



Optimistic Closure Future Me



Time: 5-7 minutes

Overview:

This activity involves asking participants to write a letter to their “future self” about what they learned from the day’s session and what they’d like to take away. It may be appropriate to encourage them to offer themselves “sage advice and heartfelt appreciations” to remind themselves of the goals and aspirations of today.

When and Why:

This is a great exercise for the start or end of the school year. You can mail the letters at the end of the year or right before school begins, or have participants use the website www.futureme.org and email themselves their letter, choosing when they would like their message sent to them through the website.



SEL Focus: This activity builds skills in **Self-Awareness** (*Identifying Emotions, Recognizing Strengths*, and *Self-efficacy*) as participants identify how a learning experience went for them, what they learned, and how they will use that knowledge.

Steps:

1. Hand out paper, pens, and stamped envelopes and ask participants to self-address the envelope. Be sure they also add their address as the return address to ensure delivery. Be mindful of alternatives for students who may not have a permanent address, like using the school as their address.
2. Read/post prompts that connect to the session; for example, “What have you learned that you plan to apply in the year ahead? (Or to your practice?) What do you want to remember from today’s session?” “What message of encourage do you want to send yourself?” “What reminders about how you’re feeling right now do you want to capture in writing and send to your future self?”
3. Collect letters in their sealed envelopes and inform participants that you will mail the letters to them at a later date.

Modifications and Variations:

Provide a postcard to each participant instead of paper and an envelope, reminding participants that this “letter to self” will be public since their writing will be visible during the delivery process.



Optimistic Closure

Human Bar Graph

Adapted from EL Education



Time: 5 minutes

Overview:

Participants form a human bar graph by standing in the line that best represents their current level of understanding.

When and Why:

This activity gauges participant understanding at the end of a session and helps plan for the next session. Be mindful of the level of vulnerability you're asking of participants as they publicly reveal their level of mastery or comfort with the topic, and create the conditions for that ahead of time.



SEL Focus: The Human Bar Graph addresses the competency **Self-Awareness** (*Accurate Self-Perception*) as participants are asked to identify what they understand and have learned and what they still need more support with. **Social Awareness** skills (*Empathy, Appreciating Diversity, Respect for Others*) also come into play as the group supports each person in noting that wherever they are in their learning process is okay.

Steps:

1. Identify a range of levels of understanding or mastery (e.g., beginning–developing–accomplished OR confused—I'm okay—I am rocking!) as labels for three or four adjacent parallel lines. Using removable blue painter's tape makes it easy to lay down and take up the lines.
2. Invite participants to form a human bar graph by standing on the line that best represents their current level of understanding.



Debrief the process by asking for volunteers to share:

- Why they chose the line they stood in.
- What would have enabled them to stand in a different line.
- What this means for a future session.
- What they most need or want next to make progress.

Modifications and Variations:

Prepare a piece of chart paper with the labels at the bottom and invite participants to add a sticky note to their bar in the graph. Add names if you are using this as a targeted formative assessment; no names are needed if you are getting a general pulse of the group.



Optimistic Closure

I Am Curious



Time: 1-5 minutes

Overview:

At the end of an engagement, participants are asked to reflect on something that they are curious about as a result of their day/meeting/lesson. They will then share their reflection with a partner or with their table group.



When and Why:

This activity respects participants' learning processes and is a quick way to find out what questions they might have. It is useful when you want to solicit input on planning for future engagements.

SEL Focus: "I Am Curious" builds skills in **Responsible Decision-Making (Reflection)** and **Self-Awareness (Accurate Self-Perception)** as participants identify their learning gaps and are encouraged to be curious about learning more. **Social Awareness skills (Empathy, Appreciating Diversity, Respect for Others)** are practiced as they form and share opinions and receive one another's input respectfully.

Steps:

1. At the end of a class or an engagement, ask participants to complete this sentence: "I am curious to learn more about..." or, "I am curious about..."
2. Give participants a minute or so to think and write a "note to self" that they will share aloud.



Debrief by inviting participants to share their "curiosity" with a partner or table group. Collect the reflection notes if you are using this as a formative assessment for future planning. Tell participants ahead of time if this will be the case. Write on sticky notes and have a poster near the door for people to add their thoughts as they leave.

Modifications and Variations:

If your group is small enough, allow more time for reflection and discussion and/or hear from everyone. It will give you and the group a sense of shared learning and help prepare for the next engagement. You can debrief this option by asking whether anyone notices any themes or recurring curiosities raised by the group.



Optimistic Closure

My Next Step



Time: 3-10 minutes

Overview:

Close the engagement or class by asking participants to make a commitment to take immediate action.

When and Why:

This activity encourages participants make a commitment to action in the near future.



SEL Focus: “My Next Step” focuses on both **Self-Awareness** (*Self-Efficacy*), as participants consider their next steps, and on **Self-Management** (*Self-Discipline, Goal-Setting*), as they are encouraged to follow up on their commitment.

