



**Venturing Outside the Box: Creating and  
Sustaining  
A True Learning Community through  
Overnight Retreats**

Presenters: Amy Crawford, Philip Halpern,  
Hasmig Minassian & Dana Moran

Communication Arts and Sciences  
Berkeley High School  
Berkeley, CA  
2013

# Venturing Outside the Box: Creating and Sustaining a True Learning Community through Overnight Retreats

Presenters: Amy Crawford, Philip Halpern, Hasmig Minassian & Dana Moran

Communication Arts and Sciences  
Berkeley High School  
Berkeley, CA

Welcome to our session!! We are excited to share our experiences with you and hope to inspire you to take the concept of overnight retreats back to your teams.

Getting outside the classroom allows teachers and students to get to know each other in a different context. The opening activities are designed as ice-breakers so that participants can get to know each other better through fun and games. Everyone is encouraged to find out something about another person that they didn't know before.

The deeper, risk-taking activities allow students and teachers to see and hear that we have much more in common than we might think, and that most of us have stories to tell that no one can see. The strength, bravery, and perseverance of our peers and colleagues is sometimes heart-breaking, but also stunning and inspiring.

The trust and admiration that develops on retreats transfers into the classroom by helping to create a safer learning environment where students can take more academic risks, both in thinking and effort or motivation. Students who have previously had very little success in school, or have experienced trauma in their lives outside of school, have the highest affective filters. These students stand to benefit the most from the assurances of a truly safe learning environment.

Here are some things students have to say about the benefits of overnight retreats:

*"...talking to Sergio late night on the beach. We talked about how finally we're not the only ones in our classes stuck in the same situation, that we face many of the same obstacles. As we talked I realized that in the future that's how life will feel. Our talk reminded me of the many talks my parents have with other grown-ups: about life and obstacles—but like them we spoke with joy and created this sense of unity."*

*"I want to bring back that warmth where everybody feels free and safe just having a good time...people talking to people they don't usually talk to, mixing it up on who they hang out with, and people acting themselves. I want to bring the cohesiveness of our class back into school."*

In the pages that follow, you will find a timeline checklist, a sample agenda, and several of our favorite activities with detailed instructions for facilitators. All other necessary documents will be posted on the conference's web site. Please don't hesitate to contact us with questions or feedback.

[amycrawford@berkeley.net](mailto:amycrawford@berkeley.net)

[philhalpern@berkeley.net](mailto:philhalpern@berkeley.net)

[hasmigminassian@berkeley.net](mailto:hasmigminassian@berkeley.net)

[danamoran@berkeley.net](mailto:danamoran@berkeley.net)

## **Timeline Check List for Organizing Overnight Retreats**

### **Late August (first month of school):**

- Contact retreat center for dates
- Gather paperwork for school board approval and submit
- Fill out transportation request for school buses
- Submit authorization for liability insurance
- Put on school's master calendar
- Advertise dates to families at Back to School Night (if possible)

### **Two months before:**

- Sign contract with facility and pay deposit
- Send families a reminder email with a save the date and information about the price.

### **One month before:**

- Create and hand out a "Retreat Info Packet" that has information for families, price, deadlines, and permission slip
- Gather students in planning meetings to discuss agenda
- Ask all staff who are attending to RSVP with exact time span of their attendance and remind them to get their subs!

### **Ongoing:**

- Collect money and permission slips; Continue meeting with planning committee

### **3 weeks before:**

- Have students create a snack list for retreat and designate 2 student/parent shopper volunteers.

### **2 weeks before:**

- Confirm buses
- Make deadline for students to hand in permission slips and money
- Finalize agenda and supply list.
- Designate student/parent to shop for supplies

### **1 week before:**

- Communicate final numbers of kids and staff to the retreat center
- Print out and go over retreat contract with students. Make sure they understand and sign.
- Once planning committee has finalized agenda, create home groups with final list of attendees
- Send out reminder email to staff

**Week of:**

- Collect retreat contracts
- Go over packing list with students
- Make arrangements for students who aren't coming (which class will they be in, etc.);
- Remind students where they are meeting you
- Verify with shoppers where to meet you to transfer food and supplies
- Photocopy agendas, make sure all supplies for activities are packed and prepped

**Day of:**

- Meet students at the bus on time; Check them in on a clipboard;
- Give final count to bus drivers and your administration before you leave
- Have a great time!!!

