

REFLECTIVE READING: A CIVIC REFLECTION STARTER KIT FOR HEALTHCARE TEAMS

WHAT IS CIVIC REFLECTION?

Civic reflection discussions use short pieces of literature—or images, audio or video—as jumping-off points for thinking and talking about central questions at the core of a group’s common work. For interdisciplinary healthcare teams, including Patient-Centered Medical Home teams, these conversations often center on tough questions about our relationships with those we serve: *Why do we serve in this way—what are our motives and our goals? What are our obligations to—and what do we expect from—those we serve? How do we handle the pressures of providing profound but limited resources in a world of profound and unlimited needs? In the face of suffering, are there limits to helping? Can we know when we’ve done enough?*

In this activity, the readings provide an anchor that the facilitator can use to focus discussion and return to whenever the discussion strays. Readings can also help participants go more deeply into questions or issues that they might not comfortably share on their own. Participants report that they go away invigorated by stimulating conversations and new ideas, with a stronger individual commitment to giving and serving, strengthened relationships with colleagues, new resources to draw on, and a fresh perspective on the challenges of their work.

Stepping back to reflect on these fundamental questions may feel quite different from other regular team activities, but such reflective discussions can enable you to understand your colleagues and yourself better, perform your work more thoughtfully and effectively, and refresh your energy for the demands of caring for patients and families.

WHY DO CIVIC REFLECTION WITH YOUR TEAM?

Caring for patients, especially with chronic, complex needs in a changing healthcare landscape, is hard work. Those of us involved in this type of medical care recognize that we constantly make difficult choices among competing and worthy goods. In addition, we come to our roles as care providers with varying motivations and philosophies—each of us striving to “do good” in our own way.

Civic reflection creates a safe space for team members to step back, pause, and consider the complexity of this work, the values that underlie it, our own perspectives on serving, and so much more. It can introduce an introspective tone to team meetings, help colleagues to connect with one another in meaningful ways, help the team to function more cohesively, and make patient care more rewarding. It also helps to provide a common vocabulary that can build bridges between team members with different roles or those with divergent views or differing experiences. By building relationships and enhancing job satisfaction, the practice of civic reflection can help combat burnout for healthcare professionals—strengthening those who serve.

A recent study of a palliative care team at a large public urban hospital that incorporated civic reflection into one of its weekly meetings each month revealed that the discussions had **enhanced the job satisfaction** of members of the team, and **increased their ability to work effectively both with one another and with the patients they serve.**

FINDING THE TIME AND PLACE FOR CIVIC REFLECTION

If at all possible, build the practice of civic reflection right into your regular team activities, rather than creating a stand-alone program that busy team members may regard as an extra obligation.

Example:

The Palliative Care Team (PCT) at Cook County Health and Hospitals System (“County”) in Chicago provides supportive care for patients and their families. Comprised of medical staff—nurses, doctors, residents and fellows, a grief counselor and a social worker—the group meets once a week for an Educational Series. Monthly events in this series include Journal Club (a discussion of current articles from medical journals), Case Conference (in which the medical aspects of a specific patient case are highlighted), and Formal Lecture/Grand Rounds. In 2007, the PCT began to incorporate civic reflection discussions into this series under the title of *Reflective Reading*. Recently, this practice was introduced during a retreat of interdisciplinary members of the Cook County Health and Hospitals System General Medicine Clinic Patient-Centered Medical Home teams as a team-building activity.

Reflective Reading sessions are typically hour-long discussions facilitated by a member of the healthcare team. Some members received training in facilitation and provided mentorship, so that every member of the team served as a facilitator. Facilitators select the readings, choose the questions that the group will discuss, and help to guide the conversation. Readings can be very short and require no advance preparation, another advantage for team members pressed for time.

The quality of conversation tends to get better and deeper the more frequently civic reflection is practiced with the same group. We encourage you to consider making this a monthly conversation with your team.

PLANNING THE DISCUSSION

So you’ve decided to try out civic reflection with your interdisciplinary healthcare team, and your fellow team members have agreed to give it a shot. How should you get ready? With a little preparation, you can lead your colleagues through a thoughtful and enjoyable discussion.

This toolkit is designed to help you prepare by providing an introduction to the practice of reflective reading, tips for planning and leading discussions, and a selection of readings, guiding questions, and opening and closing exercises. Staff members at the Center for Civic Reflection, a national organization designed to support and facilitate this type of activity, are also available for coaching and consultation. See the Appendix for more information on resources and support available through the Center for Civic Reflection.

In the planning phase, it is useful to think *first* about the underlying questions you want to help your group explore or reflect on. Once you know what you would like the group to discuss, you can decide on the reading or readings that will help this discussion happen. And once you have selected the readings, then you can plan in more detail how to structure the conversation.

