12

Morning Meeting

Teaching the Art of Caring Conversation

Roxann Kriete

THE RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM

In the spring of my first year as a teacher in a vocational secondary school, I got a letter from a student for whom I had a particular fondness, letting me know that she was dropping out of school. School was not making much sense to her, and little that she was being asked to learn held much interest. She wrote, almost apologetically, that school just was not a place she felt she belonged. More than 20 years later, her words still seem profoundly sad:

I will always remember how you said "Hi, Sue," as I walked into eighth period. It made me feel like it really mattered that I came.

It touched and pained me that something which seemed so small to me, an act I hadn't even been aware of, had meant so much to her. I vowed to learn something from it and quickly became dedicated to greeting my students. I would station myself by the door and try to say a little something to each one as they entered, or at least to make eye contact and smile at every student, not just the ones like Sue for whom I had an instinctive affinity.

Gradually, I realized how much I was learning at my post by the door. I observed who bounced in with head up and smile wide, whose eyes were red rimmed from tears shed in the girls' room at lunch, and who mumbled a response into his collar and averted his eyes every day for an entire semester. I did not know what to do about much of it, but at least I was learning how to notice.

I have learned a lot since then. It is good for students to be noticed, to be seen by their teacher. But it is only a start, not enough by itself. They must notice and be noticed by each other as well.

Years after I taught Sue, I joined the staff of Greenfield Center School, Northeast Foundation for Children's kindergarten through eighth-grade lab school. There, I saw teachers teaching students to greet each other, to speak to each other, and to listen to each other. I saw students start each day together in Morning Meeting, where noticing and being noticed were explicit goals. Today, children in kindergartens and elementary and middle schools around the country launch their school days in Morning Meetings—a particular and deliberate way to begin the school day.

All classroom members—grown-ups and students—gather in a circle, greet each other, and listen and respond to each other's news. We take note of who is present and who is absent, whether it is it still raining or not, who is smiling and buoyant, and who is having a hard time smiling. We briefly grapple with problems that challenge our minds and look forward to the events in the day ahead. Morning Meeting allows us to begin each day as a community of caring and respectful learners.

MORNING MEETING FORMAT

The Morning Meeting format was developed by Northeast Foundation for Children staff as part of an approach to teaching and learning called the Responsive Classroom. It is an approach informed by belief in seven basic tenets:

1. The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
2. How children learn is as important as what children learn.
3. The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
4. There is a set of social skills that children need to learn and practice to be successful. They form the acronym CARES—cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, self-control.
5. We must know our children individually, culturally, and developmentally.
6. All parents want what is best for their children, and we must work with parents as partners.
7. The principles of the Responsive Classroom must be practiced by educators in their interactions with each other, with the children, and with the parents.

Building on these principles, Morning Meeting is made up of four sequential components and lasts up to half an hour each day. Although there is much overlap, each component has its own purposes and structure. The components intentionally provide opportunities for children to practice the skills of greeting, listening, and responding; group problem solving; and noticing and anticipating. This daily practice in caring conversation gradually weaves a web that binds a classroom together.

1. *Greeting*: Children greet each other by name, often including hand shaking, clapping, singing, and doing other activities.
2. *Sharing*: Students share some news of interest to the class and respond to each other, articulating their thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a positive manner.
3. *Group Activity*: The whole class does a short activity together, building class cohesion through active participation.
4. *News and Announcements*: Students develop language skills and learn about the events in the day ahead by reading and discussing a daily message posted for them.

Teachers who use Morning Meeting must believe in children's capacity to take care of themselves and each other as they learn social skills like respect and responsibility along with academic skills like vocabulary and algorithms. Morning Meeting creates opportunities for children to practice social skills just as they do academic skills. It helps teachers to model these skills and give children valuable feedback, provide practice in respectful behavior, and help children stretch the boundaries of their social world.

The sense of group belonging and the skills of attention, listening, expression, and cooperative interaction developed in Morning Meeting are a foundation for every lesson, every transition time, every lining up, and every upset and conflict, all day and all year long. Morning Meeting is a microcosm of the way we wish our schools to be—communities full of learning that are safe, respectful, and challenging for all.

