

Creating More Substance, Connections, and Ideas in the Classroom

By Arvind Singhal



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Professors who revel in their vocational calling often hear their students say: "Professor, I enjoyed your class. I learned a lot. I thank you, and so on." Such remarks, whether expressed orally, or penned in course evaluations and thank-you notes, warm the heart and buoy the soul. I have been graced and buoyed by such warmth over the past twenty-nine years.

However, in the past eight years or so, the nature of the student feedback I hear has noticeably changed. Qualitatively, it is deeper, more soulful. I increasingly hear: "This class changed my life," "I learned so much about myself in this class," "I am sad that this course is ending for I will miss my classmates," and so on. And, I have even heard students say: "Thank you for teaching me about healthy communities. But thank you also for teaching me how to learn." Such statements more than make a professor's day. They make a student's life!

How do I explain this qualitative shift in student feedback? Perhaps it is because I am getting older, wiser. Perhaps my abilities to connect the classroom with the real world have multiplied appreciably. Perhaps I have learned to better manage classroom conflict. Perhaps I can, at the drop of a hat, pull out a compelling story to illustrate a point. Or, all of the above!

I believe there may be one more explanation. In the past eight years, I have increasingly been exposed to, and have put to practice, some alternative ways to approach and design my classroom interactions: Liberating Structures.

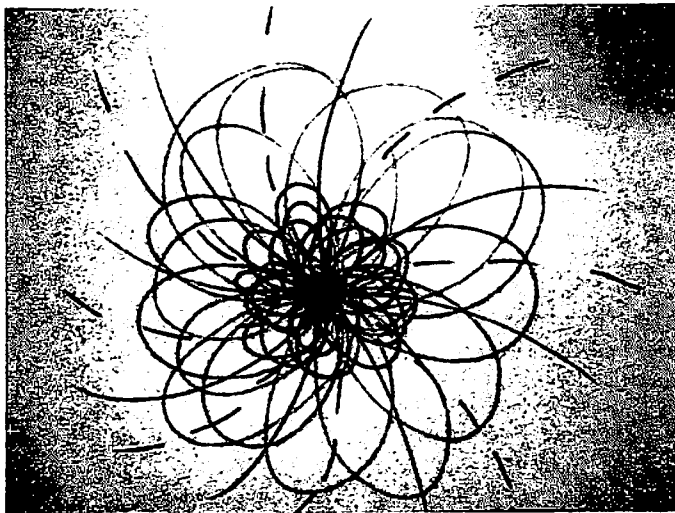
What has the adoption of Liberating Structures done to my classrooms? One of my students (we'll call her GC) wrote the following in her learner reflections:

In Dr. Singhal's class we practice Liberating Structures in the way the class is structured and in the way activities are conducted. These

structures provide an easy-to-learn atmosphere as they are adaptable methods for engagement that make it quick and simple for individuals from all backgrounds to integrate themselves into a discussion. This is exhibited by a simple rearrangement of chairs, removing order and hierarchy in conversation, and to even have space for a few moments to communicate free from course intentions. Through these practices we are working on decentralizing our thinking and actions. Through Liberating Structures we are learning to not adhere to an individual position and to not reject what others have to say.

Acadia Roher, who took my once-a-month Liberating Structures elective seminar at the Clinton School of Public Service, summarized her classroom experience with the following sketch and narrative:

My sketch represents the energy, focus, and expanding humanity that I have witnessed by using Liberating Structures in different settings and groups. I chose bright, vibrant colors to represent the electrifying energy that Liberating Structures seem to create in a room full of people. But the energy is not chaotic, it is instead focused and often creates more substance, connections, and ideas than traditional structures. The purple nucleus represents the focus that Liberating Structures bring, from which the ever-expanding circles of energy and ideas bounce outward.



Acadia's portrayal of Liberating Structures and what they help accomplish

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The Classroom Comes Alive

When I read comments such as GC's and Acadia's, I grin from ear to ear. To hear that Liberating Structures help create more substance, connections, and ideas in a classroom—priceless! Interestingly, Liberating Structures allow for such to happen with no extra resources. The classroom, the teacher, the students, the chalkboard, the laptop, the projector, and the time spent in the classroom remain the same. What changes with Liberating Structures are certain structural conditions that enhance the quality of interactions among participants, leading to very different outcomes.

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Let us give some simple examples.³ Physically moving the students from a traditional rows-and-columns classroom configuration into a circular seating arrangement changes the nature of the learning environment and the nature of the interactions. The circle structure allows each participant to be equally seen, heard, and acknowledged. There are no backbenchers or frontbenchers. No scope for hiding. The circular setting invites richer participation, allowing those who are present to verbally and nonverbally affirm, support, or question others.

Laughter ripples through a circular classroom far more rapidly and inclusively than in a traditionally structured classroom. I for one have noticed more smiles and nods. Sighs and gasps are also more visible, creating opportunities for deliberation, and spaces for corrective action. As a professor, I experience more winks and nods and quizzical looks and my antennae are constantly processing feedback that is more authentic, accurate, and timely. Such feedback enables one to be nimble, to improvise, to change course, or to maintain it.



Arvind facilitating a Master Class in the Netherlands using a circular seating configuration

I often introduce a “talking stick” when doing small-group work in my classrooms. The talking stick represents a simple structure: whoever holds the stick (can be a pen) will talk, the others will listen. The talking stick has been used by the Navajos for centuries to bestow respect on the one who is **talking**. After one is finished talking, the stick is usually passed on to the next **person**. This goes on until all have spoken. In a small-group situation, the **talking stick** can go around several times so that participants have an opportunity to widen and deepen their own thoughts and to build on the thoughts of the others. No one person dominates and the conversation does not ping-pong (bounce from one to another) as is customary in a traditional classroom brainstorm.

