



## **Program Observation: Noticing What's Happening**

Every season, MHC relies on you to facilitate Discussion Projects across Maine. We are a small staff and visiting every program is impossible. However, we aim to be very available for you. We want you to call when you need assistance or to trouble shoot an issue. You are the only one who knows what's happening in your program. We seek to observe as many programs and facilitators as we can.

### **Every season, we aim:**

- for MHC staff to observe one session of approximately one third of programs happening
- to set up about one third of programs for a peer facilitator observation,
- for the final third to go unobserved (joining the observation list for next time, if applicable)

### **Basic logistics for observation**

We prioritize new sites and new facilitators for staff observation, when possible. If your site is not scheduled for observation, but you would really like it to be, please let us know. We link up peer facilitators for observation in settings where it makes sense and with duos whom we think will mutually benefit from a conversation. We hope the peer observation will serve as a reciprocal endeavor

If your program will be observed this season, the MHC staff member or peer observer should be in touch well ahead of time to schedule the observation during a session that makes good sense to you, and to ask whether there is anything you would like them particularly to watch for.

It's important that the group receiving the visit of an observer be aware of the visit. Please introduce them when they visit. The observer will arrive prepared to participate gently in the discussion, and to do their best to *notice what is happening* so that they can tell you what they saw and heard and felt.

You and the staff or peer observer should also plan a time within one week of the observed session when you can talk it over fully. Often the best time is directly after the session. MHC will reimburse for coffee/tea. If directly after the session isn't feasible, please schedule a call, Zoom, or in-person meet up within one week.

Afterwards, we ask the observer to send MHC staff a short note describing the visit and the conversation.

## **Noticing what's happening**

Like playing a musical instrument, fostering rich discussion takes a commitment to ongoing learning and practice. A critical part of effective practice is *noticing what is happening*, so that one can choose what to do with ever increasing awareness, sensitivity, and ease.

The work of facilitating MHC book groups is substantially solitary. Even though facilitation involves being surrounded by people and interacting closely with them, your role is slightly apart. We are keenly aware that each facilitator must be their own most perceptive observer in order to keep refining and deepening their skill. We view facilitator observation primarily as a valuable opportunity for each facilitator to expand their understanding of their own work by discussing it with a peer or MHC staff member who has seen them in action, and is there specifically to notice what is happening and share what they have gleaned.

The questions we suggest that staff and peers have in mind as they observe a book group session are thus the same questions we suggest each facilitator keep in mind as they think back over a session on their own. Likewise, staff and peers observing a session will have in mind the same simple guidance we give for holding discussions (described more fully in *Talking About Texts*), and the same short list of things that indicate a discussion is going well.

## **What we ask our facilitators to do**

In sum, the guidance we give for talking about texts, gleaned from over 20 years of holding book group discussions in all sorts of settings across the state of Maine is this:

- *Holding* a discussion requires attending closely to it without quite joining in, and inviting people in the group to discover and articulate their thinking about a text without really sharing one's own.

Three specific things we suggest our facilitators do are:

- Have passages of the text read out loud, often more than once.
- Ask simple open questions about the text.
- Keep gently bringing attention back to the text.

## **What it feels like when a discussion is really succeeding**

A discussion of a text among 6 to 25 people is an extraordinarily complex situation that changes constantly even over the course of one 90-minute time period. But in general, when a discussion is really succeeding, whether the room's energy is electric or calm, in a lull or moving quickly,

- there is a feeling of ease and attention in the room, with people paying close, interested attention to what is happening, whether or not they are choosing to speak;
- people are listening and responding directly to each other, not just in a back-and-forth between two people, but with a feeling of inclusive turn-taking;
- people are discussing the text, offering observations and interpretations about the events, ideas and characters the author presents, bringing in whatever other evidence they find compelling (other texts, their own experience, the experience of others they know, etc), and then looping back to the text of their own accord;

- if it happens that one or more of the people in the room becomes especially invested in an interpretation, or especially emotional or vigorous in expressing themselves, or if a conflict of some kind emerges, such moments serve as opportunities for everyone to see something new, or from a new angle, and resolution of whatever it is feels like an achievement.

## **Questions we suggest facilitators ask of their own work and the work of others**

What did you do to start the session?

What prompted you to start this way?

What happened when you did this?

Which passages did you draw the group's attention to?

What did you do?

What prompted you to choose these passages, and to do it this way?

What happened?

What questions did you ask?

What prompted you to ask these questions?

What happened when you asked them?

What did you do to bring attention back to the text?

What prompted you to do this?

What happened when you did it?

What did you do to draw the session to a close?

What prompted you to do this?

What happened?

In general, what do you notice about what happened in the discussion you just had?

What was most striking? Why?