



Writing for Change

RAISING AWARENESS OF DIFFERENCE, POWER, AND DISCRIMINATION

2.1 Considering Body Size, Shape, and Movement

Objectives

Engender an awareness of the assumptions about body size, shape, and mobility that are incorporated into the design of public facilities. Develop a profile of a “typical” user.

Create an awareness of the access barriers that exist for people with vision, speech-hearing, or mobility impairments. Brainstorm solutions to certain access barriers and discuss ways to increase usability of selected facilities.

Materials needed

Copies of the handout

Time needed

Thirty to sixty minutes

Instructor directions

Take your students on a tour, or have them take a tour themselves, examining the public facilities of your school or campus, identifying assumptions incorporated into their designs.

Ask them to discuss who may and may not be able to use the facilities satisfactorily, as designed, including any access or usage barriers to people with physical disabilities.

Have them brainstorm ways to improve the usability of selected facilities and develop solutions to access barriers.

Variation 1

Have your students identify one assumption incorporated into the design of one of the facilities (drinking fountain, phone booth, etc.). Ask them to gather formal or informal data about the number of people on campus that might not be able to use the facility satisfactorily, based on the design assumption, and suggest one or two ways to make the facility more useful to those people.

Variation 2

Have your students choose one of the access or usage barriers they have identified and suggest a way to remove the barrier. Have them research the cost involved and identify one or two ways of funding the access strategy they have suggested.



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2.1 Considering Body Size, Shape, and Movement Handout

Directions

Take a tour examining the public facilities of your school or campus, which may include:

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| Telephone booths or stalls | Turnstiles |
| Drinking fountains | Elevators and escalators |
| Bleachers | Stairs and staircases |
| Sinks and stalls in public restrooms | Vending machines |
| Curbs, ramps, and railings | Doors and doorways |
| Chairs and tables | Fire alarm boxes |

Answer the following questions:

What assumptions about the size and shape of the users (height, weight, proportionate length of arms and legs, width of hips and shoulders, hand preference, mobility, etc.) are incorporated into the designs?

How do these design assumptions affect the ability of you and people you know to use the facilities satisfactorily?

How would they affect you if you were significantly:

Wider or narrower than you are?

Shorter or taller?

Heavier or lighter?

Rounder or more angular?

More or less mobile/ambulatory?

Identify any access or usage barriers to people with physical disabilities. Answer the following questions:

Are classrooms accessible to people who can't walk up or down stairs?

Are emergency exit routes usable by people with limited mobility?

Are amplification devices or sign language interpreters available for people with hearing impairments?

Are telephones and fire alarms low enough to be reached by people who are seated in wheelchairs or who are below average height?

Are audio-visual aids appropriate for people with hearing or vision impairments?

Describe the experience of a person in your class or school who has a mobility, vision, speech, or hearing impairment.

Variation 1

Identify one assumption incorporated into the design of one of the facilities (drinking fountain, phone booth, etc.). Gather formal or informal data about the number of people on campus that might not be able to use the facility satisfactorily, based on the design assumption. Suggest one or two ways to make the facility more useful to those people.

Variation 2

Choose one of the access or usage barriers you have identified and suggest a way to remove the barrier. Research the cost involved. Identify one or two ways of funding the access strategy you have suggested.



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2.3 Considering the Oppressor

Objectives

Recognize ways in which even oppressed people can participate in oppression.

Develop an awareness of how oppression can harm the oppressor as well as members of the oppressed group.

Materials needed

“Identity: Skin Blood Heart” by Minnie Bruce Pratt. Available in *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*. Ed. Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992.

Copies of the handout

Time needed

Twenty to thirty minutes

Instructor directions

Provide your students with copies of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s article and ask them to read it and be ready to discuss it in class.

Ask your students to consider the question “Does oppression harm the oppressor?”

Have them identify ways in which they might be considered to belong to an oppressor group and how they benefit from their membership.

Then, ask them to consider ways in which they are harmed by their participation or membership in an oppressor group. Encourage group discussion.



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2.3 Considering the Oppressor Handout

Directions

Consider the question “Does oppression harm the oppressor?”

First, identify ways in which you could be considered to belong to an oppressor group (according to your gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, etc.).

Then, answer the following questions:

How do you benefit from your membership in this group?

What are you missing out on as a consequence of your membership in an oppressor group?

How are you harmed, morally, ethically, or psychologically, by your membership in this group?

What action(s) might you take as a result of your new understanding of this issue?

What does Pratt mean by “. . . asking what new thing will I hear, will I see, will I let myself feel, beyond the fear”?

(This exercise is adapted from an exercise by Lani Roberts, Ph.D., assistant professor of philosophy, Oregon State University.)



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RAISING AWARENESS OF DIFFERENCE, POWER, AND DISCRIMINATION

2.4 Putting the People Back into Language

Objectives

Identify passive constructions.

