The Great Game of Power

Process steps

Group dynamics

1b (question)

Objectives

This exercise looks at different social relations in the context of power and privilege. Its goals include :

- To provide a container for people's experiences to come out;
- To validate their experiences;
- To locate/situate ourselves within an anti-oppression framework;
- To understand how power manifests in each of our lives, while recognizing these similarities and differences.

Artistic medium

Physical theatre

Duration

Between 30 min. and 1h30 (approx. 30 minutes for each stage)

Material

In an open space, install 6 chairs around 1 table, with 1 water bottle on top.

Progress

1 – The Image of Power

Task participants with creating an image that represents power using all eight objects. Inform them that one of the eight objects must be the most powerful in the image created.

Inform participants that this will be done in silence, without talking. When ready, a person can go up to create the image.

Once the first image has been created, invite its creator to step away. Now ask the group, "What object is the most powerful in this image?" A discussion on this particular image will emerge. Allow the discussion to run its course.

Then, repeat this process – creating an image in silence one by one, discussing as a group once the image is created – as many times as there are participants who would like to create an image. Each image must use all eight objects, and one object must be the most powerful in the image.

 Once at least everyone in the group has created an image, and if there are no further suggestions, you may pass on to the next step. The group has created their ultimate Image of Power.

2 – Bodies in Space

Inform participants that the group will now be adding their bodies to the Image of Power. One by one, in silence and without talking, they will each add their body to the image, with the purpose of making their body the most powerful object in the image – they must do this now without changing the position of the eight objects. Each person that adds themselves to the image, one at a time, must make themselves more powerful than the previous person in the image.

Once about half of the people of the group are now part of the image, ask them to hold the image they have created. Each person will hold their position for a time, as a statue.

Invite those on the outside to move around and to take in this image from different angles. Those on the outside, now an audience, are viewers of this image – ask them now, "who is the

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most powerful in this image?" One at a time, invite those on the outside to respond – with whom they identify, and why they are the most powerful. One at a time, allow others to respond and with reasons for their point of view.

Once all the viewers on the outside have spoken, invite them now to switch places with the one person in the image they have identified as the most powerful. They will switch places in silence, without talking, by touching the person they would like to replace lightly on the shoulder.

Allow those that stepped into the image to fully assume the shape, weight, and breath of the pose they have taken on. Allow those that have stepped out to stretch, move around, and now take in this new image – in silence, without talking.

Now with these new viewers, ask them the same as before : "who is the most powerful in the image?" Once everyone has responded, one at a time, you may move on to the next step.

Attention : As they will hold the image for a long time, ask anyone if they need to adjust to be more comfortable, as they will be asked to sustain their position for a long period of time, to do so. And then invite them to commit to the image they have created.

When the outsiders are taking the image in, if you feel the need to move the discussion forward at a quicker pace, you may invite people to identify with those opinions they agree with, i.e. if someone has identified a person as the most powerful in the image, ask the group "do we agree?" If all agree, move forward; if one or a few people disagree, invite them to speak in order to move discussion in a different direction. Try to gather all the information in the room, while being mindful of redundancies – there are many ways for people to express agreement.

Once the people in the image have switched places with the first viewers, you may choose to facilitate this round of discussion a little more quickly. They have heard this segment of questions before, had more time to think about them, and so it may be more familiar. Moving on to step 3 more quickly brings a new element to the discussion, at the rhythm you may determine it is needed.

Photo credit : Workshop image of the Great Game of Power, facilitated by Koby Rogers Hall. Wild Earth Retreat, April 2012. Photo by Matthieu Tallard.

3 – Analysing Power

Now with the same arrangement of those inside the image, and those viewing it, begin to ask the viewers a series of questions that they may respond to:

- It is now Montreal in 2017 (or the present municipality and year of the workshop). What does this image represent?
- Allow a discussion to develop from those viewers outside the image.
- It is now Montreal in 2012. What does this image represent?
- If this image shows up in your social media feed, what would you say?
- If this image shows up on the front page of a newspaper, what does the caption say?
- If this image is about social groups, what social groups are involved? Which groups have the most power and privilege? Which are the least powerful (the more marginalized, or experience the most systemic oppression)?

Variants

If running out of time, you may do Step 1 on its own.

Or you may do Step 1 followed by Step 2, and end there.

However, these exercises are meant to run sequentially in order to build group knowledge and capacity, and so they must be run in sequence to one another (i.e. Step 3 following Step 1 would not make sense; Step 2 on its own does not have a foundation for comprehending power without *Step 1; etc.)*

Comments

Do not take breaks between stages…the flow is most important here, in building knowledge and discoveries throughout the process. You will want to take a minimum of 15 min. per stage for that very reason, so that people have time to think, to observe, and to discover new concepts from one another. If people need to adjust physically when holding the image, allow them to do so while staying true to their image's intention; or if absolutely necessary and if requested, invite someone to take their place in the image. Most of all continue the flow of facilitation in order to maintain focus and exchange between image and participants.

The purposes of Step 3 are to create context for the image created, and for the specific group(s) you are working. The various prompts are meant to confront geographic location (the city you are in), historical timeline (past & present), media representations, and power dynamics between certain groups in community contexts. The final prompt 4) can be as specific to the group you are working in (ex: "if this image is about migrant justice…") or as general as you judge it should be – decide based on the amount of trust that already exists between group members, and between group members and yourself.

This work can be impersonal and personal at the same time – prepare to mediate given needs, and build safety between participants, throughout. Naming capacity needs earlier on in the day can be helpful (if people have access needs; if people need to leave the room, etc.) for yourself and others to be mindful of over the course of this in-depth exercise.

This is best to do with a group that has been working together for a while – either within a community organization, and you are invited in to facilitate, or a group you yourself have been working with for a while.

It is one I have seen successful in many different contexts – theatre, community settings, classrooms – as it is based in Paolo Freire's popular education Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which argues that we have all that we need amongst ourselves as members of a community.

The knowledge and experience uncovered in this exercise is invaluable in both helping the facilitator get to know a group, and in helping a group build a sense of where they are at in a given moment in their process, individual and collectively, and how to proceed in creating socially engaged work together. It connects personal experience with systemic analysis extremely well.

The complexity and personal nature of information shared requires a level of trust, patience, and listening between group members – this can work well in the second half of a day of trainings you share (where the morning contains more games and ice breakers), or at a midway point in a series of workshops around conceptual and collective creation.

Writing : Koby Rogers Hall

Source : Adapted version of Augusto Boal's Power exercise; first experienced as a participant in a Forum Theatre workshop, facilitated by Jessica Bleuer (Montreal)