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Playing with Privilege: A Creative Way for Students to Unpack Privilege

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Cover Page Footnote

The author thanks the special issue editors and reviewers for their helpful comments on this manuscript. Also, special thanks to the Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies and Intercultural Communication students who offered useful feedback after completing this activity/assignment over the years, contributing to this current iteration. This activity was presented as a Great Idea for Teaching Students (G.I.F.T.S) at the 2018 National Communication Association (NCA) convention.

**Playing with Privilege:
A Creative Way for Students to Unpack Privilege**
*Confronting one another across differences
means that we must change ideas about how we learn;
rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it
as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth.*
–bell hooks

Introduction and Rationale

Privilege carries significant symbolic baggage in contemporary American culture. Although the term is foundational in many of their classes, students often have a vague notion of privilege, struggle to understand its intersectional characteristics, and discuss its manifold effect. Marginalized students deeply understand the term due to their lived experiences, but students who are members of dominant groups may feel personally attacked in discussions about privilege (Kirby, 2016; Moremen, 1997). Teaching privilege thus becomes a delicate balancing act. Relying on hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which values student expression, this activity/assignment asks students to visually depict and explain a concrete instance of privilege to their peers in the form of a comic strip. This "Privilege Comic" marks "that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance" (hooks, 1994, p. 47). Through this activity/assignment, students interrogate their assumptions about privilege and begin to encounter its intersectional nature. Since the comics are presented, students learn from each other's examples, which often depict the personal experiences of the marginalized or examples witnessed in society by the more privileged. Recognizing that experiential knowledge enhances the learning experience, this activity/assignment helps students establish a foundation to interrogate the positions of privilege that structure their social realities.

The activity/assignment is rooted in hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy as outlined in *Teaching to Transgress*. As hooks contends, we all bring experiential knowledge to the classroom; this knowledge can enhance our learning experience. Significantly, "pedagogical strategies can determine the extent to which all students learn to engage more fully the ideas and issues that seem to have no direct relation to their experiences" (hooks, 1994, p. 86). Recognizing that students' experiences are relevant to their learning (hooks, 1994) and that each student has unique lived experiences, the following activity/assignment is a pedagogical strategy that allows students to learn from each other's lived experiences, which often differ from their own. This activity/assignment relies on hooks' (1994) contention, "I know that experience can be a way to know and can

inform how we know what we know” (p. 90). In this case, students use examples they have lived or witnessed to learn about privilege.

Learning Objectives

After completing this activity/assignment, students will be able to (1) define privilege, (2) identify the relationships between different types of privilege, and (3) recognize privilege in the world. In doing so, this activity assists in fostering a learning community where each student’s voice is recognized and valued (hooks, 1994).

Explanation

After numerous failed attempts to discuss privilege with students, I developed the following activity/assignment. It is successful because it asks students to creatively grapple with the term on their own before engaging in a class discussion. Students define privilege through concrete examples in the form of a comic strip. This can be completed in one class session as an activity, or outside of class as a more thoughtful, creative, and artistic assignment. I will provide outlines for both approaches. McIntosh’s (1988) foundational article on privilege, in conjunction with other course-related material, should be used as the entry point for this activity/assignment. For example, in an Intercultural Communication class, I use Stewart’s (2017) short book for its emphasis on racial equity and microaggressions. In an Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies class, I incorporate readings on intersectionality, such as Crenshaw (2003). The assigned readings should give students a foundational understanding of privilege and any other related course concepts the instructor desires to connect to the activity. Appropriate for any interdisciplinary course that is grounded in topics of privilege and intersectional identity, and appealing to different course topics and structures, both versions—the activity and assignment—are outlined here.

Activity

The activity was originally designed for a lower-level Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies class with 25-30 students. In preparation for completing this activity, students should read McIntosh (1988) and any other assigned readings before class (see above for examples). The instructor should bring printer paper to class. I always bring two sheets per student/group, so they have one to brainstorm and another for the final product. The instructor can also bring crayons or colored pencils, but they are not a necessity. Students can either complete the activity on their own or in small groups, depending on how long the class period is and how many class sessions the instructor wants to devote to this activity.

