

Interrupting Oppressive Language

Introduction/Purpose: The purpose of the training is to practice skills to intervene when oppressive language is being used in order to learn a new skill that serves to deepen our connection with others and promote civility when in controversy. Controversy with civility is the act of respectfully and willingly engaging in dialogue around disagreements that arise from the sharing of diverse perspectives and opinions (Alvarez, 2009; Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). Skills to cultivate include how to: engage in active listening, gain an understanding of worldviews other than one's own, criticize ideas without demeaning the persons who express them, admit a lack of knowledge on a subject, slow the urge to judge, draw analogies in a discussion, and support others' right to express ideas even if they are unpopular.

Theory: An interruption is what we say to interrupt oppressive behavior or language. The purpose of this workshop is to help develop tools to give interruptions that create a deeper connection, and help to build trust, mutuality and compassion. As an interrupter we are proceeding with the notion that we all want to be good people, the goal is to help folks connect to their goodness. An important thing to remember when learning this new strategy is that there is not a formula. Develop your own way to do interruptions and it will come more naturally. (Introduction and theory, 5 minutes)

Step 1: Begin a discussion by creating a common definition of oppression with participants. Make sure that the definition that evolves includes something about institutional power. Now start a discussion about oppressive statements, words, and the reason that they are oppressive. For example, lame is a commonly used word to describe something that we do not like. This can be found oppressive because it is also used to describe someone who has a physical disability that hinders their mobility. (5 minutes)

Step 2: Model an interruption with a volunteer. Have a volunteer say the oppressive statement. This is a very important step. Model an interruption that illustrates a dialogue rather than a persuasion. Many beginning interrupters get stuck on trying to be right. This is NOT the purpose of an interruption. (3 minutes)

Step 3: Get the participants thinking and talking about their feelings around interruptions. Ask questions like, have you ever been interrupted? What did it feel like? Share an example of a time when you were interrupted or use the following: In a Native American Studies class, I said, "I wish I was Native American, they are just so spiritual and connected to the earth." A classmate interrupted me by saying, "I hear that you have a lot of respect for Native American traditions. However, labeling them all as spiritual and connected to the earth could be tokenizing. Not all Native Americans today are spiritual or connected to the earth. It could make someone who was Native American and neither spiritual nor connected to the earth feel like their identity was invisible. You may want to express your appreciation in a way that acknowledges that there are many different people with different beliefs and values that identify as Native American." I felt very ashamed of myself and my comment. I was also grateful to my classmate because the last thing I wanted to do was make a comment that offended or hurt someone. Get participants to start thinking and talking about how they would like to be interrupted. Also, how they would like others to feel when interrupted. This can be done by staying in one large group, or for richer

discussion have folks talk to their neighbor for three minutes before coming back to the large group. (5 minutes)

Step 4: Discuss some strategies and skills for interrupting. You may want to have the participants create a list of strategies by shouting out their ideas, or you may want to give them the following list and talk about examples of each:

- A. Ask clarifying questions.
- B. Speak from personal experience.
- C. Use statistics or facts.
- D. Use humor when applicable.
- E. Make/include positive or validating comments when interrupting.
- F. Use “I statements” and don’t accuse or attack.
- G. Give an invitation to dialogue.
- H. Be non-judgmental.

Skills to cultivate while learning to interrupt:

- A. Think well of others.
- B. Demonstrate patience.
- C. Know your objective when interrupting.
- D. Share new information or knowledge.
- E. Demonstrate your leadership skills.
- F. Don’t lecture, converse.
- G. Always be interruptible...this includes interrupting yourself before anyone else needs to, as well as being open to interruptions from others. (10 minutes)

Step 5: Break participants into groups of two or three. Give them a list of statements and situations to practice interruptions. (A worksheet is provided at the end of this training. Some examples cover the same issues with a variation in the wording. Decide which examples fit best and limit the ones used to those). Have one person read the oppressive statement and the other act as the interrupter. Have any additional group members give feedback. Tell participants to feel free to play with being both difficult and easy to interrupt. Tell participants to take care of themselves during this exercise. Skip any that are too painful to deal with and take a break if necessary. These are meant for practice, so should be difficult, but not emotionally stressful (S. Eck, personal communication, July 28, 2010). (20 minutes)

Walk around and help groups out if needed. Some of the statements may be so common to participants that they will have a hard time working through how harmful and oppressive they can be. Examples D, F, G, I, J, K, and O may need further explanation. Below is an example of how one could dissect these:

D. “I don’t want to do that assignment! It is retarded.” Explanation: Retarded is a word that is used to describe someone who has a mental disability. Using it as a term to refer to something we dislike contributes to a culture that is intolerant of disabilities.

