

Lifelong Learning Collaborative

LLC Collaborative Learning Guidelines



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What is Collaborative Learning? Why is it Our Preferred Learning Style?

LLC is a lifelong learning organization devoted to the principle of collaborative learning. This means that our courses are smaller, seminar-style classes designed to actively involve all course participants. We believe that working together to learn something improves the learning experience for all.

Our course leaders are peers, not “teachers,” who may or may not be expert in the field of the course topic; they are referred to as “coordinators.” They organize the course, devise a syllabus, and suggest print and on-line resources; they do not lecture. Most often the coordinator will ask each course participant to lead a portion of a class meeting. This leader, known as the “session leader,” will research a topic selected from the syllabus, present key material, and then lead a discussion. Occasionally session leaders bring in a guest speaker or show a relevant video before leading the discussion.

The coordinator may organize the class in another way, for example by suggesting readings for each class session, which are then discussed. Expectations of class members will be clearly defined in the course description. The important point is that everyone shares in the success of the learning experience. This is the essence of collaborative learning.

Sometimes new members report feeling a bit intimidated by the expectation for active participation, but almost everyone comes to enjoy this style of learning.

The Advantages of this Method of Learning

- Promotes the sharing of diverse views and opinions, based on participants’ varied life experiences.
- Encourages discussion and questioning, often leading to new or unexpected perspectives.
- Creates opportunities for learning communication, public speaking, and technology skills.
- Provides connection to peers and opportunities for new friendships.
- Requires active learning, which leads to improved memory and deeper understanding of subject matter.
- Stimulates reading, research, learning, and social interactions beyond the classroom.
- Builds confidence and a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.
- Leads to self-discovery and self-actualization.

Testimonials from our Members

“I joined LLC a couple of years ago. I started with a Memoir Writing class; hearing everyone’s stories and sharing mine created some wonderful friendships. I also participated in two theatre classes and expanded my horizons there as well. I now enjoy dinner and theatre with my LLC friends. Recently I took the plunge and facilitated a course on The Nature of Spirituality. I was nervous at first, since I have no qualifications in the field, but I had a great co-coordinator and learned a lot. I look forward to each LLC semester to see what interesting courses are offered. LLC has enriched my life.”
DTF, retired speech/language pathologist

“I came to Providence newly retired (for the love of a woman--that old saga), knowing no one in the city, and not knowing of any outlets for the intellectual stimulation I sought. I stumbled upon LLC. I was able to delve into a broad array of fascinating courses (with no degree requirements and no grades!), and I suddenly found myself in close connection with many incredibly wonderful people from Providence and surrounding towns. LLC has been nothing short of a godsend for me. Come join us!”
GH, retired corporate lawyer

“When I was young, I studied sciences and psychology in preparation for my career. I missed the opportunity to learn about art, music, history, literature, and philosophy. Now retired, I am getting my ‘second liberal arts education’, studying all those subjects I missed out on the first time around. I actually do work hard (by choice), but I get tremendous enjoyment and satisfaction. Discussions in class, including people with varied life experiences, are always enriching. I love LLC!”
CC, retired physician

“I joined LLC about three years ago. It was in the memoir class that I realized the full potential of all that LLC has to offer. Simply put, LLC changed my life. Through writing my memoirs, I began to live fully in the present and to anticipate an exciting future. I made many new friends and expanded my social network. I actively serve as a coordinator in art-related courses. My advice to anyone considering joining LLC? Don’t wait. Do it now. Sample a variety of classes until you find the ones that fit you best. It will change your life, too.”
SKL, writer/photographer

“I joined LLC two years ago and have taken two courses since, both of which I hugely enjoyed. Learning takes place in a congenial environment among small groups of like-minded people who nevertheless bring diverse backgrounds to the subjects being discussed. I find these discussions informative and the exchange of ideas always stimulating. For me, taking an LLC course is a thoroughly pleasurable experience.”
AB, retired military officer

