made about Esne's dilemma as she teaches in her current setting?

Female: In Africa, a mature person is supposed to know it all. You're not supposed to let other people know you don't know.

Suzanne Burns: I think that, although the scenario is something intended to be in an African setting, this happens in America also. People don't admit when they have a concern because we think that we should know it all. I don't think that is something unique to any particular culture. It happens in lots of places. There's fear to say, "you know, this isn't really going well. What will they think of me if I tell them that? Will they judge me?" I think that people have fear of being judged in educational settings because we are supposed to be knowledgeable and we are supposed to be good at what we do. And we want to think that we're good at what we do.

Male: There seems to be an assumption that if you come to Christ, you totally reject everything medical out of your background. Obviously in this scenario you've got animistic connections that you would want to reject.

Suzanne Burns: If no discussion ever happens on that, there's no way to mindfully uncover where we draw the line. You know, what is okay and what isn't.

Brent: It seems as if Esne had some historical baggage that was hindering her from being open with her comrades but she also had a tremendous desire to make sure she did it right but she was afraid that she would make a mistake so she didn't do it.

Suzanne Burns: That's processing the content. I want to process the structure that we put into place. What did the structure do for you, the final word, the idea of reading a quote, not being able to comment on it, letting everyone else make a comment and then you being allowed to editorialize on your own discovery. What did that process do for you? Listen first, talk later? What kind of a scaffold, if you will, did that make for creating dialogue?

Male: It's good to listen to other persons and to strengthen our opinion.

David McEwan: I think it has benefits in reducing dominance. Many cultures in many settings are dominated by whoever is organizing the meeting. This process reduces the dominance to some degree and does allow for other opinions.

Suzanne Burns: You felt like it leveled the playing field a little more.

Male: It also enabled us to hear the different reflection on the same issue

Male: To listen to everyone around me, I could see who would agree with me. In my culture, it probably would have been the other way around, who was thinking differently from me. And I think that bears out sometimes our thinking processes and the types of societies we come from.

Suzanne Burns: One of the purposes of this structure is to level the playing field. Everybody is on an equal footing. It also has another express purpose. In this structure, we have people read the quote of the scenario that they found interesting and to be influenced as much as you influence others. We're just beginning to uncover what the needs are for learning communities. There are needs, not only on an individual level, but also on a more organizational level. How do we begin to uncover those?

Before we continue dealing with that, Jim is going to cover some misconceptions that we have about learning communities.

Jim Burns: One additional comment I'd like to make. Organizations often want to converge on the answer. We hope that as we begin to allow ourselves to be influenced by our peers we arrive at better answers because we know the total picture.

Page 4 in your handout has some misconceptions about learning communities that I'd like to call to your attention. The things on the left are the misconception. The things on the right are research statements. There's a body of research to support this other truth. The delusion there at the top says, "if we work together, we're doing a good job." But there's a strong body of knowledge that would suggest that team harmony can breed skilled incompetence. If you're working together too well, if there's not some dissonance, some item that is of concern, some disagreement, some discomfort in the thinking, perhaps you are breeding skilled incompetence. Everybody has converged. There is no challenge. There is no spirit of inquiry.

The next one down is an interesting one to me. It is a delusion that we learn from experience. Most of you could probably tell me of a time when somebody made a decision that affected you and you didn't think they had any idea what the effect of that decision was. They just made it, as far as you knew. Now if you look next to that, it says we seldom see the consequences of our actions. In learning communities, we hope that we get more information from each other so that we begin to understand the total consequence of our action and that our decision making improves.

The next one down says, "training makes a difference." Well, we hope it does but the truth of the matter is that training often leads to new ideas but without the chance to consider them, to share them with a colleague, to think about how they might be useful in our own practice, they seldom make a difference. I can't count the times I've been to a seminar, got a bunch of new ideas, went back, was too busy to change, too busy to think about it, too busy to even mull it over

with my colleagues. I hope, as we go through these simulations, you take the time to mull over some of the things that we're talking about and when you get back you begin to mull them over with colleagues.

Suzanne Burns: Research on creating change in schools says that people take about 10% of what they learn from a training session back with them. However, if you create systems where they systematically, on a regular basis, come together to have focused dialogue and reflect on their practice they will retain as much as 70-80% of what they learn in any setting. That tells us we have some serious discovery to do about how to put different systems in place for faculty development. They can't be sessions where you sit and listen to a lecture for two and a half hours and then have no follow-up or dialogue or discussion or reflection. And so what we're going to do is talk about how do you put in place learning systems within your school that can really make a long-term systemic, systematic difference.