F. “I think all feminists are femi-nazis.” Explanation: A femi-nazi is referring to a woman who wants to wage war on all men. One definition for feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression (Hooks, 1984).

G. “Mexicans tend to be really patriarchal. You know they feel like it’s okay to beat their partners. They also have a higher tendency to have bad tempers.” Explanation: Like several of the interruption examples, this is stereotyping. Stereotyping is attributing a quality or behavior to a group of people. Every time a person performs this behavior they reaffirm the stereotype and whenever they act contrary to the behavior they are the exception (Plous, 2003). Many cultures are patriarchal, including most Western cultures. What we know about domestic violence is that it is not culture specific. It affects everyone.

I. “Bums just like being poor. If they wanted a job they would get one.” Explanation: Society often blames victims of poverty. Blaming the victims of structural violence for the problems they face will never lead to a more equitable society. We need to look at the positions people are born into as well as the way society shapes their life course in order to help people further their actual life circumstances into their potential circumstance.

J. “PSU should give a psychological evaluation to all new students, so we don’t end up going to school with crazy people.” Explanation: This statement brings up questions of who should and should not have access to higher education and who gets to decide.

K. “That makes me want to kill myself!” Explanation: Mental health issues are serious and negatively impact the lives of many people. Killing one’s self is nothing to be blasé about. 30,000 people die from suicide each year leaving millions affected by the experience (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 2010).

O. “I’m so fat. I’m a cow.” Explanation: Saying oppressive things to oneself is still continuing a cycle of negativity.

Debrief: Ask participants to share any scenarios that they had a difficult time coming up with an interruption. Turn to the group for help discussing possible interruptions. Ask participants to share any thought provoking rich dialogues that came up when doing interruptions. Spend some time talking about strategies participants practiced and what worked best. (10 minutes)
Sometimes it is necessary to explain why stopping the cycle of oppressive language is important. Below is a diagram that illustrates how oppressive language feeds into a culture that is more likely to engage in other acts of violence. It may help to draw the below diagram for participants. (Use any remaining time here)

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Closing Question: How might you apply the skills learned in this training in a situation of controversy?

Interruption Scenarios:

In each of the following scenarios, have one person be the one making the oppressive statement and have the other person be the interrupter. This is a role-play, so get into character. Feel free to be difficultly or easily interrupted. This is a chance to practice different strategies for interrupting oppressive language. Note: many of these scenarios may be difficult or trigger emotions. Please, take care of yourself. You may skip or ask group members to skip any that you are not prepared to deal with today (S. Eck, personal communication, July 28, 2010).

- A. "Do you like my new sweater? I got a really good deal on it, I jewed them down."
- B. "That's stupid. That is so gay."
- C. "You gave this to me, don't be an Indian giver."
- D. "I don't want to do that assignment! It is retarded."
- E. "I love you man, no homo."
- F. "I think all feminists are femi-nazis."
- G. "Mexicans tend to be really patriarchal. You know they feel like it's okay to beat their partners. They also have a higher tendency to have bad tempers."
- H. "You're Middle Eastern? Really? It's so good to know there are actually decent Middle Eastern people out there."
- I. "Bums just like being poor. If they wanted a job they would get one."
- J. "PSU should give a psychological evaluation to all new students, so we don't end up going to school with crazy people."
- K. "That makes me want to kill myself!"
- L. "Asians are bad drivers."
- M. "You are very ambitious for a girl."
- N. "I'm offended that Black people can call white people racial names but us white people can't call them racial names back or it's 'Discrimination'."
- O. "I'm so fat. I'm a cow."
- P. "Some people like being poor. They see their families doing it and they just stay that way."
- Q. "What do you mean you don't celebrate Christmas? Christmas is for everyone!"
- R. "I wish I had his disability so I could skip class and get extra time on tests."
- S. "Oh, they'll get in anywhere you want. They got [high SAT score] and there're black!"
- T. "Why is she so loud? Women are supposed to be lady-like and feminine, yet she acts like a man."
- U. "That skirt is too short. She is such a slut!"
- V. "You know, Obama may have black skin, but he was basically raised white."
- W. "If you don't like being reminded of sexism, just ignore it."
- X. "Ohmygawd, there're totally not what people think of when they think of Muslim women. There're so... cool!"
- Y. "Why can't we just forget about slavery? It's been so long, people need to get over it."
- Z. "She is so OCD!"