

The Deschooling Convivium

Handbook for Leaders

compiled by Charles Eisenstein

What is a Deschooling Convivium?

A Deschooling Convivium is a regular gathering of students (and sometimes faculty and former students, which includes pretty much everybody) dedicated to undoing the habits of the classroom.

And what are the habits of the classroom? Here is a partial list:

- Looking to an outside authority (teacher, book) for answers.
- Looking to an outside authority for questions.
- Having assignments
- Being graded
- Being examined
- Wanting to be right
- Expecting rewards for being right
- Self-censorship
- Sitting in rows
- Being passive
- Wanting to be told what to do
- Automatic opposition to and distrust of all authority
- Pretending to care
- Doing things "good enough" and no better
- Staying in the head
- Being objective
- Playing it safe
- Scoring points
- Not being real
- Being academic
- Not showing real feelings
- Not letting yourself be vulnerable
- Competition
- Raising your hand
- Seeking approval
- Learning by being "taught"

The habits of the classroom might be appropriate in certain circumstances—for instance, in a classroom. The problem is that these habits become so ingrained that they become a way of life that infects our relationships, our learning, and our whole approach to life.

For example, have you ever known a professor who tends to "lecture" even when he's not in a classroom? Have you ever found yourself craving step-by-step instructions on how to accomplish something in life, not sure how to even begin figuring it out for yourself? Have you become uncomfortable or irresponsible in situations where it is unclear exactly what is expected of you? In the classroom we are typically granted very little freedom—has that become a habit too, so that you are unused to freedom or even a little bit afraid of it? Do you find yourself often afraid to speak up, for fear of saying something "wrong"? Are you so used to being told what to do, doing your assignments, that you aren't sure what you really want to do with your life? Are you such a stranger to your passion in life that you assume you must be lazy? Do you feel that you are not really living your own life, and instead living a life structured by other people's expectations?

Apathy, sullenness, and resentment, you see, are a normal response to being coerced into doing that which we don't truly want to do. And this history runs so deep and it includes almost all of us. How many fourth graders actually want to learn long division and the state capitals and Vasco de Gama and the presidents? If your favorite subjects were recess and lunch, then you know you weren't doing what you wanted to. The apathy of the schoolchild is a natural response—even a noble response—to the

ordeal of the classroom. But then that apathy too becomes a habit, and we float through life maintaining a cynical distance from the world, unwilling to commit fully to anything or anyone. We become cynical, indifferent, or blindly rebellious.

About Deschooling Convivium Activities

One of the most toxic hidden lessons of school is that learning is hard. The reason it seems hard is that school makes it hard, which in turn renders us dependent and reliant on teachers experts, and other authorities. And how is learning made hard? It is made hard by being forced on us. You see, anything is hard if we don't want to do it, because then we are struggling against ourselves. When we are really interested in something, learning comes easy. So you can see that when we become apathetic, everything seems hard and we shy away from challenges, find the easy way, become slackers, and lose our innate sense of self-confidence. Actually, learning is easy.

The challenge in the enterprise of deschooling is to break free of those habits of indifference, playing it safe, cynicism, and non-commitment. Deschooling doesn't happen by sitting around talking about it. Deschooling is about transformation—the shedding of an old way of being in favor of a new. It is not that the old disappears, it is just that unconscious behavior patterns become conscious, so that we are no longer slaves to them. And this too is not hard! It is scary though. The main barrier to deschooling is fear. We stay in our comfort zone and are afraid to enter new territory. (And if you think about it, you may find that this cautiousness is also a result of our schooling.)

Without a firm intention going into a Deschooling Convivium, it is possible that no one will leave their comfort zone, and it will be no different from any other student gathering. The conversation will devolve into superficial topics that don't touch anything real in anyone. Everyone will be presenting and upholding their usual persona, not being real, playing it safe, not opening, not trusting.

With this in mind, however, we can say that almost any activity is suitable for a Deschooling Convivium. Each leader will have different strengths, and no two conviviums will ever be alike. There is no "curriculum" for a Deschooling Convivium! The Deschooling Convivium is an organic entity that grows and adapts over time. The Deschooling Convivium you experienced as a participant may be very different from the one you experience as a leader. In fact the whole idea of faithfully replicating a curriculum, of administering a program created by someone else, is contrary to the spirit of the Deschooling Convivium. I encourage you to make it your own. Experience freedom. If you try to do it the same way as you experienced it, and try to "be" whoever it was that led it, you will only end up as an inferior version of that leader. If you make it yours and be yourself, you will be awesome even when you make mistakes, because no one in the world is better at being you than you are. You, in your fullness. Really, the only way it "won't work" is if you do not hold the intention of the Deschooling Convivium and let it deteriorate into a bull session, chatting about all the usual stuff.

The Deschooling Convivium will be different from any other student club or informal gathering of friends. Whether as participant or leader you will learn new things about yourself and become comfortable with a way of being that is more effective, more authentic, and more free than what is ordinary. So in contrast to the habits of schooling, the Deschooling Convivium fosters:

- Self-confidence
- Autonomy
- Honesty
- Cooperation
- Leadership
- Listening
- Trust
- Acceptance of others
- Non-judgmentality
- Spontaneity

- Fearlessness
- Independence
- Interdependence
- Mindfulness
- Imagination
- Integrity
- Commitment

Some Ground Rules

Before I describe some of the activities that worked well in our Convivium, I will offer some general principles for creating a space where all of this can happen. None of the activities will be effective without an atmosphere of comfort, acceptance, and trust. These will grow over time of course, and will grow even faster in the context of some important ground rules:

1. Anyone is free to opt out of any activity he or she feels uncomfortable with. He/she then takes the role of a silent witness. There is no stigma attached to this choice. We fully trust in each person's wisdom to know when it is time to take the next courageous step. We remind each other that we all have our own unique fears and limitations—what may be trivial for one person could be huge for someone else. We provide a space for people to unfold according to their own inner timing, which we recognize as perfect.
2. We maintain confidentiality without secrecy. Anything someone shares in the Deschooling Convivium remains in that sacred space and we don't share it outside the group. At the same time, nothing we do is secret. We are completely open about everything we do. All of our activities are public knowledge and may be publicly shared.
3. The membership of a Deschooling Convivium stays constant over the entire 8-12 week duration. We do not bring in guests or add new members halfway through. At least, that is my suggestion. The reason is that trust builds with familiarity, and the learning and personal breakthroughs tend to be cumulative. Each session builds on all that went before it. It is best if people don't join halfway through.
4. The Deschooling Convivium has leadership without hierarchy. The leader or leaders never attempt to coerce, command, pressure, or control. They do not seek to establish their authority. They do not try to exact promises from participants or enforce promises or "hold people accountable." That would be a school model. We trust in people's higher accountability, to themselves.
5. No money is exchanged for a Deschooling Convivium. There is no tuition and the leaders are not paid. The only exception is to equally share the cost of the venue rental, or other direct expenses such as if you rent a van to go somewhere.
6. No academic credits are involved in a Deschooling Convivium. The motivation for participating comes entirely from within.
7. I feel it is very important for the leader not to exchange sexual or romantic energy with any of the participants. It may or may not be helpful to declare this intention to the group. Even if you do not declare it out loud, set that intention to yourself. It will enhance the atmosphere of trust.

