



Messages I Learned

Time Frame: Minimum of 40 minutes

Supplies Needed: Sheet of paper divided into four quadrants
Pen/marker for each participant

Room Set Up: This activity is done privately with dyad conversations at the end. Each person could be seated at tables and turn to a neighbor, or sit on the floor and cluster in sets of twos (or very small groups) afterwards.

Facilitator Notes: *I think it is important to provide a private space for participants who really need to trace back roots of where bias grows. It is imperative to facilitate this activity as serious, quietly encouraging participants to be honest with themselves. I keep track of time per quadrant, give a minute warning before moving to the next section, and remind participants that they do not have to share anything with anyone in the room that they don't want to share. The purpose of this activity is for each participant to bookmark roots of their belief systems. Some of the roots are important and unchangeable while others may be sources of shame, embarrassment, frustration, anger, and/or deeply held pain and stories of harm. I also only read the instructions for one quadrant at a time. This allows for interesting conversation around our dependency on binary systems (when the third quadrant is named). Lastly, the instructions below are specific to race. However, I have also facilitated this activity around sexual identities and it worked quite well.*

The Script: Hi everyone, I'm [insert name]. This activity is a little different than most diversity trainings in that I want you to have a think back... way back. I'm going to lead us all through an activity where you are going to be asked to record or bookmark messages you have learned about specific topics that I will give you. You can draw, write words, or whatever you need to mark different experiences in your own life. When you think of one, record it, and then think further back. Keep recording everything that comes to mind. You are not going to share anything you record on your sheets with anyone in the room unless you chose to; I will not ask you to share anything with me or anything else. When doing social justice work, it is important to document the roots of our beliefs, where we learned these beliefs, and what messages are attached to them in order to chose what needs to be updated so to speak and what remains critical to your current belief system.

[Make sure everyone has a sheet of paper and something to write with. Ask participants to draw a large X on their paper dividing the sheet into four quadrants. Some folks may want to record the prompt in each section so that they can remember what they record in each section. I will be referring to the quadrants by

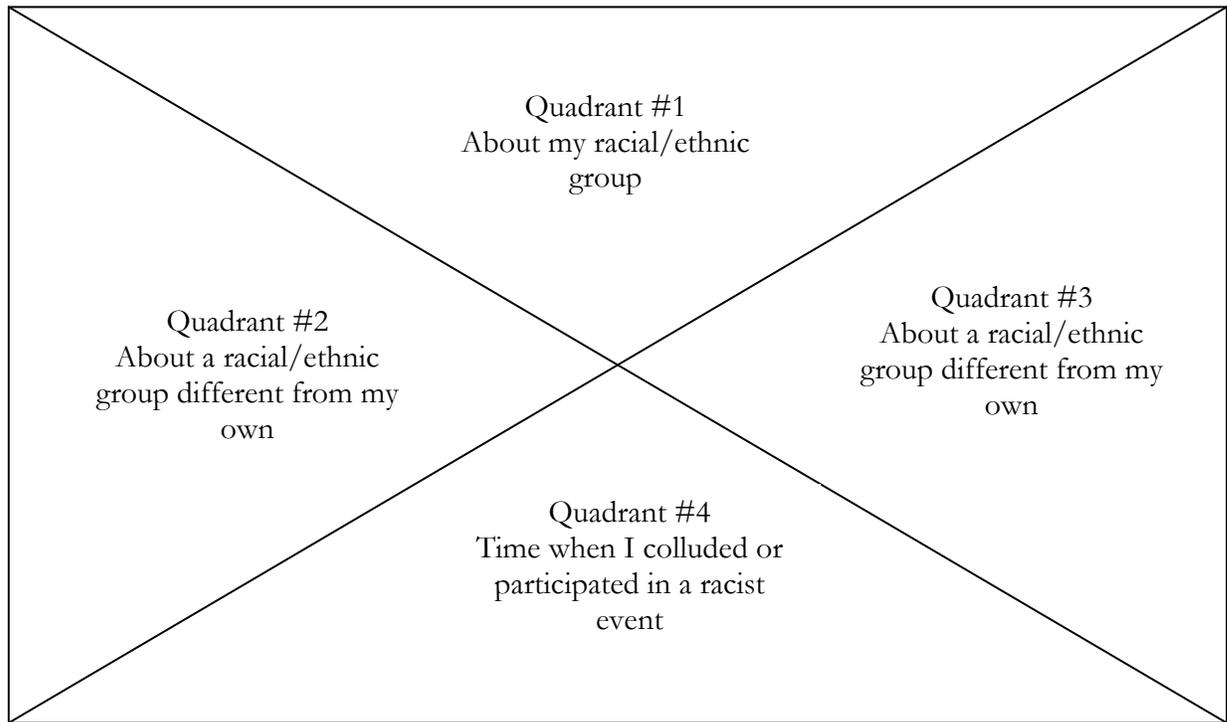
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number, 1, 2, 3, and 4.]



