

How to Create Transformative Gatherings – 4 Tips for Educators

Based on ideas from *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker

Why should educators bother to read a book about *gathering*?? Many of us feel far from a world that thinks about ordering the right bubbly and debating the merits of ice centerpieces. But so much of what we do in school – in fact the essence of what we do – is about gathering. Everything from the full staff meeting to the 7th-grade team PLC to the school leadership meeting to every single class that every teacher teaches. Imagine if teachers thought of their lessons like Japanese tea masters thought of their tea ceremonies – as *Ichi-go ichi-e* – basically, “one meeting, one moment in your life that will never happen again.”

Given the prominence of gatherings in schools, I thought we should maximize their power and significance by taking some lessons from Priya Parker. She says, “A gathering is a moment of time that has the potential to alter many other moments of time.” Further, “Gathering – the conscious bringing together of people for a reason—shapes the way we think, feel, and make sense of our world.”

Yet, when most of us plan staff agendas or lessons, we tend to focus more on the logistics (PPTs, refreshments, Post-Its, etc.) rather than the *people* because those are the items we can control. Given the great need to build connection and a sense of belonging in schools right now, why don't we rethink the *way* we gather in schools to make our gatherings unforgettable, meaningful, and centered around *people*. What if (and remember the [Maya Angelou quote](#)), we think about how we want gatherings to make people *feel*. Below are four areas to think about to elevate school gatherings (such as celebrations, staff meetings, PLC meetings, classes, parent-teacher conferences), based on ideas from *The Art of Gathering*.

1. Find a specific purpose for the meeting.

We often think the purpose of a gathering is clear – a birthday is to celebrate a birthday, a staff meeting is to introduce a new initiative. But the truth is that this isn't very specific, and we end up confusing a *category* of gathering with a *purpose*:

Basic Category	Thoughtful Purpose
Back-to-School Night	We want families to more deeply understand our PBL approach to learning & invite them in as partners.
PLC meeting	We want teachers to take ownership over the learning of <i>all</i> students in the grade and plan accordingly.
Full staff meeting	We want staff to feel a deeper sense of pride and connection to the school given the past two years of the pandemic and the often disparaging portrayal of schools in the news.
Math class	We want to empower students to believe in their abilities even when they struggle.
Theater club	We want to communicate to a group of kids that they matter.

If we don't dig deeper, then we end up doing the same old thing. Parker offers a few tips to tease out a more compelling purpose:

- 1. Zoom out** – Look at the larger picture. Think about what larger needs might your gathering address? For example, instead of one chemistry teacher thinking of her purpose as teaching chemistry, she saw it as giving young people a lifelong relationship to the organic world. The result? A much more exciting classroom.
- 2. Drill down** – Drill below the obvious reasons for the meeting. In education we often employ the [5 Whys Protocol](#). You want to have a Curriculum Night. *Why?* We always have one. *Why?* To explain the curriculum to families. *Why?* So we can form a true partnership with families in educating their children. Ah – now that's a **worthy** purpose.
- 3. What do you want to be different because you gathered?** In education we encourage our teachers to backwards plan – start with the learning goals and *then* plan the unit. Why don't we do the same thing with our meetings? How do we want people to be altered by attending this meeting? Start with your specific purpose, and all meeting details should flow from there.

2. Be an active facilitator.

In social gatherings, we tend to be “chill” hosts – we plan the details of the event (when, where, dinner menu) and then leave guests on their own when they arrive (usually to talk to the same people they knew from before the event). The same is true in schools – we set the meeting time, and even the meeting agenda, but then we don't feel as comfortable serving as an *active facilitator*. We don't want to be seen as overbearing. But as Parker says, “Freedom for the wolves has often meant death to the sheep.” This is the problem when we have no agenda or take a *laissez-faire* approach in order to be “chill.” It's not enough to set a purpose, an agenda, and ground rules – you also need to steer the ship and reinforce those rules. Instead, as host (aka facilitator), we need to take an active role to *protect*, *equalize*, and *connect* our guests (participants).

- 1. Protect and equalize your guests** – When you don't step up to lead, that creates a vacuum and others fill it. In the Alamo Drafthouse movie theater they have rules against cell phone use during a movie. But they *actually* kick people out! *Why?* To protect their guests. Thomas Jefferson introduced seating by “pell-mell” not by rank at his formal dinners. *Why?* Most gatherings have hierarchies. How can we, in education, not only set norms but enforce them? How can we use structures like protocols to make sure everyone gets an equal chance to speak?

