

Dialogical Literary Gatherings

Federació d'Associacions Culturals i Educatives de Persones Adultes (FACEPA)

I. General information

Field :	Basic skills learning and promotion of active citizenship
Theme(s) addressed	Basic skills, active citizenship, solidarity, empowerment, egalitarian dialogue, equality of differences, instrumental dimension of education
Target audience	<p>People with no university qualifications who take part in adult education centres or associations. Children, teenagers, families, adults, elderly people...</p> <p>This action can be developed in different types of associations, such as: Family Associations, Women's groups, Cultural and Educative Organizations, Primary Schools, High Schools and Adult Education Schools.</p>
Pursued objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To improve the reading and writing skills of people at basic adult education levels • To foster reflection about universal topics of society through egalitarian dialogue • To improve self-confidence of adults at basic education levels so that they feel confident to express their thoughts in public as well as active participation
Method(s) used	<p>The dialogical gatherings are based on dialogical learning approach. Dialogic learning is the result of egalitarian dialogue; in other words, the consequence of a dialogue in which different people provide arguments based on validity claims and not on power claims. The concept of dialogic learning (Flecha, 2000) are linked to contributions from various perspectives and disciplines, such as the theory of dialogic action (Freire, 1970), the dialogic inquiry approach (Wells, 1999), the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984), the notion of dialogic imagination (Bahktin, 1981) and the dialogical self (Soler, 2004). The main principles of dialogical learning are: egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, transformation, instrumental dimension, creating meaning, solidarity and equality of differences.</p>

II. Description

Practical modalities

In order to begin a Dialogical Literary Gathering it is not necessary to have any literary knowledge, neither to be a large group. What is needed for a Dialogical Literary Gathering is to be excited to do it.

The duration of literary dialogical gatherings is agreed by the own group in order to facilitate and promote the participation of all the participants in it. Usually, we meet in a two-hour session per week. The objective is to talk about the contents and topics that come up from reading the classic we have agreed on.

Use of space: The only space needed in order to develop a literary gathering is a comfortable space where all participants can see and listen to each other without difficulties.

Number of participants: As many as we wish to. If at the beginning there are not too many people, this should not discourage us. It has been proved that the number of people increases when the people participating in the gathering explain them to their colleges, relatives and friends. A lot of dialogical literary gatherings have been initiated by few people (3 or 4 persons) and then it number has been increased to 30 or 40 people.

In case the gatherings are carried out with children or at high school level, they can be introduced in subjects involving reading as one of its activities. This is been done by several Primary Schools and High Schools.

Necessary equipment: all the participants need to have the book which has been agreed to read. Each gathering has to consider what the best manner to get the book is. Sometimes, organisations themselves buy the books, and these are being used by the different groups. Other times, organisations contact book publishers, who donate classic literature books. A third option would be to use the network of public libraries, or even participants can buy the books themselves. The only requirement is that books belong to Universal Classic Literature.

Description

“Mom, why are you reading that book?” This is the question a son asked to his mother when he saw her reading a book for the first time. The book he was asking about was “The Metamorphosis”, by Kafka.

The dialogical literary gathering is an educative and cultural activity where people join to share, read and talk about a book of the Universal Classic Literature. In the Dialogical Literary Gatherings attention isn't only paid to what the author wants to transmit with his/her text, but also to the different interpretations, thoughts and reflections that the book creates in participants.

This activity is being carried out in different kinds of associations, such as adult education centres, parents' associations, groups of women, primary and secondary schools, high schools, cultural associations, etc.

“Reading is not enough. Talking about the topic we have read is needed. So we can be aware of our social behaviour in life, through the reflection that literature projects in our lives. One of the books I have enjoyed more is “The Plague” by Albert Camus. It was difficult to understand, but while listening to the others talking about it, I could clarify my ideas. Some of us expressed that rats were only rats and that the “plague”, that contaminates the city, was the illness transmitted by them. Others believed that the book was like an allegory where rats represented ideas like intolerance, racism and the “plague” was the contamination that these ideas spread among the people of the city.” Participant from a Dialogical Literary Gathering.

