Activities for Shifting From Avoiding Conflict to Inviting Challenge

What do K–12 educators need to know, do, and demonstrate in order to shift from avoiding conflict to inviting challenge? The following three activities guide you to reflect on your avoidance tactics, examine your relationship with discomfort, and build skills for inviting challenging conversations.

Activity 1: Engaging in Reflection

In this work of building identity consciousness and opening the door to difficult conversations, it is important to think about the first and early messages you received that inform and impact the way you relate to conflict or avoid discomfort. Read the following reflection questions, and record your thoughts and experiences in the space provided.

1. Think back to a time when you avoided a conversation about identity. What were the benefits of avoiding the conversation? How might you have benefited from engaging in the conversation?

2. What topics were emphasized in your teacher preparation program? What topics did you not learn about or not learn enough about in your training or educational program?

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3. What do you notice about your behavior as a teacher or leader when difficult or controversial topics come up in your class? How would your students describe your approach to these moments?

Activity 2: Seeing Discomfort as an Invitation

Experiencing discomfort is a key component of engaging in conversations about identity. Yet, discomfort is also a common reason that people avoid tough conversations. The chart for this activity provides space for you to reflect and write about how you experience discomfort in the classroom. You can add other identities in the blank space provided in the chart's first column.

For each identity category, record your thoughts about the following.

- **Comfort level:** On a scale of 1 (not very) to 10 (very), how comfortable are you talking about each of these identities? Note your level of comfort in the Comfort Level column.
- **Causes of comfort or discomfort:** Note causes that contribute to your comfort or discomfort around the identity.
- **Action plan:** Note one action you can take to become more comfortable with the identity.
- **Next step:** Note one step you can take to have more conversations about the identity in your classroom.

Identity Category	Comfort Level	Causes of Comfort or Discomfort	Action Plan	Next Step
Race				

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Identity Category	Comfort Level	Causes of Comfort or Discomfort	Action Plan	Next Step
Social class				
Sexual orientation				
Gender				
Disability				

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Activity 3: Writing a New Narrative

As you build the habits and skills of an identity-conscious practice, you'll find it easier to address the discomfort that comes with difficult conversations. Writing about a time when you experienced discomfort related to a conversation about identity and imagining a different response are a great way to practice these skills. The box provided for this activity lists a series of five steps for reflecting on an experience and identifying different possible outcomes. Refer to figure 2.1 (page 32) for an example version of this tool.

Step 1: Describe in detail an interaction, comment, or experience related to identity.

Step 2: Underline words or phrases that highlight the discomfort or the conflict you experienced.

Step 3: Circle opportunities where something could have happened in a more positive way.

Step 4: Add to or change the story to reflect how you would shift to a different response.

Step 5: Revisit the new conversation and reflect on how you were engaged rather than avoidant.

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Discussion

This guide provides structures for you to think deeply about identity and difficult conversations. To advance this beneficial work, engage in conversations with others using the following discussion prompts.

1. Have a conversation with a partner or a small group of three to four people. Go through each activity in this chapter together. Leave enough time to engage in conversation that does not rush learning. Be sure to create intentions for the conversation and expectations for participation. See Bringing People Together on page 8 to help set expectations.
2. In a larger group, engage with the following questions.
    - What did you experience as you did the activities in this chapter?
    - What did you notice about yourself as you completed these activities?
    - What do you believe is your next step as you continue this learning process?

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