Strategies for Choosing and Using Activities and Exercises
for Intergroup Learning

Compiled by Paul C. Gorski (2002) for the Multicultural Pavilion

You are preparing to lead a workshop, teach a class, or facilitate a dialogue. You know what issues and topics you'd like to cover, how many participants you'll have, and your objectives. You've sat down to compose a plan--an outline for the experience. What is your next move?

For many educators, trainers, and facilitators, the next move is to flip through our mental Rolodex of activities and exercises, jotting down the names of those that might fit into the context, time allotment, and atmosphere in which we'll be working. Many of us have shelves of books describing endless collections of activities and exercises for this and that topic or binders full of outlines and descriptions of activities from classes and workshops in which we've participated.

In my own process of planning classess, workshops and dialogues, trying to piece together the optimum experiences for participants, I developed eight simple guidelines that help me avoid some common programming pitfalls. The following are my strategies for choosing and using activities and exercises for intergroup learning.

1. I must build my lesson plan around topics and concepts you I to cover, then design or choose activities that can lead to an exploration of those topics or concepts. I must not build my lesson plan around activities.
2. I must diversify the types of activities and exercises I use. Every group of participants will have a range of learning styles and comfort levels with different types and formations of activities. Some enjoy big group work, others prefer to work in pairs. Some like simulations and role plays, others prefer narrative and story-telling activities. I must try to pull from a range of approaches when designing my plan.
3. The key to intergroup learing is dialogue. I must avoid filling so much of my class or workshop with activities and exercises that I fail to leave ample time for dialogue and processing.
4. Too often, multicultural or intergroup program designs call for People of Color to teach White people about racism, women to teach men about sexism, and so on. I must avoid activities that call for oppressed groups to teach privileged groups about their oppression.
5. Whenever possible and appropriate, I must model a willingness to be vulnerable by participating in class exercises and activities. This can be particularly effective when activities call for story-sharing or personal narratives. In these cases, I can set the tone for the kinds of stories or narratives I hope others will share.
6. Many popular diversity activities simulate life through role plays or other experiences in which participants are asked to take on one or more predefined identities. These can be effective, interactive, and engaging, but I must balance them with activities or discussions that draw from the actual lived experiences of the participants.
7. Films can provide excellent illustrations of concepts, leading to fruitful dialogues. But I must avoid using long films that drain away dialogue time. (Many filmmakers produce two versions of their films--a full length version and a shorter "training" version.) In addition, I must be thoughtful about how to transition from a film back to the personal experiences of the participants.
8. I must be creative. Too often, educators and facilitators become dependent on one or two activities or exercises. But only I know the context in which I am working--canned activities and exercises are not designed in every context. I have a sense for what will and will not work within that context. I must be willing to take the time to thoughtfully design new activities or modify existing ones.

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