“What makes LLC collaborative? Everyone participates! What makes it fun? Everyone participates! What makes it Lifelong Learning? It’s fun, so you’ll come back for more. Everyone comes to LLC to enjoy a shared learning experience. Best of all, the days of competing for grades are long gone, so participants are supportive of and helpful to each other as they explore a topic together.”
EB, lifelong learner

Role of the Session Leader I

In LLC, we all learn together. In most courses, each participant will be asked to enhance the learning experience by leading a portion of a class meeting. This expectation will be made clear in the catalogue description. Although this may seem intimidating at first, most of our members find that they learn the most when they prepare to lead a session.

Most often, session leaders will research a topic selected from the syllabus, present key material, and then lead a discussion. Prior to the class, the session leader may assign reading material and/or hand out a list of questions for the class to ponder. Occasionally, session leaders bring in a guest speaker or show a video before leading a discussion. Sometimes several class members will cover their assigned sessions as a team. Different subject matter and classes provide other kinds of opportunities for leading a session.

The coordinator is always available to help and advise.

In addition to preparing content, session leaders should use a few simple techniques for leading a stimulating session:

- **Observe time limits:** Rehearse the presentation or edit the video to make sure that it fits within the timeframe. This is very important in order to leave time for discussion and in fairness to other presenters.
- **Limit the amount reading from a prepared text:** Remember that reading more than two pages of text without a pause can become boring to the class. Instead, try to develop an outline or note cards rather than reading an entire presentation. Presenters who choose to read should plan to take pauses for questions and discussion.
- **Use presentation technology:** PowerPoint, audio clips, videos, photos, and images can dramatically enhance presentations. These technologies get easier to use all the time and LLC members will have many opportunities to learn how to use them. If you use presentation technology, be sure you are familiar with the equipment available in the classroom and use the technology appropriately. The class coordinator should be able to help.
- **Be sure you can be heard:** We have microphones in the classrooms and urge you to use them if you have difficulty projecting your voice or if the class is large.
- **Focus on two or three stimulating questions:** The most interesting presentations and discussions are not compendiums or summaries of everything known about the topic. Instead, they focus on the most prominent points of controversy and/or new research relevant to the topic. They provide the necessary background information so that the class can understand those interesting controversies and new developments.
- **Share your sources:** After a stimulating session, class members may want to learn more. It can be very helpful to share a short list of print and Internet sources (which can be sent out via email).

Role of the Session Leader II - Researching a Topic

Your job as a session leader is to bring the class information about a topic so the group can discuss it. You will want to explain the main facts and ideas, and you will also want to explore a range of opinions about them.

Once you have selected your topic, write down a few basic questions you might want to answer about it. Make up questions which begin with words such as what, who, where, how, when, and why since these often help to organize research. Simply put, ask yourself two questions: What is this topic really about? Why is it interesting?

The session leader will dig into the topic and become very familiar with the most relevant aspects, such as its history, its prominent personalities, its methods of analysis, its controversies, and so on. Along the way, session leaders should explore a variety of sources, taking note of issues and themes that might prompt interesting discussion during class. The coordinator is always available to make suggestions about resources that may be helpful in exploring subject matter.

Now you are ready to begin browsing to get an overview of what is available to answer your questions. You might:

- Go to a bookstore, a library, or an online vendor such as Amazon. See what writers have published about your topic. Try to find current material.
- Go to Google or Yahoo or wherever you are most comfortable on the Internet and type in your basic questions. Get an idea of what information is available online. You might find a mini-lecture on YouTube or an article on a website that seems promising.

Now, select some material to actually read, or listen to, or watch. Most people find one or two hours of sustained study every day for a week or so is enough to bring a topic into focus.

Take notes, being particularly careful to make note of your source. Good research includes not only what you learn, but also where you learned it. You might need more time or less, but the key is to allow yourself plenty of time to think about your topic and to become really familiar with it. Then you will be well prepared to decide how to facilitate a good class discussion.

