

Learning activity

Skill Sets for active solidarity

TIME: 90 mins

LEARNING AIMS:

- Understanding a range of different skills needed to navigate the reality of systems of oppression and dynamics of power and privilege
- Drawing new understanding from past experiences of conflict/tension around the dynamics of power and privilege
- Creating a shared vocabulary

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 10-20

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS:

Pre-prepared flipchart diagrams / presentation, markers, pens and flipchart paper

Key references:

- Leticia Nieto, Beyond Inclusion, Beyond Empowerment;
<https://beyondinclusionbeyondempowerment.com/about-the-book/>
- Series of three articles: [Part One](#), [Part Two](#), [Part Three](#)
- MLC Curriculum Part One, Module Five

FRAMING:

Do read the three overview articles linked above. This will help you to understand the way the skillsets framework is intended to help us all increase our ability to make more conscious choices about the ways we engage with dynamics of oppression and privilege.

Prepare a presentation using flipcharts or slides, emphasising that the model of skillsets describes a range of skillsets that we can develop and move through, but that, as we grow and practise our anti-oppression skills, the skills we learned earlier don't disappear, rather that they are included in an expanding repertoire. The later skill sets offer us more choice, more possibilities for action, and a truer sense of ourselves and others. However, the earlier skills are still with us and we will might still fall back on them in certain settings.

The flipchart or slides should include:

Agents of Oppression Skillsets

Indifference: we are able to not notice the existence of Targets and their life conditions, and the whole system of Rank. It can be as innocent as saying, “I don’t know any _____ people.” “I don’t know,” “It’s not my problem”

Distancing: allows Agents to hold members of the Target group at arm’s length, to keep them “away” from ourselves, emphasising differences. There are three common forms of distancing. 1. Distancing out: "I don't have anything against.... but". 2. Distancing down: "They should be in jail. This is wrong", which might show up as wanting to help. 3. Distancing up: "They are special!". Often connected with appropriation or romanticisation.

Inclusion: here, Agents focus on the similarities between Target group members and ourselves and emphasise similarity and connection (“We’re all children of God,” “fundamentally, we’re all the same.”). As Agents, we experience Inclusion as liberating. It feels like we’ve finally gotten out of the oppression business. We can appreciate members of the Target group. This seems terrific, to us. We feel happy to welcome Targets – but we unconsciously expect them to conform to our expectations, to make us comfortable

Awareness: requires us to move well out of our comfort zone. It’s a difficult transition that we’re unlikely to make without a powerful motivation. Awareness is initially experienced as unpleasant. We can feel cold, paralyzed and even disoriented by emotions such as guilt and shame. We realise that we don’t know what it’s like to experience oppression in this particular Rank channel.

Allyship: fully aware of the reality of oppression and of the privilege we receive under the rank system. We acknowledge that we can never fully understand the experience of Targets in that rank area. We see the Rank system operating within us and in others, and we recognize the dehumanising effect this has on all of us. At the same time, we remain able to think and to act. We are not paralyzed; we can choose to work against oppression, a growing sense of being comfortable when being uncomfortable

Targets of Oppression Skillsets

Survival: Enables us to stay alive by conforming. Approximating the agency or fitting the stereotype. Goal: make the agents feel comfortable. Unconscious agreement with norms. Exhausting (constant shape shifting).

Confusion: We begin to see the privilege dynamics but lack the language/support to make full sense of it. Contradictions, doubt: “That doesn’t seem fair but there must be an explanation”, “I am taking it personally”.

Empowerment: Requires a lot of work. We might need access to non-mixed spaces to support our development of these skills. We will often experience a constant need to talk about the experience of oppression.

Strategy: Choosing our battles, less reactive, more freedom to make choices. Conserving skills and maximising effectiveness. Allying with other target groups. Able to acknowledge the complexity of intersecting oppressions.

Recentering: Strong connection to the inner sense of values. Being guided by an inner ethical system, not reactive to the system of oppression. Centering our values, well-being and a compass towards systemic transformation.