The following section features Greeting, one of the four components of Morning Meeting. We chose to feature this component because it is the simplest of all the components to implement and the first one taught when teachers are introducing Morning Meeting to their students.

GREETING: A FRIENDLY AND RESPECTFUL SALUTE

"Good morning, Morgan." Hector speaks seriously and earnestly, for that is who Hector is. He looks directly at Morgan, who sits on his left, and offers his right hand.

"Good morning, Hector!" returns Morgan. She grins widely and grasps Hector's hand with exuberance. Morgan's "good mornings" are always punctuated with invisible exclamation points, for that is who Morgan is.

Shannon, on Morgan's left, shifts a bit and sits up taller, ready to receive the enthusiasm of a greeting, Morgan-style. And here it comes. "Good morning, Shannon!" "Good morning, Morgan!" Her teacher smiles, pleased with Shannon's strong voice and firm handshake. Shannon had entered the third-grade classroom in September with a tentative air. Everything about her seemed designed to help her escape the notice of her peers—the acceptable, regulation clothes in quiet colors, her fade-into-the-chair posture, her barely audible voice at meetings. Now, 4 months and more than 70 Morning Meetings later, here she is, wearing a smile almost as broad as Morgan's above her bright purple and red-striped turtleneck, a shirt which will not fade into any school woodwork, her hand extended and waiting for Morgan's.

And so it goes around the circle. Greeting takes slightly less than 3 minutes. Every member of the circle—children, teacher, assistant teacher, and Matthew's mother, who is visiting this morning—has been greeted by name, with a handshake and eye contact.

PURPOSES AND REFLECTIONS

Morning Meetings begin with Greeting. Even on days when there is not time for a full Morning Meeting, teachers convene the circle and make sure Greeting takes place. It is that important because of the tone it sets and the way that tone carries into the rest of the day.

Some mornings, Greeting is simple and straightforward. Variations might be simple, such as students tossing a ball to the student whom they are greeting, or substituting a high five for the handshake. Other mornings, the greeting process is more elaborate or complex, perhaps fanciful. It might be a call-and-response greeting, or a greeting that requires students to offer an adjective describing themselves and beginning with the same letter as their name. Some greetings work with all ages; others have features that make them appropriate only for younger grades or have complex steps better suited to older students.

Long or short, dignified or playful, greetings share four common purposes that are explored in the sections that follow:

- Set a positive tone
- Provide a sense of recognition and belonging
- Help children learn names
- Give practice in offering hospitality

Greeting Sets a Positive Tone for the Classroom and the Day: To greet, according to the Houghton Mifflin, is to "salute or welcome in a friendly and respectful way" (Answers.com, n.d.). Welcoming, friendly, respectful—those are attributes that characterize the climate in exemplary classrooms. Beginning Morning Meeting with a greeting helps create such a climate.

The fact that there is a designated Greeting each day is important. Although there is great room for individual personality to infuse the greeting—Hector's "good morning" is different from Morgan's, which is different from Shannon's—there is also an equity and a safety in having a structure for the greeting. It is unlike the spontaneous, informal way we greet our friends and acquaintances according to our immediate feelings: Our close friends get warm and enthusiastic smiles, maybe even a hug; acquaintances get more neutral hellos; those with whom we struggle to get along may get only a perfunctory nod or perhaps an averted glance.

The goal in Morning Meeting Greeting is for *all* to greet and be greeted equally. In a classroom community, starting a day by hearing your name spoken with respect and warmth is not a privilege that lands on just the popular few. It is, instead, a right to which all are entitled. When we make time for Greeting every morning, no matter how full the schedule, we make a statement as teachers that we expect respect and equity and that we will make sure it happens.

Being Greeted Provides a Sense of Recognition and Belonging That Meets a Universal Human Need: In *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge, 1994, p. 3), Peter Senge tells of the most common greeting among the tribes of Natal in South Africa. The greeting, "Sawu Bona," translates literally as, "I see you." The standard reply is "Sikhona," literally, "I am here." The order of these phrases is important and not variable. One cannot be there until one is seen. The truth of this extends beyond linguistic convention.

