



Openings and Closings

Overview: How we open and close a workshop or gathering is crucial to forming safe, creative, and supportive spaces and building ongoing relationships of solidarity and action. The following are a sampling of possibilities that range from very short and basic introductions, openings and closings to more complex and involved processes.

Purpose: Openings and closings are a vital part of any workshop. They establish the framework for safe, creative and productive spaces and help foster trust and relationships conducive to collaboration and solidarity. They establish a common footing for everyone in the room which is why facilitators should participate in these activities as well. To encourage an environment of exchange, it is good to begin with a positive and personal topic to help people tap into something meaningful in their lives. Sometimes to start off with, the topic can be very light and entertaining especially when people don't know one another. Over time, as trust grows activities can invite deeper reflections. We provide a sampling of ideas that range from very short and basic introductions to more complex and involved processes and opening and closing rituals.

Credit: These examples come from Mariela Arce, Valerie Miller, Patricia Ardon, Lisa VeneKlasen, Nani Zulminarni, and Alexa Bradley drawing on many traditions of popular education.

Facilitator Notes:

- ***Introductions and Setting up the space:***

At the start of any process you need to bring people into the space, introduce the facilitators and the participants, provide logistical information, share aims and expectations and address any concerns arising. You also need to set the tone, by how the space is set-up, and by the methodologies used to introduce people.

- ***Safe space:***

You need to make sure participants are comfortable and feel safe sharing. Facilitators need to think about what to bring into the room to support this? Tissues, comfortable chairs, cushions, sweets, iced water etc. See our Safe Space methodology for more detail.





- **Introductions:**

First up, introduce the facilitators so that participants know who will be responsible for ensuring the process is smooth.

- **Confidentiality and Consent for Documentation:**

Openings are also an important time to speak to confidentiality and documentation. Since sharing is often very deep we need ask for confidentiality among the group so people agree not to share what they hear, and to always ensure that permission is sought and participants are informed of the ways in which we are documenting the process and how we plan to use quotes/stories/information from the workshop so they are able to choose how to participate and to identify themselves.

QUICK INTRODUCTIONS

1. **Country greetings:**

A quick fun way to introduce each other in situations where participants come from different countries or language groups.

Process:

- Three rounds, participants all standing in circle.
- Go around circle. Each language/country group says and shows:
 - How they greet each other in their country/community – a phrase and/or gesture; then all participants repeat in unison.
 - How they express their excitement in their country/community, then all participants repeat in unison.
- Finally, each person, says:
 - Their name, country and organization.

2. **Personal/Organizational Likes:**

Process: People give their names, places where they live, organization, and something they like or appreciate about themselves, and/or their organizations. Option: also can mention something about themselves – a skill, quality, experience etc. – they would like to share with the group; this information can be used to create a group resource list.

3. **Superpowers:**

Process: Name, place, organization, and share a special quality or strength you have – your own personal superpower – or a superpower you would like to have.



4. *Sources of joy:*

Process: Name, place, organization, share something or someone who gave you joy or inspired you recently and a sentence or two why.

5. *Generosity:*

Process: Name, place, organization, describe an act of generosity you have received or extended to someone recently.

6. *What's in a Name:*

Process: In pairs, people describe what's behind their name: who gave it to them, why they like it or don't, what other name they might like instead; in plenary, each person shares a few words about their name, then provides basics such as where they live and what organization they work for.

7. *A Chorus of Names:*

While this activity may appear appropriate only for those musically inclined, it can be quite an amusing way for people to introduce themselves. It's guaranteed to provoke some laughter. Karaoke anyone?

Process: The facilitator needs to ham it up a bit and sing or chant her first and last name. Everyone then follows. At the end, everyone sings or chants their name three times in unison.

8. *Basic Introduction with Our Hopes for Process:*

A more straightforward introduction process.

Process: With all participant sitting in a circle, have each one say their name, organisation, country and 1 thing they want to gain from this process. Facilitator should flipchart and summarise process and then review the programme and methodology reflecting on some of the expectations.

LONGER INTRODUCTIONS

1. *Personal Symbol:*

This can be done in a variety of ways.

