

# Collaborative Learning



## Liberating Structures: including and unleashing everyone, inside and outside school.

We human beings learn more when we participate actively and we are more likely to be motivated to participate when we feel autonomous, competent and positively connected to others around us (Deci & Ryan). How to create such settings? In this unit, special tools to organize classroom interaction, or any other group activity, in inclusive and engaging ways are going to be presented: the so-called Liberating Structures. You don't know them yet (that well)? Then there is no time to lose! Let's get started!

**Estimated time**

1h 45'

If you go through this whole unit, you will

- become more conscious about the factors which foster learning processes and participation
- learn to observe microstructures which you yourself build in your environment and reflect on their impact
- learn to regulate such factors consciously
- get to know Liberating Structures and experiment with them.

**Learning goals**

## Warm-up

Imagine you both are planning a project in collaboration with a school in a city nearby. You are invited to visit it and they let you participate in two lessons on the same topic, though held by different teachers.

"In the first classroom, students sit in **fixed seats arranged in rows and columns**, and the teacher stands in front, **delivering a prepared lecture** with a PowerPoint presentation. [...]  
The instructor runs through a set of prepared slides, projecting an expert demeanour while **pausing occasionally to ask or take questions**, and **moves rapidly to cover the content** - aware of the ticking clock." (Singhal et al. 2019)

"In the second classroom, students **sit in a circular formation** with the teacher among them, and the class begins by the teacher asking the students to take two minutes and quietly **reflect on their own experiences** as a customer, recalling specific instances when they felt deeply engaged or disengaged.  
  
After two minutes, the teacher rings a bell, inviting the students to **discuss their observations in pairs** for a few minutes, and **then in groups of four** (quartets) for a few more minutes. Then the teacher invites all quartets to **share the gist of their conversations** with the whole group, bringing attention to common patterns as also points of divergence. The teacher then **broadens and deepens the insights** already generated by the whole class, paying attention to inconsistencies if any, **filling in the gaps** as necessary." (Singhal et al. 2019)

List in silence the differences between the two classes.

When you are done, answer these questions: which class do you think

1. teachers and students are enjoying more?
2. students will remember the contents more?
3. students feel a higher degree of **autonomy, competence**, and social **relatedness** to the others?

You have 3 minutes to write down your personal answers to these three questions and list the arguments which explain them. When you are done, share your thoughts with your buddy.

# Learn

LS (Liberating Structures) are easy-to-learn microstructures that enhance relational coordination and trust. **Structure** -a constraint imposed on participants- develops out of a clear specification of progression from solo to pairs to quartets to the whole group, and the time allocated to each cycle.

The structure is **liberating** if it provides an equal opportunity for all kids to engage -as individuals, pairs, quartets. So it is about choosing the right structure for the right purpose! Get to know the 5 dimensions that all LS have and the 10 principles they follow!

## The design of all LS has five dimensions:

1. a structuring invitation
2. how the space is arranged and what materials are needed
3. how participation is distributed
4. how groups are configured
5. a sequence of steps and time allocation



The 33 Liberating Structures quickly foster lively participation in groups of any size, making it possible to truly include and unleash everyone.

## All LS relay on following principles:

- Include and Unleash Everyone
- Practice Deep Respect for People and Local Solutions
- Build Trust As You Go
- Learn by Failing Forward
- Practice Self-Discovery Within a Group
- Amplify Freedom AND Responsibility
- Emphasize Possibilities: Believe Before You See
- Invite Creative Destruction To Enable Innovation
- Engage In Seriously-Playful Curiosity
- Never Start Without Clear Purpose



*Is this elephant in your room?*

# Transfer



## Impromptu Networking

Get to know this LS with your buddy and think of a concrete way you can test it in the next few days with your group of young people and maybe also with your team!

*Rapidly Share Challenges and Expectations, Build New Connections* (20')

**What is made possible?** You can tap a deep well of curiosity and talent by helping a group focus attention on problems they want to solve. A productive pattern of engagement is established if used at the beginning of a working session. Loose yet powerful connections are formed in 20 minutes by asking engaging questions. Everyone contributes to shaping the work, noticing patterns together, and discovering local solutions.

## Five Structural Elements

### 1. Structuring Invitation

- Ask a question that invites participants to shape the direction of their work together

### 2. How Space Is Arranged and Materials Needed

- Open space without obstructions so participants can stand in pairs and mill about to find partners

### 3. How Participation Is Distributed

- Everybody at once with the same amount of time (no limit on group size)
- Everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute

### 4. How Groups Are Configured

- Pairs
- Invite people to find others in groups/functions different from their own

### 5. Sequence of Steps and Time Allocation

- In each round, 2 minutes per person to answer the questions. 4-5 min. per round
- Three rounds

Here an example:

"In **Impromptu Networking**, the teacher gets all students **immediately involved in the subject** matter. The teacher asks the students to **rise, and pair up** with another student, preferably **someone who is a relative stranger**.

Each student gets a **set amount of time** (let us say 2 minutes) to respond to a structuring invitation, for example, 'how can you use the management principles you have just learned to design your project?'

The teacher tells the students that **a bell** would ring after the first round, and they would have to **pair up with another student in the second round** and then **another student in the third round**. In the second and third pairing, the question and the time allocation would be the same. As participation is distributed in **three rounds of two minutes each**, all students get an opportunity to **provide their response and then listen to their partner**. The three rounds make it possible for each student to **reflect on the question more deeply and with iterative inputs** from their peers.