2. Connect your guests – Connections don't just happen on their own. You have to plan for them. At one conference, Parker had people frequently switch tables for small-group conversations and the group reported never having felt so connected to so many people so quickly. You could start with a connector like a round of "Good Morning" that many churches use, or you could give pairs a physical "Conversation Menu" and have them choose a topic to discuss for a few minutes. Imagine if you had chosen the specific *purpose* for your Back-to-School Night as connecting families so they could serve as resources for each other? Then you would focus more on planning some good "turn-and-talk" prompts rather than choosing the right snacks.

3. Give it some spice.

Parker reminds us (and you might have read this in [The Power of Moments](#) by the Heaths) that research shows people remember the first and last 5% of an event along with the most climactic moment. So, how can we make our gatherings memorable?

Openings and Closings – Don't start or end with logistics when these are the times people will remember! Most TV shows don't start with the credits. Rather than starting with the welcome PPT slide or an announcement "There's a white Camaro in the parking lot with lights on..." start and end by inspiring people (a poem, a pledge, etc.) Yes, people need logistics, just don't start with them. And for a closing, help people to look both *inward* (to reflect on or remember what transpired here) and *outward* (What from today do you want to take back with you?) You might do a "checkout" where everyone shares one word that describes how they're feeling. Or find another memorable way to close. Imagine how powerful it would be for a teacher to end a class with a story rather than an assignment. At our last mega Mastermind gathering, we ended with the last 2 minutes of Amanda Gorman's "[The Hill We Climb](#)."

Prime Your Guests – The event starts as soon as your guests learn about it. We prepare food and agendas way in advance, but we don't prepare *people*. If you want the event to be celebratory, get people in the mood ahead of time. One host had guests send two happy photographs ahead of time and then printed them out and had a holiday tree decorated with their 24 printed photos of happiness – this prepared guests for good cheer and conversations. If you plan to brainstorm at your gathering, perhaps send people an article about tapping into their wildest ideas to prepare them to unleash their creativity. At our Mastermind meeting about re-igniting sparks, we asked guests to send us a song that lifts you up and we compiled a songlist to play at the meeting and share with them. So, instead of asking guests to bring something (like wine), consider asking them to *do* something to prime them for the event.

Create an Alternate World – If you want an event to be memorable, Parker suggests you create an "alternate world" – something different from their daily lives. You might give the meeting a **name** (how about an "idea lab" instead of a "staff meeting"?). Maybe employ some special **pop-up rules** (just for this event). One mom's dinner that aimed to give the women a break had the rule, "You talk about your kids, you take a shot." At one conference to maximize learning, they had "The Law of Two Feet" – if at any point you aren't learning or contributing, just use your two feet to go to a different session. No hard feelings.

4. Get beyond a "culture of nice."

Having "good controversy" as Parker calls it, is not something we want to have at *every* gathering, but sometimes making things fruitfully controversial helps us to move forward. In education, we often get stuck in a "culture of nice" and people don't feel comfortable sharing what's actually on their minds.

1st we need to fuse people – Before people engage in good controversy, they need to be connected. See above for ideas to actively connect people. Find ways to deepen relationships and connections between people. Even when people work and know each other, the idea is to see each other with *fresh eyes*. At one of Parker's events, people had to share a story no one at the gathering knew.

Next, we need people to be "real" – We tend to want gatherings to stay positive, so we focus on what's going well and our hopes for the future. But what about including an opportunity to pause and share what's *not* going well? Or sharing something that is thought- or heart-provoking? The idea is to create a space for the darkness to come in, too. "Every time people gather, they are being brought into the opportunity to help one another, to do what they couldn't do or think up or heal alone. And yet so often when we gather, we are gathered in ways that hide our need for help." Also, if you want your participants to be open and real, you as the facilitator need to share your **own** stories that reveal your vulnerability.

Prepare for dealing with conflict – It rarely happens that gatherings automatically address controversial issues. Again, we need to plan for it. We tend to avoid issues "when they affect or threaten people's fears, needs, and sense of self." Good controversy helps us re-examine what we hold dear and for this reason it can be risky. So, in order for a facilitator to prepare, they may want to interview participants to get a sense of what those issues are: *What are people avoiding that they don't think they're avoiding? What are the sacred cows here? What goes unsaid? What are we trying to protect? And why?* To get at these issues, you might ask, "If you were to say something that was politically incorrect, or taboo, about this process or project, what would it be?" and "What do you think is the most needed conversation for this group to have right now?" Then for the actual event, it is essential to have a clear structure and set ground rules (ask participants, "What do you need to feel safe? What do you need to take a risk?") This is a much bigger topic, but if your event involves invoking good controversy, take some time to consider how you will plan for that.