Process: Ask everyone to think of a symbol – some animal, object, or something from nature – that they identify with and why. Facilitator records everyone's first name and their symbol on a flip chart to get an idea of the range. At this point, they should only identify the symbol



not the reasons for choosing it; then people form pairs and exchange ideas about the symbol. Each person shares why they chose that symbol, what it represents to them in terms of character, values, personality etc. In plenary, the facilitator asks what people have learned from the activity – about themselves and their partners.

2. **Map: Personal Places of Change and Inspiration:**

This opening exercise can serve a variety of purposes and be used in different ways. Using a map, it encourages personal introductions around meaningful places in people's lives. It can provide a first step in examining the notion and experience of change and can be shortened and adjusted depending on time. It also can be a first step in a longer more analytical timeline process, identifying a personal moment of importance, when it occurred, then placing it on a timeline that later can be analysed in terms of the larger historical factors operating to influence that moment.

Materials:

- A map of world (depending on how exercise is used, a map may not be necessary)
- Colored dots – yellow, green and red
- Masking tape or blu-tack
- A wall for the map
- Power point slide with instructions

Process:

Individually:

- Take 5 minutes and think about places that have been important to you in your life – a) place of birth, b) place where something very meaningful happened to you that encouraged you to become an activist, (something that changed you significantly) and c) place that inspires you or that you call home.

(Note: You can do the sharing first in pairs or triads to help those who may feel shy or uncomfortable with doing this immediately in plenary.)

In Plenary:

- To introduce yourself, give your name, then place on the map a yellow dot for your birthplace, red dot for your meaningful place of change, and green for place you call home, and explain briefly why the one place/moment contributed to your becoming an activist/facilitator. (This can be abbreviated and just used to identify and affirm a person's place of change.)

Facilitator Summary Points:

- Thank everyone and affirm scope of people's experiences and journeys and summarize key points. Depending on your focus, here are some possible examples -- *Change is not always joyful. It can involve conflict, heartbreak, awareness of power, courage, anger, new interactions, seeing other people's realities; these experiences have touched us, radicalized us, given us an opportunity to develop our power, and often taught*



us to think more critically. They have brought us new knowledge and the ability to take action. As facilitators and organizers, we work to catalyze personal growth and transformation, to create new forms of collaboration and power so that we can build a better future for all of us. Women's empowerment can be thrilling and exciting but also difficult. People change because of something they feel, not just something they think. We need to remember that out of these challenges and reflections can come great learning, great solidarity and important changes - which are at the heart of our education and organizing work.

- [If there is time, might invite them to reflect on what they learned from the exercise]
- Caution: Need to be aware of time as some people can be overly enthusiastic and lengthy in their explanations, find ways to set time limits and respectfully remind people of the need for everyone to have a chance to speak.

3. **Our Tree of Hopes:**

Introductions are usually accompanied by a moment of sharing people's hopes and concerns about a workshop or a longer term process such as alliance or movement building. This activity forms a type of ritual that can be used at the beginning of a process and at the conclusion as a way to celebrate and evaluate progress and change. Participants create a tree filled with leaves and fruit that represent their hopes. The activity helps identify individual expectations and allows the facilitator to clarify them in light of actual program goals. It provides a way to affirm everyone's voice and highlight their growth and blooming as women and activists in the closing session when they identify their achievements.

Materials:

- Workshop program
- Vase and long sticks for branches to hang hopes and dreams on
- Cut out shapes of leaves and buds in different colors for opening, and a set of flowers for closing
- Magic markers
- Ribbons to tie leaves/buds/flowers on branches

Process:

Opening:

- Everyone takes one or two leaves or buds and write down one thing you want to nurture and develop in yourself and for the women's movement during the workshop or training program.
- Each person reads them aloud and hangs them on the tree.
- Facilitator affirms the hopes and dreams and then reviews the program and clarifies what can actually be done, especially if there are any major differences in participant expectations and what has been planned for the workshop/program.



Closing:

- Everyone takes one or two flowers, writes down what they feel was accomplished personally and/or collectively, reads them out loud and ties them to the tree.
- Facilitator summarizes and celebrates the achievements, notes areas that perhaps still need more attention, and a photo is taken to commemorate the event.

4. *Human Bingo*:

Overview: This activity can be used in multiple ways as an initial exercise for introductions or as a game to start off an evening of informal conversation.

