

MODULE 4

BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS

CONTEXT

In a community of learners, protégés learn from and support one other. They help each other reflect, plan, change, and grow as professionals. In your role as a Mentor-Coach, you can build strong communities of learners by:

- Recognizing protégés as leaders who bring strong professional skills to their work
- Forming positive relationships with protégés
- Being open to learning with and from each protégé
- Helping protégés reflect on their practice—individually and in groups.

Earlier in this unit, you explored strategies to promote reflection and reflective conferencing. You learned how to use journals to support your protégés. In this module you will reflect on your conferencing skills with a colleague. And if you would like an additional challenge, the module will introduce you to a strategy for using reflective practices in a group setting—guided discussions. These discussions, whether face-to-face or online, give protégés formal opportunities to share their knowledge and reflect on their experiences with peers.

TIME: 5 hours

OVERVIEW

- Exercise 1: Background Reading—Preparing and Facilitating Guided Discussions (30 minutes)
- A Special Case: Online Guided Discussions (1 hour)
- Exercise 2: Plan and Conduct a Face-to-Face or Online Guided Discussion (2 hours)
- Exercise 3: Analyze a Post-Observation Conference (1 hour)
- Exercise 4: Professional Development Plan (30 minutes).

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By completing this module, you will:

- Gain and be able to apply knowledge in facilitating face-to-face and online group discussions
- Learn a method for planning a focused discussion group
- Understand your strengths and challenges as a facilitator
- Enhance your knowledge of reflective conferencing skills.



EXERCISE 1: BACKGROUND READING: PREPARING AND FACILITATING GUIDED DISCUSSIONS

Please review this background reading before you move on to the next exercise. The reading provides information and tips on how to use discussions to promote group reflection.

Preparing and Facilitating Guided Discussions¹

You can use guided discussions to build and support communities of learners. Guided discussions are simply focused discussions. Discussions can occur either face-to-face, or via computer, through online guided discussions. Often, a combination of the two can extend the discussion by adding a way for protégés to continue their dialogue between scheduled meetings. You can plan and facilitate discussions on a wide range of literacy topics.

Guided discussions allow protégés to share and analyze information that they can apply to their work. They also help protégés to become self-directed learners who are more willing to implement new strategies. Protégés fully participate in the discussion, leading to a deeper level of learning that is retained for a longer period of time. All of these factors contribute to better outcomes for children of all ages.

Guided discussions have these features:

- A group that meets on a regular basis to explore new ideas.
- Group members who are prepared to talk about their practice and a child's learning.
- A leader who is willing to commit to the group and its development.
- A set of identified goals and learning objectives.
- A common stimulus derived from program materials, experiences, or other sources—video clips or observations of practice, books and journal articles, real-life vignettes, and case studies.
- A set of questions designed to guide the discussion and to help protégés reflect on their practice and ways to apply new ideas to their work.

¹ Adapted from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (1998). *Moving Ahead: A Competency-Based Training Program*. Activity 1-D: Leading a Guided Discussion. Washington, DC: Author.

As a Mentor-Coach, you lead the effort to include this strategy in your program. At first, you may need to take the responsibility for planning and facilitating guided discussions. Once the group has gained experience with this approach, other potential leaders will emerge. Your role can then shift to coaching and supporting protégés.

Step 1: Preparing for a Guided Discussion

An effective discussion begins with thoughtful planning. Experienced discussion leaders know that preparation makes their job easier. In fact, well-planned discussion groups often seem to lead themselves. You can plan a successful experience by following these steps:

- Develop a goal and learning objectives to meet the needs of participating protégés.
- Select a resource to illustrate the learning objectives and promote discussion.
- Develop discussion questions to help the staff analyze key points and practices.

Develop Goals and Learning Objectives

The goal conveys the content area of the discussion. It also may spotlight specific areas and challenges related to the topic. Often, the goal is to address an issue or new challenge the group is facing. The goals can be derived from:

- New initiatives the program is undertaking.
- Feedback about practice from Mentor-Coaches, supervisors, and program assessments.
- An area of interest that the group chooses to delve into more deeply.
- Newly-published research in the early childhood education field.

Goals are stated in broad, general terms so they are open to interpretation. Learning objectives are more specific. They clarify the goal by stating the major points you want participants to take away from the discussion.

