

Dealing with Challenging Moments in Equality Courses

This is the third in the series of resources for facilitators of equality courses. The first two resources were “Personal Preparation for Facilitators of Equality Courses” and “And More Preparation for Facilitators of Equality Courses”. While the earlier resources introduced self-reflection as a way to prepare for facilitation, this article discusses observation of participant learning.

At its core, an equality course addresses racial identity and power. In Canada, it is a statistical fact that the dominant racial group is white. White people as a group are the majority of Canada’s law-makers and corporate leaders, own most of the country’s wealth, and face fewer barriers than other groups to finding work, education, fair treatment in the justice system, and so on. As a result, regardless of the racial or ethnic diversity among participants in a Steelworker classroom, including a class where there are no white people, “whiteness” is always a factor. Exploration of identity and power is guaranteed to elicit powerful emotional participant responses.

The table below helps facilitators to i) identify three stages of emotional learning, ii) recognize the emotions and behaviours related to each stage, and iii) intervene appropriately and effectively.

Stage 1: The Ending	Participant Emotions and Behaviour	Facilitator Intervention
<p>What is ending? The end of the idea that in Canada everybody is equal.</p> <p>For individuals in the dominant group, they are realizing that things taken as “equality” are in fact privileges that no other non-dominant group enjoys.</p> <p>For individuals in non-dominant groups, they are realizing that they have historically been, and still currently are, oppressed by the dominant group.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear • Denial • Anger • Guilt • Frustration • A sense of loss • Defensiveness • Shame <p>Emotions produce participant behaviours known to facilitators as “challenging moments.”</p> <p>People are being forced to let go of ideas they have assumed are true. This stage is often characterized by emotional upheaval combined with behaviours indicating resistance to learning.</p>	<p><i>What to know:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People have to accept that something is ending before they can begin to accept new ideas • It is important to accept people's resistance, and understand their emotions. • If you do not acknowledge the emotions that people are undergoing, you may encounter resistance throughout the workshop • Prepare for strong emotions accompanying a wide range of opinions and perspectives <p><i>What to do:</i> Slow down, take time and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Allow resistance – do not suppress it</i> • Encourage people to reveal their thoughts without imposing your value judgment • Let people talk about what they are feeling and why they are experiencing it • Acknowledge that emotion is an important factor in learning

Stage 2: The Bridge	Participant Emotions and Behaviour	Facilitator Intervention
<p>If the learning process is like crossing a bridge, then people are now “on the bridge.” They occupy the middle ground between the ending and the (new) beginning.</p> <p>In this stage, people may still be angry. However, anger is mixed with uncertainty.</p> <p>Uncertainty is a stage of learning. It shows that people are questioning what was thought of as self-evident truths during Stage 1.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertainty • Curiosity • Hopefulness • Remorse • Vulnerability • Surprise • Sadness • Relief • Frustration • Abandoned <p>A person’s uncertainty at this stage represents a pendulum between “positive” and “negative” emotional states.</p> <p>Participants may express their feelings in “word pairs” that show they are experiencing both positive and negative reactions: “I was sad about...but also surprised that...”</p>	<p><i>What to know:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think of this phase as the bridge between the old and the new; in some ways, people will still be attached to the old, while they are also trying to continue to the new • Uncertainty is an emotional state indicating progression from Stage 1. • Participant behaviours are determined by emotional uncertainty more so than behaviours of resistance, as in Stage 1. • During this stage, some participants can become silent. Silence is not necessarily disengagement. The engagement is internal and personal as the individual struggles with feeling both positive and negative emotions. <p><i>What to do:</i> Take time, allow long silences and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to allow people to freely express themselves without value judgment from the facilitator • Pay attention to words and word pairs that indicate uncertainty. These indicate a shift from Stage 1 to Stage 2 • Encourage participants to explore and explain their pendulum word pairs

Stage 3: The Beginning	Participant Emotions and Behaviour	Facilitator Intervention
<p>In the last stage, there is clear acknowledgement that white privilege exists for white people, and it needs to be dealt with by everyone, including white people.</p> <p>From dominant and non-dominant groups, this leads to the question “Now, how do we begin?”</p> <p>Beginning again leads to attitudes of equality as shown in changed behaviour.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern • Understanding • Worry • Enthusiasm • Comfort • Happiness • Relief • Remorse • Affection • Acceptance <p>Behaviour in this stage is characterized by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Naming when privilege exists and who does/does not benefit from it - Expressing pain at the damage that privilege has caused and is causing - Providing time for non-dominant groups to talk and participate - Expressing appreciation for learning from the perspectives of non-dominant groups 	<p><i>What to know:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage 3 is not the opposite of Stage 1, i.e. “negative” does not convert to “positive.” Rather, it is finding a way to begin again, this time based on changed behaviour that reflects equality <p><i>What to do:</i> Slow down, take time and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to allow people to freely express themselves without value judgment from the facilitator • Encourage people to explore and explain the connection between their emotion and their behaviour • Encourage people to explore and express the <i>difference</i> in their current emotion and behaviour compared to their recent emotion and behaviour

(The table above is adapted from William Bridges' Transition Model (William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, DaCapo Life Long, 2004.) and "The Navigation Tool for White Privilege" by Barb Thomas and Kai Lai (2017).)