



SUSTAINING AN OPEN HEART

"The love and discipline I bring to my students is based on a belief that there is a core of goodness in each child. I believe there is an innate thrust toward creative growth in each person. If we connect to that core, if we can nourish, affirm and acknowledge it, the seed will grow and flourish into its unique potential."

—Rachael Kessler

OVERVIEW

Staff members discuss in pairs a variety of prompts that focus on establishing healthy boundaries in order to create deeper and more positive relationships with students and colleagues.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- After introducing the practice of Focused Listening in Dyads
- To help school staff build relationship-centered classrooms:
- At the beginning of the school year with all staff
- At a day-long teacher induction program
- In a faculty meeting or professional development session
- In January, at the beginning of the new semester

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 60 minutes

LEVEL

- Adult

MATERIALS

- An open space to set up concentric circles of chairs

- Timer (smartphone or other)
- Chime

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

School staff will:

- Learn how they can compassionately express their authority
- Become more aware of the boundaries between work and personal life
- Learn about how gratitude connects with their experience of an open heart
- Explore the relationship between an open heart and working with boundaries

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Relationship skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

For facilitators: Take a moment to reflect on how respectful boundaries help you to cultivate positive relationships with colleagues and students. What helps you to set and maintain these boundaries? What gets in the way?

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Teaching with an open heart is not just about being warm and caring with our colleagues and students. It also includes having clear emotional boundaries that allow us to safely and wisely open our heart.

Boundaries and an open heart are like the two wings of a bird: without both, we cannot fly straight or for sustained periods of time. Boundaries involve our capacity to identify when we are taking on too much, when we are consciously or unconsciously trying to “fix” a student or colleague, and when we need to step in and draw a clear limit.

OPTIONAL BEGINNING (5 MINUTES)

- Introduce a simple pause or mindfulness practice for the group. For example, invite participants to:
 - Take three deep belly breaths (eyes open or closed)
 - Check in, see what is present in you: sensations - emotions - thoughts
 - Be curious about what you notice without making judgments

PART A: WHEEL-WITHIN-A-WHEEL (35 MINUTES)

Note: This protocol allows participants to explore the practice of Focused Listening in Dyads with a variety of different partners. Be sure to briefly review the guidelines for focused listening in dyads (see below).

- Participants count off by 1's and 2's.
- Ask the 1's to form a circle of chairs in the middle of the room facing out and the 2's to form an outer circle facing the inner circle.
 - If you do not have enough room for chairs, you can do this activity standing in pairs in a line.
 - If you have an odd number of participants, you can either participate in the wheel yourself or ask for one person to sit out and witness for each round of the wheel within a wheel.
 - Keep the pairs of facing chairs close, but allow for as much space between the pairs of chairs as possible.
- Tell participants that they will be experiencing a series of paired dyads with different people.
- Briefly Review the ***Focused Listening Guidelines:***
 - Each person is given equal time to talk.
 - The listener does not speak – to interpret, paraphrase, analyze, give advice, or break in with a personal story.
 - Confidentiality is maintained.
 - The speaker is not to use the time in the dyad to criticize or complain about the listener or mutual acquaintances.
 - Silence is honored: if the speaker finishes with their sharing before time is up, the pair honors the silence until the end of the time.
- Introduce the first prompt (see below), and let the inner circle know that in this round they will speak first and their partners second. Each person will have two minutes to speak. (You can vary this time 1-2 min based on the prompt, time allotted and the group.)
- The facilitator will be the timekeeper and will ring a chime or raise a hand to indicate that time is up (a timer on a smartphone is very helpful).
- Explain to the "listeners" that they are to listen without giving a verbal response.
- After two minutes is over, ring the chime or give a hand signal to indicate that the first speaker's time is up.
- Then, ask the second person in the pair to begin speaking on the same prompt (remind people of the prompt again, so everyone is clear about which prompt).
- After both members of the pair have had a turn to speak and listen, ask the people sitting in the outside circle to stand and move one chair to the left.
- For the next dyad round have the outer circle begin as speakers.
- Continue through the prompts, switching which circle/partner speaks first.

SPEAKING PROMPTS ON "SUSTAINING AN OPEN HEART"

- *What stories from your life and your school years contribute to your image of boundaries, boundary setting, and discipline? How does that impact your teaching?*
- *How can setting clear emotional boundaries for yourself support you to keep an open heart?*
- *Talk about a time when setting a boundary supported you to create an even deeper and more positive relationship with a colleague or student.*

- *Sustaining an open heart has much to do with our capacity to feel gratitude. What do you feel gratitude for in your teaching life?*

PART A DEBRIEF

- After you have completed the wheel within a wheel, take a few moments to debrief the activity. Begin by asking about the practice itself.
- Then, take a few comments about what participants learned through their conversations about the balance of an open heart and boundaries in the classroom.

PART B: CLOSING CIRCLE REFLECTION (5 MINUTES)

- Gather all the participants into a large standing circle. Say to the group:
 - *Sustaining an open heart has much to do with our capacity to feel gratitude.*
- Then invite each person to share something that they are grateful for in their work at school.
- Close by thanking everyone for their heartfelt contributions.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

For facilitators: How did people respond to this practice? Did they find it helpful? What might you change for next time?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Studies show that cultivating social and emotional skills, such as boundary setting, can help lessen [burnout and turnover](#) and increase [job satisfaction](#) in both teachers and [principals](#). In addition, these skills also help improve [relationships with students](#), leading to higher [academic achievement](#).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Establishing respectful boundaries is an essential part of an educator's teaching practice and for their own self-care. In teaching, boundaries help teachers to 1) compassionately express their authority, 2) take responsibility for themselves and their classrooms, 3) clearly define and communicate their limits, and 4) maintain caring relationships in the midst of conflict or challenge.

For their own self-care, maintaining clear boundaries between work and life is critical for teachers' well-being. One of the most challenging aspects of teaching is learning how to leave work life at school so one's personal life is not consumed by the complexities of the profession.

Many teachers struggle with the emotional burden of their teaching lives—especially because teaching involves so many personal relationships and interactions with students, col-leagues, and families. When we develop healthy habits to help leave the concerns of the workday behind, we foster clearer boundaries between our work and personal life.

SOURCE

This is a practice from [PassageWorks Institute](#) courses and workshops (e.g., Creating Engaged Classrooms, and SEL and Equity). You can also read more about this practice in [*The Five Dimensions of Engaged Teaching: A Practical Guide for Educators*](#) by Laura Weaver and Mark Wilding (Solution Tree 2013)