My student Sue (whom you met in the beginning of the chapter) went ungreeted and unseen for seven eighths of her day. Unseen, she felt she was not there. Because she was old enough to do something about it, she chose to physically remove herself. Sadly, our classrooms have too many other children who, although physically present, walk through their days feeling unacknowledged and unseen. They feel they are not really there.

I think of the old expression "neither here nor there." It means "unimportant and irrelevant," the opposite of how we want our students to feel. We want them to feel important and relevant. For them to be *here*, they must feel seen. The act of intentional greeting ensures and reinforces our seeing and being seen.

Greeting Helps Children Learn and Use Each Other's Names: To know someone's name and to feel comfortable using it provides powerful options. It lets us call on each other. It is a way we get each other's attention, enabling us to ask a question, to recognize one another in a discussion, to request help, to offer congratulations, or to whisper an apology.

We cannot assume that because students are grouped together that they will learn each other's names. Last year, a colleague returned from meeting with a group of middle school teachers who had asked him to come and speak with them about Responsive Classroom strategies at the middle school level. With fewer than 200 students comprising the seventh and eighth grades, this regional school was not large, although students from several adjacent towns met for the first time in seventh grade. The faculty really wanted to build a sense of community among their students and teachers and had been using a heterogeneous, team-based approach to organize their school for several years.

One of the teachers mentioned in conversation that just the day before he had asked a student in his math class to hand back a set of papers and she could not do it. Why? She did not know all of her classmates' names—could not match the names at the top of the papers with the faces of her peers. It was mid-January, and this was a team of students who had been together in many classes using cooperative learning strategies since September.

A student who does not know her classmates well enough to hand them their work is unlikely to feel familiar enough with them to offer her dissenting opinion about a character in a short story, or admit that she does not quite get this business of "3 is to 21 as x is to 28," or share a poem she wrote about her grandmother. And what a loss that is for her and for her classmates.

Much of our learning happens through social interaction. Knowing names is a fundamental building block for those interactions. It is why name tags at workshops are such a help and one of the reasons why substitute teachers, faced with 25 students they may have never seen before and cannot address by name, often feel so powerless. Naming is often the beginning of knowing.

Hearing our name is also a reminder of our identity, our individuality in the group. As members of a community, we regularly identify with larger groups. Although it is very important that we feel a part of a larger community, it is essential that we retain a sense of ourselves and other group members as individuals as well. Hearing our name lets us know that someone values speaking to us as an individual and wants our attention. Our name allows us to claim authorship when we are proud of what we have created, a stamp that lets the world know we exist and that what we have done matters.

Greetings Give Children a Chance to Practice the Art of Offering Hospitality:

> Hospitality is always an act that benefits the host even more than the guest. The concept of hospitality arose in ancient times when this reciprocity was easier to see: in nomadic cultures, the food and shelter one gave to a stranger yesterday is the food and shelter one hopes to receive from a stranger tomorrow. By offering hospitality, one participates in the endless reweaving of a social fabric on which all can depend. (Palmer, 1998, p. 50)

Welcoming each other to our classroom each day is an act of hospitality. The offering of that welcome, one to another, affirms that we are caregivers of each other in that community. Being a host also implies, builds on, and strengthens a person's ownership and investment in that place.

We practice daily the skills of welcoming with each other—the clear voice, the friendly smile, the careful remembering that Nicholas likes to be called Nick, the firm handshake. When guests visit and are part of our circle, we extend a welcome to them as well, although it can feel a bit awkward at first. "Should we call her Carol or Mrs. DiAngelo?" whispers Andy to his teacher when he notices that his friend Matt's mother is coming to Morning Meeting today. "Could you check with her and see which would feel more comfortable to her?" replies his teacher.