Purpose: This is an interactive activity to break the ice and get to know other group members. It helps establish a creative, fun and safe space. This can be adapted to draw out the kinds of issues being faced in the group and experienced within the context e.g. find someone who has lived in more than two countries or someone who has been dislocated by war/economic conditions. Participants use the bingo sheet to find people who fit the criteria and write down their names in the relevant blocks. When they get a row of filled in blocks they shout bingo and introduce the people they met.

Time: 20 minutes

Materials:

- The bingo chart from below
- Flip chart and markers

Credit: adapted by JASS Southern Africa.

Process:

Facilitator Note: The sample Bingo sheet below has different descriptions of people that need to be adapted to your specific context and group. It can be customized to draw out the kinds of issues being faced in the group and experienced within the context e.g. find someone who has lived in more than two countries or someone who has been dislocated by war/economic conditions.

- Each participant gets a bingo sheet (see attached) and is asked to read the descriptions on it.
- Participants need to see if they can find someone in the room who matches a description in the different boxes.
- That person is then asked to sign their name in the box that pertains to them.
- Participants have to try to be the first person with five signatures in a row (or if you are short on time, five signatures on the sheet) to get BINGO. The first person to get BINGO introduces the people on her sheet and then she and everyone on sheet gets a prize. If you have time you can have two rounds.



Handout: Bingo Sheet (example – create your own)

Someone who has grandparents who came from another country	Someone who is or has a family member who is adopted	Someone who is wearing a bracelet	Someone who has a first or middle name that is the same as a relative's	Someone who can speak another language
Someone who has lived in the same house all his or her life.	Someone who lives with more family members than just parents, sisters, and brothers	Someone who is a member of a religious institution	Someone has been affected by the HIV / AIDS epidemic	Someone who has been to a family reunion
Someone who is an immigrant	Someone whose name begins with the letter R	Someone who is a feminist	Someone who is wearing pink underwear	Someone who has a pet
Someone who knows how to play a musical instrument	Someone who like strawberry milkshakes better than chocolate	Someone who is the oldest child in the family	Someone who is the only child in the family	Someone who is called by a nickname
Someone wearing brown shoes	Someone who skipped breakfast today	Someone who knows the names of the seven dwarfs	Someone who has a pet	Someone who can sew

5. *Collective Collage of Celebration:*

This can take many forms – as a way to reflect on what gives people happiness or pleasure in life, what they consider are ingredients for a life of dignity, what they believe are the successes of their organizations, movements, struggles, what they see are the lessons learned from the workshop etc. It can be used as an opening or closing of a workshop.

Materials:

- Several large sheets of light cardboard in a vibrant color as backing to the collage
- Magazines
- Scissors
- Glue sticks

Process: Using magazines, cut out images that reflect on these themes and put them together to create a large collage. As a group, stand back and reflect on the meanings people draw from the collective collage.



6. *Butterfly:*

As a symbol of change and transformation, the butterfly image can be used as a way for people to voice their long term personal hopes and dreams either toward the beginning or at the end of a workshop. The very act of putting on a butterfly mask can be very powerful.

Materials:

- Butterfly mask
- Chair
- Optional: colorful cut outs of butterflies

Process:

- Everyone has a chance to sit in the chair – the symbolic chrysalis – and put on the butterfly mask. As they do, they express one or two long term dreams for themselves – personally, professionally or both. If done at the beginning of a workshop, these can represent what they hope to get out of the process; if it is done at the end, people can express their long term dreams and tie those into what they learned or acquired from the workshop.
- If desired, cut outs of butterflies can be added to the exercise. These can be used by participants to record one or two of their dreams which can be posted on a wall. People can then be photographed individually and as a group with the collage of butterflies in the background.

7. *A Place of Meaning and Offering:*

Prior to a workshop, ask people to bring something of special value to them that will help create an evocative space of hope and caring and shared emotions. It could be a photo of a loved one, a poem, a rock because of a love for rivers and nature, a piece of chocolate because it was a favorite of a grandmother, etc. Drape a table with a pretty cloth and ask everyone to place their item there and explain its meaning. At the end of the workshop, people retrieve their memento, now infused with the energy of the group.

Materials:

- Table
- Lovely cloth
- Everyone's memento, including that of the facilitators

8. *The Light of Life:*

Using candles to symbolize the life and energy of people and the spirit of the group can be a powerful activity to open up and close a process. This can be done in multiple ways and is a compelling gesture of welcome and of good-bye.