Will you read a brief statement about it? Will you speak using notes from an outline? Will you show something you found online? How will you make your topic come alive?

You won't be able to tell the class everything you learned about your topic, but you will want to touch on the major themes surrounding it. You will want to explain why those themes are key to understanding the topic. The rest of the important material will emerge in the discussion. Keep that in mind as you do your research.

Role of the Session Leader III - Developing a Great Presentation

Presentations by class members are a core component of many LLC classes. In an art class, for example, a session leader might present a slide show with informative commentary. In a literature class a session leader might present her analysis of a story while also presenting information about the author. In a current issues class, session leaders might share data, examples and the history of a problem while building an argument in favor of a preferred solution.

Clearly the nature of presentations will vary from class to class. At the same time, there are some aspects of good presentations that are consistent across classes:

- The session leader is excited about the subject matter and willing to take a risk in sharing newly learned content.
- The session leader has made a selection from among the available information, analyses and ideas regarding the topic, narrowing down the focus to a few major points, with a theme or thesis, and with vivid examples.
- The session leader has arranged the content into a predictable sequence or structure, using his/her own words, rather than repeating extensive quotes from sources.
- The session leader has made an effort to keep class members engaged.

Shaping and Arranging the Information

Once you have selected and researched your topic, and checked with the coordinator to confirm the preferred thematic or analytical approach to new content, here are several steps leading to a great presentation.

1. Sort your information into categories: Take a few minutes to sort through the ideas, stories and information from your reading and research, to put the various materials into categories. Such sorting will definitely speed up the writing of the text for your presentation. Here are some categories for sorting.
 - Generally known information
 - Information, analyses, and/or examples that are of particular relevance to the themes of the class
 - Facts and examples that are new or surprising to you, as well as examples, data and stories that might be particularly engaging for class members
 - Controversial aspects of the topic, along with a couple of experts' stances on these controversies
 - Background information that will help class members understand all of the information in the other categories
2. Make an outline: Now, you should easily be able to generate an outline or a first draft of your presentation. You could, for example, rearrange the categories into the order you prefer, using the category titles listed above, and write through your researched information, using your own words and preferred focus. Or you could generate an outline of major ideas, as suggested by the class themes, and then slot in your researched information to support and explain those ideas. Or you can develop your outline or draft, using this audience-centered sequence.

- Introduction: A short opening “hook,” such as a brief story, surprising facts, a dramatic scene, or a concise quote from an expert. Follow this with a clear statement of your specific topic, then a simple list of the three or four items or issues you will explore, plus a one-sentence statement of your main overall message.
 - Body: Systematically explore each of your three or four core issues or items. For each item, be sure to explain or define it in your own words, provide interesting examples, and draw on the opinion of experts if these help you clarify difficult points.
 - Conclusion: Briefly summarize the main ideas of your presentation. Then, close with a final anecdote or look to the near future regarding your topic and main message.
3. Include class participation: Once you have completed a draft or a set of note cards for your presentation, decide when and how you will invite your classmates to participate. You might start by asking for their impressions and questions about your topic; and/or you could pause at the end of each section to ask if they have any added insights on the points covered, so far. Of course, at the end you should allot time for further question and discussion on your topic.

Final Preparations

- Once you have a draft or set of note cards, *rehearse it*. Make sure you can move through all of your content in a relaxed manner within the allotted time, including time for questions and answers. Revise as needed.
- Get feedback. Rehearse in front of a classmate, friend, or a spouse, to see if the stories are making an impact and if the content is clear. Listen to their suggestions and revise to improve the impact on the listener.
- If you use notes or read text you have written, be sure to make frequent eye contact with the audience during the presentation.
- Check and recheck the technology you are using as part of your presentation. Make sure you can handle the devices comfortably and that they are completely compatible with the hardware in the classroom. Test the compatibility in the week prior to your presentation.
- Use a microphone if you have any difficulty projecting your voice; many LLC members have impaired hearing.
- Have fun!! LLC is a supportive environment and you have friends.

