

Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

Hands-on Activity for Exploring Privilege and Oppression

Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

To get students to think critically about privilege and oppression, the instructor asks students to review five clues about an oppressed group and to write down guesses about the identity of the group on a sheet of paper. For example, the instructor provides these clues:

1. There are people who are part of this group who are still forcibly converted to the dominant group.
2. Almost every known religion has a negative meaning connected to being a member of this group.
3. Stereotypes of this group include that these individuals are dirty, evil, clumsy, and homosexual.
4. In American history, there was a time when people in this group were considered mentally ill.
5. If you were a member of this group during the Salem witch trials, this would have been proof that you were a witch.

The oppressed group that the instructor describes is left-handed people. As students are writing their answers down, the instructor watches students to determine who is left-handed. In order to encourage students to continue guessing, the instructor summons the left-handed students to the front of the room (without disclosing the reason) and shares that these

students are all members of the (still unidentified) oppressed group. The instructor then asks the left-handed students to write their name on the board; at this point, most students are able to identify the nature of the oppressed group.

Next, the instructor walks the students through the five clues and explains how these relate to left-handed people specifically. Right-handed students are then asked to brainstorm ways in which left-handed people experience oppression in current times; some examples include desks, scissors, spiral notebooks, etc. The left-handed students then comment on this list and share their experiences with the rest of the class.

To conclude the class period, the instructor leads a discussion about which examples listed by the students might need further explanation because right-handed people might not fully understand how they are oppressive. The class then discusses privilege in multiple contexts within society. The instructor asks right-handed students how often they have thought about the privilege associated with being right-handed and how this privilege may be similar to other privileged positions taken for granted, such as being white and wealthy. The class also discusses how privilege becomes built into American society and how various systems (e.g., educational, societal, etc.) oppress certain groups.