In a 75-minute class with 25-30 students, I recommend dividing the students into groups of three. After distributing the supplies, instruct the students to develop a comic strip that depicts privilege. It can be a personal example or one they have witnessed. Students can use McIntosh (1988) or any other course

readings as a starting point but should feel free to go beyond the article's scope. The comic must have a minimum of two frames, but students can add as many frames as they want. It is also important to inform them that they will be presenting their comic strips to the rest of the class. In a 75-minute class, I give them 30-45 minutes to complete the comic strip. As the students work, the instructor should walk around and answer any questions or provide inspiration to struggling groups. Some students embrace the creative nature of this activity, while others loathe it and need a little more encouragement and reassurance. I always emphasize that their work will not be evaluated/graded based on artistic talent but rather on the quality of the example depicted. This seems to comfort those who are fearful of their art being judged.

Once all the groups are done, students will use the document camera or other available technology to present their comic strips. Ask students to explain the comic strip, why they chose their representation of privilege, and to identify what type(s) of privilege are depicted. If the activity was completed individually, more time will be needed for the presentations. For small groups, each group should come to the front of the class together to present. The presentations are usually just a few minutes each.

Assignment

For both an upper-level and lower-level Intercultural Communication class, I transitioned this activity into an assignment. The assignment gives students more time to grapple with the concepts outside of class, and I found that their work tends to be more artistic and well thought out when they are not restricted to completing the activity quickly in class. I explain the assignment in class at least a week before it is due. Like the activity, I task students with creating a visual representation of privilege in the form of a comic strip. I tell them they can be as creative/artistic as they want, and that they can create a digital comic if they are more comfortable with that than drawing. The same requirements from the activity are used: the comic must provide a concrete example of at least one type of privilege, and it must have a minimum of two frames. The students are also informed that they will present their comics in class. Again, I emphasize that this assignment will be graded based on following the requirements, not on artistic ability or talent. In a class with 20-25 students, the presentations can all be delivered in a 75-minute class session. I use the following rubric to grade the assignment, which can also be used to grade the activity:

Privilege Comic						
You've already rated students with this rubric. Any major changes could affect their assessment results.						
Criteria	Ratings					Pts
Comic Provides a Concrete Example of Privilege	25 pts Excellent A clear example of privilege is depicted and the comic strip is visually appealing.	20 pts Good A clear example of privilege is depicted, but the comic strip could be more visually appealing.	17.5 pts Average The comic strip depicts an example of privilege, but its depiction needs to be clearer.	12.5 pts Needs Improvement The comic strip is incomplete and/or does not depict a clear example of privilege.	0 pts Missing	25 pts
Comic Contains 2+ Frames	5 pts Yes			0 pts No		5 pts
Presentation Clearly Explains the Comic Identifies what type(s) of privilege is/are depicted	10 pts Excellent Clear explanation!	8 pts Good	7 pts Average Needs to be more fully developed	5 pts Needs Improvement	0 pts Missing	10 pts
Presentation Explains Why You Selected This Form of Privilege	10 pts Excellent Clear justification!	8 pts Good	7 pts Average Needs to be further elaborated on	5 pts Needs Development	0 pts Missing	10 pts
Total Points: 50						

Figure 1. Privilege Comic grading rubric.

Debrief

Regardless of whether the activity is completed in class, or the assignment is completed outside of class, students must present their work. In other words, to reap the full learning benefits of this activity, students must see the different visual depictions created by their colleagues. After the presentations, ask the students the following debrief questions:

1. How did you or your group define privilege?
2. How are privilege and microaggressions connected?
 - a. Only ask this question if microaggressions have been taught or adapt this question for other related course concepts.
3. How is privilege intersectional?

- a. Only ask this question if intersectionality has been taught or adapt this question for other related course concepts.
 4. What type(s) of privilege do you enjoy?
 - a. Give students a few minutes to reflect; I do not ask them to share.
 5. Why is privilege such a difficult topic to discuss in our society/culture?
- Asking guided questions helps keep the discussion on track. This structured debrief tends to avoid the politicized, divisive, and unhelpful comments that can arise when discussing this sensitive topic.

