



Learning Circles as a Tool for Diversity Dialogue

Overview: This workshop is a “learning circle,” designed to initiate dialogue concerning diversity. A learning circle is one approach to education and community dialogue that is based on a spirit of reciprocal and cooperative learning for self and social transformation which allows different people will implement with different styles and emphases This particular learning circle is meant as the introduction to further workshops on discussing gender and diversity, the workshop will guide participants through a series of discussion questions, helping to prepare them for thinking about the issues that affect diversity. It is important that participants in this workshop leave feeling good about entering and working within diverse settings rather than scared and/or unwelcome.

Category: Diversity

Level: Beginner

Type: Structured activity suitable for meeting or retreat

Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- To help participants develop a definition of diversity
- To help participants understand the benefits of diversity

Materials:

- Flip chart and markers

How to Prepare:

As the facilitator, there will be little to prepare for this. The most important preparation is to review the trainer guide and read a background of “learning circles” and make sure that you can relay this history in a concise manner to the workshop participants. You can find a short background of learning circles on the Educators for Community Engagement website: <http://www.e4ce.org/LearningCircles/Introduction.htm>.

Just have plenty of flip chart paper and markers handy to jot down the group’s ideas and be familiar with the discussion questions.

How to Do/Brief Outline:

Total suggested time for this workshop is 1 hour 50 minutes, but may be lengthened or shortened depending on the group's experiences:

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|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Understanding Differences | suggested time 20 minutes |
| 2. What is Diversity? | suggested time 20 minutes |
| 3. Types of Diversity | suggested time 20 minutes |
| 4. Is Diversity Important? | suggested time 20 minutes |
| 5. Hindering Diversity | suggested time 20 minutes |
| 6. Closing | suggested time 10 minutes |

1 Understanding Differences

Suggested time: 20 minutes

Begin the workshop with any icebreaker that you feel will be most appropriate. (See "Icebreakers for Diversity Workshops" for suggestions.) Make sure that the group is arranged in a manner that allows all participants to see each member of the group, i.e. around a table or in a circle.

After the icebreaker, pose the first question to the group:

When was the first time in your life that you felt different from others around you? How did it make you feel?

Give participants about five minutes to think about the question. Then have each participant respond as you briefly record their experience on the flip chart paper. As the facilitator, look for places to open up a discussion. Ask participants to further clarify their statements.

Once each participant has shared his/her experiences, try to point out trends in their statements, perhaps a strong focus on experiences that are race- or culture- related. Ask whether other people pointed out the differences to the participants or if they realized the differences on their own. Try to articulate the trends to the group.

2 What is Diversity?

Suggested time: 20 minutes

Now pose another question to the group:

What is your definition of diversity?

Again, give participants about five minutes to think about a response.

After five minutes, allow each participant to respond. Record their answers.

Once all responses have been given, examine the notes. As a group, develop one unifying definition of diversity. To help you construct this unifying definition, understand that diversity (or being diverse) is commonly identified as:

“Differing from one another or being composed of distinct or unlike elements or qualities...”

The remainder of time should be devoted to helping the group decide on one standard definition of diversity that will be used for the rest of the workshop as well as following workshops on specific diversity related issues.

3 Types of Diversity

Suggested time: 20 minutes

A. Diversity as part of a community

Pose another question to the group:

What is community?

Again give participants 5 minutes to think about the question.

Following the previous procedures, have participants respond to the questions as you copy down their ideas. After the responses, point to trends in their statements. How are they defining community? Does there seem to be any classifications of community evident? Try to classify their responses into groups or types of communities, which include:

- 1) A group of people sharing common characteristics.
(*Ex.: ethnic, religious, sexual communities*)
- 2) A group of people sharing common interests.
(*Ex.: human rights organizations, sports, etc*)
- 3) A group of people inhabiting a particular area.
(*Ex.: neighborhoods in cities*)
- 4) Society at large.
(*Ex.: the international community, the global community*)

B. Individual Diversity

Some people are different in ways that do not make them part of a natural community. Ask what ways individuals can be different. There are many answers to this question including: places people have lived or visited, family situations, health issues, etc.

Try to make sure that everyone in the group lists one way that they are different from everyone else in the group.

4 Is Diversity Important?

Suggested time 20 minutes

Ask the group:

Why is diversity important?

Again give the group about five minutes to think about the question.

After five minutes, have each participant give responses and copy them down. Again point out trends in their responses. *Do people discuss the value of diversity in individual ways (i.e. broadening one's own horizons, learning more about a culture, etc.) or in ways that affect groups of people (i.e. strengthening community, making the world smaller, etc.)? Can the group decide on the #1 reason diversity is important?*

5 Hindering Diversity

Suggested time 20 minutes

Now summarize the work that has been completed thus far by explaining that both you and the group opened by sharing the first time you realized you were different. Continue by explaining that you could be different because you were a member of a specific community that shared characteristics, that was geographical in nature, the believed in similar ideas, or you could be different in a variety of other ways. Acceptance of diversity requires a certain level of sensitivity to many types of diversity. When we don't have this sensitivity, our differences can be pointed out, ridiculed, and made into a source of oppression and marginalization.

Unfortunately, oppression based upon membership in a specific community is a reoccurring theme in the histories of peoples around the world.

Now explain that it is important to answer this next question:

What hinders diversity?

Again give participants five minutes to think about the question.

After five minutes, have each participant respond. Jot down their ideas. Looking at the list, ask if any of the other participants see these problems on their campus or in their organizations or communities affecting diversity.

Have participants give examples of these instances from their experiences. After discussion, point out that diversity on campuses and in organizations and communities can only be achieved and appreciated when these hindrances are confronted in dialogue and action.

Ask what they think that they can do to remedy the problem. How will developing an appreciation of differences change the way they relate to others? How could it change their organization, their school, their circle of friends, etc.?

6 Closing

Suggested time: 15 minutes

Now, ask each participant to take the next five to seven minutes to jot down notes to the following questions:

- What is something new you've learned in this workshop?
- How will you take this information back to your campus, community, or organization to address issues stemming from racism?

Have participants present their answers and adjourn.

7 Additional Resources

People's Institute for Survival and Beyond
<http://www.thepeoplesinstitute.org/>

Southern Institute for Education and Research
<http://www.southerninstitute.info/>

The Twomey Center for Peace through Justice
<http://www.loyno.edu/twomey/>

ERACE
<http://www.eracismneworleans.org/whats/whats.html>

Highlander Center
<http://www.highlandercenter.org>

EdChange: Multicultural Pavilion
<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/>

Tolerance.org: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center
<http://www.tolerance.org>