

Using Initiative-based Activities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning

Presenter: James R. Morton, Jr. MEd, MA, NCC  
Achievement Transition Group, Inc.  
E: [james@atg-family.com](mailto:james@atg-family.com)  
[www.atg-family.com](http://www.atg-family.com)

“Play—Trust—Learn:” Consider the motto when attempting to use active-based interventions for social-emotional learning. The concept of playing promotes laughter while increasing communication links between one another. Further, it fosters the receptivity to learn because there is a sense of increased trust (Collard, 2005). Protective barriers are reduced and a larger opening for ideas and influences become possible.

Think Theory: People have what I consider “low” level theories that serve as a way to organize perceptions, plans, and manage actions. Action Theory as defined by Collard (2005) explains how individuals conceptualize particular situations in a very automatic way. Through experience, people construct theories about how things happen and create predictive models to anticipate how certain behaviors could lead to outcomes. People’s way of managing anxiety has been conditioned with established propositions and behavior patterns that are nonconscious. Additionally, polyvagal theory (Porges, 2007) highlights not only the fight-flight-freeze response to intensity but also the dynamic to establish “safety.” According to the theory, individuals interact with other with the brain functions to identify a way to established safety among others.

Experiential Learning Theory: David Kolb (1984) constructed a theory about learning through experiences. The cycle can begin with having some kind of experience (the concrete), but through reflecting on the situation in terms of how things went (the What), generalizations are constructed (So what). From these generalizations, we can project them forward into the future as expressions of cause and effect: “If I do this, that will happen.” Again, we have a subsequent experience (the concrete) to test our newly developed theory. We are back again reflecting on what happened, how to make sense of what happened, what is to be learned, and what can be done next. This is a very, very simple explanation but much research and writing has gone into this subject.

Group Work: Group work through active-based games and initiatives provide opportunities for individuals to have a microcosm experience of his or her larger worldview operated in day-to-day living. Through a well-sequenced set of activities, individuals can interact with one another to achieve one’s individual goals (what brought the person to the group). However, it what becomes revealed during the interactions that becomes the work to meet those goals that happen within the group context. The lead facilitator is the guide that can read the dynamics of the group to then orchestrate opportunities for individuals and the group to learn more about itself (the group) and oneself (the individual).

Yalom (2005) is often cited for being a prolific contributor to understanding group work and how it functions. I encourage others to explore focal conflict theory (FCT) as explained by Whitaker (1989). Its premise is that group members bring anxiety to the group along with their own way of managing it (action theory). As individuals and the group as a collective come together, each person employs his or

her individual coping strategies into the group and the group begins to define its own way to managing the group's anxiety. As the group understands how it manages anxiety, rules and rolls are established in how the group functions. With appropriate facilitation, group members can use group experiences to explicate unhealthy social and emotional patterns and then try on more effective solutions that are more conducive to positive human interactions. Group leaders understanding the group through this lens offers a unique perspective for how anxiety is managed and avoided in the collective.

Activities: Seek out activities that can move from less threatening and with high "fun" function to assist the group to form and individuals to feel and experience greater emotional-social safety. As the group matures, interject more emotionally sensitive topics. As people share with one another (universality and interpersonal interactions), group members will feel a greater connection with one another (cohesion) and be willing to take greater risks to share vulnerabilities (work). People can try on new behaviors, check out perceptions, and explore greater interpersonal boundaries in healthy and constructive measures. Specific activities are in ample supply through the Internet and in books. Please refer to the references below for further explorations.

#### Websites

<http://www.wilderdom.com/games/> Provides an array of activities that you could try with your students.

<http://www.crnhq.org/> An organization that works to provide support in resolving conflict.

<http://www.project-adventure.org/> One of the pioneers for adventure-based counseling and initiatives for learning.

#### References

- Collard, M. (2005). *No props: Great games with no equipment*. Beverly, MA: Project Adventure, Inc.
- Fleming, L. M., Glass, J. A., Fujisaki, S., & Toner, S. L. (2010). Group process and learning: A grounded theory model of group supervision. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 4*(3), 194-203. doi: 10.1037/a0018970
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, F. P. (2009). *Joining together: Group theory and group skills* (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Kerlinger, F. N. (1986). *Foundations of behavioral research* (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (Vol. 1): Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Porges, S. W. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. *Biological psychology, 74*(2), 116-143.
- Reber, A. S. (1989). Implicit learning and tacit knowledge. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 118*(3), 219-235. doi: 10.1037/0096-3445.118.3.219
- Whitaker, D. S. (1989). Group focal conflict theory: Description, illustration and evaluation. *Group, 13*(3-4), 225-251.
- Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. C. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.