

Dance of Structural Inequality Facilitation Guidelines

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Because the Dance of Structural Inequality has a great impact on its participants, we highly recommend that you read the following guidelines for effective and safe facilitation.

Background

In the United States, social inequality is often either ignored or explained as a result of personal deficiencies. While personal strength and persistence can and do overcome adversity, many people remain unwilling to examine the facts and admit that the overall patterns of success in our society are not an accident.

To help students begin to think about privilege constructively, diplomacy is needed. Simply ranking students by their level of social privilege can have a damaging effect. Both privileged and disadvantaged students are often upset by the results and may blame their fellow students - or the instructor.

However, the solution is not to do as some writers have suggested and stop doing this challenging exercise altogether. In that case, the instructor's unwillingness to engage with social issues leaves his or her students uninformed.

Social Inequality in Technical Fields

Why is this diversity activity relevant to science, technology, math and engineering instructors? Science is not exempt from social pressures. Social and political connections, funding, personal wealth, and opportunities all play a role in deciding who succeeds in technical fields.

Even though colleges and universities strive to provide a fair academic environment, students enter technical courses with a variety of backgrounds and do not all have equal access to resources. An anecdote in an article by Dionne Smith (2003) describes an African American engineering student who had to read his textbooks in the bookstore because he could not afford to pay for them. Students who need to work to support a family face economic difficulties during their education as well. There are many instances of socioeconomic inequality in academic settings. Often, they are not discussed.

Preparation

Preparation and goal setting are key to effective facilitation of the Dance of Structural Inequality. Before you assign this exercise to your students, think through your goals and read the

paragraphs below for some ideas on how to implement them. Try to anticipate problems that individual students may have so that you can address them effectively.

This may be the first time that some of you have facilitated a diversity exercise. We encourage you to become familiar with the literature below on diversity, privilege and group facilitation before proceeding.

Recommended reading:

Adams, Maurianne et al. (2000.) *Readings for diversity and social justice* . New York: London: Routledge.

It is the responsibility of the facilitator of this exercise to create a safe space for the participants. This means that the participants must understand the context of the exercise and its purpose in the course, they must be willing to participate, and they must have guided opportunities for reflection and discussion afterwards. All of these elements must be present for the exercise to be successful.

Students should understand how privilege is relevant to their professional lives. One way of emphasizing the way privilege permeates our society is to customize the questions in the exercise for your group.

For example, in an engineering course, you could ask questions such as:

- Did your family own a car?
- Did you own a computer before coming to college?
- Did you read science books (other than school texts) as a child?
- Were you ever given a science or mechanical kit as a gift?
- Were you encouraged to repair household items, cars, or computers?
- Did you participate in home building or repair projects?

Of course, the types of questions you use can be directed towards different types of privilege. A working-class male auto mechanic entering engineering has a different kind of privilege from an upper-class female science enthusiast.

It should be clear by now that privilege is not simply a matter of race or even socioeconomic status. This activity can be altered to show many kinds of hierarchy, including family connections in the field.

If your goal is to emphasize vulnerability, rather than hierarchy, you can restructure the dance as a circle, with the most vulnerable people stepping towards the center. This has been done effectively in Social Work classes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, using questions such as: “Has anyone in your family been hospitalized for mental illness?”

Student Activities

The Dance should always be preceded by assigned readings, such as the book by Maurianne Adams et al., which put the issue of privilege in context. The video “The Color of Fear” can also be useful, although it may not be suitable for all groups.

The next step in creating a safe environment is to provide students with ground rules. Tell them that their participation in the activity is optional. Encourage them to use “I” statements, such as “I think...” and “I feel...”, rather than talking about others. Emphasize the importance of listening to everyone and recognizing experiences different from their own as valid. Make it clear that everyone in the room is “on the same side”- that this exercise is intended to encourage people to talk to each other about their experiences.

The “Dance” involves students taking steps forward or backward based on their responses to questions about privilege. After the students are standing in their final places in the line or circle, you will have the opportunity to ask them how they feel about what they have learned. Discuss the advantages of being at the back of the line (less privileged) - and the disadvantages of being at the front (more privileged) - so that students who are less privileged will not be discouraged. You can also ask the students to turn around and describe how they feel after their positions have been reversed.

Don't be surprised if your students have strong reactions to this exercise. In another Social Work course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, students found that they needed to continue their discussion for several weeks after the event! You can also give students an opportunity to express their thoughts by writing down their individual response to the following question: “How do you feel about what you learned from the Dance of Structural Inequality?” This question keeps students focused and helps them to frame their anger constructively instead of expressing frustration with the course or the instructor.

We hope that this activity will provide your students with an unusual learning opportunity which will help them to understand each other better. Maintaining an open dialogue between students is key to this process. Encourage your students to speak openly and to respect each other's viewpoints. If today's college students can discuss inequalities in a safe environment, they will be in a better position to remedy them for the next generation.

Dance of Structural Inequality

(Adapted from the Instructor's Manual for Eitzen & Baca Zinn, Social Problems Eighth Edition)

1. If you are male, take a step forward.
2. If you have ever attended a private school, take a step forward
3. If you or anyone in your immediate family has emigrated from another country, take a step back.
4. If English is not your first language, take a step back.
5. If you grew up with a set of encyclopedias in your home, take a step forward.
6. If you have had a computer for more than 15 years take a step forward.
7. If you were raised in a home with two parents, take a step forward.
8. If you are married, take a step forward.
9. If you are a person of color, take a step back.
10. If you were raised in a home with a front and back yard, take a step forward.
11. If you have ever been without health insurance, take a step back.
12. If you own your own car, take a step forward.
13. If either of your parents has attended college, take a step forward.
14. If you are/were working full time while attending college, take a step back.
15. If you lived in a dormitory, take a step forward.
16. If you belonged to two or more student organizations while attending college, take a step forward.
17. If you attended a suburban high school, take a step forward.
18. If you took five or more years to complete a bachelor's degree, take a step back.
19. If you were older than 25 when you completed your undergraduate degree, take a step back.
20. If your parents took you to visit two or more colleges prior to your final choice, take a step forward.