Communication Arts, and Sciences  
Berkeley High School  
2013

## Agenda CAS Sophomore Retreat 2012-Pt. Bonita YMCA

Wednesday November 7<sup>th</sup>

Time	Agenda Item
9-10:30	Arrive
10:30-11:00	Orientation by Staff, layout of land, home teams, ground rules, retreat agreements <b>Need: List of Home groups</b> <b>Girls are in Farallon: 9,11,13 with staff in 7</b> <b>Boys are in Golden Gate: 7,8,9,10,11 with staff in 6</b>
11:00-11:45	Group Games: Send me someone who (whole group), Charades in home groups <b>Supplies: List of "Send me....", Slips of paper/pens for charades</b>
<b>Settle in and Lunch: 11:45 - 12:45</b>	
12:45-1:05	<b>Activity #1: Appreciation Bags, explain and then everyone writes a minimum of 10.</b>  <b>Supplies: Paper bags, Sharpies, and index cards and pens</b>
1:10-1:40	<b>Activity #2: Relay Races: Cut the flour, pass the orange, shoot a hoop, scramble a word, pin the hole, balance something (?)</b>  <b>Supplies: Flour, Garden Spade, Bowl, Oranges, Word Scrambles, Balloons, Spoons, String, Safety Pins, Empty coke cans,</b>
1:45-2:05	<b>Activity #3: Secrets in home groups, one funny and one serious</b>  <b>Supplies: Paper and pens for everyone</b>
2:10-2:30	<b>Activity #4: Toilet Paper fashion show</b>  <b>Supplies: Toilet Paper</b>
2:30-2:45	<b>Break (snacks, bathroom, etc)</b>
2:45-3:45	<b>Sophomore Class Talk (adults just observe, kids discuss)</b> <b>WHAT CHANGES DO WE WANT TO SEE? HOW DO WE WANT TO BE DIFFERENT? WHAT DO WE NEED FROM EACH OTHER?</b> <b>(talk in dyads. Dyads make a four-some. Then whole group).</b> <b>Sara and Alex facilitate.</b>

	<b>Supplies: Talking object, goals written on board, agreements</b>
3:45-4:30	<b>Trike Walk</b>
	<b>Supplies: List of kids, list of questions</b>
4:30-5:30	<b>Free Time (an adult needs to know where you are the whole time)</b>
6:00 – 7:00	<b>Dinner</b>
7: 00 – 9:00	<b>Artifact Share</b>
9:00- 9:30/45	<b>Bonfire/Sm'ores</b>  <b>NEED: Wood/Fire Starters/Kindling/Matches</b> <b>Marshmallows, Chocolate Bars, Graham Crackers</b>
10:00 – 11:00	<b>Night Hike-</b>
11:30 – 12:00	<b>Wind it down people...</b>
<b>12:00 MIDNIGHT</b>	<b>BEDTIME – all students and teachers in bed</b>

**Thursday November 8th**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Agenda Item</b>
8:00-9:00	<b>Breakfast</b>
9:00-9:30	<b>Clean-Up Dorms and Pack up. Have all belongings in Bothin Room.</b>
9:30-10:00	<b>Campus trash clean-up in pairs from home group. Candy for all groups with 15 or more pieces of trash</b>  <b>MATERIALS: Candy</b>
10:00-11:45	<b>Closing Activities:</b> small group count, 1-10, "In 5 years, I will be" , Cross The Line, Group debrief with web of yarn

	<b>Need: Cross the Line Questions, Cut up paper, Yarn, Scissors</b>
12:00	<b>Pick Up our bag lunches and Departure</b>

Needs:

- Teachers responsible for their kids AT ALL TIMES, need a staff for fire and for night hike
- Talk about bed-checks after lights out, counting kids, etc.
- HOME GROUPS: Minassian, Berent, Martinez, Daly, Garfinkel, Brewer (Katz, Sandberg, Moran)

Shopping List

**Snacks:**

- White String Cheese
- Corn tortilla chips
- Nutter Butters
- Cut veggie plate with dips
- Fruit (cuties do well)
- Red Vines
- Cheezits
- Chocolate Covered pretzels
- Yogurt raisins
- Chips
- Pretzels
- Reeses
- Trail mix
- Oreos
- Bag of flour
- 6 oranges, the larger the better, (for a game)
- S;mores stuff: Chocolate (3 big tablets) , Graham Crackers (one box) , Marshmallows (one bag)
- Bag of candy (as prizes for campus clean up)