Role of the Session Leader IV - Leading a High Quality Discussion

A good discussion session in an LLC class is very satisfying. Through the give-and-take of ideas, information, analysis and stories, class members gain a new or deeper understanding the topic being studied. During a good discussion, participants listen to each other, they respond directly to each other and stay on topic, while offering new information, relevant examples or clarifying analyses, and they consider a wide range of related issues until they have new perspectives.

Session leaders can help the class engage in this kind of high quality discussion by asking stimulating, thought-provoking questions, and by mediating the give-and-take to ensure a productive interchange of ideas and opinions that will keep the dialogue moving forward.

A Crucial Element: Purposeful Questions

Good questions help class members to examine a topic or item more closely, to tease apart its complexities, and/or to clearly articulate why they like an item such as a work of art or a novel, or why they support a line or argument or public issue. Different subject areas (such as literature vs. current issues, vs. the law, etc.) may call for different kinds of questions, and subject-based questions can be found at the LLC website (link address). In general, however, session leaders can develop a stimulating array of questions by drawing on the journalist's "5-W's": Who, What, Where, When, Why, plus How? This scheme works well when the W's are paired into stimulating, open-ended questions, for example: "What is this play about and why is it so powerful?" Or: "How did this problem arise and what solutions have been tried?"

A variation on the 5-W's question format comes from the great rhetorical tradition of Aristotle: describe, analyze, argue. This scheme works best sequentially, starting with description. "How would you describe this item, problem or place?" Then analysis, with questions that target parts, process and comparisons: "What are the major parts of this item, problem or place?" "What is it similar to?" "How does it work?" "What are its causes?" "What are its effects?" Then, ask participants to take a stand. "What would be the best possible solution?" "Why is this an important work of art (or not)?" And so on.

In addition to developing an array of questions about the subject matter, session leaders should consider sharing them ahead of time through email or as a handout during the prior class meeting. Also, consider having a mix of brief presentations and discussion: A few class members could be ready to give brief initial responses to the prompt questions, and then class members can respond with follow-up commentary to each initial response. Also, at the start of the session, session leaders can offer a few minutes of free response time, or "venting," for those who have strong personal feelings about the topic. But leaders should keep this activity limited; such venting is not a substitute for the discussion prompted by a planned sequence of questions.

A Crucial Element: Mediated Exchanges

Once a question is posed and a response is offered, a good discussion leader has two tasks: Encourage everyone to participate with more responses but keep the give-and-take on topic.

Session leaders can encourage everyone to participate by asking for different kinds of contributions to the discussion, including:

- Initial answers to core questions

- Follow-up responses that give more examples, or helpful new information, and/or *relevant* personal stories
- Follow-up opposing responses that give valid contrary data, and/or counter experiences or information
- Deeper probing into the topic through: unique analyses, new comparisons, alternative contexts and/or more background information

At the same time, session leaders should be vigilant about helping the group stay on topic by using the following strategies.

- Break complex responses into small chunks for consideration
- Focus the group's attention on one or two recurring threads that seem to be of concern to everyone
- Move the group onto the next set of questions in a timely manner
- Watch for problematic participants and be ready to act assertively
 - Many participants have a tendency to express random opinions rather than stay on topic. ("Well, I think . . ."). Session leaders should not hesitate to redirect the discussion back to the core topic ("We can come to that point later, right now, would someone like to respond to . . .?")
 - Some responders always jump in first and comment on everything, while some responders want to win an argument rather than analyze a topic or hear other's views. These participants drive others out of the discussion. Session leaders must make room for other opinions and/or analysis ("The question under discussion is . . . Is there another way to pull apart the problem? How about looking more closely at . . .? Even if you do not agree, what might be another perspective . . . Let's give others a chance to speak.")
 - Some participants may be very hesitant to speak publicly. LLC believes that everyone has something to contribute at some point during a class. Thus, session leaders should keep inviting all class members to participate and offer different ways of responding. Sometimes quieter members will respond to requests for special kinds of responses, such as sharing relevant personal stories, unusual examples and comparisons, or by taking on unusual perspectives for a few moments. ("If you were "X" in this case, how would you respond?"). In addition, session leaders can hold small group discussion before whole class discussion and /or ask for short written answers before whole group discussion; both strategies give quieter class members alternative ways of sharing their ideas and responses.

