TURN-TAKING WHEN REVIEWING IN A GROUP

by Roger Greenaway, Reviewing Skills Training

A group has just completed an activity or a real-world project. Your job is to help them reflect and learn from their experiences. What turn-taking strategy will you use?

DO YOU MAKE ANY OF THESE FOUR MISTAKES?

1. Not having a turn-taking strategy. '*Laissez-faire*' is very unfair especially when it results in domination by the loudest people.

2. Adopting your usual 'default mode' (which you might spot somewhere below) without considering other turn-taking strategies.

3. Imposing a turn-taking method on the group that is either too structured (and lifeless) or one that is too jolly (and superficial).

4. Not making room for participation - by talking too much, getting in the first word, taking all the best lines, filling in the silences, and only asking for participation when you run out of breath.

AN EVALUATION OF TURN-TAKING METHODS

No method is perfect. What follows is a list of turn-taking options with comments about the strengths and weaknesses of each. Methods with lots of minuses are best avoided, or used sparingly. [Please let me know if I have unfairly maligned your favourite methods, or if you have other methods you would like to add – by writing to roger@reviewing.co.uk]

FREE FOR ALL

The facilitator asks a question to the group. Anyone can respond.

+ PLUS +

+ People only speak up if they have something to say.

- MINUS -

- The first person to speak is likely to be the least reflective person in the group who simply says the first thing that comes to mind.

- People who like time to reflect before responding find it difficult or impossible to reflect while others are talking.

- People who lack confidence or feel they hold minority views may be reluctant to speak up.

- The facilitator's open questions will do little to challenge or change norms in the group: dominant individuals will be as dominant as usual; quiet people will be as quiet as usual (and they do not prepare to say anything because they do not expect to be asked).

? WHAT IF ?

... everyone has reflection time before speaking, and if everyone is invited to speak?

HANDS UP / THROUGH THE CHAIR

Hands up - or catch the chairperson's eye if you wish to speak.

+ PLUS +

+ Same as 'Free for all': people only speak up if they have something to say, but it enables wider participation because there is a queuing system for turn-taking.

- MINUS -

- Same as 'Free for all' except that the queueing system makes it a little easier for less assertive people to join in

? WHAT IF ?

... we had different and better ways of turn-taking? (Better than the 'hands up' routine that we learned on our first day at school.)

TALKING STICK / CONCH / ROVING MIKE

There are some interesting differences between these methods. What they have in common is the rule that holding the object gives you permission to speak. It usually involves catching the eye of the current speaker (and object holder) rather than catching the eye of a chairperson.

+ PLUS +

+ It reduces the power of the chairperson - with each speaker having the responsibility of deciding who speaks next if there is competition for the object.

- MINUS -

- It reduces the power of the chairperson – who would usually be in the best position for noticing who is next in the queue for speaking.

? WHAT IF ?

... we find ways of turn-taking that do not draw attention away from what we are talking about?

ROUNDS

Rounds (also known as 'go-round', 'whip' and 'creeping death')

"Starting with the person on my left you are each invited to answer, in turn, in one or two sentences. As always, passing is allowed."

+ PLUS +

+ Everyone knows they will get a turn to speak. It feels fair and democratic.

+ At the start of a review a quick round gives everyone a chance to check in while informing the facilitator (and everyone else) about what's 'on top' for each person.

+ A quick round early in a review helps to establish full participation at what is likely to be a relatively easy starting point.

+ Can be used at any time (beginning, middle or end) to give everyone a quick say.

+ As a 'sounding board' it permits a greater range of responses than, say, a show of hands.

- MINUS -

- The first people have little reflection time before speaking (though you can provide this).

- People may be thinking about what they will say rather than paying attention to what is being said.

- The last people to speak often feel that everyone else has stolen their lines, even if the facilitator assures them that repetition is OK

- 'Creeping Death': the structure and predictability of Rounds can readily drain the life out of reviews if used too much, or if people are allowed to speak at length when it is their turn.

- Rounds is not designed to stimulate free-flowing discussion (though an occasional quick round can help to include consideration of all views within a free-flowing discussion).

? WHAT IF ?

> ... we could find a way of achieving full participation without breaking up the flow of a good discussion? It is interesting to listen to others, but not when they are talking simply because it is their turn rather than because they have something they want to say.'

RANDOM TURN-TAKING

Random turn-taking – such as spin the bottle, spin the arrow or picking a name out of a hat.