Some of the most troubling dilemmas we encounter in our work as direct service professionals are really enduring human questions—questions not unique to one organization or profession, time or place, but arising in a variety of times, places, and circumstances. These are age-old questions like *What matters most in this work? What should we expect from those we serve? What difference do I hope to make?*

What kinds of questions would you most like to have an opportunity to explore with colleagues? What questions are rumbling underneath your group’s common work but often overlooked? Start with an underlying question—and from there move forward to find a reading that opens that question up for discussion.

SELECTING A READING

The reading (or image, video, song) is a tool to help get people thinking and talking with each other about the large questions underlying their work. For this reason, there is no set canon or ideal combination of texts. The most important thing to remember as you select readings is that *the reading is for the discussion, and the discussion is for the people in the room*. A civic reflection discussion is *not* a book group or a literature class, and the reading for these discussions is *a means rather than an end*.

In our experience, some kinds of readings are more useful in these conversations than others. Good readings provoke a variety of responses from participants and don't necessarily provide answers to the questions they pose. For this reason, imaginative pieces often work best. The meaning of a story or a poem, especially one from another place or time, may lead to fresh consideration of the issues at hand.

Choosing shorter pieces that can be read out loud at the start of the session avoids the problem of group members feeling pressured to prepare or arriving unprepared.

By contrast, it pays to be cautious about texts that at first glance seem to be “natural” choices:

- **Inspirational texts**—readings that have an uplifting message (“lessons about life”) or present a particular model of leadership (“seven habits,” “six steps,” etc.)—may not leave room for disagreement or provide opportunities for differences in interpretation. A good text will be complex, unsentimental, invite controversy and even elicit discomfort. Good advice for helping patients and families deal with illness, dying, and grief is abundant. But civic reflection allows for complexities and unanswerable questions in the face of these challenges.
- **Popular texts** (e.g., current bestsellers) may initially seem attractive, too. But because interpretations and meanings of these texts are “out there” in the culture already, it may be more difficult for people to have fresh, imaginative responses to them. In our experience, literature, images and videos that are less well known often surprise people, and because of their unfamiliarity, such texts are more likely to invite a wide range of interpretations.
- **Professional literature is also tempting.** Why not use this precious reading time to catch up on the latest study or journal article? Nonprofit executives, service providers, and especially those in the healthcare field all have literature that is highly specific to their respective fields of work—a literature that is useful and with which people are familiar. But in Reflective Reading (as opposed, say, to Journal Club), the aim is to provide opportunities for colleagues to pay *a different kind of attention* to familiar work, a kind of attention that imaginative literature elicits more easily.

You will find ideas for readings, images and video in the Resource Library on the Center for Civic Reflection’s website, www.civicreflection.org. See the Appendix for information on additional publications and resources. The Center for Civic Reflection (CCR) has published print anthologies of readings, listed in the Appendix, that have been useful to other healthcare teams. Visit the CCR website or contact staff directly for guidance.

OPENING AND CLOSING THE DISCUSSION

Opening Exercises—An effective way to start getting at a “big question” that is rumbling around underneath our common work is to begin the conversation—even before turning to the reading—by asking people to pair or triple up and discuss this question as it relates to their own experience.

Examples:

- A group of healthcare providers is exploring the challenge of finding meaning in their work by reading Mary Oliver’s short poem, “The Buddha’s Last Instruction.” The facilitator might start by asking participants to talk in pairs or triads about a ritual that they practice on a daily basis.
- A group is exploring the challenges of being a “gatekeeper,” of saying “no” to those in need, starting from Henri Barbusse’s short story “The Eleventh.” The facilitator might begin by asking participants to write about a time when they were turned away, or had to turn others away.

Short opening exercises like these can go a long way toward helping participants feel comfortable in the room, ready to consider difficult questions, and open to a meaningful link between the reading in front of them and their own experience. And participants are often grateful for the opportunity to have these kinds of substantive yet informal exchanges with colleagues.

Closing Exercises—Toward the end of a civic reflection discussion, participants may yearn for some sense of closure. How do you end collective inquiry without bringing people to consensus?

You might try the “go-round” to ask people what will likely resonate for them from the discussion—a phrase, image, question—after they have left the room. A go-round can also serve as an invitation for people to connect the experience they have just had with their professional lives. For example, you might ask people to imagine what questions a character in the reading who visited their institution might have, or what advice they would like to give the character.

If you don’t have time for a go-round, you might simply sum up for the group the fruitful questions and themes that came up during the discussion. Another technique for closing involves everyone writing down the answers to two questions: What was useful about this conversation? As you leave, what is *your* question? This can give the facilitator(s) helpful feedback for the next meeting.

There are many potentially satisfying and thought-provoking ways to open and wrap up a civic reflection discussion. This toolkit provides suggestions for each reading and image that you may find useful—or you may enjoy experimenting with ideas of your own, especially after a little practice.