Attendance

One of the habits of the classroom we have identified is indifference, which arises from the common recognition that what happens in a classroom doesn't really matter. Even though a teacher may employ

persuasion and threats to make students behave *as if* it mattered, the very setup of school sends the opposite message. For example, no matter what you are doing, when the bell rings you start doing something else, switching abruptly to another subject. What really matters more than whatever you are doing is the schedule, the clock. The extreme disconnection among school subjects furthers the sense that none of it relates, none of it matters. And then once the test is over, you rarely need to apply it ever again. You might read Macbeth and have to know some things about it, but it won't be part of your life after that unit is over.

Another source of indifference stems from the hierarchical model of knowledge dispensation. It does not matter if student A or student B is missing that day, because all knowledge comes from the teacher or the book. The other people in the class are not really essential to the stated purpose of the classroom. You could be alone there, or in a different classroom in a different city, and still get the same material. Standardized curricula administered by standardized teachers in standardized classrooms to standardized students ensures that it doesn't matter who else comes to class. It stands to reason that it doesn't matter to anyone else whether you come to class either. If you are absent, the class breezily proceeds without you. If you are late, it starts without you. You have no responsibility toward your classmates to be there. Why should it matter—they'll still get the lesson. It is everyone for themselves. Without interdependency, there is no community but instead competition.

In a Deschooling Convivium this is one of the habits we seek to undo. We consider ourselves a community and we know that because we generate the Deschooling Convivium ourselves, the absence of any participant diminishes the power of the gathering. In other words, you matter. We keep a list of cellphone numbers and if someone hasn't arrived by the starting time, we are concerned and we give them a call. If we know beforehand that we can't make it that evening, we send out an email so that our friends won't worry, and so the leader can plan for the activities. In short, we treat the Deschooling Convivium as if it mattered. We undo the habit of cynicism that we have so rightly cultivated in the context of the vast pretense of forced schooling. We meet a deep longing to do something we actually care about, and to commit to something bigger than ourselves.

At the same time, we don't put any pressure on any participant to attend. If someone says they won't be coming, we don't try to make them justify their choice. If they give a reason, we don't question their reason or try to convince them to change their mind. When someone emails me and says, "I have a lot of homework this week and I'm not sure I'll be able to make it," I usually say something like, "Respect yourself, be gentle with yourself. We would love to have you with us. We will miss you. Let me know for sure as soon as you can." We don't need to put pressure on people, because we trust them to know their highest good, and we give them space to follow that.

Creating a Sacred Space

More than we usually realize, the human mind operates in a realm of ritual and symbol. The leader can utilize this fact to signal to the unconscious mind of all participants that this is not an ordinary gathering. One way to do this is to prepare the space in a way that makes it special. Candles or music might be effective in accomplishing this, or a beautiful welcome sign on the threshold. In addition, each session can begin with a symbolic signal: a declaration, a chime, a turning off of the music, lighting a special light or candle. The message being communicated is, "You have now entered a special time and space." There has to be an identifiable beginning moment that gives people unconscious permission to lay their ordinary state of being aside. Without a clear beginning it is as if it never starts and never really happens.

In addition to a brief opening ceremony (which could be as simple as declaring, "The Deschooling Convivium is now convened"), I like to open with a dedication. Usually I say something like, "The Deschooling Convivium is dedicated to creating the more beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible." It is actually probably more powerful to state it in the first person: "I dedicate today's Deschooling Convivium to the more beautiful..." or "I dedicate today's Deschooling Convivium to love," or to justice, to peace, to beauty, to the trees, to the living planet, to the awakening of all beings, to all children everywhere, to the healing of hurts. Whatever fits in with the theme for that day. The purpose of the dedication is to reinforce the message of the opening—that this is no ordinary gathering; it is an intentional gathering for a heartfelt purpose. The dedication is especially important for the leader. For me it is a reminder of why I am here. It affirms my intention to stay true to my purpose. It reminds me that I'm not here for my ego agenda of looking good, being right, establishing my social identity. I am here to pass on a gift that I have received. I add my own contribution and pass it on.

After the dedication I recommend some kind of check-in ceremony that involves all participants. The leader poses a topic and we go around the circle, or we take turns spontaneously until everyone has spoken. Here are some examples that worked for us:

"Your name, something that made you laugh recently, something that made you cry." Encourage people to be specific.

"Your name, and something beautiful to you." Again, something specific.

"Your name, and something that strikes you with awe." I like always beginning with "your name", because it has the effect of each person declaring themselves present. Names are powerful!

"State your name, then demonstrate a posture or gesture that expressed how you feel right now." Or "... how you felt overall this week."

"...something you want to do but are afraid to."

"...your greatest gift."

"...Something you wish you could change about yourself."

I'm sure you can think of lots more. Often you will be able to choose an opening that fits in to the rest of what you have planned. The best ones are those that invite us to be vulnerable. One that did not work was when we shared about someone we admired. It was too tempting to make it not about me, remote, not sharing about ourselves.

Of course, you can open your Deschooling Convivium any way you want; you don't have to use my suggestions. There is an important advantage to starting out the same way every time, though. It helps bring people back into the flow from the previous session. It evokes the mood and spirit that grows stronger over time. It communicates to the participants' unconscious mind that it is time to get back into deschooling mode again.

Creating an Atmosphere of Comfort, Openness, and Trust

You don't have to be perfect—you only have to be you. Do not pass judgement on yourself. Do not hide or pretend. For example, the first time you lead you might feel nervous. It might be best to acknowledge that along the lines of "You know, I'm feeling very nervous right now. I feel under pressure and that pressure is all coming from myself." You're not asking for compliments or reassurance, you are just being authentic. You might communicate that by saying, "Just wanted to tell you where I'm at. Okay, now let's move on..." Whatever you share, you are presenting an example of emotional openness

that invites others to do the same. You don't expect perfection of yourself, so you won't expect it of others either. And they will sense that. In a Deschooling Convivium you want to offer people infinite space to be themselves and discover themselves. The better you can do this for yourself, the better you can do it for others. You can even practice by using the mantra "give it space." Repeat it to yourself throughout the day, so that you'll remember it whenever intense emotions arise. Then instead of letting them carry you away, you can expand to give the emotion space so you can fully feel it. All you need to do is witness them—no control is necessary. The witnessing itself is far more powerful than most of us imagine. Of course, I am not telling you not to act. Just witness the emotion, and then act.

As additional practice for leading the Deschooling Convivium, you can apply witness consciousness to your own feelings of judgmentality toward yourself and others. You don't need to control your judgmentality, just notice it and observe it. Examples of judgmentality include shame, guilt, and self-criticism, along with blame, praise, and criticism of others. These are not good or bad, they just *are*, and they will become less dominant the more you notice them. The goal is not to eliminate judgment, but simply to make the unconscious conscious, so that judgment is your tool and you are not the tool of your judgments. Then when you lead the Deschooling Convivium you will not be sitting in judgment and people will have a much deeper experience. Sure, judgments will still come up in your head, but you'll be able to notice them without acting on them. They'll come and go without disrupting your presence. Then you'll be able to listen fully and without judgment. This is something very different from the typical classroom, which is all about judgment, evaluation, criticism, debate, right and wrong.