Following the debrief discussion, I share my inspiration for this activity/assignment. [“On a Plate: A Short Story About Privilege”](#) is a digital comic about privilege that was circulating on social media during the #MeToo movement (Willard, 2021). I thought this example did an excellent job breaking down a complex and politicized topic into a story that was easy to understand. It took an academic concept—privilege—and made it relatable. I thought it would be a great teaching tool to have students visually depict their representations of privilege rather than trying to have an open dialogue about them, which is how this activity/assignment was born. There are two characters in the comic, so I ask for two student volunteers to read the lines for each character. As the instructor, I serve as the narrator. Not only do the students appreciate seeing the inspiration for the activity/assignment, but this digital comic gives them another tool they can use to inform family, friends, and even children about privilege. Ending with this comic connects the topics and concludes the discussion about privilege. I do not recommend sharing it at the beginning as it stifles students’ creativity.

Assessment

Predicated on bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy, this activity/assignment seeks to affirm the value of student voices. Sadly, students assume that their professors do not value what they have to say (hooks, 1994); this activity/assignment poses a direct challenge to that belief. The reason it is so important for each student/group to present their work is because “focusing on experience allows students to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak” (hooks, 1994, p. 148). Although some students are less privileged than others, each student learns that they enjoy some type of privilege. As higher education students, they all share educational privilege. Not only do they learn about the course concepts, but they also learn more about each other by sharing their experiences in ways that an instructor’s lecture simply cannot accomplish, while also not burdening the underprivileged students to teach privilege to their more privileged colleagues. The activity/assignment also positions the instructor as a learner (hooks, 1994). The instructor learns more about each student through their depiction of privilege and their presentation of their comic; many disclose that their comics depict personal examples in impersonal ways. During the debrief students discuss how drawing these experiences makes them easier to share. The

activity/assignment contributes to laying the necessary groundwork for developing a community of learners. As hooks (1994) believes, “one of the reasons that I appreciate people linking the personal to the academic is that I think the more students recognize their own uniqueness and particularity, the more they listen” (p. 151). I often find that this activity/assignment contributes to a more cohesive and empathetic class that is willing to engage in dialogue and difficult discussions later in the semester.

Before class ends, I always ask my students if this activity was helpful/useful to their understanding of privilege and related concepts. Most students find the ability to visually represent the complicated concept beneficial, and enjoy seeing their classmates’ different depictions of privilege, which they had not considered. In doing so, they learn that there are different types of privilege (racial, gender, socio-economic, etc.) that intersect with one another (Crenshaw, 2003; McIntosh, 1988). Each semester, at least one student expresses that they disliked the activity/assignment as I was assigning it but grew to learn the benefits and usefulness of learning about privilege and the related concepts in this way. Course evaluation feedback frequently suggests that this is the students’ favorite activity/assignment in the course. For example, a student sent me an email following the completion of the assignment stating, “this was by far my favorite assignment yet, not just in this class, but out of all of my classes!” For hooks (1994), “some version of engaged pedagogy is really the only type of teaching that truly generates excitement in the classroom, that enables students and professors to feel the joy of learning” (p. 204). By identifying this activity/assignment as their favorite or as a turning point in their learning throughout the semester, students recognize the value of engaged pedagogy and realize that learning can be exciting and enjoyable.

Overall, although students might initially feel intimidated, they enjoy “playing with privilege” and learning how course concepts such as racial inequality and microaggressions are rooted in disparities of privilege. Through developing concrete examples of privilege, students develop their own definitions of privilege nuanced enough to begin thinking about their complex intersectional position. Additionally, students learn to recognize the positions of privilege that influence social reality (McIntosh, 2013). By recognizing “the uniqueness of each voice and a willingness to create spaces in the classroom where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, knowing their presence will be recognized and valued” (hooks, 1994, p. 186), this activity reaches its objectives in a timely, creative, and engaging manner, continuing the legacy of bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy.

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