DEVELOPING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Along with preparing an opening and closing exercise, we recommend developing a set of questions to draw upon as you lead the discussion. It might be useful to develop three kinds of questions:

1. Questions of Clarification: *What does the reading say? What is literally going on in this story? What is happening here?* In the case of a story, it might help to find a point in the plot that makes a significant impact on one of the characters and ask participants to describe what is happening at that point. For a poem, you might start with a specific image or metaphor that jumps out at you and puzzles you. In each case, you can simply ask, what is going on here? Can we make sense of what is being said or done here? In response, the group will begin collectively to “construct” the text in front of them, to explain to one another and themselves its essential features.

2. Questions of Interpretation: *What does it mean? Why does the poem, or story, take the path it does? What is it trying to tell us? What in particular is it saying to you?* Questions of interpretation encourage participants to evaluate the reading—to make sense of it in terms of their own values. At this point, the discussion consists of an exchange of deeply-held and often very different opinions, but these opinions are directed at the reading, which creates some safety and allows people both to share their deeper values and to disagree about those values.

3. Questions of Implication: *So what? What do we take away from this reading or discussion, what do we think about our own work in light of what we have heard or said?* These “so what?” questions help to connect the reading to the shared work of people in the group. Often participants make these connections themselves, but you should still have these kinds of questions ready. And you should be prepared to ask the apparently obvious questions, and the questions that help participants see complexities that only emerge on a second or third pass.

LEADING THE DISCUSSION

To get started, here are a few basic suggestions regarding facilitation:

First, remember that the purpose of the discussion is to help participants think deeply and talk thoughtfully with one another about their choices, assumptions and expectations. A facilitator guides the group through this unique kind of conversation, by using a common text.

Be deliberate. The decisions you make about your arrangements matter less than the fact that you make them. How will you set up the room so everyone can participate and make eye contact with each other? How will you begin? How will you call upon people? How will you manage time? How will you manage people who want to speak—and those who do not? How will you end the conversation?

Be prepared. Read, re-read and read the text again.

Honor preparation. When you ask participants to read or think about something in advance, always honor that preparation during the meeting. Don’t assign three readings with the intention of only discussing one. Don’t tell participants to come prepared to answer a question and never ask it.

Exorcise the ghosts in the room, don't exercise them! Civic reflection conversations are intended to create a meaningful conversation among colleagues about the challenges before us in trying to give and serve. Participants' previous academic and clinical experiences, good or bad, can be powerful ghosts in these discussions. Try to do things that will exorcise these ghosts—or at the very least not exercise them.

Listen, don't lecture. Participants should do most of the talking. Use your personal understanding about texts and contexts to ask open questions, and avoid answering them yourself. Listen to what participants are saying and help them articulate the insights and assumptions beneath their words.

Allow differences to emerge. Any group of people has important differences, even if at first it seems like a homogenous group. As participants respond to a complex reading, these differences will emerge. Help people perceive and explore them. Recognize and honor disagreement and pluralities of interpretation.

Make everything as comfortable as possible for participants. For instance, make sure people can see and hear one another.

Begin and end on time.

Consider some kind of statement of expectations (in some circles these are referred to as ground rules). The need to lay out ground rules at the start of a series or one-time discussion will vary according to the group you are working with, but it will almost always be useful to convey some *basic expectations*. Here are a few of the things it may be worth naming up front:

Sample Ground Rules

- Since one goal of the discussion is to get everyone involved, encourage people to **be aware of how much they are talking**—and how they might get others involved in the discussion.
- Since these discussions can quickly go deep and personal, let participants know that this is a reflective and exploratory space, so provocative comments may be made and deeply personal matters may be touched on, but **the space is meant to be safe**.
- Since these are not academic discussions, encourage participants to set aside what they might know from outside sources about the author or the text, and to focus with their colleagues on **making sense of the reading or image in front of them**.
- Since we are rarely encouraged to leave a room more perplexed than we entered it, let participants know that we aren't after consensus or an action plan here, and **we are likely to leave with more questions than answers**.

Above all, pay attention to the people in the room. When you are leading the conversation, there is nothing more worthy of your attention than the people around the circle. What are they thinking or feeling, and how can you help them talk with each other about important questions they are likely to share?

TROUBLESHOOTING

The more you do from the beginning to create a safe, respectful space, the less likely you are to run into serious difficulties. When difficulties do arise, it is often best to *name the tension* rather than letting it fester.

Examples:

- If participants seem to be resisting the activity, it might be worth saying to the group, *It feels to me like there's some resistance to this in here—is that right, and if so, what's going on?*
- If one participant makes a remark that others might construe as offensive, it might make sense to say, *It feels to me like some of us here found that last comment offensive in some way—is that right, and if so, what was offensive about it?*

This technique of ‘naming the tension’ can be successful in innumerable situations, particularly when it is employed with gentle humor and real openness to what the group is experiencing.