Steps:

1. Ask participants to think of their first next step based on what they learned during the engagement. It might be a conversation, more reading, or thinking more about a topic.
2. After giving participants a minute to think about what that step would be, ask them to share their next step with a partner or at their table.
3. Ask participants to write their “next step” on a sticky note and post the note somewhere they will be reminded of their task, such as on their desk, inside the cover of their related text, or in their assignment notebook, or take a photo with their phone.

Modifications and Variations:

Help participants set up an “accountability partner” from the group to check in on their action step during the following week.



Optimistic Closure

One-Minute Accolade



Time: 2 minutes

Overview:

The facilitator invites a moment of reflection on the current experience, then sets a timer for one minute to allow the group to contribute toward seeing how many voices can be added to the room during that time.

When and Why:

Quick, meaningful, and informative, this activity is especially useful when it feels like there just isn't time for an Optimistic Closing!



SEL Focus: This activity focuses on **Self-Awareness** (*Accurate Self-Perception*) as participants reflect on their learning; **Self-Management** (*Impulse Control*) as they choose how to contribute in a way that leaves airtime for others; and **Social Awareness** (*Respect for Others*) as they absorb the variety of input from those who share aloud.

Steps:

1. Inform participants that you are going to set the timer for one minute (or longer if you have more time). During that time, the group will see how many people it can hear from.
2. Invite participants to think silently for a minute about ONE reflection question that you provide, such as: Something you appreciated about today, something you learned, something you want to thank someone for, or something that went very well, something you are grateful for, etc. Tell them to raise their hand when they have an idea of what they'd like to share.
3. Once several hands are raised, select one person who will start off. Explain that when you start the timer, the first person will go. Then anyone can share, whenever they're ready.
4. Encourage participants to listen attentively to each speaker. When one person finishes, someone else begins. It's okay if there is quiet between people sharing; that is natural.
5. Repeat the reflection question and start the timer.
6. When the timer goes off, listen as the person who is already speaking finishes. Then thank the group and move on. It's okay if not everyone who wanted to share had a turn this time. With repeated opportunities, the group grows more fluent and also more comfortable with silence between sharing. This closing activity can be used over and over without losing its impact!

Modifications and Variations:

With larger groups or as a smaller group becomes more comfortable with this strategy, set the time for two minutes instead of one. For very large groups, expand to three minutes.



Optimistic Closure

One Takeaway I'm Going to Try



Time: 3-5 minutes

Overview:

Participants are asked to consider and name a take away—an idea, strategy, tool, action step—that they want to try out.



When and Why:

Students or participants are often presented with a variety of ideas, strategies, and tools, with the implicit understanding that they will use one or more of the "takeaways." This activity invites participant to explicitly connect their learning to their practice and encourages ownership and responsibility by taking action.

SEL Focus: This activity focuses on developing skills in **Self-Management** (*Organizational Skills, Goal-Setting*) as participants are asked to set a personal goal and **Relationship Skills** (*Recognizing and Using Supports*) when the accountability partnerships are used.

Steps:

1. Ask participants to reflect on what they have heard and learned, then ask, "Thinking about what you heard and learned today, what is one takeaway you want to try, and why? A takeaway can be an idea, a strategy, a tool, or an action step."
2. Give participants a minute of silent think time.



Debrief by pairing participants and setting a timer for one or two minutes for each person to share their takeaway and thinking with their partner. If time permits, invite several participants to share their own takeaway and thinking (not their partner's) with the whole group.



Optimistic Closure

One-Word Whip Around



Time: 2 minutes

Overview:

This activity is a quick and easy way of starting out or closing a session. The facilitator asks a question and participants go around and provide a one-word answer.

When and Why:

“One-Word Whip Around” brings all voices into the room and enables the facilitator to quickly get a sense of the group in a short amount of time.



SEL Focus: This activity focuses on **Self-Awareness (*Identifying Emotions*)** and **Self-Management (*Impulse Control*)** in holding oneself to a one-word or short-phrase contribution as participants choose how to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

Steps:

1. Prepare a statement or question prompt that is aligned to the content of the engagement. For example, “Think of one word about how you are feeling now that you have participated in this engagement” or “Decide on one word that sums up your learning for today.”
2. Invite participants to form a circle.
3. State the prompt, explain that everyone should prepare a one-word response, and allow a minute of private think time.
4. Ask for a volunteer to start off stating their prompt. The volunteer then chooses a direction to go (left or right), and participants continue to respond in turn around the circle. As always, it’s okay to pass by saying, “Pass.”
5. *Note: Rather than “correcting” anyone who responds more lengthily, allow the modeling of the remaining group members to get the design back on track.*



Debrief If time allows, debrief the activity by asking participants if they noticed any themes or similar responses and ask what that might tell us about the engagement or participants. If it’s respectful and possible to record the words each person says, create a [Word Cloud](#) and share it with the group at a future date.

Modifications and Variations:

If there is not enough time or space to form a circle, participants can do a whip around from their seats.