As Deschooling Convivium leader you are not a teacher expected to have all the answers. In a classroom, teachers rarely try anything new and risk failure. Well, this isn't a classroom, and you are free of that limitation. You don't have to stick to your lesson plan. You can let go of the results and let something even better emerge. If an activity is a total flop you can halt it in the middle, or you can say, "This isn't working, is it?" And ask for input. I have experienced several occasions where we did that and something great emerged. Hold your intention, and let the form it takes be open and fluid.

The Flow of an Activity

In a 2.5-hour convivium there is usually time for two activities. Each one typically begins with a contexting. You would explain what to do, what to notice, how it will work. Usually you will not want to state what you hope to achieve, because that might program people with a right/wrong mentality. You might start with a story, a poem, a song. You might say what it is "about" without setting up specific expectations, as in: "This activity is about trust," "This activity is about judgment," "This activity is about creativity." Then say a few things about trust, judgment, or creativity. At least that's how I usually do it. You may develop your own style. You might say, "We did this activity with Charles and we really loved it and got a lot out of it, and I'd like to share it with you too." In the following section explaining various activities I will also give you some ideas on how to introduce them.

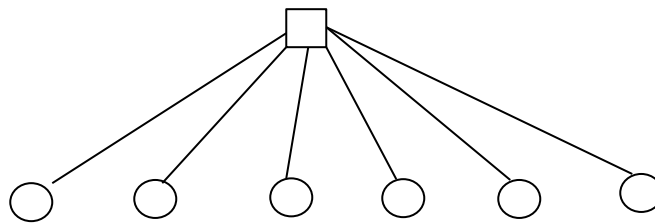
After the activity is finished, usually we take sometime to share about it, so we can digest and integrate the experience. You could simply ask, "How was that for you?" "What opened up for you?" "What did you notice in yourself as we did that activity?" Or simply, "How do you feel right now?" If people seem shy or reticent you can start things off by offering your own observation first. Another good strategy is to pose the question directly to an individual. Sometimes you can guess that someone has something on their mind.

Once the conversation has started, let it develop on its own. However, you will want to keep it somewhat focused—that is, in harmony with the intention of the Deschooling Convivium. This requires both mindfulness and skill. Sometimes it will be easy to recognize when it has veered off course. For example, someone might illustrate a point by recalling a scene from a movie, which is totally fine, but before you know it someone else has chimed in, "Oh, I saw that movie too—do you remember the part where Harry slipped and fell on a banana peel" and before you know it everyone is talking about their favorite movies. A fun conversation to be sure, but ordinary; you can have that anywhere. When you see something like that happening, intervene and nudge it back on course. You could say, "Returning to what Sally was saying about X, did anyone else feel Y?"

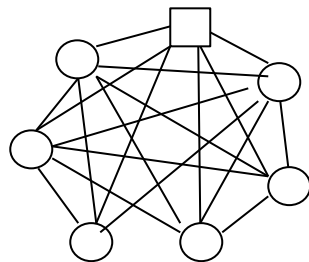
Sometimes it may happen that the conversation seems to be going nowhere. It's just not working. You might offer that to the group. "I'm feeling frustrated. This conversation seems to be avoiding the heart of that activity—does anyone have an idea why?"

You see, you are not actually controlling or manipulating the conversation, because everyone else is gathered with the same intention you are. Immersed in the deadening environment of institutional education, all of us have a deep and powerful longing for community, for authenticity, for intimacy. One of our deepest desires is to know others and be truly known ourselves. As Deschooling Convivium leader you are merely keeping the group on track with that intention. You are the reminder, the conscience of the group. You take loving responsibility for holding the group to a purpose shared by all. The participants want the same thing you do, which is why it is so effective to turn it over to the group when it isn't working.

Another key ingredient for a powerful Deschooling Convivium conversation is for whoever is speaking to offer attention and eye contact to the whole group, and not just to the leader. That is a habit of the classroom if I ever saw one! Tell the answer to Teacher. The following schematic diagrams make the difference clear. The lines represent the flow of conversation and intention:



A normal classroom



A Deschooling Convivium

In a Deschooling Convivium, the conversation bounces around the circle, go to more than one person before coming back to the leader. In a classroom, it typically follows a patten of teacher, student A, teacher, student B, teacher, student C, back to teacher, and so on. The teacher controls the conversation. It is actually a two-party conversation between teacher and class, not a multiparty conversation. In contrast, a Deschooling Convivium leader lets it go on its own, releases control, witnesses it happen, and participates as an equal, while at the same time preventing it from straying from the intention of the Deschooling Convivium. You might allow it to stray away from the original activity-related topic, however, as long as the new topic is still consistent with deschooling goals. As long as people are sharing something real about themselves, for example. Sometimes the initial topic just serves as a gateway, an access point to what is really asking for attention.

At some point you will sense that the conversation is done, or time considerations will require that you cut it short. I like to ask if anyone else has something they need to say for the activity to be complete. We don't want anyone to be left hanging.

Sometimes very strong feelings or conflicts may arise in the course of a conversation. If someone says something thoughtless or hurtful, let them finish their sentence and then interrupt and bring in witness consciousness. Ask people, "How does that last exchange feel in your body?" "How many people are having judgments, evaluations, right-and-wrong right now?" We are so deeply imbued with the habit of using speech score points, establish rightness, and present an identity that unavoidably, that habit will come out in the Deschooling Convivium despite our best intentions. But in a Deschooling Convivium those habits are contrary to our purpose. Any conflict that arises, any ill-considered use of words, is a great opportunity to learn something about ourselves.

Herein lies another goal of the Deschooling Convivium. Great philosophers and mystics since the time of Socrates have taught that the most valuable kind of knowledge is self-knowledge. Whatever happens in an activity or conversation, there is often a chance to make it an occasion for self-knowledge. Sometimes someone will say, either in the post-activity sharing or later in private, that a certain activity didn't work for them. Imagine how you would feel if everyone else seemed to be having a profound experience except yourself. It is important to validate that person's experience, no matter what it was. Any activity lands on each person differently. If your experience is doubt and resistance and feeling left out and lonely, then take note of that, witness it, and thereby gain some self-knowledge. Congratulations—you have learned something important about yourself! Make sure that participants know that there is no right or wrong experience to be had.

Sample Activities

1. Guided Mingling

There are two ways to do this: eyes open and eyes closed. I recommend doing both, first with eyes open. It is good to follow with the eyes-closed version immediately after the eyes-open—the contrast is most illuminating. Save the integration conversation for after both segments are completed.

First define the space for the activity (the room, the carpeted area, etc.) Have everyone wander around

aimlessly for a minute, then offer some points for awareness:

Do you find yourself making eye contact? Avoiding eye contact?

Do you typically break eye contact first?

Notice your posture

Notice your breathing

Where are you putting your hands? Crossed? In pockets?