Socrates said, "Those who teach must never cease to learn." Thomas Armstrong wrote a wonderful book called *Awakening Genius in the Classroom*. He takes the idea that if we're really going to make learning a dynamic experience, we have got to get to the place where we give birth to the joy of learning again. Most of us would not think of ourselves as genius, but in actual fact what he said when he made his discovery was that genius was really all about people who were able to maintain some of their most valuable childlike qualities. Look at the cube in your handout. Those are some of the qualities that he uncovered—curiosity, playfulness, imagination, creativity, sensitivity, flexibility, a sense of wonder and inventiveness. It is these kinds of qualities—and there are others that are listed there that I haven't noted—that help create real genius or give people that joy in learning.

When we look at faculty and administration, what are the elements? How many of these characteristics do we have? Do we have a sense of play about working with our difficult problems? Do we have humor? Is there flexibility in our thinking? Do we converge on one answer all of the time? Einstein says—and I'm loosely paraphrasing—you never really can solve a problem by using the same kind of thinking to solve the problem that you used to create the problem. We're going to try to learn how to create an environment that fosters these characteristics and takes a powerful look at the role of curiosity, wonder, and questioning in the idea of creating a learning community.

Before we begin learning activities, one of the first things that we have to do is acknowledge uniquenesses and figure out how we're going to harness them in our organization. Turn to the next page that's called "Appreciating difference in each other." There are two major kinds of functioners within an organization, field independent and field dependent.

Field independent people are very task-oriented. They want to get the job done and bring closure to it. They can be very competitive. They like to work alone. They like to close their door and think. They don't necessarily feel like they have to interact with people to get the job done. They depend on sequence and details. They want to know step one, step two, step three, step four, step five. It makes them very, very uncomfortable to talk conceptually without knowing all the nitty gritty. They like the theoretical and the abstract. People who are not in this category tend to say "yeah, but what's the relevance. Tell me how it works in my everyday life." Field independent people really enjoy just thinking. They like very logical, analytical stuff. And you know what? Society has rewarded them for being that way. These task-oriented people have a very important function and role in our society.

Field dependents look at the overall scheme. They like the big picture. They don't want to be tied down with the nitty gritty details. They're very intuitive. They act a lot on gut reactions to things. You hear them say, "I don't know, I just have a feeling." They use metaphors, analogies, and patterns to work. They are the people that look at the subtleties of body language and voice to determine meaning.

I want you to think about which of these categories you fall into most of the time. If you are field independent, move to this side. If you are field dependent, move to this side and get yourselves in a little group.

Jim Burns: Someone asked the question if this can be circumstantial. Yes, it can at times. There can be circumstances that can force you into one field or another. But as you think about it, where do you generally fit?

Suzanne Burns: Now there are some fence straddlers standing here in the middle and I'm not going to let you do that. You have to decide which one is most dominant

I want you to just stop and notice something. Look at these guys. They're in a little cluster. Look at you guys. You're all spread out in a big long line.

I want each of you, in your groups, to discuss what it is that challenges you most about working with people in the opposite group.

Look again at my field dependents. They're one big happy family. My field independents, there's not even a prayer of me getting one big group. Let's hear from both groups about what it is that concerns you most about working with the other side.

David Neale: It's hard for us when you guys load everything with meaning, every move. We just want to talk. We want to be direct and we want to get things done. We don't want to have a big brouhaha about it.

Danny Gales: Well, our problem is that you make decisions too quickly, too early and a lot of the times, they're wrong because you only have half the information. You haven't talked about it enough yet.

Suzanne Burns: One of the fallacies is that we can't work together because we are different when in actual fact, some of the best teams are made up of people from both categories because they each bring their unique strengths and weaknesses but they fill out each other's weaknesses by putting them together.

David McEwan: What interests me, being a Westerner who's lived in several different Western countries, is the resentment of being put in a box. As a non-American, I look at these little boxes that come out of the USA and say, "No I resent being put into either of those because some days, I'm one way; some days, I'm another way." It's an artificial distinction and from my culture, I certainly feel the middle group is the right group. He is labeled. That's the way he is. Therefore, we don't want him or her or them in this kind of a situation because they won't do what needs to get done, whatever end of the spectrum you're on. And I guess there is a resentment about this psychologizing of where human beings fit into boxes. We've had the whole thing with personality analysis. We've had it with all kinds of characterizations that come out of one culture and other cultures don't necessarily want to buy them. And this, to me, is a fairly typical one of you're either A or you're B and neither one rings bells with where we're at.