Several important messages are conveyed in that suggestion. First, there is no one right answer to that question in our culture these days. Some parents prefer that children use their first names; others deem it disrespectful. Second, the role of a host is to make the guest feel most respected and comfortable. And third, asking a polite and direct question is a very fine way to get an answer that you need. It is practice in assertiveness seasoned with courtesy, not an easy blend to get right at any age.

Kindergarten teacher Eileen Mariani of Montague, Massachusetts, is proud of a January morning in her room:

The habit of greeting in the Morning Meeting circle had been well established. On that particular morning, it was Isaac's first turn to be Morning Meeting leader. Isaac was a shy boy and had not wanted to be leader for several months after the other children were comfortable with that role. Eileen watched carefully, ready to help if Isaac seemed worried at any point. But, no need, he was doing splendidly.

He had chosen "Good morning, friends" for the Greeting, and it had been clapped and stamped with a nicely modulated glee around the circle, just returning to Isaac, when Isaac glanced up and stood abruptly, heading for the door. Eileen, whose view of the door was blocked by a bookshelf, also rose to survey what was going on. There stood Isaac, framed by the doorway, hand extended to a distinguished-looking visitor who was entering the room with the principal. "Good morning, Mr. . . . uh . . . I'm sorry, what is your name please?" Isaac proceeded to shake the visitor's hand before walking gravely back to his place on the rug to continue the meeting.

The months of modeling and practicing, the discussions of "What can you do if you don't remember someone's name?" had taken hold and enabled Isaac to extend graceful hospitality, not just beyond Morning Meeting with classmates, but even to a stranger at the door. Isaac's extended hand was a true act of welcome and hospitality.

Table 12.1 contains a summary of the highlights of Greeting. The next section provides some practical guidelines for beginning to use Greeting in your classroom.

Table 12.1 Highlights of Greeting

- Ensures that every child names and notices others at the outset of the day
- Allows the teacher to observe and "take the pulse" of his or her group that day
- Provides practice in elements of greetings such as making eye contact and shaking hands
- Requires students to extend the range of classmates they spontaneously notice and greet
- Helps students to reach across gender, clique, and friendship lines that form at particular ages
- Can employ strategies that challenge the intellect (patterns, acquisition of foreign language phrases, set making, calculating fractions)
- Encourages clear and audible speech

GETTING STARTED

Begin by Introducing Greeting

Choosing your language carefully when introducing Greeting establishes expectations from the outset. "We are going to learn to do lots of different *friendly* and *respectful* greetings," states the teacher, before going on to model what she means by those two adjectives.

The teacher turns to Sara and greets her, then asks the class, "What did you notice?"

"You said her name."

"You looked at her."

"You took her hand."

"Sara, what did you notice about the way I held your hand?"

Specific behaviors are noted and named, becoming part of a classroom lexicon. You might write on the chart as you summarize, "So, a friendly greeting means saying a person's name, looking at them, and shaking their hand in a gentle way."

As always, language and focus will vary with the age of the children in the group. With older children, focusing on the "respectful" aspect is often more useful. Even the most entrenched adolescents who argue that who they choose as friends is their own business will acknowledge that all of us are entitled to respectful treatment.

Always begin by modeling and practicing the positive ways of greeting. Then, depending on the makeup of your class, you may want to insert some of the more subtle gestures that children frequently try out. You might mumble a person's name, pump a hand exaggeratedly, or look at the clock while greeting a child. "How did I or didn't I show respect?" The details matter. We know that; they know that. Modeling and discussion helps them know that we know.

Keep Greeting Simple at First

When first introducing Greeting to a group, or at the year's start when a new group is getting to know each other, simple, direct greetings work best. The teacher models Greeting, calling attention to important qualities of the greeting—names spoken clearly, greeter and greeted looking directly at each other, and friendly handshakes and voices. When students are able to fluently go around the circle saying "Good morning" to each other, then it is time to introduce various other greetings.