Select a Discussion Stimulus

Now you are ready to select a resource that will serve as the stimulus for your discussion. It can be a video clip, an article on an early literacy topic, a section of a book, a case study or vignette, children’s work samples, or even new research findings. Sometimes (with permission) an actual videotape of a teacher working with a group of children can be a powerful stimulus. The resource you select should:

- Clearly illustrate the learning objectives
- Feature a situation that protégés can relate to
- Be written at a level appropriate for the group
- Demonstrate or include information on innovative practices.

You may also choose a resource that challenges protégés’ current beliefs or practices. These resources are more likely to provoke discussion than those that confirm what they already know.

Become Knowledgeable About the Resource

Develop the key points that you want to cover. Begin by becoming thoroughly familiar with the resource. Study it until you can answer these questions:

1. What is the main message of the resource? Do you agree or disagree with the message?

2. Are the ideas new? How do these ideas compare with the group’s current thinking or practice?

3. How will protégés respond to the resource? Will seasoned protégés respond differently from new ones? How could the group’s thinking differ from your own?

4. How can you use this resource to stimulate new ideas? Remember that many resources can be used for multiple purposes.

Develop Questions

When you're comfortable with the content of the resource, get ready to develop questions to guide the discussion. If the resource is part of a package, some of the questions in the user's guide may be appropriate. But, you may want to adapt the questions to focus on your group's needs and the discussion's objectives.

If you are using a resource that has no discussion guide, you will need to develop the questions. Prepare a core group of five or six primary questions. Also, develop some sub-questions to use if the group does not raise central points during the discussion. Begin with general questions about the resource and move to questions that encourage protégés to think and talk about the concepts in the resource and how they might apply them to their own practice. Some sample questions might include:

- What did you think about the reading (or the video clip)?
- For a written resource: How do the ideas in Chapter X relate to your own practice?
- For a video: What was your reaction to the staff's conversation with the toddler at the lunch table?
- What would you have done differently?

Help Others Prepare

The group members also need to prepare if they are to fully participate. You can help them by providing the resource or stimulus in advance to support thoughtful reflection. You may also want to share discussion questions.

Step 2: Facilitating a Guided Discussion

To lead a successful discussion you need to know the content. You also need to be able to facilitate the process. You must believe that others, even new protégés, have important ideas to contribute. You also need to believe that active engagement of the protégés promotes deeper learning.

Your role is to stimulate lively discussion and summarize the group's thinking. You will know that you are leading the discussion successfully when:

- Participants are fully engaged in analyzing the resource or stimulus
- Questions you put forth prompt many and varied responses
- Responses help the group delve deeper into the issues and practices
- Protégés begin to help one another think about their own practice.

Adult learning principles tell us that all learners need to know two things: (1) that the experience will be worth their time; (2) that the learning environment is safe. You can meet these needs by including time to discuss what you expect for group behavior. You can also set up some ground rules before beginning. Keep these tips in mind as the group develops its own ground rules:

- Establish that you, as the Mentor-Coach, expect to learn and explore new ideas with the group.
- Address how group members will be respectful of what others are saying and not interrupt each other in face-to-face conversations.
- Let protégés know that a successful discussion depends more on what they have to say than on what you say.

Leading the Discussion

Explain or review why you selected the resource that you will discuss. It is critical to think about what you'd like to see as the end result. Did you want to heighten the protégés' awareness? Did you want to help them make specific changes in their practices? The goals that guide your choice of resources, and how you present them, set the stage for the discussion. Participants will tune in differently and ask different questions, based on the goal of the session. When all group members understand what you expect for the session, begin the discussion.

Start by summarizing the key points of the resource. Or ask members of the group to summarize the key points. If all participants agree with the summary, ask the group to share their impressions. Use questions like the earlier examples in Step 1 under "Develop Questions".

The discussion continues with the prepared questions that you will pose to help the group fully explore important points.

Keeping the Discussion Going

A discussion in the hands of a skilled facilitator seems to run itself. In reality, a facilitator uses a number of techniques to create this illusion.

- Keep the conversation focused on the subject. Direct attention back to a particular part of the resource if the discussion is getting off track.
- Listen carefully and monitor body language to stay aware of how the group is doing. If you are not sure, check in with a simple "How are you doing with the discussion?"
- Ensure that each protégé has a chance to contribute. Engage reluctant participants by making eye contact with them and smiling. Let them know through your body language that they have your support when they are ready to speak.
- Discourage anyone from dominating the discussion by moving the question to another person or by saying, "Let's hear from someone else on that issue."