What kind of expression do you have on your face?

Offer these points occasionally over the next minute or two, with time in between each point so that people can really experience the awareness it generates. By now people will probably be feeling pretty uncomfortable. If that feeling is strong in the room, you might offer a point for awareness about that too: "Do you feel uncomfortable? Awkward? Locate that feeling in your body." When the exercise has gone on long enough (you will know when—trust yourself), then announce: "Okay, now everyone close your eyes and continue mingling." Again let them wander around for a minute or so, then offer a different set of points for awareness:

What do you do when you bump someone? How do you feel?

Are you holding your hands and arms protectively?

Do you have an expression on your face even though no one can see you?

Notice whether your shoulders are tense.

Do you tend to stay on the fringes or head to the center?

Another thing you can ask in this activity, and in many other activities too, is "When I ask these questions, do you feel right or wrong?" Then encourage them to let the answer just be, without evaluating right/wrong.

This is a wonderful game for the first Deschooling Convivium meeting, because it is fun, a good ice-breaker, and generates rich conversation afterward. It can inspire insights into our automatic unconscious ways of presenting ourselves, ways of maintaining distance, the artificiality of crowds (and classrooms?), as well as our nervousness when some of the distancing mechanism are inactivated. I wouldn't mention all that beforehand though. Just give the instructions and let the activity work its magic.

2. Offering of questions

In a classroom the teacher typically provides not only defines the answers, but provides the questions as well, whether on an exam or as embodied in a curriculum—which says, "Here is what we will learn about." School-learning is very much about producing answers. This activity takes a very different approach. It is a great choice for the first or second session, depending on the comfort level.

Give everyone a piece of paper and a pen and ask them to write down their questions. Not "questions you want to ask me," but general questions about life, the world, college, or any issue that is present in your life. Ask everyone to write down at least 10-15 questions. Explain that sometimes a question will lead to deeper questions, and that they have plenty of time to follow the questions wherever they might lead. Do this yourself too. After it seems that everyone is finished, ask people to choose the question "most present for you at this time in your life." Invite them then to spend 5-10 minutes just being with that question. Not seeking an answer, but just being with the question, the feeling of longing to know.

In that 5-10 minutes of silence, remind them once or twice to play with it, explore it, see what trains of thought it takes them to.

For part three of this activity, divide up into partners. Each pair goes to a quiet corner somewhere. One person takes on the role of Asker, the other takes on the role of Listener. The Asker kneels up on his/her knees; the Listener stands and listens silently, without changing expression or nodding the head, while the Asker asks his/her question from before. When you introduce this exercise, suggest that the Asker start with the question and then elaborate, asking maybe in different ways, explaining the background a little, maybe proceeding to an even deeper question behind the starting question—always gazing into the Listener's face. After a few minutes, when you sense it is time, ask everyone to thank their partner and switch roles. Also remember to instruct the Listeners to do their best to listen with full attention and no judgement, compassionately, with full confidence that the universe will provide the answer at the perfect time in the perfect way. And the Askers are to see the Listener as an omniscient being. The kneeling position automatically creates that perception.

This is an extraordinarily powerful exercise that will generate a very rich conversation afterwards. People will have amazing insights and profound realizations. Really let everyone have the chance to fully explore and integrate it in the conversation. Provide them a big listening. Lose any agenda and trust the process. You will see a great wisdom and humanity emerge from the participants. All you need to do is be there to witness it. You don't have to *make* it happen. It will happen because that potential is latent within us all.

Again, one of the great myths of our educational system is that learning is hard. Well, it is not. An even broader cultural myth is that life is hard. A struggle, necessitating willpower, discipline, hard work, a great effort at self-control and self-improvement. Well guess what? Life is not hard either, and neither need it be hard to lead the Deschooling Convivium. Everything that we want to happen is just waiting to happen, bursting to happen. As leader you do not need to impose anything on people from without. It is already there. As leaders we merely invite it out and welcome it into the world.

Trying hard will not usher in the more beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible. That is just as impossible as trying hard to be creative, or trying to make someone be something they are not. We don't need to try hard, because the more beautiful world is present already, closer than close. Some of the other activities in this manual will give you a sense of this. The spontaneity exercises, for instance, illustrate a mode of creativity that has little to do with trying and much to do with getting out of the way of what already is. So leaders, don't make it hard. All you need to do is allow your own creativity, authenticity, and spontaneity to be present. You can do this!

There is a beautiful Stage Four to the offering questions activity that provides a great segue to a closing ceremony. Everyone picks up their list of questions and identifies ten that they are willing to share. Then, go around the circle many times, each person speaking a question out loud. Before you begin, remind everyone to give each question a full listening, maybe pausing a few seconds in between. I personally feel that no integration conversation is necessary for this part; it is poetry and speaks for itself.

If there are an odd number of people for the partner work, there are a few things you can do. Three people can be in a group A listens to B; B listens to C; C listens to A. You might even choose to structure the activity like this for everyone if the number of people is a multiple of three. The person not speaking or listening can be a witness. You may even discover this approach has certain advantages.

Have everyone keep their list of questions. You might invent other activities which utilize them later on.

3. The Stone Game

This game seeks to illuminate the ways we participate in conversation. It is not as deeply challenging as some of the other activities I've described, suiting it to be a warmup for something else.

Have everyone bring in 30 small pebbles and sit around a large table. Total silence is to be maintained throughout. Going around the table, each person places a stone or chooses to withhold a stone. Keep going around the table until someone runs out of stones. You could end the game right there, or have each person who finishes leave first. However, I think it is better to end while some people still have stones in their hand, as the following questions for awareness make clear.

After the game is over, debrief the group on their experience. Describe the different ways we participate in conversation. Were you being selfish or giving in the placement of your rocks? Did you try to control the way it was going? Or did you go with the flow? What kind of feeling accompanied your choice to withhold—was it similar to the emotions you feel when you withhold participating in group conversations? Did you notice yourself interacting with some people more than others? Did you find yourself wanting to ignore some of the contributions, or feeling annoyed when someone else spoiled where you wanted to take the design? Do you pass judgment on others' contributions? Do you pass judgment on your own contributions, criticizing and evaluating yourself? Do you sometimes find yourself motivated primarily to contribute in a way that garners other people's attention and approval? All of these could equally be asked of the stone game or any conversation, particularly in a group. In fact, after the debriefing conversation about the stone game has proceeded for a while, you can ask, "Does anyone find themselves doing some of the same things in this conversation as you did in the stone game?" Or, "Does anybody notice any similarities between this conversation and the stone game?" You can also ask for general observations about the game. What kind of "conversation" was it? Inclusive? Dysfunctional? Superficial? Deep? Intimate? Light? Playful? Serious?

4. Authentic Movement

This is an amazing activity for confronting judgmentality, shyness, self-consciousness, and limiting perceptions of self and others. Probably many of the group will not want to actually do the movement. That is fine. Make it clear that witnessing another's authentic movement can be every bit as enlightening as doing it yourself.