See example sheets below.

FACILITATION:

Step 1. Setting up the activity (3 mins)

Let participants know that you will spend a significant amount of time exploring the model of skill sets. Explain that you will focus on the theory and presentation of the model for the first 30 minutes and the rest of the session time they will spend applying the knowledge by reflecting on specific case studies from their experience.

Acknowledge that we will be talking about experiences of oppression and for most people in the room this will be their lived experience and daily reality and that it might bring up emotions of grief, anger, and sadness but also useful language to name our experiences and insights helping us make sense out of our experience.

Step 2. Presentation of framework - facilitating the activity (30 minutes)

Present the model of skill sets, starting with the Agents of Oppression skill sets. As you do that, take a lot of care, and make frequent pauses for people to take words in or make notes and ask questions/make comments. Invite participants every now and then to breathe and move their bodies. Even hearing about the Agents of Oppression skill set model might be difficult for some, as people might have been on the receiving end of the described behaviours and it might bring up difficult memories.

Giving examples is useful, but make sure not to reproduce harmful language. If giving examples, give examples from your own life and about groups that are not present in the room (ex. If there are people with disabilities in the room, don't give examples of harmful behaviour towards that group of people). When explaining the Targets of Oppression skill set model you can also use examples from your own life, even if there are people in the room who might share that experience. You might let the group know that you will use your own examples related to a certain stream of oppression so that they know it's coming.

If you don't have any lived experience of being a Target of Oppression, it's best that you do not present this model to the group and find a co-facilitator who could do that.

Step 3. debriefing the presentation (10 minutes)

It is best to make small, frequent pauses during the presentation to see if there are questions or comments. In addition to that, give some space for comments and questions at the end of the presentation. If you notice the group being silent or very impacted by the presentation, you might want to invite them to turn to their neighbour and just chat for a few minutes about how they have heard the presentation.

Step 4. Exploring case studies (110 mins)

a. setting up the activity (10 mins)

Ask participants to think about a situation they were part of which involved tension or difficulty related to oppression and privilege dynamics. Ask them to choose a story that on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is not intense and 10 is very intense, is 'a 3-4'. The idea is they do not choose the most difficult story they have experienced, but something mild enough to be able to reflect and work on, without being re-triggered. They will either be in a position of Target or Agent of oppression in those stories (even if they were a witness to a situation). If you are delivering a longer training, it is good to let people know a day earlier that you will work on case studies, so that they can think about them and come to the session prepared. You can also let participants know in advance of the training about the case study work and ask them to come to the training with a case study prepared.

b. forming the groups and choosing a story (15min)

When (most of) the participants have a story in mind, ask them to divide into two groups, based on the positionality they were in when the story took place - either Targets or Agents of oppression. If people don't have a story they want to work on, ask them to choose a group, based on their overall positionality - are they more often an Agent or Target of oppression?

Within those two groups divide participants further (if needed, depending on the size of your group), so that you end up with groups of 4-5 people. In those small groups give them 10-15 minutes to briefly share their stories and choose one they will focus on for the rest of the session. The case giver needs to be ready to work on their case, as they will need to be strongly engaged in the process. Emphasise that even though not all of the stories will be reflected upon, we learn through listening to other people's experiences.

c. first stage of the reflection process (30 mins)

Now ask participants to explore the case using the questions below. The case giver will be providing information, while the role of the rest of the group is to be curious, ask questions and deepen the reflection. Refrain from giving advice or synthesising at this point. The idea is to open a reflection space, where new information can come into the picture.

Questions:

- What happened?
 - Incident + build up
 - What led to it all?
 - How was the situation taken care of? What was done/not done?
 - What was helpful or unhelpful?
- Context
 - Where did it happen?
 - Cultural and organising context
- Who was involved?
 - Who else?
 - How were they involved?
 - Which of the skillsets were they using?
 - If you have explored the concept of rank with the participants (see rank and privilege activity), you can also ask: What was their rank in that situation and context?
- How did you and others feel? What was happening in the body?

d. debrief (15 mins)

Bring participants back and ask them to shout out feelings and bodily reactions that they were naming in the groups - a mindstorm. Record those on a flipchart.