You spin the arrow and the person the arrow points to answers the question.

+ PLUS +

> + It keeps everyone alert and awake.

> + Some people think in advance and prepare a response in case they are chosen by the random process. (More will do so if you give them reflection time for this purpose).

- MINUS -

> - Some people sit back preferring to improvise an instant response should they happen to be chosen.

> - The game-like qualities of 'spin the arrow' produce game-like responses rather than reflective ones.

> - People with something they want to say may not get a chance to do so.

> - Some people may never be asked for a response (although 'name out of a hat' gives everyone a go if names are not returned into the hat).

> - The random choosing process becomes the focus of attention and distracts attention from the content

? WHAT IF ?

> ... we were to keep to reviewing methods that avoid distraction, minimise frustration, include everyone, encourage choice, set a suitable tone and ... erm, oh yes ... encourage reflection!

RANDOM QUESTIONS

Random questions typically come from question cards that are picked out of a hat. (This does not refer to questions asked by the facilitator – who would usually have some kind of rationale for asking

a particular question at a particular time.)

+ PLUS +

+ Some people enjoy the surprise, the challenge and the quick thinking of being expected to answer a random question.

+ Random questions may (by chance of course) just happen to trigger a really interesting response – and even a breakthrough.

- MINUS -

- If random questions work better than questions asked by the facilitator, the facilitator should feel ashamed (or find another job).

- Some people get completely thrown by a random question because the question does not speak to the place they have reached in their reflection. (And then ... they go quiet, or try hard to respond, or ramble, or disregard the question and say what they wanted to say anyway.)

- The use of random questions challenges the idea that reviews benefit from having a sequence that moves people through various stages such as reaction, sharing, analysis, consequences.

? WHAT IF ?

... random questions were reserved for situations in which they serve a useful purpose such as for creative thinking, for developing improvisation skills, for looking at things differently, or for creating a spirit of play? What if random questions were reserved for times when they assist learning?

RANDOM QUESTIONS WITH RANDOM TURNTAKING

Introduces even more randomness into the reviewing process than either of these strategies on their own.

+ PLUS +

+ Totally random reviews might work well. The odds are slightly better than a monkey typing the complete works of Shakespeare.

- MINUS -

- A time filler that brings out random comments from random people in a random sequence.

- Also see the minus points for 'random questions' and 'random turn-taking' above.

? WHAT IF ?

> ... a review session could be informed by a bit of learning theory, and conducted in a way that allows the facilitator and participants to draw on their skills and experiences?

TALKING TOKENS

Everyone has the same number of tokens (e.g. matchsticks) giving everyone the same number of opportunities to speak. You discard a token after speaking for more than 5 seconds (or for more than one sentence).

+ PLUS +

> + People tend to be more thoughtful about what they want to say if they have a specific number of turns available.

> + Everyone can see that it is fair and that it is designed to encourage the people who usually speak to speak less, leaving room for quieter people to speak up more.

> + So it usually gets off to a good start ...

- MINUS -

> - ... and then the discussion falters when those who want to contribute have run out of tokens, and those with tokens remaining have nothing they want to say.

> - It brings attention to unbalanced participation, but does not necessarily result in better discussions or wider participation.

> - The pressure on quieter people to speak up often happens when there is not a lot left to say

? WHAT IF ?

> ... we could find better ways of helping quieter people to join in, especially in the earlier stages of a discussion?

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE TURN-TAKING STRATEGY?

I have converted the 'What Ifs' above into a single list (below). Maybe these principles provide useful guidance for an effective turn-taking strategy?

- *Everyone has reflection time before speaking.*

- *Everyone is invited to speak.*

- *Quieter people are readily able to join in, especially in the earlier stages of a review.*

- *We achieve full participation without breaking up the flow of a good discussion.*

- *We use reviewing methods that avoid distraction, minimise frustration, include everyone, encourage choice, set a suitable tone and ... encourage reflection!*

- *We are wary of methods that draw attention away from what we are talking about (although on first use any new method will need some attention while participants are learning how to use it well).*

- *We reserve random questions for situations in which they serve a useful purpose such as for creative thinking, for developing improvisation skills, for looking at things differently, or for creating a spirit of play.*

- *Everyone is able to use and develop their skills for learning in groups – and is able to find a suitable level of challenge within the reviewing process itself.*

It is unlikely that you would find all of these features and principles in a single method – which is partly why it is handy to have a mix of methods. The methods that follow generally score a little higher (against the criteria listed above) than the methods already described.