**Non-Food Supplies**

- Toilet Paper-7 rolls
- Pack of balloons to blow up
- Index Cards 2,100 of them (not kidding about this amount)
- Paper bags (pack of 100)
- Black ink pens (enough for 100 ppl)
- Ball of pretty colored yarn
- Box or bundle of firewood
- Long stick matches

- Ball of string (like twine)
- Safety pins (small box)
- Small bag of gummy bears

**Bring:**

Bowl for flour game, garden spade for flour game, sharpies, cut up paper, scissors, tape, plastic spoons

**Copies of:** Send me someone who, Trike questions, Stand and Declare Qs, Discussion Prompts and Agenda, Agendas for each staff member, Perm Slips/Contracts

**Agenda for all CAS Sophomore Talk 3:30-4:30**

**Need:**

- Assigned groups of dyads and then foursomes
- Agreements on the Board
- Objectives
- Prompts
- Sticky Pad Paper and PENS

**Prompts:**

(on the sticky paper)

What do you see that prevents the CAS Sophomore class from being a productive learning community?

What changes do we want to see in the CAS Sophomore Class?

What do we need from each other?

How, specifically will we make those changes?

(Discussion questions to get at answers to above questions)

Describe your ideal learning environment

List classmates you see contributing to a productive learning environment, and explain what they are doing specifically.

What are the specific ways you contribute to a positive learning environment, or take away from it?

What's your level of commitment to actually making a positive learning environment, scale of 1-5, explain?

**Objectives:**

I will understand my role/responsibility in the CAS Learning Community

I will learn how to make CAS a safer place and a better learning community

I will understand my peer's perspectives

**Agreements:**

One mic rule

Step up, step back

No personal digs

Assume positive intent



**Suggestion for end or follow-up:** Small group of kids write up a sophomore class contract that incorporates all of these ideas, kids discuss and sign when we are back in school and then measure how well they are doing in 4 weeks and again at the semester.

## STAND AND DECLARE (Sophomore and/or Junior Retreat)

**This activity addresses sensitive, personal issues and requires a safe environment and strong facilitation!** This activity should be scheduled after other trust-building and community-building activities.

NOTE: This activity is sometimes called “Cross the Line” or “Step Into the Circle.” Participants can be lined up and asked to cross the line (take a step forward) when statements apply, or stand in a circle and asked to take a step into the circle. Participants should never be allowed to sit and just raise hands. It is very important for participants to physically move in response to a prompt because it requires more courage and is much less ambiguous.

### Objectives/Purpose:

- To provide a structured and safe way for people to appreciate the diversity in a group.
- To make visible the similarities between people who may seem different on the surface.
- To allow participants to choose whether to acknowledge facets of their identities.
- To provide a respectful way of discussing sensitive issues.

Time: About 30 minutes including introduction. Another 15 or so for debrief.

### Introduction for Participants:

*Say something like the following to students:* “We have been discussing the issue of identity. This activity will allow us to consider and learn some things about ourselves and others.”

### Guidelines for Participants:

*Read and/or explain these out loud to students just before the activity is to begin.*

The following guidelines must be reviewed and agreed upon by all participants:

- It is crucial for everyone to watch and listen during this exercise. Everyone must be totally silent. This means no talking, commenting, snickering, giggling or asking questions. Anyone who violates this will be asked to leave because silence is important for trust.
- No one participating in this exercise is under any pressure to share anything they do not feel comfortable with. Everyone has the right to pass, although you are encouraged to be brave and honest. Everyone learns more if everyone is more honest.
- Everyone decides for him/her self whether they want to cross the line. No telling others to do so.
- The questions intentionally start off easy and get harder.
- Some of the statements in the exercise may have ambiguous meaning (e.g. some questions may ask about things which have happened “recently.” You what “recent” means...) Each person decides for him/ her self what the question means and stands or sits based on their own interpretation. In other words, YOU decide what it means and YOU decide whether or not you want to cross the line. Sorry, but no clarifying questions allowed.
- Confidentiality is a must. Everyone must agree that what we do in this room today stays in this room
- We will talk about this exercise AFTER we are finished.
- Are there any questions?

- If you feel you CANNOT follow these rules, please raise your hand now and you may leave until the activity is over.

Periodically throughout the activity, remind students to look around and see who is standing and who is not before sitting back down. Remind them to think about how it feels, and constantly remind them to be silent.