The ideal location for authentic movement would be a big grassy field where no one can get hurt bumping into things. You can also do it indoors by forming a protective circle around the Mover to guide him/her away from any walls or dangerous objects. The Mover starts at the center with eyes closed and simply moves any way he/she wants to. It is not a performance! Tell the group to let go of any desire to impress, to look good, to avoid looking silly or weird. You see, in the normal course of human interaction we habitually restrict our postures and movements (the open-eye mingling activity demonstrates this). In authentic movement, we let go of presenting ourselves as ourselves. This can be quite freeing, since the habits of bodily self-presentation become so ingrained that we forget other ways of moving and, consequently, other ways of being. You see, the way we hold and move our bodies is

connected to our thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. You can demonstrate this beforehand with the following mini-exercise: split into partners, and have everyone stand face to face about six feet apart in various postures: hands on hips; arms crossed over waist (a lot of people actually walk like this); hands behind back; hands in pockets; hands hanging at your side. Afterward, ask how they feel different being in each posture and seeing someone else in each posture. Ask them which felt uncomfortable and which felt the most comfortable. A very fruitful discussion can arise just from this mini-exercise.

Returning to the authentic movement activity, you might observe to the group that a baby has none of the habits and inhibitions that limit how we move our bodies. A baby moves spontaneously and joyously. A baby is not self-conscious. In this activity we seek to reconnect with that. These habits and inhibitions deepen over time, producing eventually symptoms of aging such as stiffness and rigidity. In reconnecting with the infant's spontaneity we stay in touch with our youth.

This activity is obviously very much at odds with the habits of the classroom. Typically in a class, no matter what the content, whether it is a lecture or discussion or reading or writing, our bodies are in the same position all the time. Education, after all, is supposed to be primarily about the mind, not the body. Education happens mostly in a chair. One thing this activity demonstrates is that mind and body are intimately connected. If a posture corresponds to a state of emotion and a state of mind, what does sitting in a chair correspond to? Apathy, perhaps? Indifference? Passivity?

After a few of the people have experienced Authentic Movement, consider breaking for a conversation about it to digest and process and give the Movers a chance to share. This will give the shyer people a chance to collect their courage and give it a go in the second round. Now here is a situation that might arise in this or some other activity. Suppose someone who has Moved in the first round shares, "It wasn't scary at all for me. I wasn't a bit self-conscious. I don't see what the big deal is." Possibly, when that person was Moving it may have come off as a performance and not truly authentic. How do you deal with this situation? It is important to address it, because those words will probably leave others feeling inadequate and invalidated. You also don't want to shoot down the speaker. This might be an opportunity to talk about how everyone has unique strengths and inhibitions, and how our fears and limitations are nothing to be ashamed of, they just *are*. So you could say, "I wonder if so-and-so's comment made anyone feel angry, inadequate, or inferior." These are feelings to take note of. We don't need to conquer or control anything, just apply the light of compassionate attention.

A nice variation on this activity is to do it in pairs, one person moving while the other watches, then switching. This will also allow time for doing it longer. For the whole-group version I suggest providing a guideline of 2-5 minutes that is "just a guideline". In pairs you'll have time to explore it a little more deeply. Sometimes allowing ten minutes or even more allows you to go on a real journey. You get past the initial awkwardness, and real spontaneity emerges. It is amazing how quickly lifelong habits can vanish. Of course they come back again as we reenter our customary reality, but the memory of having been free of them remains, and much that was once impossible becomes possible. Be sure to allow time for reflection and sharing, both between partners and in the group afterwards.

If your Convivium is fortunate to have someone exceptionally at home in his or her body, you could also consider inviting that person to fully express that in a longer (10-minute) movement session for the whole group. I find it very inspiring to watch someone who is magnificently self-expressed. Remember what leadership really is: it is to create opportunities for people to express their gifts.

5. Gazing

There are many variations of this exercise, which generates a profound sense of connectedness. To maintain eye contact with another person can be an intensely intimate experience. It meets a very deep longing of all human beings, which is to be known by other people for who we truly are, as well as to know other people in the same way. We of modern society are some of the loneliest people ever to inhabit the earth. We have grown used to it in a way, enough at least that we call it normal. We assume life is just like that. The gazing activity tells us otherwise. It tells us of the incredibly close and authentic connection that is always so close, just five minutes away. We are like starving people wandering with heads bowed in a vast orchard of ripe fruit that we need only raise our eyes to have. Instead we drift through life starving for connection, driven by an unease, a longing, a hunger that can never be assuaged by the things we usually feed it. This is the wound of separation, from nature and from other people, and the pain of it registers as a kind of anxiety that we can never really put our finger on. Paradoxically, our greatest desire is also our greatest fear. We have grown accustomed to our cocoon. We have grown accustomed to a very superficial level of connection, and we go to great lengths to keep it that way. Because actually to forge a deeper connection is quite easy. The barrier is only fear.

If you think about it you may find it quite strange—why should a few minutes of eye contact be so uncomfortable? So frightening? We are afraid of being truly seen. We are more comfortable having people see not the real me, but the image we present. We maintain this image in all kinds of ways (this might be a good lead-in discussion. "How do most people see you? What do you do to establish and perpetuate this perception?") And then, having succeeded in presenting an image to the world, we feel lonely because no one knows us. They only know the image. We become victims of our own success.

We live in an impoverished social world. We can go an entire lifetime never having experienced—never having known—the wealth of humanity around us. Each person you interact with is an entire universe unto themselves, a divine being unspeakably precious. That is why the gazing exercise is so powerful. Not only does it establish this connection with another person; it shows us what life could be. It really gives the experience of a more beautiful world, and it confirms that such a world is possible—so close, and yet so far. How close? Five minutes away. How far? Impossibly far. It would take a miracle for silent gazing to become a normal social activity, replacing, say, small talk and gossip. Can you imagine how different such a world would be, how beautiful? How different would society be, if we received frequent experiential reminders of the divinity that inhabits those who surround us? If we lived in an ongoing waking knowledge that we are holy beings living among other holy beings in a world that is holy too? So close, so far. It will indeed take a miracle to get there. And really that is what we are in the business of doing: creating miracles. What is a miracle, anyway? It is something wholly unexpected based on the past. You sink into water a million times, and now you walk on water—that is a miracle! We stop living in the habits of a lifetime and choose a new way of being—that is a miracle too. What we have accepted as "just the way things are" can change overnight. Of course we can always go back, choose the old world over the new, but once we have experienced it even once our eventual transcendence of the old is guaranteed. Because now we know it is possible. The illusion that life is "just like this" no longer can fully delude us. A birthing process is set in motion, and even if we do return to the old world again, eventually we will be born into the new as completely and irrevocably as a baby is expelled from the womb.

Because a huge barrier of fear stands in way of our greatest desire, to know and be known, it is important to context with exercise with gentleness and care. Perhaps precede it with another activity that leads naturally into gazing, so it doesn't seem so weird. For example, the theme could be listening without judgment.... and now we are going to do an exercise about seeing without judgment. I have

found it unnecessary to have a big dramatic buildup to the gazing activity. Another good lead-in would be something on the ways we present ourselves, inflections, postures, and masks.... and now we will practice just being with someone without "presenting".