CONNECTION RULES: 'SUMMARISE FIRST' / 'YES AND' / 'CONNECT'

Each of these methods apply temporary rules that everyone should follow in order to qualify to join in. Each of these rules involves acknowledging in some way what has just been said.

- **SUMMARISE FIRST**: Summarise what the previous speaker has said before making your point.

- **YES AND:** Find some point of agreement with the previous speaker, and then add your own point.

- **CONNECT:** Find some point of connection with the previous speaker (not necessarily agreement) and explain that connection.

+ PLUS +

+ Good for flow because there is always a connection of some kind.

+ Good for acknowledging the previous speaker – and because people like being listened to and acknowledged for what they say, they feel good about participating and are more likely to participate again.

+ When people know that their words will be summarised, they tend to speak more thoughtfully.

+ The next speaker can come from anywhere in the group, making the process more lively

than when speaking in turn or when asked to do so.

+ Connecting processes tend to weave a group story around the topic, rather than participants making a series of disconnected comments.

- MINUS -

- People have to think quickly in order to make the connection between the current speaker and what they wish to say – and this may be too fast for reflective thought.

- People may not be able to participate if they cannot think quickly enough – so you can break the link and invite anyone who has not yet spoken to restart the process (and then wait patiently until someone does so).

? WHAT IF ?

... you routinely explain to the group why you are asking them to adopt a certain rule or method. For example:

- SUMMARISE FIRST 'because you are talking over each other', or

- YES AND 'because you are not acknowledging the points on which you agree', or

- CONNECT 'because there is little evidence that you are listening to each other' or (especially at a first meeting) 'because it would be interesting for you to discover what connections you have with each other'.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

Participants reflect alone, then with a partner and then share their thoughts in the whole group – such as in a round in which one person speaks on behalf of the pair.

+ PLUS +

+ Everyone at least gets to talk with a partner even if they don't get to speak up in the whole group.

+ The quality of the sharing is likely to be more reflective and articulate following a preliminary conversation with a partner to test out and clarify thoughts.

- MINUS -

- If sharing in a Round there may not be much flow or life in the sharing process.

- The sharing round can take even longer than a 'normal' round. (Because only half the group speak up in the sharing it *could* be faster compared to Rounds, but it tends to take even longer

unless you establish clear limits for what is shared.)

? WHAT IF ?

... the 1-2-Many sequence in Think-Pair-Share could lead into a more dynamic sharing process? Horseshoe (next) is one way in which this can be achieved.

HORSESHOE

Everyone stands in a well spaced horseshoe shape (e.g. standing behind a horseshoe of chairs or by standing on a horseshoe rope). Think of it as a curved Likert scale (if that is helpful!) Define the two ends of this spectrum of opinion. Each person now chooses where they stand on the particular issue that you have defined. Everyone now turns to one or two neighbours for a discussion (in twos or threes, but not fours) about why they chose their point on the spectrum. The need to 'share' (as in Think-Pair-Share) is partly redundant because people are already showing where they stand on the issue by where they stand on the spectrum. This allows you to go straight into a group discussion in which it is relatively easy to ensure that each area of the spectrum is represented even if each person does not speak up.

+ PLUS +

+ Participants first talk with someone who has a similar view, so there is agreement rather than argument when first airing their views on the subject.

+ Everyone's views are visible as soon as they first step onto the horseshoe spectrum through to the open discussion in the final stage. This accelerates the start of group discussion (relative to discussions where people start discussing a subject without knowing where others stand on the issue).

+ On most issues the spectrum draws out shades of opinion which generally leads to better quality discussion (relative to discussions that slip into polarised arguments).

+ It is easier for you (and participants) to invite people into the discussion at suitable moments because their position on the spectrum indicates the kinds of questions that would be productive.

+ Discussion takes on a more natural flow than is possible during a simple 'sharing'.

+ Unlike Think-Pair-Share, anyone can join in and speak up when discussing in the whole group.

- MINUS -

- Unless carefully facilitated, most interest is shown in those standing at the extremes – so be sure to include voices from throughout the spectrum.

- The method itself does not require 100% participation at the MANY stage (but as with all methods using the 1-2-MANY sequence, at least everyone is involved at the '2' stage).

? WHAT IF ?