Role of the Session Leader V - Videos in Presentations

Why Use Videos?

In an LLC music class or theater class, for example, historic performances of pieces and plays could easily be displayed via streaming video. In a current issues class, videos of interviews and debates among experts could be viewed and compared. In a class focused on a place, such as in a class on cities or a class on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a video walk through a city like Dublin would be readily available. Such displays would certainly add clarity and impact to a presentation.

Video Resources

For streaming video, YouTube and TED are but two of the many Internet sites that make videos available for free, and such sites can be easily accessed in the LLC classroom. YouTube and TED host huge archives, containing videos addressing all of the topics studied in LLC classes. TED features high-quality talks by experts on innumerable issues. YouTube hosts digitized versions of new and classic recordings, films, TV documentaries, interviews and more. For movies and CD versions of audio content, the public library and a service like Netflix offer a wide range of content. www.TED.com www.YouTube.com

Tips for Integrating Videos into a Presentation

- **Target the Content:** Video content should be an element within a presentation; *it should not be the whole presentation*. Nothing replaces a presenter's interaction with the class. Thus, once you have a draft of your presentation in hand, decide when and approximately how long to use video content. For example, a short clip from a video could be a great opener for a presentation, really grabbing the class's attention, or a powerful closer, adding a visual element at the end. Or a few clips shown at intervals throughout a presentation could prompt discussion on different but related themes.
- **Visit Streaming Video Sites:** Select and visit one of the easy-to-use sites, but before visiting, assemble a list of search words, including topical words and descriptive terms, names of experts and formats, such as interview, documentary, performance, etc. Enter the various terms into the site's search bar, and sample many of the listed videos. Use links on the site's sidebars to connect to other relevant videos.
- **Save and Integrate:** Once you have located an appropriate video clip, save its Internet address. Use the bookmark feature of your web browser, or copy the web address at the top of the screen and paste it into your slide show or into a digital version of your text or notes cards. Place the address at the exact point in your presentation where the video should be displayed. Then, during your presentation, a click on the address should link directly to the video.
- **Practice:** Rehearse your presentation including the video display; do it again and again until you feel comfortable with the routine. Usually, you can control the start and stopping points of a video by managing the time-elapsed bar at the bottom of the screen. Also, ask for help and support from the course coordinator. The coordinator will help you set up the technology in the room and help you manage it during a presentation. Anticipate problems. Sometimes video or audio technology just does not work during a class session. Be prepared to do the presentation without these elements. Presenters can always share the links to the video after the class, through email.

Role of the Session Leader VI - Technology Resources

Many session leaders use computer visual and audio technology to facilitate their presentations because these enable the showing of videos, the displaying of photos, graphical data or other images, the playing of audio files or recordings, and the efficient sharing of text. While it is true that some presentations and some LLC classes can function without a technology component, the use of presentation technologies--when done well—reinforces the presenter's crucial ideas, clarifies the line of thinking, provides a display of relevant examples in a simple and powerful manner, and, generally, makes a presentation more memorable. Furthermore, digital slideshows (like PowerPoint) are extremely easy to assemble and the 'drafting' process can help session leaders sharpen and organize their presentations as well as increase their topic's inherent audience appeal.

Computer Slideshow Guidelines

For typical LLC class presentations, a good slideshow usually has three crucial components (not including the research and reading that usually *precede* the drafting of any presentation).

