

Crossing the Line

INTRODUCTION: When facilitated right, "Crossing the Line" is a powerful, interactive, and effective activity that builds diversity awareness within a group. The goals of this activity include helping participants learn about themselves; give participants an opportunity to reflect upon their self- and cultural identity; allowing the community involved to appreciate its own diversity more and learn to treat each other like the diverse human beings we all are, instead of as homogenized, singular, cultureless beings.

POINT TO PONDER: "Education should not be the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." - *William Butler Yeats*

DIRECTIONS: The following is a list of recommended instructions for Crossing the Line. This activity requires thorough facilitation, and should not be conducted carelessly or lightly. Read over the directions closely, and email any questions you have to info [at] freechild.org.

Time needed

About 35 minutes for the activity. About 45 minutes for discussion.

Room set-up

- Plenty of open space (All chairs to the side or out of the room)
- Note on the door (Workshop in Progress, DO NOT DISTURB!)
- Dim the lights a bit if possible.
- Facilitator should be off to the side so he is not the center of attention.

Publicity

Keep it vague. It seems fair to describe it as "a workshop where we find ways in which we are both different from and similar to each other." Be careful about over billing the workshop.

Content

Introduction of the facilitator

Be careful not to draw too much attention to the facilitator; the focus should be on the exercise and the group.

Statement of Purpose

"This is a diverse organization and we have spent the last couple days exploring that diversity. In this exercise we continue exploring that diversity. Much of our earlier exercises addressed diversity that was obvious.

We want to acknowledge and address those differences but also bring to the surface other differences that we may not have recognized. This process might prove difficult at first, or a bit awkward. This afternoon we want to break down stereotypes and make it easier to know one another as full human beings."

Description of the Process

"I would like everyone to gather on one side of the room and face towards its center." (Wait for everyone to move.)

"I will call out specific categories/labels/descriptions. I will ask that all those who fit this description walk to the other side of the room and turn around, facing the rest of the group." (As an example, the facilitator names a category that only he or she would fit, and then walks to the other side of the room, and turns around.)

"After several seconds I will ask you to return to the group."

Guidelines

"Over the next half hour or so, we will share some of our experiences and vulnerabilities with one another. This will demand a safe atmosphere. To insure that we remain sensitive to one another's feelings, we need to follow two critical guidelines."

"The first involves LISTENING. Let's have silence throughout the exercise--no talking, snickering, giggling, etc. Silence will allow all of us to participate fully. Silence will also enable us to experience our personal thoughts and feelings more clearly."

"The second guideline is RESPECT. It is imperative that we respect the dignity of each person who is here this evening. Everything that is shared should remain confidential. Nothing that is offered should leave this room. However, if--having gone through the workshop--you truly need to talk to a particular individual about something he or she has shared, be sure you ask that person's permission."

"I need a nod of the head to indicate that you understand the importance of our keeping an atmosphere both silent and respectful..."

"Before we begin there are several other guidelines that we need to consider."

NO PRESSURE. "No one here is under any pressure to respond in any particular way to any of the questions. If you have any doubts about sharing some part of yourself, you should feel perfectly comfortable with your decision not to walk across the room."

"One final point. Each of the categories I use will have some GRAY AREAS. If you find yourself stuck in a gray area, simply define the words from your own point of view. In other words, define the terms as you yourself understand them when thinking of yourself. For example, suppose the question asks everyone who is religious to walk across the room. If you think of yourself as religious, then the word fits, regardless of whether or not someone else would use the word "religious in the same way, and regardless of other meanings the word might have. If you have serious reservations about the clarity or meaningfulness of any particular category, then the best things to do is to not cross to the other side of the room."

Suggestions to Facilitator

Speak clearly. If the group is large, people may have trouble hearing you, and their questions will cause an interruption.

Don't rush the process. Allow time for reflection. Don't ask the next question too soon.

Beginning

"So that's it for the format and the guidelines to be followed. Any questions?"

"If you cannot stay for the entire exercise, don't feel comfortable with the guidelines, or simply don't believe like the workshop is going to be beneficial for you, it's OK to wait outside the room during the exercise."

"To start, let's try a simple category. It will help me clarify the process."

"CROSS TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROOM IF YOU WEAR GLASSES OR CONTACT LENSES.
THANK YOU.

Once we begin, please, no interruptions.

ONCE WE BEGIN, PLEASE DO NOT ASK ANY QUESTIONS.

Often during the process you may feel like you want to say something. There will be plenty of time at the end for discussion about the process."

The Questions

- Cross to the other side of the room if you are not from _____.
- Cross to the other side of the room if you feel your home is _____.