Materials:

- Matches
- Large candle
- Smaller candles of single or multiple colors, tea lights are often the easiest to use
- Flowers, leaves, branches

Process:

- A large candle in the middle of the room can be lit every morning or at the start of a meeting to represent and embody the collective light and wisdom of the group. It can be surrounded by flowers to further enhance its meaning and our connection to nature.
- In some opening sessions, everyone is given a small candle; the facilitator takes the larger candle and lights one of the participant's candles. Each person in turn lights the candle of the person to their right repeating some phrase that encourages community and solidarity such as "With this candle, I offer my light to you." Different colored candles can be used to represent diversity. At the end, people place their candles around the large one in the center.
- This same exercise can be used to conclude a workshop or process, with the added option of making it more personal by thanking the person for their contributions. "With this candle, I thank you, I salute you for your light, for your..."
- Option: Create a gratitude jar that can be used during the process or just at the end. It can be decorated with stars and sparkles to emphasize the joy and energy of the spirit of gratitude. When someone wants to express their gratitude for something that someone else has done, they write it down on a piece of paper and place it in the jar. At the end of the workshop, a few people read the thank you's.

9. *Alchemy: Collective Wisdom and Transformation*

JASS envisions its movement building and organizing work as a process of alchemy. Inspired by our leadership program with indigenous and rural women in Mesoamerica, our collaboration is called *Alquimia* – an alchemy of learning and solidarity that produces new wisdom, renewed energies and ever more compelling strategies for transformation. Using this imagery in opening and closing rituals and throughout workshops can be a dynamic way to build solidarity and generate collective and creative thinking. Different questions can be used to elicit a range of reflections – from what types of challenges do people face and what kind of professional and personal support do they need to what lessons do they draw from a specific discussion or what questions does an exercise raise, etc.

Materials:

- Large clay pot
- Large wooden spoon
- Small pieces of paper
- Magic markers



- Flowers

Process:

- Place a large clay pot and wooden spoon in the center of the room, all surrounded by flowers.
- Ask everyone to reflect on a certain question and then write their reflection on a paper and place it in the pot, stirring it in with the others. Depending on the purpose, people may read their reflection before they add it to the mix or all reflections may be read together anonymously at the end of a session as way to deepen a discussion and emphasize collective wisdom. By so doing, everyone feels that each contribution is being recognized and transformed into something greater and ever more powerful.

10. Inspiring popular sayings:

Popular sayings offer a way not only to affirm local wisdom but deepen people's connections with each other. For example, in one workshop, a Mayan saying took on special meaning. "You are me and I am you." A traditional greeting in indigenous communities, participants explained that the expression honors each person and the web of life and love that sustains and nurtures the planet, the cosmos, and our shared humanity. "Together we become one with all life forms – from the birds who awaken us at dawn and the butterflies who cheer our summer mornings to the rivers that give us fresh water and the moon that brightens our evening skies. Inspired by this vision, we give the best of ourselves in each encounter, creating new energy and beauty to guide our many paths." The expression was incorporated into the closing ceremonies. As people passed a lighted candle from one to another, everyone repeated "You are me and I am you and I want to thank you for. . ."

11. Earth Blanket:

Developing a collective piece of art that represents the meaning of a workshop in people's personal lives and activism can be a compelling way to celebrate and conclude a process. Placing a colorful image of the earth at the center of the piece affirms our connections between each other and nature.

Materials:

- Creative Image of earth pasted on larger poster paper
- Colored squares of paper 5" by 5"
- Magic markers

Process:

- Have participants think about the workshop and what they want to stand for in their lives and work.
- On colored squares of paper, they write down one or two things they want to stand for:



- I stand for . . . (e.g. a world of equality, dignity, and justice for all women, men, children and our Mother Earth and all her creatures).
- Have people attach their cards to a large poster paper with an image of earth at its center (forming a type of quilt).
- Everyone links arms and reads their cards.
- Reflects together on what this new world looks like that we are standing for and imagining. What kind of power are we creating – what does it look like?

Two More in the Openings and Closings Pack:

There are other powerful exercises for the opening and closing of training and convening spaces. In the “Openings and Closings” Pack you will also find:

1. **Wall of Ancestors and Mentors** – a wonderful way to both honour our mentors and explore the leadership qualities we want to embrace.
2. **Loaded Paper Ball Toss** - great for knowledge consolidation during a process.