Jim Burns: Good comment, David. We would have to admit that everybody has some of both and that much of it is situational. This may indeed be one of the inquiring dilemmas that we need to approach as we think about how to give learners an opportunity to demonstrate their character and yet not to box them in as we do so. I thought that there would probably be people on both sides from every culture

Leah: When we take a culture as a whole and say, for example, American culture is independent and African culture is dependent and everybody who does not behave like that in America is odd. When an African goes to America, instead of looking for people who are dependent like themselves, they transform themselves and become a different kind of a person.

Suzanne Burns: One of the goals of this activity is not really to polarize but to acknowledge that there are differences. Where do you find yourself most at home? The research tells us that we have a tendency toward one or the other. Brain research is now showing to us, as we look at neurology and how your brain actually works. There are sustained periods of the day when you have different dominances. Just because I'm in a particular state doesn't mean somebody else is. I have to respect that even though I may be at a field independent state of mind right now and I need to be alone to think, someone is knocking at my door and they are not in that state. How am I going to transition?

It can be highly frustrating to be constantly interrupted and have people feeling like they need to be talking. You're just saying, "Oh, man, I just so need to just have five minutes of just complete quiet." You can tell by body language if someone is in a field independent state. You say, "Could I have about five minutes just to talk to you about something that's bothering me?" They're like, "Uh huh, yeah, sure, okay. Yeah, I'll be right back. Just a minute." And they're walking all around and they're not present. They're not physically present in the conversation.

We ebb and flow in and out of these states. I think it's important to realize and acknowledge that different people are in different places at different times. That's part of respecting differences in learning.

We're going to move now to the idea of powerful questions. We want to create a scaffold, if you will, to ask powerful questions in your organization. Bruce Wellman in the United States once said, "if your organization asks questions that don't uncover something that makes you really uncomfortable, you are probably asking questions that no one really cares about anyway." When you think about faculty development, what are the really important questions to be asking within your organization? What are the questions that make people feel really uncomfortable to be asking? Wellman goes even a step further and says, "if you don't have a question that really is uncomfortable for you, ask yourself, what don't we talk about and why don't we talk about it? And almost always that will uncover something really important." I don't know what I think about this because I think you have to be highly trained to really take this seriously.

With that in mind, we're going to begin. What don't you talk about and why don't you talk about it? If the questions don't uncover something really uncomfortable, it's probably a question that no one really cares about anyway. This moves us into this really uncomfortable zone but we have to differentiate between comfort and safety. It should always be safe to talk about things but the more challenging the question, the more we really have to question about what kind of structures are going to be put in place to make sure that everyone really is safe. Not comfortable. We don't need comfort. If we're doing our job, we shouldn't be comfortable but we should feel safe. So why do it? Let's talk about questioning.

I have four questions that are listed in the middle of the page. Jim is going to hand out a number to your table and that is the question that you are going to ask. People who have a number one on

their table will discuss in their groups, “in what ways do powerful questions promote school reform, change or improvement.” For those of you with a number two, “what challenges do you face in using questioning as part of your work?” Question three, “what functions do powerful questions serve in the professional learning of individuals and groups?” And number four, “what professional development needs are you aware of in relationship to the use of questions and questioning?” In other words, what do you have to do to get ready to put an organization in to this kind of system where you begin to ask these kinds of critical questions? I’ll ask you to discuss s the number that has been placed on your table and we’ll collect that information through process in just a moment.

Would the person in your group whose birthday is closest to Christmas day be your spokesperson?

Sal: One of the things that we found out is that if you don’t ask questions, you won’t have evaluation of whatever is taking place in the institution. So powerful questions, help to evaluate the practice in the institutions.

Male: We had a question, what does it mean to be a powerful question, whether it is uncomfortable question or something else? However, so then we have this kind of questions that makes us to ponder over and dig out and try to find out something new.

Male: Among the others that have already been spoken, it uncovers incompetence.

Suzanne Burns: That interesting. Did you hear that? One of the things that he thought powerful questions can do is uncover incompetence. I think you want to be careful how you use that language. The issue of a learning community is everyone learning side by side and I think that’s

really important. But maybe it's collective incompetence. Maybe it's all of us learning together. Number two, what challenges do you face in using questioning as part of your work?

Male: If you ask a question that's not just simply low-level, the challenge for the instructor is to wait for people to process the question and come up with a reasonable answer. Again, the research shows we'll wait about two and a half seconds and then we'll give the answer.

Another issue is some people who work in isolation . . . their problem with the challenge in using questions is to find someone to ask the question to. Related to the leadership issue, questions are frequently viewed as a challenge, as finger-pointing, rather than honest inquiry.