I like to lead this activity in three parts. First a few minutes of gazing. Before it starts and for the first minute also you may need to issue some reminders. Urge people not to slip into "presenting" themselves by raising eyebrows, making expressions, or looking away. (Blinking is okay though—it is not a "staring contest".) Here are some ways to set it up:

Look for what is beautiful and good in the other person.

See the other person as your self, looking back at you through different eyes.

Look with appreciation at the real person in front of you.

Just as we strive to listen without judgment, let us now see without judgment. Just see, without adding anything on, without interpreting, guessing, evaluating.

Pick one of these that fits in with the evening's theme, or lead it in your own way. Often these work best when one person is the Seer and the other is the Seen. Then they switch after 3-5 minutes—whenever you feel it is time, without breaking eye contact. The above instructions are for the Seer; the Seen should be reminded to be unguarded and present in order to be truly seen. In reality, the difference between the two roles isn't so big.

If the gazing session starts out with a lot of giggles, you may need to guide people over this hump. People usually giggle because they feel nervous and uncomfortable. You don't need to tell them to stop giggling. Simply name what is happening. I would say something like, "It is quite natural to be feeling a little nervous or uncomfortable and to start giggling. That's OK. Just keep gazing, let the giggling stage run its course, and soon you will move into the next phase of the experience." This phrasing validates their behavior and at the same time invites and encourages them to move past it. (The wording also "reframes" the giggling as a "phase".)

I highly recommend that you do this on a day when there are an even number of people present, so that you can participate yourself. You can talk while still maintaining eye contact with your partner.

After the initial 5-10 minute gazing exchange is over, you will likely want to extend the experience because it is just so sweet. A good way to do this is to ask people to maintain eye contact while listening to their partner describe what they felt in both roles. Take turns as speaker and listener. The listener fully listens, again without judgment or verbal response. After each partner has had the opportunity to share, invite everyone to still maintain eye contact while having a "normal" conversation. Just continue talking about the experience.

Eventually you will have to end the experience and bring people back to the circle. When I finally broke eye contact with my partner it actually hurt. When would I ever reenter that realm? That wrenching was a clear sharp experience of the constant ache that underlies modern social life. In the life of separation that hurting is a constant fact of life. No wonder distractions from life are so compelling, so addictive. We'll do almost anything to make it stop hurting. Drugs, alcohol, TV, video games, spectator sports obsessions, pornography, all are ways to temporarily numb the pain of separation. But do they do anything to heal that separation? Do they actually deepen the human connections in our lives? Usually not, Usually they isolate us all the more and we feel even lonelier. When you wake up hung over the next morning, the soul ache is still there, with a headache to boot.

When the circle regroups it is likely that most or all participants will be in a very expanded state of consciousness. They will have been profoundly moved by the beauty they experienced. Now it is time to provide some kind of a bridge connecting this experience back to real life. The lesson of this experience is NOT that the Deschooling Convivium is some separate reality that is irreconcilable with the real world. That would be deflating, not empowering. Actually, the Deschooling Convivium aims to empower us in the real world by showing us its potential. It is not a way of being that is separate from life; it is what life can be. In the Deschooling Convivium we become aware of an expanded potential for ourselves and our lives. The vision is for the authenticity and immediacy of our interactions here to gradually become the norm for our lives and for people generally. We seek to heighten our expectations and never settle for less. We come together to live more fully—that is what the word "convivium" means: people coming together to live more fully.

It would be sad indeed if anyone walked away believing, "This is only possible in the Deschooling Convivium." The message is that it is possible at all. Because what, really, is the Deschooling Convivium? It is just a group of people holding an intention to be free. All people everywhere share this desire.

The conversation following the gazing experience is an opportunity to bridge it back to life outside. Read this section several times before the evening you guide this experience so that you can bring these ideas into the conversation naturally. Read this section and make the ideas your own. Soak them into your bones until they become a part of you. Then you will be able to share them as yours, in your own words, illuminated by your own gifts, stories, examples and experiences. I would also bring into the conversation the question, "OK, how can we apply all this to our lives?" "What is the message of this experience?" Probably you won't have to apply much guidance to keep this conversation at a very high level. It might occasionally lapse into a kind of "full" silence as people re-submerge themselves in that state of connectedness. Allow this to happen. Hold the intention of the conversation bridging the experience to the rest of life, but really let this happen in its own way. You are witness to a wisdom far surpassing your own—it is the organic, self-emergent wisdom of the group. You are like a midwife assisting in a birth. You create the conditions for it to happen, but you certainly didn't create the child. You can ease the labor and you can guide the mother and child past certain dangers and complications. Mostly you are witness to a sacred process that proceeds according to its own mysterious wisdom and logic. It is a foolish midwife who would impose her own schedule on a mother's labor.

At the same time, you are also a participant, another member of the group. This is what makes your leadership genuine. Sometimes when I was leading the Deschooling Convivium I noticed a secret agenda in myself of gaining approval, dominating, being right, or being overattached to things being a certain way that wasn't really necessary to fulfill my deepest intentions. In other words, I found myself being tempted by the habits of the classroom. I believe that in most cases I was brave enough to let go of these controlling agendas. I hope the participants experienced freedom and respect. If you notice any of this happening in yourself, simply witness it and let it go without shame. There is no shame in being human. We have been conditioned from very early on to seek approval, to have the right answer, be acceptable, be in control of the situation. School is a huge part of this conditioning. As Deschooling Convivium leader you are deschooling yourself too. The more you release the conditioning, the more you become a giving, generous, and powerful leader. Conditioned by the world-as-it-is, no matter how hard we try, we will end up producing results that perpetuate the world-as-it-is. The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Generations of revolutionaries, social activists, and environmentalists have discovered this to their sorrow. We can try to frighten people into changing their ways; we can manipulate them by invoking guilt; we can coerce and dominate and force and control them, and for a time we may experience a semblance of success, but all the while what we are

really strengthening in the world is the fear, domination, coercion, and control. Everyone thinks they have a good reason for applying these tools, or actually weapons. In the Deschooling Convivium, in our own small way, we practice another approach. We trust in people's goodness and wisdom and create a clearing for that to manifest.

I encourage you to do the same for yourself as you lead. Don't make it hard for yourself. Trust in your own goodness and wisdom too. When we use controlling methods on ourselves—guilt, threat, shame, criticism, blame, conditional approval—then inevitably we will do it to other people too. Even if you use these methods to try to force yourself to be less critical, less judgmental, less controlling, you will only end up strengthening these traits. Instead, simply witness, gently laugh at it, and know it isn't your true nature. That is the alternative to the hopeless strategy of trying harder. Trust yourself, relax into yourself, let your true wisdom and goodness emerge so that it can emerge in others around you.

6. Speaking the Unspoken

This activity follows nicely from an introduction along the lines of "your name and something you've been afraid to tell someone." It addresses the question of how to actually create a world of authentic relationships.