REMINDER ABOUT GRAYNESS

REMEMBER, all the legal and philosophical questions about "home" don't matter. What matters is what the word "home" means to you. If you are confused or uncomfortable, the best policy is NOT to cross to the other side of the room.

- You are male
- You are female
- Since joining (this program), you have broken off a serious relationship.

REMINDER

No talking... (Consider issuing this and other reminders as an ounce of prevention, even if a problem isn't coming up at the moment.)

- In the past year you have been in a relationship and been hurt.
- You feel that you have not formed a close friendship in national service.
- You take pride in your work in national service.
- You are Catholic
- You are Protestant
- You are Jewish
- You are another religion other than those three major U.S. religions.
- You are an atheist or agnostic.
- You are a person of color.
- You know little about your cultural heritage
- You wish you had more money
- You consider your family as working class
- You consider your family as middle class
- You consider your family as upper class (VERY FEW WILL GO, BECAUSE THAT NOT HOW THEY THINK OF THEMSELVES, BUT THAT'S OK)
- You have felt embarrassed about the economic class your family is in

REMINDER

Walk across the room only when you feel comfortable identifying yourself in this way.

- You come from a family of four or more children you are an only child
- You live independently of your parents
- You have taken primary responsibility either for raising another member of your family or caring for an elderly member of your family
- You have low self-esteem
- You would like to lose ten or more pounds
- You feel lonely (ALWAYS AN IMPORTANT QUESTION)
- You have been to college or plan to go to college
- You have not graduated from high school
- You have had serious thoughts about leaving national service
- You feel physically unattractive

Note

As the workshop is structured it makes one dip into the personal with the previous question. Then we back up to what is easier before making a deeper trip.

- You consider yourself a Democrat
- You consider yourself a Republican
- You consider yourself a socialist
- You consider yourself a feminist
- Your parents have either divorced, separated, or never married
- At least one of your parents have died
- You feel estranged or unconnected
- There have been times when you have seriously felt that, if you could choose, you would not choose
- the ethnicity into which you were born

- You find yourself thinking about food considerably more often than you want
- You have medical problem
- You have a learning disability
- You have a physical disability
- You have questioned your sexual orientation
- You have experienced the effects of alcoholism in your family
- You have experienced the effects of drug addiction in your family
- You have had a sexual experience that you regretted
- You have experienced suicidal thoughts at some point in your life
- You have cried at least once this year
- You have cried at least once this year for someone or something other than yourself
- Since you joined _____, you have laughed at yourself at least once
- Cross the room if you could use a hug right now. (People generally begin hugging each other during this time.)

Discussion Afterwards

REMINDER OF GUIDELINES

"I want to remind the group again of the guidelines. During this discussion we must have the utmost respect. Again, no talking while others speak, no side comments, giggling, etc.

"I also want to remind people that everything spoken in this room stays in the room."

DEBRIEF OF DISCUSSION

(The discussion should feel a bit confessional. If the exercise has run well, people will be very introspective and quiet. FOCUS THE DISCUSSION ON TWO QUESTIONS:

"How are you feeling right now?"

"Is there anything you want to say to your fellow participants about why you crossed the room on a particular questions?"

(Use the discussion to allow people to EXPLAIN, SHARE, AND TELL STORIES about any of the statements. Use the discussion to allow people to talk about HOW THEY FEEL right now and how they feel about the exercise.)

WARNINGS

BE CAREFUL ABOUT THE DISCUSSION CENTERING THE MERITS OF THE WORKSHOP.

One person says they did not like how we had only two choices, crossing the room or not. Another defends the workshop and the workshop becomes the center of the discussion. (If someone makes a comment about the workshop, thank them for their comment and refocus the discussion towards people's feelings and stories.)

BE CAREFUL ABOUT COMMENTS THAT FOCUS ON OTHERS RATHER THAN THEMSELVES.

(The discussion can become a group of people questioning other people why they crossed. Try to gently steer the discussion to give space for those who really feel the need to explain and tell the group something about themselves.)

Closure

End the discussion by thanking everyone for participating. You may want to describe how this workshop has affected you.

REMINDER

Remind everyone again that whatever was said in the room stays in the room. It is a serious breach of respect and trust if you share any of this with anyone outside this room. If you feel like you need to speak with an individual about something he or she said, please ask them first.

Suggested Citation

Fletcher, A. (2002). *FireStarter Youth Power Curriculum: Participant Guidebook*. Olympia, WA: Freerchild Project.

Workshop Designers: This workshop originally came from presentations done at Stanford University around 1985 by Isoki Femi and Linda Gonzales csp). This is a modified version based on an outline from Dennis Matthies, Center for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University.

<http://www.freechild.org/Firestarter/CrossingTheLine.htm>