

How To Use This Book

This field book presents experiential learning exercises based on social construction thinking and understanding that have been developed by the Institute for Creative Change. The exercises and experiences are organized into Learning Labs that promote new learning and innovative thinking for the participants. The Labs are designed both for those familiar with social construction thinking as well as for participants with little or no experience with social construction. The Learning Labs inform and enhance creative change strategies for mental health, organizational development, human resource and community development professionals. They also offer powerful learning experiences in social construction theory and practice for educators from high school through post graduate training. This book will be of value to anyone who is interested in learning how to facilitate creative and responsible change with social groups of any size.

Learning to create effective change with people desiring specific changes in their lives has been a very exciting and stimulating journey for the Institute for Creative Change throughout its existence. Many perspectives and possibilities relating to creating meaningful change have been explored during these years. Many approaches to generating change with diverse populations of people have been studied and tested in real life situations. Additionally, learning effective ways of teaching change practices that appear to work constructively for those seeking those services has also been an ongoing process at the Institute, always entwined with the change practices themselves.

This journey of learning, practice and teaching has always been challenging. Working with change is a powerful experience for all involved. The responsibility is awesome and uncertainty is pervasive. New learning and unexpected change is unavoidable. Relational and cognitive flexibility is critical to success. Intellectual honesty is essential. Taking all of this into account, the journey has been immensely rewarding. It has had a profound influence on all of the participants in the Institute, personally, relationally and professionally.

Much has been experienced and learned at the Institute during the years that it has been a learning community dedicated to creative change. It became apparent some time ago that experiential learning with change practices was an extremely valuable teaching tool. As

social construction became the underlying worldview and theory of change at the Institute, it became clear that experiential learning was a very powerful teaching school for this postmodern thinking. Explaining social construction and creative change to others is difficult, often confusing and, at times, incomprehensible. However, being able to demonstrate its concepts and assumptions experientially, to perform them with others, provides a unique and revealing understanding of social construction and creative change. The freedom of thinking and acting generated by this experiential learning is joyous and transformative and gives hope for positive change at all levels of relationship and community in the future.

Since 1986, The Institute for Creative Change has developed and presented more than eighty Learning Labs to practitioners, educators and others interested in social construction and creative change. Labs typically run two hours for ten to fifty participants. Some can be modified for use with large groups of up to 250 participants. Twelve of these Learning Labs have been chosen as a representative sample of experiential learning in social construction. The Labs that are presented demonstrate the excitement of creativity when there is safety to explore.

Basic Elements of a Learning Lab:

Learning Labs are designed to produce new thinking about diverse societal and professional issues through the lens of social construction and a commitment to creative change. The primary relational tools used in the Lab are *inquiry*, *appreciation*, and *dialogue*. Questions that challenge and expand thinking are the oxygen of any Learning Lab. An ideal outcome for the Lab is a sense that the topic is more open to the creation of new meaning and has generated more possibilities for creative action than was so when the Learning Lab began.

Format for Learning Labs:

Purpose: Concise description of the intentions of the Learning Lab, theoretically and practically.

Overview: Brief outline of the Learning Lab's structure and process.

Materials Required: Specific items needed to enact the Lab.

Set-up and Space Requirements: Spatial and facility requirements.

Number of Participants: Minimum and maximum number of participants for which the Learning Lab is designed. These are suggestions, not prescriptions. Use them as guides and modified as needed. Sizes of the group can be adjusted to fit each individual situation.

Number of Facilitators: Number of faculty or leaders suggested for successfully guiding the Lab.

Running Time: Approximate time required for completing the Learning Lab (does not include preparation time).

Structure of Exercise: The operating modules of the Lab from introduction to completion, with time lines and description of structure.

Commentary: The theoretical thinking reflected in the exercises. It is designed to stimulate conceptual thinking on the part of the facilitators and to offer suggestions for expanding the group discussions occurring in the Lab.

Applications: Suggests specific types of participants that may especially be benefited by the Learning Lab. It also may seed ideas for creating restructured Labs for different contexts of groups.

How to Use This Book:

It is possible to perform any Learning Lab presented in this book without reading the rest of the book, especially when the reader is familiar with social construction. Each Lab is self-contained and ready to be performed. However, we recommend taking time to read the theory chapter, “Social Construction and Creative Change: Basic Assumptions and An Evolving Understanding of Human Change.” It addresses the social construction of meaning, the nature of change, principles of creative change, and the practice of creative change. This is a practical and applied version of social construction that has grown out of collaborative learning experiences in the Institute for Creative Change and the change practices of the Institute’s members. The evolution chapter (“An Evolving Understanding of Human Change”) describes the social and relational context that has nurtured the development and practice of this theory over the past forty years. The glossary will provide the reader with definitions of specific concepts presented in the book. The bibliography offers up-to-date resources for those interested in exploring in more detail the many dimensions of social construction theory.

After reading this field book and performing a number of the Learning Labs, readers may be interested in creating their own experiential learning exercises in social construction. The process of inventing a new Lab and then presenting it to others is a rich learning experience. True to theory, there is no “right way” to construct a Learning Lab. Therefore, collaborating with colleagues and co-constructing a Lab to present to others will lead to new perceptions and learning for those who participate.