In many of our relationships, the most important things often go unsaid. Unresolved issues sit there for years and, like the proverbial pink elephant in the room, make it impossible to fully be with that person. I use the example: suppose a year ago I took money from Rajan's wallet. He knows I did it, and I know he knows, but out of awkwardness we never talk about it. For a whole year he's been feeling angry and I've been feeling guilty. With this issue in the background, can we ever have a real conversation about anything? Can we ever be real with each other? We can talk about trivial matters—sports, the weather—and pretend everything is okay, but we cannot be close because there's this huge thing between us. Moreover, it is likely that Rajan will often blow up at me for no apparent reason, and that I will try to avoid him.

As you read this, you might have been reminded of relationships with friends or family where there is something big and unsaid between you. We are sometimes tempted by the illusion that we can "work on the relationship" or improve it by trying really hard to be nice, without addressing the real issue, but this is impossible. For example, Rajan could resolve to try really hard not to blow up at me for no reason. No matter how hard he tries though, the underlying energy is still there. At best he can expect eternal stasis; more often what we experience is continued degradation of the relationship. Eventually maybe we really do forget about the wallet. I conclude Rajan is hotheaded and unreasonable; he concludes I am standoffish and cold. It is like a toxic waste dump that has been paved over and forgotten. Now why is everyone getting sick? Hmm, better wash our hands more often. No. Sometimes it takes a little digging to find the source of the poison.

Like other kinds of transformation, to transform a relationship is not hard, but it usually is scary. There is something we are afraid to bring out into the open. Bowing to the fear, we stick with the status quo, and the full potential of the relationship is never expressed.

In this exercise everyone is given an identical pen and piece of paper. Explain beforehand that these letters will be shared anonymously, so don't use your own name or any obvious identifying information. We all have parents, so to further the anonymity we can all write the letter to a parent. These are not really letters, just practice conversations—you won't have to send it.

The idea of this exercise is to imagine that, for once, you have the full attention of the recipient: that now is the time to say what has for so long gone unsaid. What have you always wanted to tell him or her that was always too awkward, too uncomfortable, or just never the right time? What have you held back, thinking "They'd never listen" or "It wouldn't do any good"? Now is your chance to say it all. The letter doesn't need to be too long though. Usually a few sentences suffice to say what is really important, while we devote enormous quantities of words to say almost nothing at all.

After everyone is done, put all the letters in the center, mix them up, and ask everyone to take one that isn't their own. In order to read it aloud effectively it helps to read it in a whisper to oneself a couple times first. The idea is to read it with feeling, as if you were an actor playing the part of the person expressing those words. Go around the circle, everyone taking turns to read the letter in their hand. Encourage everyone to devote their full listening—don't read yours while someone else is reading aloud. In fact it might be more effective for everyone to listen with their eyes closed.

In the integration discussion afterward, one productive question to pose to the group is, "What is going to stop you from actually having this conversation?" Another topic to explore is the impact that hiding the issue might have. People could even put themselves in the place of the person who wrote their letter. This can turn into a whole other activity. Be sure to leave room for undirected conversation too. In each individual letter a lot of universal themes will come up. People will find themselves relating to a lot of what was read.

7. The Realm of the Possible – Relationships

A good opening to set the tone for this activity is "Your name, and something you wish you could change about somebody in your life." Often it helps to introduce such an opening in a way that increases everyone's comfort level. Here is how I would do it: "You've probably heard somewhere that it is not right to try to change other people, but let's face it, we all probably find ourselves wishing that our roommate, boyfriend, girlfriend, brother, sister, friend, or parent would be more this or less that. More considerate, less messy, more self-confident, less critical, and so on. For example, sometimes I really wish my wife wouldn't be such a neat freak." This introduction gives people permission to be open and vulnerable because I have set the example.

The above is just a suggested opening. The activity itself asks everyone to describe a relationship in their lives that could be improved. It could be a totally dysfunctional relationship, or a pretty good one that isn't quite perfect. Have each person take a sheet of paper and divide it into four quadrants. Explain that the left side is for judgments. The top half is: "What about the other person makes this relationship imperfect?" The bottom half is, "What about me makes this relationship imperfect?" After everyone has taken a few minutes to write these down, ask them to identify which of them are judgments. Examples are: "He is too lazy." "She is too demanding." "He never listens." "She is too indecisive." "He doesn't respect me."

Marshall Rosenberg writes that a judgment is a tragic expression of an unmet need. In the right column, then, try to find the need behind each of the judgments. Perhaps "He never listens" would correspond to "I need to be heard."

After everyone has finished, go around the circle to give each person the chance to share one of the judgments and the associated need. You can also lead a conversation on what people discovered

through this process. People can also help each other to identify the needs behind judgments they can't figure out.

Another way to approach this exercise is to use the letters from "Speaking the Unspoken". Have each person underline all the judgments in their letter, and identify the associated need.

8. Wants and Needs

One of the deepest rationales of school is that of social engineering. Just as technology seeks to control and improve upon nature, education is one of the cultural technologies that seeks to improve on human nature. Part of that is improving on you!

You see, the real you, the natural you, just isn't good enough. You would rather play than work. You'd rather be outside than sitting at a desk in a classroom. You would rather talk to your friends than pay attention to the lesson. You would rather go out than do your homework. Therefore, if we accept that the classroom, the lesson, the homework is more worthy than the alternatives, we need to impose control and discipline upon ourselves. We need to deny our wants. We are presented in school with a vision of success that depends on constant self-denial. It is those who make the biggest sacrifices (we are told) who achieve the most. And if you follow your desires, if you trust yourself, then you will fall behind, you will get poor grades, you will be less successful in life.

Pounded into us year after year, both in school and from parents, churches, and society, this way of thinking becomes deeply ingrained. The result is a profound self-distrust and a constant battle against ourselves. We withhold our pleasures and desires until we feel, after having made enough sacrifices, that we finally deserve them. Or we deny them as long as we can, until at some point willpower fails and, seemingly helpless, we engage in binges of various sorts and "blow off" our work. This behavior ends up reinforcing the underlying message that the natural self is not to be trusted. "See what happens," we think, "when I let myself do whatever I want?"

Part of deschooling is to free ourselves from this regime of control, and to reconnect with our natural desires and begin to trust them. For many people, this process of liberation from "shoulds" is quite lengthy and gradual; however, we can also experience huge sudden breakthroughs. At the very least, the activity I am about to describe can sow the seed of a new way of thinking.

Step one is for everyone to make a list of their wants. Encourage everyone to release self-judgment and be honest with themselves. Even the most superficial, materialistic wants are fair game. After many years of denying our wants, sometimes we lose touch with them and don't even know what we really want. So instead we reach for substitutes. In this exercise, tell everyone to give themselves the chance to dig a little deeper. What are the wants behind the wants? What deep needs do they ultimately arise from? Let everyone know that this list is just for themselves; they will not be sharing it.

Follow with a discussion on how the process was for people. Did anyone discover a want that surprised them? How do you respond emotionally to openly acknowledging your wants? Empowered? Guilty? Selfish?