Ask them what was helpful and unhelpful in the ways the situation was dealt with, again in a mindstorm fashion and recording things on the flipchart. There might be things that will appear on both flipcharts and that's ok.

Points to draw out/questions to ask:

- There is no magic or one-fit-all solutions to deal with situations of tension around oppression and privilege dynamics
- Those situations usually bring up stress and difficult emotions in our bodies. Regulating and co-regulating strategies are crucial for transforming and taking care of those situations.

e. second stage of the reflection process (40 mins)

Ask participants to go back to their groups and explore follow up questions - a set of different questions for the groups of Agents and Targets of oppression. Ask each group to finish with a round where everyone (case giver and other group members) share how they feel now having done this and what are their takeaways, lessons learned and insights they gained through this process.

Suggested questions:

- Targets of oppression
 - What requests do you have/did you have towards the Agent group(s)?
 - What did you do to take care of yourself?
 - What kind of other support/resource would you have benefited from?

- Agents of oppression
 - What questions are you left with?
 - What did you do to attend to the situation?
 - What else could have been done or done differently?
 - What is your long term learning project here?
 - What kind of resources did you access? What other resources are there?

f. final debrief of whole activity (15 minutes)

Ask some people to share what have they learned, ask Target group members to share some of the requests towards Agents they have named in their case study exploration. You can finish with something embodied like sitting back to back, centering or shaking the exercise to help participants move through any difficult emotions and support learning integration.

Alternative session plan

1. *Introduce Leticia Nieto's skill set model and explain the concept of Systems of Oppression (5 min)*
2. *Ask participants to name some of the systems of oppression (5 min)*
3. *Invite participants to reflect on a situation where they have experienced tension related to privilege and oppression (30-40 min)*
 - *Ask those who came up with a story if they would like to dig into it*
 - *Create small groups around the storytellers*
 - *Explore the case studies in those groups using reflection questions*
 - *Bring the group together and gather some of the feelings and body reactions that they identified in their stories*
4. *Explain Leticia Nieto's skill set model for agents (20 min)*
5. *Explain Leticia Nieto's skill set model for targets (20 min)*