Develop an awareness of how the use of passive constructions can obscure meaning, perpetuate oppression, deflect responsibility, or deprive people of identity or of agency (autonomy) in their actions.

Materials needed

Copies of the handout

Time needed

Twenty to thirty minutes, depending on variation

Instructor directions

Ask your students to consider the use of passive constructions in the sentences provided.

Have them discuss how the use of passive constructions can obscure meaning, perpetuate oppression, deflect responsibility, or deprive people of identity or agency (autonomy) in their actions.

Variation

Have your students locate a print or online news article that uses passive constructions and discuss the article in class with reference to the given instructions.



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2.4 Putting the People Back into Language Handout

Directions

Identify the passive constructions in the sentences below.

Discuss how use of passive constructions can obscure meaning, perpetuate oppression, deflect responsibility, and deprive people of identity or of agency (autonomy) in their actions.

Compare the effects of using the passive voice to those of using euphemisms in language (see Identifying Euphemisms). What are the similarities?

Rewrite the sentences in the active voice. (Note: You may need to insert an appropriate subject noun or pronoun.)

In 1920, American women were given the vote.

The bus driver was attacked by an unknown assailant.

Mistakes were made.

She was the first woman awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The victim was brought to the shelter after it was discovered that she had been severely beaten.

The book was removed from the library's shelves.

A decision was made not to observe the recommendation to delay the launch.

Private Golden was wounded by friendly fire.

Ming Wu was admitted to the conservatory in 1997.

The test, which was administered to freshmen and sophomores, yielded results in the 50th percentile.

The demonstrators were subdued with rubber bullets and tear gas.

An investigation was performed, and it was determined that no hazing occurred.

In what year was America discovered?

Variation

Locate a print or online news article that uses passive constructions. Discuss the article with reference to the instructions above.



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2.5 Identifying Euphemisms

Objectives

Increase ability to identify euphemisms.

Discuss how euphemisms can obscure oppression and distance agents (people or groups performing acts) from responsibility for their actions.

Materials needed

Copies of the handout

Time needed

Twenty to thirty minutes

Instructor directions

Ask your students to consider the euphemisms in each of the sentences.

Encourage them to discuss how the use of euphemisms can obscure acts or systems of oppression and remove agents from responsibility for their actions.

Have your students rewrite the sentences to express the euphemistic concept more directly.



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2.5 Identifying Euphemisms Handout

Directions

Identify the euphemisms in the following sentences.

Discuss how euphemisms can obscure meaning, perpetuate oppression, and distance agents (people or groups performing acts) from responsibility for their actions.

Compare the effects of using euphemisms to those of using the passive voice in language (see Putting the People Back Into Language). What are the similarities?

Rewrite the sentences to express the euphemistic concept more directly.

The Siletz Indians were relocated to reservations by the government.

He lost his virginity when he was 15.

This administration was left with no alternative but to send in a peacekeeping force.

At age eight she underwent female circumcision.

The new tax laws will primarily benefit high net worth individuals.

This agency adheres to the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” rule.

The country was embroiled in a period of ethnic cleansing.

The patient manifested an STD following an assault.

During World War II, the Japanese military made extensive use of comfort women.

They are in the class for special children.

Sometimes I purge to enhance my athletic performance.

This city saw a sharp increase in police activity last summer.

That little girl was careless and got herself pregnant.

The presence of industrial effluvia has been detected in the groundwater.

Military operations are imminent in the area.

They better not push us, or they are going to get themselves hurt.

We're sorry, but we're going to have to let you go.



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2.6 Shedding Light on Color

Objectives

Develop an awareness of the groups subsumed under the phrase “people of color.”

Analyze factors that determine a person’s inclusion under that heading.

Materials needed

Pen and paper or copies of the handout

Possibly, reference materials

Time needed

Thirty to sixty minutes; ten to twenty minutes for variation

Instructor directions

Ask your students to develop definitions of the phrase.

Encourage them to analyze relevant components of the definition and to identify the diversity of groups included in it.

Collect the individual writings or encourage group discussion.

Variation

Have your students create group definitions for the term “people of color” and follow the first two steps listed.



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2.6 Shedding Light on Color Handout

Directions

Write a definition of the phrase “people of color.”

Do you think this phrase is appropriate? What does it imply? What does it omit?

Expand your definition using two of the following techniques:

Description by geographical location

Analysis by cultural practices

Comparison/contrast between several ethnic or cultural groups

Examples that demonstrate the specific items in your definition

Variation

Work in groups to create your definition for “people of color.” Follow the first two steps above.



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2.7 Writing About Racial Identity

Objectives

Develop a perspective on the role of racial identity in people's self images.

Analyze the influences of racial identity in various aspects of people's lives.

Materials needed

Pen and paper or copies of the handout

Time needed

Thirty to sixty minutes

Instructor directions

Ask your students to write a two- to four-paragraph autobiography based on their racial identities.