Statements:

Begin each prompt with, "Please stand (or cross the line, or step into the circle) if you..."

2. are not from California
3. are male
4. are female
5. are Christian
6. are Catholic
7. are Jewish
8. are Muslim
9. are Buddhist
10. believe in any other religion not already mentioned
11. are agnostic, atheist, or do not believe in any God or gods
12. are Asian or Asian American
13. are Black, African or African American
14. are Chicano, Latino or Hispanic
15. are Native American or American Indian
16. are White, Caucasian or European American
16. are of mixed racial or ethnic heritage
17. feel you know very little about your cultural heritage

18. would describe your family as blue collar, working class or poor
19. would describe your family as middle class
20. would describe your family as upper class or rich
21. are the only child in your family
22. have high self-esteem
23. have had serious thoughts of dropping out of school
24. generally feel you get the best grades you are capable of getting
25. feel attractive
26. have birth parents that are divorced
26. have birth parents that were never married
27. believe your parents should be divorced
28. are a parent
29. do not get along with one or both of your parents
30. have laughed at yourself recently
31. have a close friend or family member in jail or prison
32. have a close friend or family member who has been harassed by the police
33. have yourself been harassed by the police
34. have been arrested
35. have had a close friend or family member die as the result of violence
36. have a close friend or family member who is gay, lesbian or bisexual
37. have experienced the effects of alcoholism in your family
38. suspect that one of your peers abuses alcohol or drugs
39. have a close friend or family member that has experienced child abuse
40. have a close friend or family member that has been sexually abused or assaulted

41. have a close friend or family member that has seriously thought of suicide
42. have a close friend or family member that has committed suicide
43. are currently supporting yourself financially
44. do not live with either of your birth parents
45. live in neighborhood you do not consider safe
46. have been called derogatory names based on your ethnicity
47. have been put down or made to feel ashamed because of your ethnicity, culture or religion
48. have been called a failure or been told you can't succeed by a parent, teacher or other authority figure
49. have been teased or put down because of the size or shape of your body or parts of your body
50. have been teased or put down for being too smart or for getting good grades
51. have ever dieted or exercised to change to size or shape of your body
52. feel you are often misunderstood
53. believe that love is a crucial part of your life
54. believe money is the most important element in one's life
55. were raised to believe that being tough is more important than being caring
56. have saved someone's life
57. have had your life saved by someone else
58. feel you will live a short life
59. have carried a weapon with the intent to use it in the past
60. have been threatened with a weapon in the past
61. have a close friend or family member who is HIV positive
62. have a close friend or family member who has died of AIDS
63. believe that one or both of your parents is/are racist, sexist or homophobic

64. want to be happy in life

Debrief:

Tell everyone to relax and thank them for their participation and honesty. Remind them that if any issues were raised for them for which they feel they would like some help or more information, they can come and see you for referrals. Be aware that this activity may open up issues for students, and facilitators must be able to help students get support if they need or want it.

*Ask students:*

- Why did we do this?
  - To think about the experiences which have shaped our lives
  - To see similarities among people who are different on the surface
- What did it feel like to do this exercise?
- How did it feel to be the only one standing? the only one not standing?
- How did it feel to not be able to explain your answer to the group? Does anyone want to explain one of your responses now?
- Were you surprised by anything you saw?

Communication Arts and Sciences  
Berkeley High School  
2013

## **Artifact Share (Sophomore and Junior Retreats): Evening Activity**

This activity is the centerpiece of the retreat and students must be asked in advance to prepare for it . They are asked to bring a significant artifact from their lives that has special meaning for them.

### When:

This activity usually takes place after dinner on the first day. Students have been told in advance to bring an artifact that says or shows something really important about them. Adult participants should bring an artifact to share as well.

### Why:

The purpose of the Artifact Share is to allow everyone to reveal or share something about themselves that most of group does not know.

### How:

Everyone sits in a circle, with no one sitting in front of or behind anyone else. Everyone must be able to see everyone else.