When the three rounds are completed, the teacher can ask, 'Who would like to share something you heard that you thought was valuable?' The **sharing of insights** can go on until it naturally ends, and the teacher can **capture the key points in a few minutes**." (Singhal et al. 2019)

## TIP

**Taking a group outside the usual room increases the fun factor**



And here follows another popular LS. Please read it and see how you could try it out...  
*Engage Everyone Simultaneously in Generating Questions, Ideas, and Suggestions* (12')

**What is made possible?** You can immediately include everyone regardless of how large the group is. With this method you can create a safe space for expression, diminishing power differentials. In this way you can engage every individual in searching for answers.

## Five Structural Elements

### 1. Structuring Invitation

- Ask a question in response to the presentation of an issue, or about a problem to resolve or a proposal to put forward (e.g., What opportunities do YOU see for making progress on this challenge? How would you handle this situation? What ideas or actions do you recommend?)

### 2. How Space Is Arranged and Materials Needed

- Unlimited number of groups
- Space for participants to work face-to-face in pairs and quartets
- Chairs and tables optional
- Paper for participants to record observations and insights

### 3. How Participation Is Distributed

- Everyone in the group is included (often not the facilitator)
- Everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute

### 4. How Groups Are Configured

- Start alone, then in pairs, then quartets, and finally as a whole group

### 5. Sequence of Steps and Time Allocation

- Silent self-reflection by individuals on a shared challenge, framed as a question (e.g., What opportunities do YOU see for making progress on this challenge?) 1 min.
- Generate ideas in pairs, building on ideas from self-reflection. 2 min.
- Share and develop ideas from your pair in quartets (notice similarities and differences). 4 min.
- Ask, "What is one idea that stood out in your conversation?" Each group shares one important idea with all (repeat cycle as needed). 5 min.

Here an example:

"In a 1-2-4-All, a teacher can very quickly tap the know-how and imagination that is distributed among the participants to generate a range of ideas.

It has a different rhythm as it sequences steps in an ascending order of distributed participation, beginning with 1—a silent self-reflection by individuals on a structured question.

For instance, what challenges do you see in applying the economic theory you just learned in your project? What ideas or actions do you recommend?

After the silent reflection, the individuals get to 2—in pairs, then to 4—in quartets, sharing and developing their ideas further. From quartets, they go to All—the whole group, sharing and synthesizing the key ideas from quartets." (Singhal et al. 2019)

#### TIP

- **Build naturally toward consensus or shared understanding**
- **Invite each group to share one insight but not to repeat insights already shared**
- **Record graphically insights as they emerge from groups**

# Reflection

---

The two activities above have been tested in 7 different classes. Check the feedback of the facilitators involved and of the students and discuss with your buddy, if you think you will get or you have gotten with your group similar results.

## Feedback from students (Singhal et al. 2019)

**Scary to enjoyable:** For most of the students, 'LS were "scary" and "uncomfortable" at first, but the discussion and engagement (that followed) was great'. Some students reiterated that the inertia of passive listening is a difficult habit to overcome. Generally speaking, students were intrigued by what LS enabled or made possible, notwithstanding their initial hesitation or wonderment. [...]

**Timing and rhythm:** The timing and rhythmic nature of the LS—with beginnings, middles and ends, as also transitions from pairs to quartets to whole groups, was not lost on the students. As one said, 'It was like taking dance lessons—at first one feels awkward...then you become comfortable and get into the rhythm of how things work'.

**Engagement, inclusion and democratic participation:** Participants clearly seemed to find the LS more engaging than straight lectures; experiencing a sense of inclusion and democratic participation that is generally missing in traditional classrooms. As a student noted, 'In many classes, there are people who talk a lot and some who do not talk at all. LS helped in balancing these voices'. [...]

**Deeper learning:** Several students enthusiastically pointed out that LS help provides a 'deeper understanding' of the subject matter, emphasizing 'We ought to do more of this-in other courses'.

**Actionable inquiry:** The class experience with LS, encouraged several students to reflect and inquire about 'where else LS might be used', and with what effect. [...]

**Appropriateness of LS:** Not all students were thrilled with the LS, [...] revealing about the traditional roles and expectations on part of both, the students [...] and on part of the instructors [...].

## Feedback from teachers (Singhal et al. 2019)

**Redeeming value of structure:** All instructors pointed out, the redeeming value of the structure provided by the LS, and what that enabled. As one noted, 'student engagement was more structured and led to better (student) responses'. Another said, as a result of LS, 'more answers and feedback emerged than expected'.

**LS as an innovative pedagogical practice:** Several instructor comments alluded to LS representing a 'welcome variation' in pedagogical practice. One said, 'it was fun'. Some talked about how they may use LS in other classes to 'break ice' between students and for deeper student engagement with the subject matter.

**Shared responsibility:** In general, the instructors liked the use of LS as it relieved pressure on them to do all the talking: 'It is good that the students make the connections (on the topic) themselves instead of (I) having the responsibility of making meaning for them'. Almost all the instructors noted that student participants went from '1-2 students talking' all the time to 'everyone talks' with LS.

**Enhanced Feedback and Relational Mutuality:** [...] The implementation of LS enhanced feedback loops, created a safe space for 'critical' feedback, and created a container of relational mutuality, where the teacher became a student.

**Role clarification:** One instructor wondered if LS would go down well with the students 'who were reluctant or resistant' to participate or with those who felt that the instructor's 'worth lies in their lecturing expertise'. Notably, all the instructors recognized that the purpose of a classroom experience is not to 'please' the student but rather to create an inclusive and engaging space for learning.