1. Title slide: This first slide should display a pithy, very short headline that captures the core subject and the central thesis of the presentation.
2. Four-to-eight topical slides: Each topical slide should capture one main idea in the presentation. For a typical twenty-minute presentation, there will not be time for more than eight slides, with each slide exhibiting a minimal amount of text, usually with a relevant photo or image. The sequence of these slides should be easy for viewers to anticipate, because the slide sequence should follow a discernable order: chronological order, narrative order, geographical order, or some other logical order.
3. A summary slide: One final slide should bring together and reinforce the main ideas in the presentation, perhaps in a bulleted list or a final short quotation from a source.

Slideshow software comes loaded with formatted slides in dazzling colors and preset text boxes. These are "eye candy." Do not let eye candy substitute for good content. Have good content and take control of the options offered in the software, as follows.

Six Steps to a Great Slideshow

1. First, do the research and decide on the general ideas for the presentation. Also, check with the coordinator to make sure that the slideshow software is compatible with the technology in the classroom.
2. Now, develop the *text* for the topical slides: First, put the main ideas into an easy-to-follow outline of four to eight elements. Then, reduce the words in this outline *to the least amount of words possible for each idea*. Use this reduced text for the four-to-eight topical slides.
3. Now, load the text into the topical slides and check for the following features:
 - a. Can you make use of bulleted lists and various font styles (bold, italic, etc.), to clarify the message?
 - b. Have you kept the same font from the beginning to the end of the show?

- c. Is the text on each slide large enough to be read easily from the back of the room? A font size of 30 points, at least, is a handy guide.
 - d. Have you avoided copying lines of text from a source onto a slide? (*Never* copy and paste long quotes onto a slide. Such text is always unreadable, unless it is very short.)
 - e. Have you used black as text color? Black is the most readable text color on screen (unless the formatted slide provides an alternative readable color).
 - f. To enhance the impact of a slide, have you added visual content like a photo or an image? But remember the rule of thumb for visual content: Less is more. Use only the most relevant and clear photos, drawings or images.
4. As each reduced-text slide is developed, also draft a separate and parallel set of notes, explanations and comments. These notes can become the basis of the written and spoken texts that accompany the slide show.
 5. Now develop the title and summary slides, following the same processes.
 6. Once the slide show and the accompanying written and spoken text are complete, rehearse the presentation, to make sure it fits within the timeframe and to feel comfortable handling the technology while making the presentation.

Temple Beth-El Policies for LLC Classes

Access

Access to the Temple for LLC classes will be through the rear entrance from the parking lot. Since access to the Temple is restricted, LLC members should push the button to signal the office and will be buzzed in.

Emergencies

For all medical, fires, and other genuine emergencies, call 911 and then call the Temple office 401-331-6070 Ext 105. Any concerns or complaints about the conditions in the classrooms, which are not deemed emergencies, should be reported to the coordinator only. The coordinator can contact the LLC Temple liaison, David Hansen, at 401-726-0171 or ampa8hansen@gmail.com. Do not bring minor issues to the Temple staff.

Parking

The assigned parking spaces in the Temple parking lot belong to the Rabbi and staff of Temple Beth-El. Please do NOT park in these assigned spaces. Any vehicles parked in assigned spaces will be subject to towing at owner's expense. There is usually ample parking on Orchard Street, so if the lot is full, please park on Orchard Street.

Food

Food is not allowed in the classrooms. Beverages are permitted, but must be covered.

Food is permitted in the break room from 9 AM – 5 PM and in the meeting hall during Brown Bag lunches, parties, and other special events.

Any food brought into the Temple must not include pork, pork products, or shellfish and should not mix meat and dairy in the same dish.

Be sure to clean up after eating or drinking in any room.

Cancellations

If the Temple closes for inclement weather, LLC classes for that day will be cancelled. The Temple director will notify the LLC president, the curriculum committee chair, and the LLC Temple liaison. The curriculum committee chair will notify the coordinators, who, in turn will notify their class participants by email. All communications should happen in a timely fashion.

In the event of a funeral at the Temple, the venue for our classes may change or, in rare cases, classes may be cancelled. Communication to class members will occur as above.