- Encourage people to address the whole group. Some participants may be tempted to direct their comments to you alone.
- Acknowledge the appropriate points made by the participants.
- Don't panic if the discussion lags; protégés may need more time to reflect on what they are hearing. Or you can try rephrasing the question. Perhaps the participants aren't responding because they didn't understand the question.
- Use humor appropriately to diffuse tension or conflict.
- You must be ready to handle challenging situations. What will you do if a protégé shares an opinion that goes against accepted practices in early education? These guidelines can help you to respond to this type of situation:
 - ❑ Always challenge ideas, never challenge the individual personally.
 - ❑ Always reinforce appropriate responses positively. Build on such responses.
 - ❑ Acknowledge the effort of a protégé regardless of her response.
 - ❑ Minimize potential embarrassment for protégés whose thinking or understanding lags behind others.

For example, a protégé suggests that it would be a good idea to teach children the alphabet by doing a “letter of the week” approach. You might respond respectfully by saying: “Yes, Sarah, it is important for children to become aware of letters. Does anyone else have thoughts about ways to expose children to the alphabet?” When you use this technique, the group is not left with the false impression that you agree that the “letter of the week” is an acceptable practice. And Sarah is not embarrassed in front of the group.

Step 3: Concluding the Discussion

Make the most out of the discussion by leaving time at the end for a wrap-up. Summarizing the key points and helping protégés to draw conclusions prevent the information from getting lost. Determine the next steps.

Summarize Key Points

Ask participants to summarize the insights they gained from the discussion. Capture not only the points that you thought were important, but also those that represent the opinion of the entire group. Record these key points.

Draw Conclusions

Help protégés to reflect on the implications that these key points have for their practice. Ask questions like: How does this information affect your work? What will you do differently as a result of the discussion? What new approach might you try in your own practice?

Determine Next Steps

Give the group the chance to continue with this same topic at the next guided discussion. Or, invite the participants to choose another area of focus. Some topics may span several discussions using different resources. Once the group has exhausted a topic, encourage each participant to develop an action plan. This plan should address how they will apply what they learned to their practice. It may include steps like these:

- Obtain more information about the discussion topic. You can do so by reading about the topic, observing staff, or discussing the topic with a supervisor or Mentor-Coach.
- Try a new practice (make sure they are concrete ideas).
- Share new information with colleagues.

Use these action plans as tools in your individual work with protégés. Set timelines for implementation and revisit the plans together on a regular basis.

A SPECIAL CASE: ONLINE GUIDED DISCUSSIONS

Like face-to-face guided discussions, online guided discussions help build a community of learners and provide an opportunity for reflection. In both types of guided discussions, a Mentor-Coach and a protégé, or a Mentor-Coach and a group of protégés, explore topics related to children's outcomes and protégés' teaching practices. Most of the concepts outlined above for face-to-face discussions are also true for online guided discussions, but for online guided discussions, the group uses e-mail or a discussion forum on the World Wide Web (Internet) like the one on STEP-Net.

Many fields—including business, youth support, and higher education—are using online discussions to provide personal and professional learning and growth opportunities.

To create and maintain an effective online discussion group, ensure that the protégés have easy access to the necessary technology. Protégés must be able to use a computer to send e-mail or add messages to a discussion forum. Mentor-Coaches provide support and training for the protégés in using technology.

Lastly, the success of this strategy depends on clear guidelines for participation. Work with protégés to develop a set of shared expectations for contributing to the discussion.

STEP-Doc 3.4a provides information to assess your readiness for facilitating an online discussion. It provides tips for getting the discussion going.

What Mentor-Coaches Can Do:

- Set up the online discussion
- Work with protégés to decide on how often to read and contribute to the online comments
- Develop a set of ground rules for participation
- Provide stimulus materials to get the online conversation started
- Regularly check in and participate in the discussion.

What Protégés Can Do:

- Respond to thought-provoking questions or reflective writing prompts
- React to each other's responses in a group e-mail discussion or online forum, asking follow-up questions and sharing their own thoughts and experiences.

Reflections on Online Discussions

Assess your readiness to use online discussions in your work with protégés. Use these questions as a guide:

1. Are you comfortable using computers and the Internet? If not, are you interested in learning more about them?

2. Do protégés have access to computers and e-mail?

EXERCISE 2: PLAN AND CONDUCT A FACE-TO-FACE OR ONLINE GUIDED DISCUSSION

This exercise will give you a chance to practice using this strategy in your work as a Mentor-Coach. You may complete the steps in the exercise on your own or work with a colleague.