If one person is talking too much, and some aren't talking at all, you might use body language—break eye contact with the over-talker, lean toward other folks, etc.—to subtly encourage the group to restore the balance. You could also restate at a graceful time (or the next session) that the conversation is for everyone and that the more who enter it, the richer the reflection will be.

IN CONCLUSION

Facilitating civic reflection is rarely easy, but the result—for you and your team—can be both enjoyable and rewarding. When you lead this activity, you are helping colleagues get to know each other, their work, and themselves better. You are helping to build a stronger, deeper team with enhanced resources for caregiving. And for facilitators, the practice of leading a discussion develops skills in leadership, listening, communication, and critical thinking.

We hope this tool kit will help you get started, and we hope, too, that you will let us know about your challenges and successes in leading civic reflection with your healthcare team.

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Okay

by Lowell Jaeger*

There's a man in the road, waving.
We're driving home from Hot Springs,
my wife and I, and our three kids.
He's holding something bundled
in his arms. *Don't stop*, my wife
telegraphs to me with a sideways glance.
I'm okay with that.

It's a dog! the kids shout, *He's
carrying a dog!* So, okay, I stop,
roll down the window.

Please help, the man says, tears
leaking down his stubbled chin.
The dog is bleeding. He's rolled up
in an old rug, eyes open, miserable.
I just run over my dog, the man
blubbers, He's drunk. And stinks.

Okay, I'm thinking, I'm stuck
with this. The kids squeeze together;
the man and dog huff and groan,
sniffle and slide themselves into
our lives. My kids' faces in the rearview
are pinched, afraid to breathe –
wet dog, blood, booze, rotting socks.
The man whimpers, cradles his dog,
*I'm f-ing sorry, man. So f-ing, f-ing
sorry.* This is less than okay.
We spit gravel behind us and speed
back to Hot Springs to find a Vet.

It's a Sunday, my wife whispers, *everything's
locked up.* I'm thinking, Okay, what now?
At the one payphone on Main, I pull over
to let the man and dog out. *You better call
someone*, I say. My voice sounds afraid.
The man's eyes are shut, not asleep,
but almost. The dog's eyes are shut, too.
You better call someone, I say louder,
Okay? Okay?

The man stands at the payphone, his dog
bundled on the sidewalk. He just stands there.
My kids cry silently. My wife trusts me
to be the man she hopes I am. I don't
know what's okay and what's not. The man
is fumbling in his empty pockets for change.
I feel a lot like that.

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APPENDIX: RESOURCES

Electronic Resources

The Center for Civic Reflection offers an extensive resource center at www.civicreflection.org. Here you will find introductions to hundreds of resources—readings, images, audio and video—along with associated themes, questions and exercises designed to help spur reflection on civic activity. You may use the questions and exercises either for actual discussions or for inspiration. The readings listed on the website are linked to the full electronic text, if available.

In the resource center you will also find facilitator summaries in which discussion leaders share their experiences using these texts. You can view these discussion summaries, share your own experiences with using a particular piece, or suggest a reading, visual image, audio text or film that is not yet included in the resource list.

Print Resources

The Center for Civic Reflection has published several well-reviewed anthologies of readings and questions appropriate for civic reflection discussions. All of those listed below are available directly through their respective publishers and via online booksellers such as amazon.com.

- ***Taking Action: Readings for Civic Reflection*** (Great Books Foundation, 2012) contains over 60 thought-provoking short readings and visual images to help educators, social workers, community organizers, medical professionals, and others who work to make the world a better place discuss their values, aspirations and challenges.
- ***The Civically Engaged Reader*** (Great Books Foundation, 2006) is an anthology containing 47 short, provocative readings on associating, serving, giving, and leading, as well as discussion questions for each reading.
- ***Hearing the Call Across Traditions: Readings on Faith and Service*** (Sky Light Paths Publishing, 2009) contains over 50 readings, from diverse religious traditions, that bear on the questions *Why do I serve?*, *Whom do I serve?*, and *How do I serve?*
- ***The Perfect Gift*** (Indiana University Press, 2002) is a collection of classic short texts about giving and receiving. These pieces are rich and dense, having the “excess of meaning” that we find stimulates consequential discussion.
- ***Talking Service: Readings for Reflection*** (Great Books Foundation, 2008) is a booklet of seven short readings accompanied by discussion questions and suggested opening exercises. Each selection is short enough to read aloud at the start of a discussion, and all the selections are accessible to wide range of readers.

- *Talking Giving: Readings for Civic Reflection* (Center for Civic Reflection, 2010) is a booklet of six short readings accompanied by discussion questions and suggested opening exercises. It is intended chiefly for philanthropic groups and organizations.



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