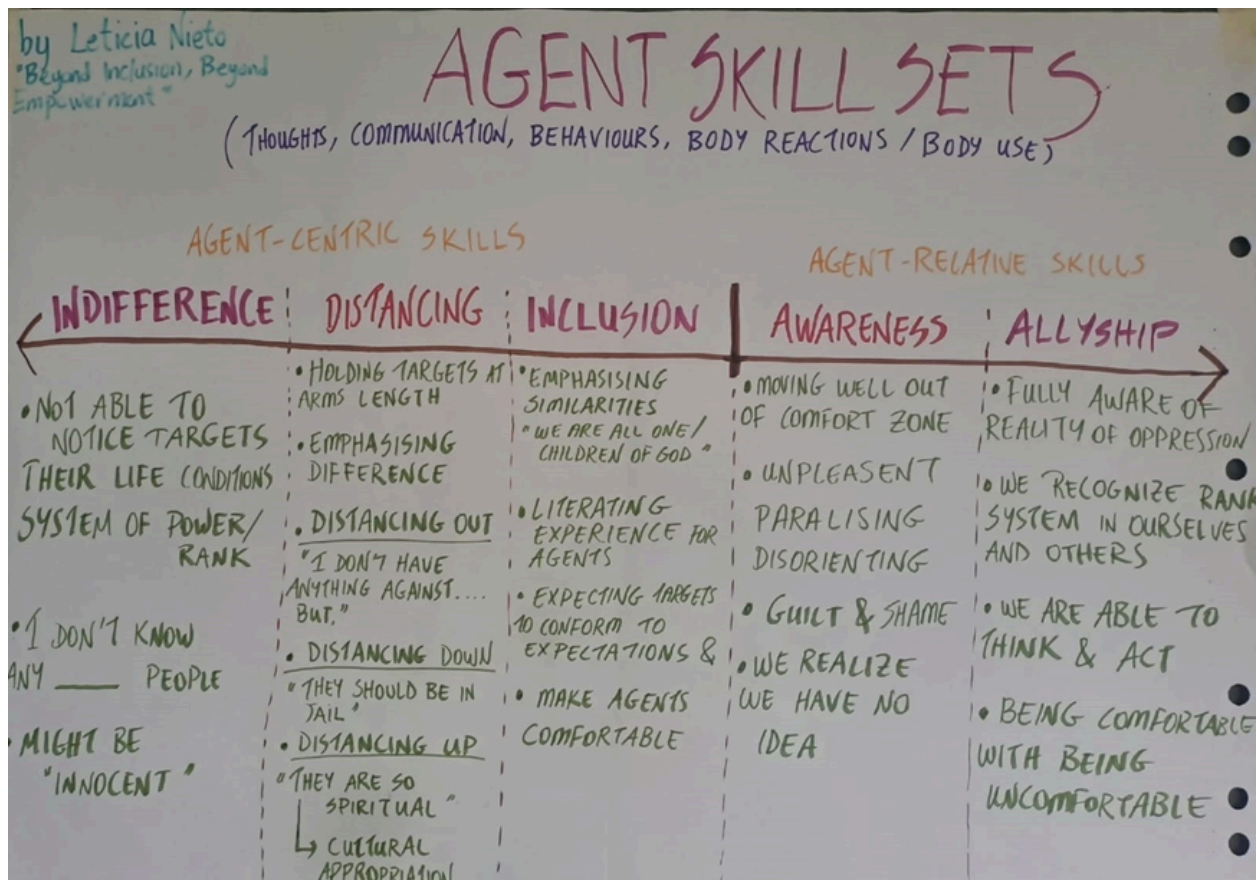
6. Invite participants back to the small groups to reflect on how the target and agent skills were present in their stories (30 min)

- Which of the skill sets were used?
- Which skills would have been more helpful and what would support them in using a different skill set in the long and short term?

7. Invite the whole group to have some final reflections (10 min)

SOURCE: Ulex Project, based on Leticia Nieto's skillsets model

IMAGES:



by Leticia Nieto

TARGET SKILLSETS

(THOUGHTS, COMMUNICATION, BEHAVIOURS, BODY REACTIONS & USE)

← SURVIVAL	CONFUSION	EMPOWERMENT	STRATEGY	RE-CENTERING →
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ENABLES US TO STAY ALIVE BY CONFORMING • APPROXIMATING AGENCY/ FITTING THE STEREOTYPE • GOAL: MAKE THE MAINSTREAM FEEL COMFORTABLE • UNCONSCIOUS AGREEMENT WITH NORMS • EXHAUSTING (CONSTANT SHAPE SHIFTING) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WE BEGIN TO SEE BUT LACK LANGUAGE/SUPPORT • CONTRADICTIONS, DOUBTS • "THAT DOES NOT SEEM FAIR BUT THERE MUST BE AN EXPLANATION" • "I AM TAKING IT PERSONALLY" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REQUIRES A LOT OF WORK • WE NEED ACCESS TO NON-MIXED SPACES • CONSTANT NEED TO TALK ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF OPPRESSION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CHOOSING OUR BATTLES • LESS REACTIVE • MORE FREEDOM TO MAKE CHOICES • CONSERVING SKILLS AND MAXIMISING EFFECTIVENESS • ALLYING WITH OTHER TARGET GROUPS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CONTINUOUS HEALING • COMING BACK TO OUR CENTER • STRONG CONNECTION TO INNER SOURCE