[Do not give participants the prompts for all quadrants up front. Give the instructions one quadrant at a time.]

[After participants have divided their sheets into quadrants, remind them that this is an activity for personal reflection.]

As we begin this reflection activity, I will give you prompts for each quadrant. I will give you a warning when you have about a minute left to finish up the documentation in each quadrant. You are welcome to go back throughout the activity if you think of other messages you learned or if you need to finish something you were working on in an earlier time period. I will then ask you to set your pen down when you are done with the quadrant and to sit quietly while your peers may still be working. Remember, doing social justice work is very much based on the messages you have learned. Anything you record is to remind you of your memories, life experiences, etc.

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For the first quadrant, remember that you might want to take note of the prompts in each quadrant to help you later when you look back over this sheet in the future. I will be referring to the quadrants by number. So, number one, please record, draw, list reminders of messages you learned about your own racial group. *[If doing sexual identity, the prompt would be for your own sexual identity group].*

[Give at least 5 minutes of silence. Watch for the length of time people need. Give a one minute warning by asking people to get to a stopping place or to finish up the memory they are currently recording.]

We are going to move to the second quadrant now. In quadrant two, please record messages you have learned about another racial group other than your own.

[Give at least 5 minutes of silence. Watch for the length of time people need. Give a one minute warning by asking people to get to a stopping place or to finish up the memory they are currently recording.]

Wrap up quadrant two so that we can move on to the third quadrant. In quadrant three, please record message you have learned about yet another racial group other than your own.

[Notice that white participants tend to lump all non-white racial groups together in this quadrant. Just let them – don't say anything. Non-white participants, may use this quadrant to depict white messages or another racial group, and bi-racial/ multiracial people may not see a problem with these directions and not understand other's confusion.]

[Give at least 5 minutes of silence. Watch for the length of time people need. Give a one minute warning by asking people to get to a stopping place or to finish up the memory they are currently recording.]

For the last quadrant, I am going to ask that you reflect on your own inactions or actions. Remember that what you chose to record on this sheet will not be shared with the larger group unless you chose to share. This quadrant may be more difficult for some; I challenge you to dig up at least one example. Please record a time, place, or event where you colluded or supported racism through your direct action or inaction.

[Give at least 5 minutes of silence. Watch for the length of time people need. Give a one minute warning by asking people to get to a stopping place or to finish up the memory they are currently recording.]

[Notice that this is usually extremely difficult for participants, especially for non-white participants. When giving the direction for this quadrant be mindful that most don't understand the word collude so be prepared with a definition, but not an example. If you give an example, they will find a time they did exactly the same]

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thing and put that down on their sheet. You want them to come up with something on their own and/or struggle to do so.]

Thank you for your patience during this activity. As I told you, this isn't easy nor a typical diversity activity. Truth be told, our lives are like most diversity activities and this one is really about own life.

Now, I have stated a number of times that you don't have to share with anyone what you have recorded on your sheets. This is really for you and your own on-going reflection. What I would like to do now is give you the opportunity to talk with one other person about this experience. Before you pair up, please turn your sheets over and record four conversation prompts so that I don't have to interrupt the flow of conversation with the next prompt.

Prompt #1

What did you think about this activity? How did you react to the directions?

Prompt #2

Which quadrants were easier or harder to fill out?

Prompt #3

What did you feel while working in each quadrant?

Prompt #4

How are you feeling during this conversation?

I am going to give you and your partner about 10 minutes [maybe 15 minutes depending on confusion/frustration levels] to work through these four conversation prompts without interruption. Please pair up with a partner and make sure that both of you have a chance to share. I will be back in a little while.

[After 10 or 15 minutes bring the group's attention back to the front of the room.]

By show of hands, how many of you wish you could keep talking?

[Look around the room and then state the rough percentage of hands in the air – usually WAY more than half.]

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I want to take this opportunity to mention that you don't need me or any other diversity speaker to have conversations like this. You just need to make the time and space to really deeply listen and share with one another. That is doing social justice work.

Now, about this activity and the brief conversations you had with your partner... What, if anything, would you like to share with the large group? Do you have any questions for me or your fellow participants?

[Take comments from the participants.]

[Your role during this conversation is to notice patterns, and stir up the discussion about how this experience might be different for different people. You can then pull from the conversation a mutual understanding of the social construction of race as well as the importance of holding one to lessons learned and finding lessons you may need to unlearn to be congruent with one's core values. How does class (upbringing and/or current economic status) impact this activity? What about internalized and externalized racism? Do you see any connections between the ease in which you completed the activity and your place (or the placement of others) within a "hierarchy of oppression?"]

[If you do this activity with sexual identity, I find the patterns to be very similar. Your sexual identity, a sexual identity different than your own, yet another sexual identity different than your own, and a time you colluded with your actions or inactions with homophobia or heterosexism.]

Thank you!

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