.. we could find more ways of instantly bringing out shades of opinion and keeping these visible throughout the process? This would save time by clearing the fog of assumptions that is so often present at the start of 'normal' discussions. And maintaining a 'visible' position prevents the fog from returning.

FISHBOWL

There are many variations of this method. The basic set up is that people in the inner circle (the 'fishbowl') speak while those in the outer circle watch and listen. Every so often people in the inner and outer circles swap over (or individuals move in and out as they choose).

+ PLUS +

+ Because quieter people are more likely to speak up in smaller groups, full participation in a group of five is more likely to happen than in a group of ten.

+ People tend to be more thoughtful about what they say when there is an 'audience'.

+ People tend to listen better when they are in an audience and are (temporarily) freed up from thinking about how they might join in.

- MINUS -

- Some people may feel more intimidated when 'on stage' and are more likely to speak up when sitting in the larger group (though in my experience, the opposite situation is more typical.)

- If maintained for too long, the audience may lose interest.

- People have their backs to some of the audience (so you may prefer having semi-circles facing each other rather than using concentric circles)

? WHAT IF ?

... you were to regularly review the review methods with the groups you are working with. This would help you tailor review methods to suit the group, and help you develop more versatile ways of using these methods.

HOKEY-COKEY

Everyone stands round a rope circle. You ask a question for which you expect a unique answer from each person in the group. The first person to give their answer steps inside the rope. The next person to give an answer (but not an immediate neighbour) also steps in. And so on ... until a few people are still outside. Typically it is now much harder for people to come up with a unique answer, so you can change the rule and allow those inside the rope to suggest an answer which one of the 'outsiders' is happy to accept as something they can say. And so on ... until everyone is inside the rope. You now ask a second question and the same process is followed, except that on this occasion participants are stepping out of the circle one at a time (hence the name 'Hokey-Cokey'). Paired questions work well. For example, the first question can be 'What did you do well as a team?' and the second question 'How did you, as an individual, contribute to the team achievement?'

+ PLUS +

+ Everyone is included.

+ Those who struggle to answer are helped – it becomes a team exercise as soon as the facilitator asks for people to make suggestions.

+ If the question is about individual contribution, it becomes a positive feedback exercise once the facilitator asks for suggestions.

+ It is more participatory, democratic and lively than asking a question to the group and writing up answers on a flip chart. (If you really, really want a written record of responses, find a volunteer to make a record while you are busy facilitating Hokey-Cokey.)

+ It is a good alternative to Rounds where you want everyone to respond to the same question. This is because in Hokey-Cokey people speak up when they are ready to do so, those who struggle get help, and (instead of draining energy) the energy reaches a climax from the point where it becomes a team exercise.

- MINUS -

- It does not lead to flowing discussion (although the team aspect makes the process more lively than many other turn-taking methods).

- It is less suitable for adult groups unless you are working in an informal (outdoor) setting.

? WHAT IF ?

... I could find a better name for this exercise! And what if we used less flipchart paper when reviewing? Just like those email logos that say 'Do you really need to print me?' I'd love to see a logo on every sheet of flipchart paper that reads, 'What is your pedagogical rationale for using me?'

SPOKES

The group stand in a well spaced circle (touching finger tips) around a central object representing the hub. Each person imagines a personal spoke that connects them to the hub. Each spoke is a personal scale extending from zero to a maximum score about one step away from the hub. You now ask one question about personal performance that applies to everyone e.g.

"What score would you give yourself for ... how much effort you put in, ... how much you supported others, ... how much you were task-focused, ... how much you gave or inspired creative thinking?"

After asking your first question, each person simultaneously moves to their chosen position on their zero-maximum scale. You now ask everyone to look around and see if there is anyone who deserves to be further in (towards maximum). I encourage people to be as specific as possible when inviting someone in. I also encourage the invitee to consider whether to accept the invitation. If they decide not to move, they say something like "Thank you. I accept what you say, but I think I am already in the right place." Some useful variations are described at: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/ropes.htm

+ PLUS +

+ It reverses the normal pattern of participation in a group: those who are usually the centre of attention start paying more attention to others, because those in the middle (who have given themselves high scores) tend to invite 'outsiders' further in.

+ Those in greatest need of positive feedback tend to receive it as they are usually furthest out.

+ As a facilitator you can help to ensure that feedback is specific and helpful and not just "move in a bit because you look lonely out there".