Step 1: Plan and prepare for the guided discussion.

- Use the **Discussion Planning Guide** on the following page to help you plan the discussion.
- Decide whether you will plan a face-to-face or an online discussion, or a combination of both.
- Review the section in the Background Reading on how to guide a discussion. Reflect on your skills as a facilitator. Think about how these skills could influence the process.

Step 2: Conduct the guided discussion.

- At the end of the discussion, jot down thoughts or questions while the information is still fresh in your mind.

Step 3: Analyze and reflect on the experience.

Revisit your completed **Discussion Planning Guide** and your notes. If you co-
led the discussion with a colleague, meet with your partner to discuss the
experience. You may use these questions to guide your analysis and reflection:

1. Did you achieve your learning objectives for the group?
2. Was the stimulus material appropriate? Effective?
3. What were the positive outcomes of the discussion?
4. What challenges did you encounter? What strategies did you use to address these challenges? Were the strategies effective?
5. What would you do differently next time?
6. How might you incorporate the guided discussion approach into your Mentor-Coach work?
7. What resources and support will you need to use this strategy with protégés?

Discussion Planning Guide

1. What is the goal (or goals) for the discussion?
2. What are the specific learning objectives for each goal?
3. How did you arrive at these goals?
4. Who will participate?
5. What discussion stimulus will you use?
6. What are the critical points in the discussion stimulus? How do they support the goals and learning objectives for the discussion?
7. What questions will you prepare to guide the discussion?
8. Will the participants review the discussion stimulus prior to the guided discussion? If so, how will they access the information?
9. If this is an online discussion, are participants adequately prepared to engage in a successful online experience?

EXERCISE 3: ANALYZE A POST-OBSERVATION CONFERENCE

This exercise will help you build your reflective conferencing skills. It will also give you a chance to share your knowledge with and learn from a colleague.

You may want to look ahead to Unit 4 Module 4 for some tips on videotaping.

Part 1

- Choose a partner for this exercise. Your partner may be another Mentor-Coach, or it could be a colleague who is well-versed in reflective conferencing. You may also choose to complete this activity with a small group of Mentor-Coaches.
- Select a protégé who is willing to participate in a videotaped post-observation conference. Explain who will view the videotape, that it will be used to support your own professional development, and that the protégé's participation in the conference will not be judged or evaluated.
- Each partner will videotape an actual post-observation conference with a protégé. When videotaping, be sure that the sound is clear. And, make sure that the volume allows you to hear all of the conversation.
- Preview the videotape of your conference before meeting with your partner or group of colleagues. Assess the approaches and strategies that you used during the conference to guide reflection.

Part 2

- Meet with your partner or group of Mentor-Coaches. View each videotape and engage in a discussion that supports your colleague(s) in building skills and expertise in the conferencing process.
- Use the following **Post-Conference Analysis Guide** to frame your discussion.

Post-Conference Analysis Guide

1. Overall, were you or another Mentor-Coach successful in achieving the goals for the conference? What is the evidence of success?

2. What effective strategies did you use? How do these strategies support the key principles of reflection? How did you:

- Encourage and value the protégé’s voice?

- Promote reflection?

- Challenge the protégé’s thinking?

- Build on strengths?

- Focus on realistic goals?

3. What effective strategies were used to end the conference? Did you:

- Agree with the protégé about the highlights of the discussion? Agree with the protégé about the next goal to address?

- Guide the protégé in developing a “next steps” plan?

4. What major challenges did you face? Did you miss opportunities to support the protégé’s growth? What next steps would you recommend for your professional development?

EXERCISE 4: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Think back on the information in this module:

- Gaining and applying knowledge in facilitating face-to-face and online group discussions
- Learning a method for planning a focused discussion group
- Understanding your strengths and challenges as a facilitator
- Enhancing your knowledge of reflective conferencing skills.

Take a few moments to reflect on these questions:

1. What new ideas can you apply to facilitating face-to-face or online group discussions among protégés?

2. What are some skills you would like to practice? What additional knowledge do you want to acquire?

3. How will this information influence your work as a Mentor-Coach?

Based on your reflections, revisit your Mentor-Coach Professional Development Plan and make any necessary updates.

Congratulations on completing Unit 3! The skills and knowledge that you've gained so far from *Steps to Success* will help you work through **Unit 4: Using Child Assessment Information to Guide Instruction**. This final unit focuses on a critical area of young children's literacy development—phonological awareness.