### Introduction by facilitator, say the following out loud to students:

- This activity requires active listening
- If anyone needs to leave (for bathroom, etc) please do so quietly and respectfully
- Silence all electronic devices and absolutely no side conversations or questions for the speaker
- No clapping after speakers (silent supportive hand signals are ok, e.g., “jazz hands” or “twinkles”)
- If anyone forgot to bring an artifact, you can still participate by describing what you would have brought and what it means to you
- A reminder about teachers as mandated reporters (intent to harm self or others, current harm being done to you by another including physical, emotional, sexual)
- Tell your story, but also be aware of air time (60 participants x 2 minutes each = 2 hours!)
- Confidentiality

The facilitator then asks for a volunteer to go first (or the facilitator can be first, and probably should be for the sophomore retreat in order to model depth and length) and move around the circle from the first speaker. Everyone is asked to describe what they brought, and why it is important to them. Participants are allowed to pass, but the facilitator comes back to them at the end to see if they have changed their minds. Adults can set the tone by choosing something personal and deep.

### Closing by facilitator:

- Check to make sure those who passed have not changed their minds
- Thank everyone for their courage and honesty
- Encourage everyone to continue the conversations, offer support, give hugs, etc. throughout the retreat
- Now time for the night hike!

Optional addition: You can bring a skein of yarn that is passed around the circle as each speaker tells his/her story. Each speaker wraps the yarn around his/her wrist a few times while talking and then passes it to the next person. After the activity is done, the yarn represents the “connectedness” or “web of connection” that binds everyone together. Participants then cut the yard and turn to a neighbor who ties the ends together. This yarn bracelet is a reminder of the activity and the community.

Sophomores may or may not take risks and share personal stories since they are sometimes gauging the safety of the room/community. Juniors who have participated as sophomores will take much greater risks.

That said, this activity has often created a need for direct follow up with students, either immediately that night, or upon return to school, and has sometimes led to CPS reports. In recent years our guidance counselor accompanies us on retreats and helps if immediate intervention is needed. In the past we had occasions where we returned with a shortlist of students who needed a counselor check-in. The community of students and teachers formed through the activity helped support kids who had shared intense experiences throughout the retreat.

Communication Arts and Sciences  
Berkeley High School  
2013



## **Appreciations and Apologies (Senior Retreat): Evening Activity**

### When:

This activity usually takes place after dinner on the first day. It takes the place of the Artifact Share from previous years.

### Why say the following out loud:

The purpose of the Appreciations and Apologies is to take advantage of the opportunity to say something you have been meaning to say to someone you don't normally get the chance to say it to. In other words, NOT your boyfriend/girlfriend or best friend. While it is great to thank them for "always being there for me," you have opportunities to say that every day, and the point of this activity is to take advantage of the chance to reach out to someone else.

(Students have been asked in advance to think about whom they might pick and what they might say.)

### How:

Everyone sits in a circle, with no one sitting in front of or behind anyone else. Everyone must be able to see everyone else.

### Introduction by facilitator say the following out loud:

- This activity requires active listening
- If anyone needs to leave (for bathroom, etc) please do so quietly and respectfully
- Silence all electronic devices and absolutely no side conversations or questions for the speaker
- No clapping after speakers (silent supportive hand signals are ok, e.g., "jazz hands" or "twinkles")
- A reminder about teachers as mandated reporters (intent to harm self or others, current harm being done to you by another including physical, emotional, sexual)
- Pick either an appreciation or an apology and be aware of airtime (60 participants x 2 minutes each = 2 hours!)
- Choose this time to issue an apology only if it is sincere, relevant and appropriate for the public format. If it doesn't meet the criteria, choose an appreciation instead. (For example, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade playground fight is probably not relevant, unless it has had lasting consequences for your relationship.)
- Reminder to NOT pick your bf/gf or bffl
- Confidentiality

The facilitator then asks for a volunteer to go first (or the facilitator can be first) and move around the circle from the first speaker. Participants are allowed to pass, but the facilitator comes back to them at the end to see if they have changed their minds. Adults can set the tone by choosing something personal and deep.

### Closing by facilitator:

- Check to make sure those who passed have not changed their minds
- Thank everyone for their courage and honesty
- Encourage everyone to continue the conversations and make individual appreciations and apologies throughout the retreat

- Now time for the night hike!

This activity has often created a need for direct follow up with students, either immediately that night, or upon return to school, and has sometimes led to CPS reports. In recent years our guidance counselor accompanies us on retreats and helps if immediate intervention is needed. In the past we had occasions where we returned with a shortlist of students who needed a counselor check-in. The community of students and teachers formed through the activity helped support kids who had shared intense experiences throughout the retreat.

Communication Arts and Sciences  
Berkeley High School  
2013