Have them answer questions about ways it has influenced them.

Collect individual assignments or discuss in large group.

Variation

Have your students write an autobiography based on their religious affiliation.



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2.7 Writing About Racial Identity Handout

Directions

Write a two- to four-paragraph autobiography based on your racial identity. Answer the following questions:

When and how did you become aware of this identity?

What role has it played in your life?

How does it affect you in your social activities?

How does it affect you in your school or your major?

How does it affect you in this class?

In what ways do you benefit from this identity? In what ways do you suffer or miss out?

Variation

Write an autobiography based on your religious affiliation. Answer the questions above.



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2.2 Responding to Bullying

Objectives

Develop an awareness of the factors involved in bullying.

Explore feelings and attitudes around expectations of the behaviors of people involved in such situations.

Discuss ways to intervene safely in such situations.

Materials needed

Copies of the handout

Time needed

Twenty to thirty minutes

Instructor directions

Have your students read the range of responses to oppressive behavior and the scenario provided.

Ask them to evaluate the behavior of each of the participants in the scenario in light of the information given.

Ask them to evaluate each person's behavior when each is identified with a particular age, academic standing, gender, and ethnicity. Have them discuss if and why their expectations change in light of these variables.



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2.2 Responding to Bullying Handout

Directions

Consider the following range of responses to oppressive behavior:

- Actively joining in the oppressive behavior
- Not responding to the oppressive behavior
- Educating oneself about the oppressive behavior
- Interrupting the oppressive behavior
- Supporting others' proactive response to the oppressive behavior
- Initiating a proactive response to the oppressive behavior

Now consider the following scenario:

In a university gymnasium, five adults of various ages are engaged in swimming laps, some swimming freestyle, some using kickboards, in lanes along the long axis of the pool. The lane markers have been removed for cleaning. A lifeguard watches from a chair a few yards away. A group of four students approaches and noisily enters the pool, laughing, splashing, and playing, swimming across the short axis and cutting across the lanes of the five swimmers. After a few moments, when the behavior of the newly arrived group continues, one of the original swimmers leaves the pool. Another begins to swim shortened laps in a lane at the far end of the pool. Two others cross to the side of the pool and remain in the water, watching the newly arrived group. The fifth swimmer, using a kickboard, continues to swim laps in a lane along the long axis of the pool. The newly arrived group continues to ignore the original swimmers and to splash and play across the short axis of the pool.

After the third time one of the newly arrived group cuts across the lane, the fifth swimmer says politely, "Excuse me; the lanes for swimming laps are going in this direction," and indicates the long axis of the pool. Three of the newly arrived group ignore the fifth swimmer's comment, and the fourth replies, "Yeah, well, I'm only swimming in one direction." The fifth swimmer responds firmly, "We are already established going in this direction," and continues to swim. The newly arrived group moves out of the way but begins to make loud comments including profanity and derogatory remarks about the fifth swimmer's appearance. The lifeguard continues to watch. One of the other original swimmers leaves the pool.

The fifth swimmer continues swimming laps while the newly arrived group continues to engage in derogatory remarks, splash water in the swimmer's face, and move in and out of the lane the swimmer is using. Of the remaining original swimmers, one continues swimming shortened laps, and the other continues to watch without speaking, as does the lifeguard.

When finished with laps, the fifth swimmer leaves the pool and approaches the lifeguard, asking, "Did you see what they were doing?" indicating the newly arrived group. The lifeguard responds carelessly, "Ah, they didn't mean any harm." The newly arrived group proceeds to occupy the entire area of the pool, and the remaining two original swimmers now leave the water.

Based on the scenario given above, and in light of the range of possible responses to oppressive behavior, analyze the behavior of each of the participants in the situation. Answer the following questions:

What was the responsibility of each of the individuals involved?

Based on what you know, do you think each participant behaved appropriately? If not, what do you think each should have done differently?

Now assign each of the participants an age, an academic standing, a gender, and an ethnicity. Analyze their behavior. Do your feelings about each person's behavior change if you assume that the fifth swimmer was female? If the lifeguard was white? If the disruptive group was elderly? The original swimmer who left was faculty? What if the disruptive group was black? If the observers were freshmen? If the lifeguard was female? If the fifth swimmer was Asian? Think about how and why these factors might change your expectations of each person involved.

Discuss other possible scenarios. Answer the following: If you were in the newly arrived group but felt uncomfortable with their behavior, what would you have done? What would you have done if you were the fifth swimmer? The lifeguard? One of the observers?

Are there ways to intervene safely in bullying situations? Do you agree with the position that not responding to oppressive behavior works against social justice just as much as actively joining in oppressive behavior? Why or why not?

McClintock, Mary. "How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior." *Camping Magazine* Nov.-Dec. 1990: 32-34.