The talking stick, perceptibly, slows the conversation down, making it deeper and richer. [See the **Conversation Café** in Part Four for details.] Once the stick is in circulation, participants often get into a zone, playing off each other—like a jazz improvisation. In ten to fifteen minutes, a small group can have an orderly, respectful, deep, and creative conversation. And multiple small-group conversations can be simultaneously carried out in a classroom, ensuring that all class participants are engaged and participating at the same time.

Simple structures like sitting in a circle, introducing a talking stick, and providing people an equal opportunity to be seen and heard changes the quality of the connections and interactions in a classroom. Imagine if such happens twice or thrice a week over a sixteen-week-long semester course! More diverse inputs lead to a wider and deeper understanding of the issue at hand. Interestingly, within the first week or two, the classroom feels more dynamic, arms begin to uncross, words begin to flow, smiles and laughter rise, and sighs and gasps become more visible and acceptable. Trust rises as relationships deepen over time.

By the third week of classes, even before I enter the classroom, the din of conversational chatter greets me at the door. Multiple conversations are under way, telephone numbers are being exchanged, and most people know the others by their names. After class, participants feel comfortable to hang around. Compassion for others is palpable: someone offers a ride to another, someone puts the chairs back in rows and columns, and someone erases the chalkboard clean. When such happens, and with repeated frequency, I experience immense joy, realizing that the class has begun to act like, feel like, an interconnected whole. I am reinforced, convinced, and affirmed that we, collectively,

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must be doing something right to build a sense of community, a safe collective space.

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My Personal Transformation

I have often reflected on how the practice of Liberating Structures has enhanced my quality of life as a professor. How do I prepare differently? What am I mindful of when in class? Who is the arbiter of knowledge? When do I speak up? When do I let go of the conversation, and so on? There are no clear-cut answers, nor any prescriptions to dole out. But my experiences suggest the following.

The practice of Liberating Structures has helped liberate me from bearing the sole burden of "professing" in a classroom, i.e., being a Sage on Stage, a knower, and a content deliverer.

The practice of Liberating Structures has enabled me to see the vast experiential and intellectual resources participants bring into a classroom, individually and collectively. These resources are usually hidden, lurking, and need a safe environment to find utterance. When such happens, participants learn from peers, a less hierarchical and often more effective mechanism for co-learning than just being at the mercy of the professor.

Operationally, just "letting go" of the thought of "professing" profoundly changes the way my classroom is designed.

I am now deeply mindful about how seats are configured—e.g., in a circle where everyone can be "seen" versus in rows and columns, and how these spatial configurations (geography) affects pedagogy.

I am now deeply mindful about my "positionality" vis-à-vis the participants. Am I seated with the class participants, one participant among many, or am I behind a podium—in control with a PowerPoint clicker? What do such spatial "positionalities" symbolize?

I am constantly thinking about how I can create and frame the structural parameters so that participant conversations are focused and yet are allowed to expand and deepen. I am strategizing about how all participants can be engaged at the same time, whether as individuals who think in silence, or with a partner in a conversational space, or in a small group as a contributing or listening member.

Now, when I prepare to walk into a classroom, I ask not "What is it that I need to do?" but rather "What is it that WE need to do?" I focus on what the participants are "doing" in the classroom for it is the experience of doing that

validates that learning has occurred. I have to constantly remind myself to curb my urge of lecturing, or professing an answer when a question is asked, for efficient as it may seem, learning can be quite superficial when people are just passively watching PowerPoint slides, taking copious notes (so they could study for an exam), or listening uncritically to the one behind the podium.

In creating such conditions, the professor in me experiences deep humility. He realizes that no ONE person is (or can be) the arbiter of learning, but rather knowledge is created by the collective in the conversations they have, and the processes they experience.

From Sage on Stage to Chief Enabler

Liberating Structures create the enabling conditions for people to contribute, to ask for help, to develop skills in listening and paraphrasing, and to build trust and safety, while valuing (rather celebrating) diversity and difference.

The design aspects of Liberating Structures go way beyond the frame of “what we need to do in a classroom?” In order for meaningful, collective conversations to occur in a classroom, I am now deeply mindful of what individual class participants need to do prior to coming to class—what texts to read, what lectures/talks to watch in advance, what problems to solve, and what questions or reflections to bring to share with the collective.

As a professor, one asks how class participants might prepare themselves to come into a designated interactional space once/twice/thrice a week at an appointed hour, and benefit from the presence, knowledge, and experience of others, including the professor. This mindfulness also influences the design of what the class participants do, individually or in small groups, in between class sessions to widen and deepen their understanding, to engage in actions and reflections, and such.

My professorial role is now one of a Chief Enabler whose responsibility it is to design and enable a process so that all class participants feel invited, engaged, and allowed to contribute as “whole” people. As an enabler, I bear the responsibility (and challenge) to create the safety and supportive conditions for such invitations, engagements, and contributions to potentially occur. Poetic as it sounds, this process of “enabling” can be difficult and challenging, as the control of the classroom space, time, and content is no longer solely with the professor. The professor exercises some degree of control over the process, and can help provide the frame for structuring conversations, but cannot

completely control (or predict) what surfaces from the collective. That means Liberating Structures, necessarily, create the conditions for “surprising” and emergent classroom outcomes—both of a substantive and relational nature. I have seen how, for the most part, these outcomes result in opportunities for deeper, experiential learning for individuals and the collective and deeper friendships and relationships.

With Liberating Structures, a classroom, its participants, and a professor are always a work-in-progress. And that is what learning is all about, no?