

*Empowering* **YOUTH**  
*for School and Community*  
*Change*

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## Chapter 5 Reflection and Celebration: Making Meaning

It was 11:00am, Sunday morning, and the retreat was almost over. Twelve young people, four teachers, and a facilitator had gathered over an autumn weekend to plan a youth-voice initiative for their school. They had made much progress in their work, and everyone was looking forward to sharing their exciting new plan with the rest of their school community. Before they left for home, however, the facilitator, Jason, called the group together so that everyone could reflect upon their weekend experience.

Jason asked the group to think of three things:

- When was your voice most heard this weekend?
- When was your voice least heard this weekend?
- How might we change our group norms the next time we meet so that your voice is better heard?

After each youth and teacher answered these questions aloud to the group, everyone moved to a long table and ate together the brunch that some of the young people had prepared that morning. The food, which two of the youth had organized earlier in the week through donations from local grocery stores, was nourishing and tasty. That morning, as everyone ate, joked, and relaxed, they all grew closer to one another.



This chapter is about making meaning from the work you did in the community. It talks about the importance of reflection and celebration and gives strategies for integrating the two into your work.

### Why Reflect and Celebrate?

There are two main reasons to reflect. First, reflection helps make meaning of everyday experiences. Second, reflection helps impact future choices. You reflect every time you come home and tell your family a story about your day. You reflect as you commute to work, thinking about what happened yesterday and about how that affects today. If everyone—young people, parents, educators, and community members—reflects in these everyday situations, why not reflect when doing a community project as well? The first reason to reflect is to make meaning—helping participants of a project or an event grow as individuals and as a community. The second reason to reflect is to impact future choices—help sustain and refine projects and ongoing events to make them better.

Celebration is also one of the most important elements of any project (although it is often considered the toss-off, do-it-if-we-have-time, doesn't-really-help-the-project component). Celebration gives young people a sense of closure and accomplishment for all the hard work they have done, just like graduation parties do for high school graduates. A celebration provides a time to acknowledge community and parent involvement and helps validate the importance of young people's work in the community.

Imagine the casual environment of a celebration, where stories are enthusiastically shared, or where project participants enter into a conversation, agreeing that everything went beautifully, but that next year, it will be even more... reflection, right? Imagine, a more formal reflective environment, where a young person shares that the highlight of her work with your project was when you gave her the confidence to achieve what she thought was impossible. She's celebrating a success. When you both reflect upon and celebrate a project, you are allowing your group the opportunity to look back and look ahead at the same time. Often, when both reflection and celebration are practiced, the two begin to mix with one another to become something even more powerful.

# Strategies for Reflecting and Celebrating

## Reflection

Reflection can look like a number of different things:

- Oral Conversation—Participants share how they felt about an experience (see opening story).
- Participants can share out with the whole group
- Participants can pair into partnerships and have private conversations.
- Write a Story—Participants write a personal narrative about an experience.
- Journal—Participants write freely about an experience. This wouldn't have to be a narrative, but could be a series of random thoughts.

There are two important points to remember about reflection:

- To make meaning, reflection does not have to be documented, nor does it have to be shared with the rest of the group. **HOWEVER**
- To impact future choices, reflection does have to be documented, and it has to be shared with the rest of the group.

Reflection can be quite effective if it is guided by a series of questions. Some common questions are:

- What happened? This question allows you to clarify the important experiences of a project or event.
- Why did it happen? This question allows you to interpret these experiences.
- What might it mean? This question allows you to take your work to a deeper level.
- What did I learn? This question allows you to identify experiences that allowed you to personally grow.
- What did I contribute? This question can help participants focus on their individual achievements, and it can help confirm that they were indeed an important part of the group.

## A Story about Celebration

After returning with 13 youth from a 200-mile bicycle trip, Mr. Trenton made his young people small cards and presented each one to them at a gathering at his house. Each card recognized a special quality of that person. To a young person who had fallen numerous times, he gave the "Get Back on the Horse" award. To a youth who had ridden the whole trip on a mountain bike (!), he gave the "M.E.P.M.—Most Effort per Mile" award.

### What Might this Mean?

Some awards were more humorous (the "Just Another Hour!" award for the person who consistently had trouble getting up each morning), while some awards recognized truly outstanding accomplishments. In the end, however, each young person was recognized and celebrated by his or her teacher for a specific achievement.

## A Story about Reflection

After hosting their first community supper for the school year, Ms. Roberts' class met on Monday morning to reflect upon their experience. Each student wrote silently and freely for ten minutes. This writing helped students recall the event. After they finished writing, Ms. Roberts asked her students to discuss in small groups what they learned from the event. She had each group appoint a note taker so that the class could look back upon these reflections at a later date. After these group discussions, Ms. Roberts had the class come back together in a circle. She asked students to acknowledge a contribution of another student to their supper. When all students had been acknowledged, Ms. Roberts dismissed the group.

### What Might this Mean?

Ms. Roberts used a variety of reflective methods to engage her students. She had them write, listen, and speak. She had them work independently, in small groups, and with the entire class. Most importantly, she had them reflect upon their own actions, and upon the actions of others.

## Celebration

Celebration, like reflection, can happen in a number of ways. Some celebrations are more like parties or gatherings. In this vein, you could:

- Throw a huge party for your group.
- Share a meal with your group.
- Go on a mini field trip with your group.

Skip the movies! It is usually best to celebrate in a setting where the group can talk with one another (remember those great reflection/celebration crossover moments discussed above). Often, community members who may have collaborated with you on your current project, or on a past project, are eager to share either their homes or workspaces for a celebration. Take advantage of these opportunities—young people love exploring new places as a group.