Optimistic Closure

SEL Standards Connection



Time: 4+ minutes, depending on group size

Overview:

Participants review the skills connected to their local SEL standards (or the SEL competency wheel with skills) that they used or saw others use during the engagement and select one to share with the group. As volunteers share out, everyone who selected that same skill sits down when the sharing person does.

When and Why:

In this low-risk activity, reviewing and connecting learning to SEL skills and standards helps participants keep sight of the SEL nature of the work we do in meetings, professional learning, and classrooms.



SEL Focus: This activity focuses on **Responsible Decision-Making (Reflection, Situation Analysis)** in selecting the skill that most resonated with participants, **Relationship Skills (Effective Communication)** and **Social Awareness (Appreciating Diversity)** as connections are made and diversity of experiences highlighted during the whole-group sharing.

Steps:

1. Distribute a copy of your local SEL standards (or the CASEL wheel with skills) and ask participants to put a checkmark next to each of the SEL skills they used or saw others using, during your time together.
2. After a minute or two, ask participants to go back through the skills they checked and circle one that is especially important to them.
3. After another minute, when you notice almost everyone is done writing, invite all to stand.
4. Explain that as you go around the room, one at a time participants will read their one circled specific SEL skill (or local standard) and then be seated.
5. Encourage participants to look boldly around the room as they read their choice, because everyone who happened to choose the same skill or standard will sit down at this same time. If participants want to wave or make a signal of connection, invite them to!
6. Ask for a volunteer or invite someone to begin. Listen without comment to the sharing.



Debrief: Once everyone is seated, you may wish to make a general closing remark or connection to student skill development.

Modifications and Variations:

If using with students, invite them to reflect on the skills within only one or two specific competencies to narrow the focus until they become fluent in identifying the SEL skills they are using.



Optimistic Closure

Suit Yourself

Source: Adapted from Playing with a Full Deck: 52 team Initiatives Using a Deck of Cards, by Michelle Cummings (2006), Training Wheels, Inc.



Time: 4-6 minutes

Overview:

Participants reflect on and then share valued takeaways from the experience using playing card suits as a focus area.

When and Why:

Use this activity when you would like the group to hear a broad range of what was perceived as valuable from the engagement.



SEL Focus: “Suit Yourself” builds **Responsible Decision-Making** skills (*Reflection, Evaluating*) as participants are asked to identify how the engagement impacted them. It opens the group to **Social Awareness** skill development as they notice how varied individual takeaways are from the same experience (*Perspective-Taking, Empathy, Appreciating Diversity*.)

Steps:

1. Randomly pass out a playing card to each participant. [Each suit describes a category of responses:](#)
 - **Hearts:** Something from the heart. How did you feel? What did it mean to you?
 - **Clubs:** Things that grew—new ideas, new thoughts, a new point of view.
 - **Diamonds:** Gems that last forever. What are some of the gems of wisdom gathered from people or content?
 - **Spades:** Used to dig in the garden. Generate conversation about planting new ideas or things participants dug up during class.
2. Give one minute of quiet time for each participant to jot down (or think about) their answer.



Debrief using one of the following:

- Ask for one volunteer from each ‘suit’ to stand and share their response. Do not comment during the sharing.
- Ask participants to turn to a neighbor and share their response.
- Invite each participant to answer aloud to you as they walk out door or hand in their written response as an exit ticket.



Optimistic Closure

UFO/Energy Ball

Source: The UFO/Circuit Energy Ball is available from many sources, including local science or toy stores, and can easily be found with an internet search.



Time: 3-5 minutes, depending on group size

Overview:

Participants form a standing circle, join hands, and are surprised when the connection of their hands allows the UFO/Energy Ball to light up.

When and Why:

The element of surprise and delight makes this a great closing activity after a full-day or multi-day professional development experience. The activity promotes the ideas that it takes all of us working together and that we may not be able to see the fruits of our individual work or collective work, but that those fruits do exist.



SEL Focus: “Energy Ball” focuses on **Self-Awareness** skills (*Accurate Self-Perception, Recognizing Strengths*) and **Relationship Skills** (*Recognizing and Using Supports*) as participants acknowledge their productive contribution to the group.

Steps:

1. Gather participants in a circle. Express appreciation for everyone's contributions during the engagement. Remind them that even though our work may sometimes feel invisible, or that we are working all alone, it is actually adding to the progress of the field and is important, even when we don't always see the fruits of our labor right away.
2. Ask everyone to join hands. (Assure them no singing is involved, if that humor fits the group and the moment!)
3. With your right index finger, touch the UFO ball on the metal strip closest to you while you hold hands with the person on your left.
4. Ask the person on your right to touch the metal connector on their side of the Energy/UFO ball instead of joining hands with you.
5. The ball will light up and make a noise.
6. Let people take turns letting go and re-joining hands (one at a time) to make the light and sounds stop and start again.



Debrief: Offer closing language that appreciates the energy everyone has put into the shared experience and in the work they do with and for others. Or invite participants to share a closing thought or appreciation, such as “Something that's giving me new energy in my work is...”