The dialogical literary gatherings usually take place for two hours every week. Together the group chooses a book to read and to discuss during the next session. Each person can propose one classic and explain to the group what they know about it or why they would like to read it, so that there are criteria to decide. Once the book has been agreed on, the number of chapters or pages that will be read for the next session are agreed on as well. Everybody reads, reflects and talks with family and friends over the course of the week. Each person chooses a passage to read aloud and explains why it was particularly meaningful to him or her. The dialogue constructed is then based on these contributions.

Different opinions are debated and resolved through discussion. If the entire group reaches an agreement, this is established as a provisional true interpretation. If consensus is not reached, all the members of the group or subgroup maintain their own positions; no one determines the correct or incorrect reading based on his or her position of power.

A moderator is in charge of facilitating the discussion so that everybody can express their thoughts and impressions on the part of the text which is being discussed. The “moderator” learns as much as, or more than, the “participants”. Even when he/she is very sure of something, he/she cannot impose it but must try to convince the rest of the group. He/she is, thus, obliged to think and rethink what he previously took for granted, to find more reasons to support his/her opinion, or discover that he/she was partially or entirely wrong.

Each person makes individual contributions to the dialogue. The various comments are not classified as better or worse, but are appreciated as different. This horizontality brings the participants closer to an ideal speech situation.

The experience of Dialogical Literary Gatherings has two criteria which define it and differentiate it from other types of gatherings:

- 1) The readings which are chosen belong to the Classical Universal Literature.
- 2) The people who participate are adults without university degrees or pupils from Primary and Secondary Schools.

This is the way to demonstrate that Universal Classic Literature does not belong to a cultural elite. All the people can read and understand it. With Dialogical Literary Gathering we overcome some conceptions about education and learning promoted by people with an academic culture who deny that people without academic education can have access to this kind of culture.

“What is taught about literature is important for the world. But, from my point of view, theory is not enough. It is quite incomplete because it doesn’t develop the thought. Feelings, sensations, ideas and experiences must be encouraged. All these concepts are very important to open our mind, to be able to communicate yourself with all kinds of people, and to be more tolerant, understanding and reasonable. So as to have a peaceful coexistence.” Participant from a Dialogical Literary Gathering.

Remarks

One of the main points contributing to the Dialogical Literary Gatherings success is its methodology, the dialogic learning. At next we detail the main principles:

1. Egalitarian dialogue: we respect every contribution in an egalitarian way within the gathering. But we do not accept contributions of anybody trying to impose his or her opinion as the unique truth; it does not matter if it is somebody who has participated for a long time in the gathering or if it is the moderator. By everyone being able to expose their own point of view (without impositions, respecting and valuing the different opinions, and learning from each other) literature becomes a shared pleasure.

“The gathering taught me. Then, it showed me a door that I did not know it could exist. In this door there is: communication, shared feelings, laughs and sadness ...” (Participant from a Dialogical Literary Gathering)

2. Cultural intelligence: all of us have cultural intelligence. That means, in the course of our lives we have learned a lot of things in diverse ways. In conclusion, every person is able to participate in an egalitarian dialog. Cultural intelligence proves that we can learn throughout all of our lives.
3. Transformation: we have been transformed by this way of learning through dialogue and valuing everything we have learned throughout our lives. We feel able to learn much more because we prove it constantly. This is how we change the concept we had about ourselves. When feeling different, we change our relationships with the rest of the people and the environment. Reading, dialoguing and thinking we have overcome the barriers which exclude us from education and social participation.
4. Instrumental dimension: dialogue makes possible that we also learn academic and instrumental knowledge. Because when we learn and we comment a classic, we are very interested in what happened at the time the piece was written, which literary movement it belongs to, which are its characteristics, too.

The members of the gatherings that want to look for this information search for it on the Internet or in encyclopaedias, asking their relatives, etc. And then, if the group is interested, they explained what they have found to them.

“Everything started with Helen of Trojans. She was Greek and run away with a Trojan Prince... or did the prince kidnap her? We have to look for more information!” (Participant from a Dialogical Literary Gathering).