- MINUS -

- As in any methods that do not retain a circle, there may not be full eye contact throughout the group.

- If your questions are too similar there is a risk that the method creates an 'in' group and an 'out' group – so be sure to use a variety of questions that changes the pattern, and stay long enough with invitations to allow significant movement towards the central hub.

- Negative feedback ('*You should move out a bit because...*') is best excluded from this particular method, because it could easily be experienced as more negative than intended.

? WHAT IF ?

... there were more ways of quickly generating high quality feedback – and doing so in a way that is sensitive to people's current self-evaluation in relation to what you are giving them feedback about. And what if feedback could be the norm: frequent, welcome, sensitive and balanced.

KNOT TALKING / TALKING KNOTS / TALKING ROPE

These are three different titles for the same method. It is similar to Talking Stick (described above) in that you may only speak if you are holding something – in this case a knot in the rope, of which there are at least two. Everyone holds onto a circular rope with knots in it and passes the rope around the circle to their left. When anyone wants to speak they grab and stop a passing knot. At any time you can specify what kinds of questions or statements each knot permits. You can view a one minute video of this method at https://www.youtube.com/user/rogerreview

+ PLUS +

+ Everyone feels connected to the process because all are holding the rope.

+ There are frequent opportunities for everyone to speak up – because knots are regularly passing through their hands.

+ People only speak up when they choose to do so.

+ If the rope moves round in silence for a while this is useful reflection time.

+ It works particularly well as a finishing activity.

+ Like Rounds, it is best used for personal statements rather than for flowing discussion.

- MINUS -

- It is one of those methods where a group is distracted by the novelty before there is a payoff from using the method.

- Not recommended if people are sitting at tables with papers, tumblers of water, etc. (best used in a standing or sitting circle with nothing in the middle)

? WHAT IF ?

... we could develop more methods which are self-facilitating? Such methods do not threaten the role of the facilitator – they simply allow the facilitator to operate at a more advanced level. Instead of putting your facilitative energies into monitoring turn-taking, you are free to add value and take reflection to a higher (or deeper) level.

HAVE YOU NOTICED?

Have you noticed that the second part of this article includes several methods that require 'staging' and breaking out of the norm of being in a seated circle? Maybe facilitators feel comfortable when sat in a circle, but in most cultures the simple act of sitting in a circle brings in certain norms, habits and pecking orders that have a strong influence over turn-taking. There is often a hidden rule that influences the order in which people take turns. I have found that breaking out of the circle and

creating different group shapes and dynamics helps to disrupt any unhelpful norms that limit what happens in the circle. Try something different and see what happens.

The emphasis in this article has been on the various ways in which you can facilitate turn-taking in a group review. The Active Reviewing Guide at http://reviewing.co.uk contains many more articles about reviewing methods and strategies related to different purposes and activities. Please let me know if I have unfairly maligned your favourite methods in this article, or if you have other methods you would like to add. Yes – you can have your turn by writing to: roger@reviewing.co.uk I will be happy to extend this article by adding your comments or your favourites.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN! - to try something out and/or to write something in.

Bob Larcher writes:

With regards to turntaking, a method I often use (not always) is to ask participants to take time to **write their answers or thoughts** to a question, this stops the "dominants" responding straight away and gives time for the more reflective to put their ideas into words; I then ask participants to exchange in pairs or trios and then ask the pairs or trios to exchange - I sometimes decide on the groups myself, mixing and matching personal styles and sometimes I leave it to the participants to choose; although I "hint" that it would be a good idea to not always exchange with the same person.

Bob's website includes articles about teambuilding and facilitation.

Discussion should be illegal
say Jim McCarthy and Michele McCarthy.
> "Jim: It's not that it's a bad idea to exchange ideas. That is necessary. It's that often discussion is just posture and noise.
> Michele: Also, the larger the group, the worse it gets. I find the quality of discussion degrades as the number of people goes up."

Source: http://www.mccarthyshow.com/2013/discussion-should-be-illegal/
Roger writes: Jim and Michele recognise some of the same problems I have outlined above. Their solutions are based on strict protocols being followed by each participant. "Horseshoe" (described above) is another efficient way of quickly discovering different views and bringing out proposals that everyone supports.

Would you like to add your ideas about turntaking?

Since writing this article I have frequently revisited the topic of engaging learners in reviewing - each time from a different perspective. These articles are
brought together in Active Reviewing Tips 12.2

Related articles
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