

CONNECTING EXPERIENCE AND CONCEPT

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Growth Rings

The following procedure illustrates the use of several inter-related learning cycles (generating a concrete experience through recall, reflecting on it, forming abstract conceptualizations from it, and trying out these conceptualizations in the context of discussion). The course topic is adult development, and this exercise occurs at the beginning of the course as a prelude to beginning an ex-

ploration of pertinent theory and research. For a number of years, the process below has consistently produced the following results: (a) the anchoring of the discussion of adult development theory and research in the personal experience of participants, (b) the introduction of the course's key concepts, and (c) the illustration of how to learn from experience. The process has been adapted to other subject areas.

Individuals. Within the context of the large group, ask individual participants to brainstorm times in their lives when they felt that they had grown—become a different and better person. Ask them to list as many episodes as they can without editing. After about a minute, request that they select one of these significant periods to re-experience. Participants need to know that they will revisit these life episodes because some of the growth episodes may have traumatic elements that individuals do not want to re-live within the class context. Once everyone has selected a growth experience, then proceed.

Individuals. Again, within the context of the large group, guide a visualization of these growth experiences. Explain that students are free to choose not to participate in this visualization exercise, and that if they make this choice, they must avoid disturbing other students. Usually, everyone chooses to participate. Ask students to place both of their feet on the floor, to put their hands on their thighs or in their laps, to sit up straight, and to close their eyes. Ask them to concentrate on their breathing—slowly, deeply, in and out, breathing in calmness and relaxation and breathing out the tensions of the day. If time allows, relax students' whole bodies, beginning with their feet and working up through the body to the head. Remind them periodically to breathe. Once they are in a relaxed state, ask students to visualize themselves during the period of their lives that they chose to re-experience. Invite them to let their minds roam free through events, especially trying to sense how they changed and people around them changed as they went through their growthful transitions. What were they thinking? How did they feel? What did they do? What did people with whom they had relationships think, feel, and do? What changed from beginning and middle to the end? Remind them to breathe periodically. After sufficient time to re-experience the events, tell students that they are going to leave that time and come back to this classroom, here and now. Ask them to breathe out that time and to breathe in this time. Suggest that when they open their eyes they will feel refreshed. Instruct them to open their eyes as they feel ready. As people are opening their eyes, instruct participants to brainstorm as many features of that growth experience as they can. What stands out to them about that experience? How had they changed? What were the features of the beginning,

middle, and end? Again, ask them not to edit, but to brainstorm. As the brainstorm appears to be over, ask them to review their lists of characteristics and to star the most important ones.

Small groups. In groups of four (or larger if necessary), ask participants to describe briefly their growth experiences and to share their lists of its major features. The group's tasks are as follows: (a) to select someone who will report to the large group, (b) to identify the features of their growth experiences that are shared in common, and (c) to delineate any major differences among the experiences of the group members.

Large group. Each of the groups report. The teacher charts the lists of common characteristics from each group. The task of the large group is to identify commonalities among the groups. The level of abstraction—and robustness—grows from individual to the small group to the large group and eventually to the scholarly literature. The teacher makes the link to the literature, pointing out that the students' experience has yielded many, if not most, of the prominent concepts and findings from the adult development literature. Normally, students understand deeply how the ideas that they are about to read are really just expressions of their own lives.