Male: We came up with three challenges: one to ask the question so it's not taken personally or as a criticism. Secondly, to ask in a way so that the asker is not seen as being a negative kind of person, always digging up junk and also to ask in a way so you're not being seen as a person that knows all the answers.

Suzanne Burns: Question 3. Threes?

Cookie: The threes on this side of the table said if you don't ask direct questions and just not say, "Are you having your devotions . . . if you don't say, what did you read? How did it help you today? How did you grow from what you read in Psalm 23, then we never realize if our students really are learning, really are getting anywhere, and we just maintain a superficial level and so we really haven't mentored them.

Male: . . . We're analytic people because we spent most of our time differentiating between professional learning and learning in a cognitive sense. It helps us identify unmet needs and guide us toward fulfilling those needs.

Suzanne Burns: Thank you. Question four. The question was, "what professional development needs are you aware of in relationship to the use of questions and questioning?" Where are my fours?

Woman: One thought was to create an environment where questioning is safe. Uncomfortable is okay but losing your job over it isn't.

Suzanne Burns: That's really critical and I can't over-emphasize that. Some faculty do have the idea that if I ask dangerous questions, I won't be here very long.

Male: You would need to create an environment of freedom, of acceptance, of respect, of maturity where everybody's the same level.

Suzanne Burns: Thank you. One of the things that really worries me about this session is that we can give you just enough information to make you really dangerous. I think it is important to know that there are lots of structures that can be used to help people in facilitating the idea of inquiry.

To illustrate that, this next activity goes back to Esne's scenario. I want your groups to basically have a brainstorming session about the organization in which Esne works. I want you to just get all the questions that you can think of out on the table and have a recorder write them down quickly.

(Participants work in small groups.)

Now take your questions, put the recorder's name at the top, and take your questions to the table next to you and have them read your questions. As you read another table's questions I want you to star the ones that you think are really good ones to begin thinking about, the questions that you value most on their list. I want to get at least three different groups to read your questions and have the chance to star the ones that they really find are critical ones. .

All right. How many of you have a question on one of your lists that has at least three stars? Can you tell us what that question is?

Male: Is there a mentoring program for established faculty?

Male: Does the organization provide the teacher time and space to overcome their lack of training?

Suzanne Burns: Any questions that you have that have two stars?

Male: Is there an expectation to be an expert in your area?

Suzanne Burns: Let me just say this. I know there are cultures that really struggle with the idea that we must be experts but let me just tell you something that is going to impact us in the next decade. The information age is exploding so quickly that information now doubles every six months and they reckon by the year 2010 that information will be doubling every three months.

That means you can never know it all. That's why it's so important to have a learning community, to constantly be learning. We have to learn together as well as individually.

There is no way that we can contain the attitude that we know it all and that we are the experts. Yet, there are still professors who absolutely refuse to be a part of faculty development. They really do take this idea of "getting off the boat." But "getting off the boat" is going to be analogous in the information age to running backwards because everything is going to be going so far ahead of us.

We really have to re-conceptualize what we think about in terms of what learning really means to us. Admit that we don't know it all and that we can learn from one another. And that's really hard to do. It's hard for me to open myself up as director of faculty development to stand in front of the faculty and admit my own weakness. But it is only through doing that that they begin to take me seriously. Okay. Any more two star questions?

Male: What is the collegial climate?

Suzanne Burns: One star questions?

Male: What structures are there in place for her to share?

Male: Two one-star questions. One, does the school foster independent thinking by students?

Suzanne Burns: Does the school foster independent thinking by students? Good question. There are many organizations that value group think.

Male: Does the school foster non-judgmental, interactions between its professors?

Male: Is Esne the first and the only woman on the faculty at the school?

Male: We have three on this sheet. Is there an effective structure for communication? Is there peer-based faculty evaluation? And does the institution provide structure for faculty to work together?

Male: Does staff have access to assistance, guidance, counseling and development?

Male: What's the context or the culture in which this institution exists? Do they teach from an exclusively Anglo point of view? How much attention do they give to the spiritual development of their teachers?

Suzanne Burns: Good questions. One quick delineation I will make before we break. It's very important to differentiate and draw a hard line between creating structures for people to dialogue and open themselves up to the issue of improvement evaluation. It is the kiss of death to connect it to evaluation. I'll just tell you that right now if it's tied to evaluation, I don't want to risk anything. There's no incentive for me to do so.

After lunch, we will come back and process these questions and look at the characteristics of powerful ones versus non powerful ones. Thanks very much for your attention this morning.