5. Creating meaning: the loss of meaning is a common phenomenon that appears constantly in our society. It is a result of the belief that we live in a system which determines our lives. Through dialogic learning, meaning re-emerges, as we choose our relationships with people and with the environment. This is why we decide what and how we want to learn.
6. Solidarity: Literary Gatherings are open to every person. There is no economic impediment (this activity is free), neither an academic impediment, because people participating have just learned to read and write. Priority is always given to people who are at the initial academic levels. So, we get to learn all together. If we believe in egalitarian educative practices, these should only be based on egalitarian relationships to generate more solidarity.

“I like very much how Ulysses’ colleagues help him escape from the chant of the mermaids. All us need friends who help us to overcome our problems...” (Participant from a Dialogical Literary Gathering).

7. Equality of differences: every person participating in gatherings is equal to others and different at the same time. One of the most important principles is equality between people. That means the right of everybody to live differently.

Dialogical Literary Gatherings have been considered as a successful educative action by the Integrate Project INCLUDE-ED (2006-2011), with 7th priority in the 6th Framework Programme of the European Commission.

They have also been recognized by leading personalities in the field of culture such as Portuguese writer José Saramago, winner of the Literature Nobel Prize, or Eduardo Galeano, among many others. All of them have stated the transformative aspect of this experience.

Dialogical literary gatherings have also been recognized by many prestigious universities, such as Harvard University, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Norder Illinois, the University of Sao Carlos (Brazil), University do Minho (Portugal) or University Victoria (Australia).

I'm glad to see how people take a great interest in literary gatherings, and that they have achieved such a success. I would love to have attended the Conference, since your work plan is so extraordinary and so necessary for making people conscious of the individuality of each one in a society in which we try to be with more and more solidarity (José Saramago).

III. Self-determination evidence

The results achieved are conclusive:

1. Non academic people have access to reading and discussing universal classics. Dialogical Literary Gatherings get people without the habit of reading (from children and young people to adults) to read classics of the Universal Classic Literature, through its methodology.
2. Participants participate in building knowledge through Egalitarian Dialogue. They can actively participate in the process of building knowledge. Moreover, they share values like solidarity, respect, coexistence, finding new points of view, etc.
3. Participants improve extremely their skills in reading and expressing themselves. Participants get to improve faster and more effectively their reading skills. They increase their vocabulary, they gain skills to speak in public, etc.
4. Participants acquire a broader and richer vision of the world through classics. They get a better comprehension about Culture and Society through dialogical reading. People coming from basic education levels have already read more than 100 classics thanks to Dialogical Literary Gatherings.
5. Participants' participation in gatherings contributes to a deeper social transformation of their environment and personal lives. Adult people, coming mainly from initial levels of basic education, gain more self-confidence, which encourages them to participate in other public spaces. It also makes it easier to have other conversation topics with their relatives.
6. People who hold no academic degrees find new self esteem upon realizing that they can teach the teacher something and that they can learn a lot by talking among themselves. Suddenly, they stop being passive receptors of knowledge and being active to the generation of knowledge. Reading and reflection become deeper once people realize that the group values their contributions.

IV. Organisation that develops the product

Name of the organisation	<i>Federació d'Associacions Culturals i Educatives de Persones Adultes (FACEPA)</i>
Status	Non profit organisation
Details	
Address	Claramunt 2-4. 08030 Barcelona
Country	Spain
Tel/Fax	T. +34933152969
Web site	www.facepa.org
Short description	<p>FACEPA gathers cultural, educational and adult learning associations and serves local associations developing adult education, cultural programmes and activities for population at risk of social exclusion.</p> <p>It's composed of adult people with no university qualifications taking part in adult education and governing their associations by means of direct participation in social, cultural, educational, political and economic fields in their territory. Our purpose is to work collectively towards a democratic educational and cultural model, in which the voices of people with no academic qualifications -and who, because of this, have been excluded from public debate- are taken into account.</p> <p>We work on the following topics: Adult education and adult literacy; Democratic adult education; ICT literacy and media literacy; New technologies and social participation; Groups at risk of social exclusion; Counselling; Civil participation; Deliberative democracy and democratic participation, Intercultural Dialogue.</p>
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