This example illustrates how Sandra Norried of Washington, DC, a masterful and experienced third-grade teacher, offers her class just the right amount of choice:

For the first weeks of school, Ms. N. had chosen the greeting and now, in October, is beginning to hand that choice over to students. She knows from her years of teaching, however, that too many choices can be as limiting as too few, especially when the year is young. So for this week, the leaders will not choose the greeting itself, but one element of it—a rhythm instrument. Each instrument has been introduced, one per day, and now there are six to choose from.

"Today Sienna will lead our Greeting. Sienna, what will you use?"

Ms. N. hands Sienna a blue crate containing an assortment of rhythm instruments. Sienna studies the possibilities intently for a moment before reaching in to make her choice. Gently, with the slightest of jingles, she produces a tambourine and holds it aloft for her classmates to see. A collective grin spreads around the circle. The tambourine is clearly a favorite of these third graders.

The greetings move clockwise around the circle. After each "Good morning," the greeter shakes the tambourine before passing it to the greeted. Some shake it tentatively and softly; others brandish it above their heads, with extended and elaborated rhythms involving their whole bodies.

This kind of boundary setting helps to define space for learning, something teachers do constantly in their planning—deciding how far apart to place the cones on the play yard for tag games, which books to set out on the Choice Reading Shelf, how many choices to make available for greetings. Ideally, we set boundaries far enough apart that they allow ample room for exploration and experimentation, but not so wide that they allow students to get lost.

Help Students Learn Each Other's Names

Name tags, either prepared ahead by the teacher or made by students, are a great help in the early days of a new group. There are also many games and activities that focus on learning names and are very helpful in the early days. With young children, starting the year with chorus greetings in which everyone says or sings the names together can help the children feel comfortable and help them learn each other's names. When the children are ready to say names individually, making pairs ahead of Greeting so that each is prepared to say a partner's name can help boost children's confidence.

Anticipate and Help Students Handle Awkward Moments

Many greetings require students to choose the person they will greet, rather than simply proceeding around the circle in order. This requires participants to pay attention to remember who has and has not been named. Teachers can help by modeling what to do in those inevitable moments when, despite their best efforts, students cannot remember a name or who has already been greeted. "What can you say if you forget someone's name?" "What can you say if you forget who has been named?" Some teachers work out a signal—such as thumbs up until you are greeted—with their class to help the last few greeters who may be struggling to remember who remains to be greeted.

Implementing and Assessing Progress

The following lists can be used as a guideline for teachers in implementing and assessing Greeting activities in the classroom. Teachers should ensure that they

- organize space in the room so that there is adequate space for a meeting circle,
- teach a variety of age-appropriate greetings,
- model aspects of warm and respectful greetings,
- make sure children use friendly and appropriate words and body language,
- give students opportunities to choose and lead Greetings.

Teachers should also see to it that students

- choose different classmates each day to greet;
- wait for their turn;
- use a clear, audible voice;
- use friendly and appropriate body language and tone of voice.

CONCLUSION

The skills developed by Greeting and by many other components of the Responsive Classroom contribute to students' achievement in a number of ways. Second-grade teacher Barbara Knoblock of New Sarpy Elementary School in Destrehan, Louisiana, speaks specifically of the effects she has seen in her classroom as a result of implementing Morning Meeting for 3 years:

> I think the biggest impact has been on my students' attitudes toward one another. Morning Meeting has made my students much more aware of their language—verbal and body—and how it affects others. Because of this increased awareness, cooperative group activities are more successful now than in the past. The children help each other more willingly, share materials more easily, talk more nicely, and work together more cooperatively to complete an activity. They also like working together. As a result I find that I plan for group work more often. I also notice that the positive and caring atmosphere created by Morning Meeting has given my students the courage to become risk takers. Because they feel safe and known, they are taking more risks in their learning. What more could a teacher want for her students, but to be more positive learners and willing to try new experiences!

More formal evidence is summarized in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (2003) *Safe and Sound* document at www.CASEL.org. But the message for classroom teachers is the same: Building students' social-emotional skills creates marvelous learning opportunities and deepens the positive experience that schools can and should be for students.

Author's Note: Ongoing information about all aspects of Responsive Classroom and the Northeast Foundation for Children can be found at www.responsiveclassroom.org.