STEP-Doc 3.4a: Guidelines for Online Discussions

Online discussions can provide protégés with rich opportunities to learn from and with each other. Keep these things in mind to make this strategy effective.

- 1. Are you comfortable with using computers and the Internet?** Not everyone is a “techy.” If you haven’t used computers, e-mail, and the Web very much, become familiar with these tools. Many public libraries offer free use of computers. Also, many communities have public Internet centers or “public access computing centers.” These centers offer free use of computers and free training. Call your library or city hall to find out what is available in your area, or offer to do a “knowledge trade” with a peer—for coaching you in technology, share some of your own expertise.
- 2. Does the staff have easy access to computers and the Internet? Are protégés comfortable using these tools?** Your protégés must have an easy way to get to a computer and must set aside time to use the technology for your online discussion. And, protégés must feel comfortable with *their* ability to use the technology.
 - If you are forming an e-mail discussion group, protégés need an e-mail account and use of a computer. If you are using a Web-based discussion forum, like the one on STEP-Net, protégés need to have access to the Internet and an understanding of how the forum works. They may need coaching and support from you—or from each other—to get started.
 - If protégés do not have easy access to a computer at work or at home, there are a few other options. First, talk to their supervisors to see if it is possible for them to have access to a computer. Or, contact your library or public Internet center. Then, take protégés to the library or to the Internet center to show them how to sign up for and use the computers.
 - If you are forming an e-mail discussion group, and protégés do not have work e-mail accounts, they can sign up for free accounts. They need access to the Internet to check their e-mail. The following Web site has an A-Z listing of free e-mail services with a description of each:
http://www.emailaddresses.com/guide_types.htm.

- 3. Are you ready to set up your online discussion?** If you've decided to form an e-mail discussion group, all e-mail programs give you the option to create a "group list" or "contact list." If you have never done this, click on the e-mail program's Help menu to give you guidance. Once you've set up the e-mail group on your computer, you work with each protégé to create the "contact list" in their e-mail account.

If you've decided to use a Web-based discussion like the one on STEP-Net, there are many free discussion boards. One is "QuickTopic":
<http://www.quicktopic.com/>.

- 4. Are you ready to facilitate your online discussion?** You have a key role to play as a "facilitator of and advisor to" online shared learning. Set a warm, inviting tone for discussions. Provide protégés with the technical support they need to contribute to discussions with confidence. And, provide clear guidelines and "ground rules" to help make discussions rich and effective. The following are examples of guidelines and ground rules for online discussions:

- As a group, agree upon how often—and when—you will check and contribute to online discussions. Will everybody read comments and write in twice per week? Will they read and respond on Monday and then later in the week? Choose whatever works best for your group.
- Provide a writing prompt by sending an e-mail or posting the first message on a Web-based discussion forum. You may want to send a prompt to the group each week to help guide the discussion. But, be flexible. If a topic flows over from a previous week and participants want to keep talking about it, let the discussion flow. After a while you can ask participants to take turns providing writing prompts. Ask them to provide prompts that come from their own classroom experiences and represent challenges in their practice.
- Make your first "writing prompt" an easy "icebreaker" discussion to create a warm, collegial atmosphere. For example, share some thoughts with them about why you enjoy working with children or your favorite children's books. Ask participants to respond to your thoughts and share their own stories.
- Work with protégés to come up with a set of "ground rules" to guide your discussions. These could include: what is written by our group stays in our group; there are no stupid questions; we will give only constructive feedback, and we are all experts and learners who have strengths and areas to improve.

- In addition to the ground rules, share some of these specific, time-tested suggestions to help online discussions stay friendly and effective:
 - ❑ Avoid sarcasm—it is impossible to tell if you are being serious or joking when you use sarcasm in an online discussion.
 - ❑ Avoid using all capital letters—it is shocking to the eyes and can make it seem like you are angry.
 - ❑ Respond to others' messages and discussion-board comments—don't just read them and “stay silent.”
 - ❑ Read all messages or discussion-board comments before replying—someone may have already asked the question or made the comment you're thinking of.
 - ❑ In e-mails, write very specific subject headings that refer to the topic being discussed. Doing that helps discussions stay focused and clear.
 - ❑ Never worry about grammar, punctuation, spelling errors, or typos—everybody makes them, and it's the idea that counts.

UNIT 3 REFERENCES

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