Next I usually lead people in a meditation where I encourage them to fully experience the state of wantingness. What is it like to want something? How does it feel in the body? I ask people to choose from their list the want that is currently the most present in their lives. Have a discussion about this

meditation also. Even though the objects of our desires are different, the state of wanting is the same, isn't it. Could it be that if we traced them down deeply enough, the underlying needs would be the same too? There is material here for a rich conversation. You might pose the following questions: "What is the deepest human desire?" A powerful activity would be for everyone to write down their deepest and highest desire, and then to go around the circle and share.

Finally, I ask each person to think of something that they want to do but cannot justify. It should be something that they are ready to do anyway. Each person writes it down in the form, "I am going to X because I want to." Again we go around the circle and take turns reading our intention aloud, using exactly that sentence pattern. I sometimes interrupt at the beginning and ask people to notice any feelings of being apologetic, and to state it powerfully. Of course, people can pass on this if they feel it is too personal. The effect of hearing lots of other people declaring they are going to do something important to them just because they want to can be quite powerful. It tells us it is okay for us to do that too. It also helps to take the spirit of the Deschooling Convivium outside the room and into life. You can agree to share the results of your declarations the next week.

9. Improvisational Theater Games

The habit of self-censorship has been so deeply instilled in us that we sometimes cannot access our inborn spontaneity. Ask someone, "Imagine a box. You open it—what's inside?" they will often hesitate, skip over the first couple responses, and then "make something up." Spontaneity means going with the answer that was already there. To do that, the internal censor has to get out of the way. Since in school this could result in ridicule or the wrong answer, we have a fear barrier to being spontaneous.

In order to undo this habit, I have used many of the concepts and games from Keith Johnstone's marvelous book, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. I encourage you to read this book and experiment with bringing some of its techniques into your convivium. I put three participants in charge of devising an activity for the next week, and we acted out some hilarious improvisational scenes that they'd come up with. The storytelling games are especially liberating because in addition to developing spontaneity, they show people that it is OK to not always try to control one's expressions in order to look good. Read Johnstone's book and familiarize yourself with the concept of blocking and accepting. Try a few of the games: "Yes, and" "Yes, but" "Overaccepting", and so on. It helps to demonstrate them first with someone in the group who has improv experience or is naturally gifted at it. Well, we are all naturally gifted at it. What I mean is someone whose natural gift for improv is relatively intact.

Another concept Johnstone discusses is status, which of course is an obvious characteristic of the classroom and the academic world in general. You can read aloud sections on status from Johnstone's book and try some of his exercises. Master-servant scenarios are fun. You might also talk about some of the body cues and verbal cues we use to convey status, and ask people to become aware of them in their conversations. Stage some conversations between two people with everyone else watching, and see how many status cues you can recognize.

We played a great status game from *Impro* called the Hat Game. Four people wear hats labeled with numbers: 1, 2, 3, and 4, while the others watch. Number 1 is the boss; he or she can order the others around, manage them, yell at them, or at the most extreme, take their hats off and throw them at their feet. (Do not throw them far away, as it breaks up the scene.) Number 2 can do the same to 3 and 4, while 3 can only do it to 4, the lowest in the hierarchy. Number 1's favorite target is number 2, of course, while 3 and 4 are usually (but not always) beneath his notice. These four people are a team

trying to accomplish a given task, such as "find Lisa's wallet."

Since 3 and especially 4 are quite powerless, their job is to covertly resist by inventing problems and passing them up the hierarchy, by being lazy, and by pretending to be stupid. They cannot overtly disobey though, because they are afraid of punishment (the humiliation of having their hat thrown on the floor). Number 1 wants to achieve the objective, but equally important is to constantly establish his or her authority. To do this he/she can't humiliate 2 too much, so that 2 loses authority in the eyes of 3 and 4, only enough to establish that he is top dog. Here is a typical scene:

1: Okay, listen up guys. We have to find Lisa's wallet. Two, divide up the room with Three and Four and let's start searching.
2: You heard him, guys. Three, you look under all the chairs. Four, you look inside the desks.
3: Four, don't just stand there, start looking.
4: Which side of the room should I start on?
3: It doesn't matter... oh, just start with the big desk.
1: Two, why hasn't anyone started looking yet?
2: We're on it, sir! Three, why haven't you and 4 started looking?
3: We are, we are. Hurry up, Four! Found anything?
4: The desk drawer is locked, sir.
3: (to Two) the desk drawer is locked.
2: (to One) the desk drawer is locked.
1: Well the wallet obviously couldn't be there then, could it? (angrily) Why is everyone still standing around? (throws Two's hat on the ground).
2: Three, pick up my hat! Put it on my head. And now get your butts in gear.
3: Four, how many drawers have you looked in? None? Why not?! (throws Four's hat on the ground)
Now pick that up and start looking.
2: Three, found anything under the chairs yet?
3: I'm getting to it, it's just that Four...
2: Let's leave Four out of it. She is in charge of the desks, I'm talking about the chairs. You mean to tell me you haven't even started to look yet? (Throws 3's hat on the floor)
3: Four, pick up my hat! And help me look under these chairs.
1: Two, all I'm seeing around here is fighting. You're supposed to be managing these people. How hard can it be? It's just a very simple task. (Three and Four have stopped searching to watch with secret delight as Two gets in trouble. But now One turns to them.) Three, Four, what do you think is so funny?
3: Ah, um.
1: (throws both 3's and 4's hat on the ground).
3: Four, pick that up!
2: No, not yet. You can pick up your own hat, 3. But first listen to One.
1: That's right, Three, you'd better do what Two says or you're going to be demoted to Four.

And so forth. To anyone watching, it soon becomes apparent why bureaucracies never get anything done. In the conversation after this hilarious activity, ask the group whether they maybe see a little bit of themselves in each of the four clowns. Replay the game again with a different "task". Experiment by assigning meek, deferential people to the role of number one, and more dominating people to number four.

I think it is a good idea for the four "clowns" to meet beforehand to talk about ideas and get comfortable with each other. The Hat Game works on its own, but some of the other scenes require a

little planning to set them up (not to script them though).

10. Meditation, Creative Visualization, and Trance

These are activities that are totally inappropriate to the classroom! (Although I suppose classes on Eastern religion often bring in an experience of meditation.) The reason they are usually considered inappropriate is that they are not about receiving information. They are intrinsically something we have to do for ourselves, and their success arises from our own internal resources. They foster independence, not the dependency of schooling.

The simplest way to start is with ten or fifteen minutes of silence. If you have never led a meditation, then good! It will probably be awesome. Don't start thinking it is hard. I would tell you how I lead it, but I do it a different way every time. However, since we have huge taboos against doing nothing and wasting time, especially in a classroom where we are supposed to be productive, I suggest encouraging the group to sit silently not doing anything productive, but just being. You could even introduce it as simply as, "We are now going to spend 15 minutes just being. Don't try to do anything productive. Just be with yourself." You may be surprised at how rich a conversation this generates.

Creative visualization, popularized by Shakti Gawain in her book by that title, is a way to utilize the creative imaging power of the mind. If you read Gawain's book you'll get lots of ideas. I like to link this activity to the idea that we are the creators of our lives. That again is the opposite of school's message, which is that life is about going through a curriculum laid out by others. School is preparation for living lives that are not our own.