Sometimes, people celebrate by recognizing the strengths that everyone brought to a project. You could:

- Hand out certificates of recognition to everyone who was involved with your project.
- Ask youth to make awards (like the ones in the story on the left) for community members who worked on their project with them.

Reflection and celebration can be so exciting, inspiring, and rewarding—why not reflect and celebrate every single day? Read on to discover strategies for getting those reflections and celebrations to happen—no excuses!

## *Obstacles and Solutions*

The main ingredients for reflection and celebration are time, energy, and planning. When planning projects with young people, it is common to gear up for the big date of completion and then move on to the next project right away. You may intend to reflect after racing to complete a project, but then find that it is frustrating or tiresome to return to a project you have already finished. Here are some tips for integrating reflection and celebration into your project:

- If you are worried about not having enough time to reflect, plan small reflection activities and celebrations into your schedule.
- Although the group may have been working together comfortably, the intimacy or ‘touchy-feeliness’ of reflections may make participants uncomfortable at first. Strategies that allow all voices being heard (i.e. going around in a circle) and that restrict how much one can talk (i.e. ‘Say two sentences about how you felt today’s meeting went’) are effective ‘first reflection strategies’ to open up the group for further, closer interactions.

<i>Idea</i>	<i>Implementation</i>
You could reflect and celebrate at the end of your project.	If you give yourself 4 weeks for a project, set the project’s completion date a couple of days ahead of the end of your allotted time and then take a day off to reflect and another to celebrate.
You could reflect and celebrate along the way.	Build in time for reflection at the end of each meeting. When you allow reflection to become a regular part of each meeting your students will begin to feel a great sense of closure and group bonding at the end of each meeting and will look forward to future meetings and reflections.

## *A Case Study About Reflection and Celebration*

At least two great things happened in January 2004 at Harmony School, a private, progressive Pre-K-12 school located in Bloomington, Indiana. First, Martin Luther King Day was a ‘day on’. Rather than stay at home, students, parents, faculty, and administration came to school and celebrated the national holiday with an annual Social Action Day. On this day, the Harmony School community both commemorated and expanded upon Martin Luther King’s vision of social justice. Second, for the first time in Harmony School history, students planned this day themselves! Ten high school and middle school students chose the speakers and workshop leaders they wanted for the day, and they determined the format of the day—heavy on action and light on people talking to students for long amounts of time. The students also organized a lunch to which local business donated food, and an all-school march downtown in the freezing January cold to hear a guest speaker. For the march, much of the school made noisemakers, posters, banners, and masks that depicted their dreams for social action. At the end of the day, the entire school gathered in the gym and reflected upon the day. After the event, the ten students who organized the day took time to compile a binder of reflections and to celebrate at a local restaurant.

Reflection was an important part of the planning and of the event. In order to better fulfill their dreams of sustaining the high quality of 2004’s Social Action Day, the student planning committee wanted to:

- Reflect upon the day as carefully as possible;
- Use a variety of methods to reflect;
- Include their reflections in the documentation binder —when future generations of students look back at the binder; they will find out not only what happened, but also why and how it happened, and how students felt about it.

Three reflections in particular went very well:

- What went well? What didn’t go so well? What could we do better next time? Although students came up with few things that didn’t go well, they had a bunch of suggestions for how to tweak things for next time;
- A second reflection was to create a short and easy survey for the entire school to complete. This took surprisingly little effort and coordination. Aside from receiving good statistical data about what went well and what could be improved for the entire school, the planning group wound up receiving a slew of valuable feedback;
- In reflecting upon the day itself, the Harmony community engaged in a very simple protocol that turned out to be powerful and profound. The entire community formed a large circle in the gym, and each participant was asked to say

just three words about their experience that day. Some memorable words: 'Youth creating peace,' 'Live your dreams,' and 'Community, Peace, Hope.'

Celebration was the theme of the second half of the day, and was followed by reflection. This might be unusual compared to other projects where celebration is more of an afterthought. The three most inspiring ways in which people celebrated during this project were:

- The all-school downtown march. This was a celebration, not just of the event itself, but also of each student's dreams.
- The planning committee's lunch at a local restaurant.
- The way the planning committee infused their binder with a real celebratory spirit, showing that celebration can be more than a party or gathering. The students give a shout-out/inspirational message to the next planning committee.

### ***What Might this Mean?***

Social Action Day 2004 was an event that helped unify various Harmony School communities and that helped strengthen the connection between Harmony School and Bloomington. Reflection and celebration were tools that students used to help sustain this important tradition. By reflecting and celebrating in your own projects, you will find that students will be more willing to return and work with you on future tasks. When these students graduate, reflection and celebration helps build a strong foundation from which the next group of students can create even stronger work.

A surprising, but common barrier to a great celebration is cost. Often when our projects are budgeted, we simply do not include fees for celebration. Allotting \$25 of your next grant or budget to help with celebration can buy a lot of pizza.

### ***Conclusion***

As with all things in life, it is so important to celebrate what you have done. Reflection has two goals: to make meaning and to impact future choices. Though you can reflect in a way that only addresses one of these goals, it is perhaps ideal to reflect in a way that would address both goals. This chapter discussed the purpose and benefits celebration as well. You can reflect and celebrate at the end of a project or integrate reflection and celebration into the work as you go. Feel free to utilize the sample reflection questions to help young people make meaning of their work and consider what impact they made.