

Equiano



Brief description of the activity

Equiano is an activity that allows participants to explore their culture perceptions and to create awareness about cultural relativism.

Equiano

Topics, objectives and methodology:

This activity talks about cultural relativism, stereotypes and prejudices.

It uses parts of a real book written by an African author, Olaudah Equiano, which talks about his first experience of European culture in the 18th century. These parts are presented to the participants and they have to make the profile, the identity, of the person who wrote the passages that are given.

Duration:

1.5 - 2 Hours

Costs:

This activity can be done without any costs.

Location:

A room with chairs and, if possible, a blackboard or a flipchart. It is advisable that it should be a safe place for the participants to debate and do the debriefing

Materials:

- Papers and pens for the participants
- Flipchart, blackboard or whiteboard (optional);
- Book extracts (printed or in digital form)

Staff needed and eventual specific skills required:

One facilitator

Participants involved:

6-25

Steps:

Before

Setting up the activity and location

Prepare the room so all the participants are facing the coordinator and it is possible for them to have a place to write. Have the passages ready to read and if you think there is the need, translate them keeping in mind the way they are written, as, since it was written in the 18th century, it is normal that the way people wrote back then is different from the way we write and speak now. Try to make the translations give the same idea and sound of the original text without revealing the any details about the writer.

During

Do not explain the purpose of the activity or introduce the activity as Equiano, otherwise the participants can guess the profile of the writer right away. Give all the

participants a paper and a pen. Tell them that you are going to read some extracts from a person's diary. Tell that the text was originally wrote in English and some of the terms used in the text may not be understood so you can explain them and give them other words with the same meaning (those words appear in brackets on the extracts; the square brackets indicate words that were omitted from the text because they would make the task easy.). Their task is to make the profile of this person (age, nationality, where he was when we wrote the dairy, profession, what he was doing when he wrote the diary, year it was written, etc.) Tell them that you will read the extracts and you can also show them to the participants or write them in the board or in a flip-chart. Explain that the words in brackets are simplified terms of the original ones and that the square brackets refer to parts of the text that were removed because they would make the task easier. Give some time between the extracts for them to think about the texts and also clarify anything that they didn't understand

about the text and write down some notes for making the profile. You can also allow them to share between each other their ideas and write down a “general” profile of the writer. The extracts are the following:

“I feared I should be put to death (killed), the [...] people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner.”

“were we to be eaten by these [...] men with horrible looks, [...] faces, and loose hair?”

“I was amazed at their ... eating with unwashed hands...”

“I was amazed at their ... touching the dead.”

“... we were totally unacquainted with (we knew nothing about) swearing (bad language), and all those terms of abuse ... which they use.”

“I could not help remarking (noticing) the particular slenderness (thinness) of their women ... and I thought they were so modest (pure) as [our] women.”

If you didn't share the ideas of the participants until now, it is a good time to do it. You can ask one or two participants to share their profile and ask the others if they agree/disagree. After a small debate you can introduce the one more extract.

“I was amazed at their not sacrificing or making any offerings...”

Now you can ask if this final extract has changed their view. After this you can start the debriefing phase.

After:

Before revealing the true identity of the writer you should ask some questions to the group.

Debriefing

Now ask the participants about how the profile they made about the writer and get an idea of how they felt during the activity.

Some examples are:

- How did you visualize this person?
- From which century do you think this person was?
- Did you regard the writer as European or non-European?
- What do you think it was his job?

Usually, but not always, participants from European cultural backgrounds develop a profile of a European explorer, missionary or someone similar, coming into contact with past non-European cultures. Once you feel that they have a fairly comprehensive picture of how the group saw the writer, let them know the true identity of the writer.

The book is called “The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African” written in 1789. Olaudah Equiano was from one of the biggest Nigerian ethnic

groups, Igbo. When he was 11 years old, he was kidnapped by a group of slave hunters and was enslaved. He was bought by a British official that took him to Virginia in The United States and after to England where he is mocked and named Gustavus Vassa, the Swedish king. He was used as a sailor and was part of the seven-year war. He was a slave until he was 21, when he managed to buy his freedom. He worked as a barber in London and then joined expeditions to Nicaragua and the Arctic. In 1789 he published his autobiography where he tells his story, before, during and after being a slave which contributed to the Act Against the Slave Trade of 1807 which abolished the trade of slaves in the British Empire.

After this you can ask some questions about the impact of the activity.

- Were you surprised or shocked when told the identity of the writer?

- Did you identify with the writer or those being described?
- Are you surprised at (western) Europeans being perceived/seen in this way? (Ask this if you have participants from western European cultural background)
- Why do you think these were your first impressions or guesses about the origin of the writer?
- Based on what do you think you had those ideas?
- What do you think is cultural relativism?
- Can you give examples? (make sure here that meaning of this concept is understood)
- How can we deal with cultural relativism, stereotypes and prejudice in our life and work? (Cultural relativism is often viewed as no culture is superior to any other culture when comparing the systems

of morality, law, politics, etc. It's the philosophical notion that all cultural beliefs are equally valid and that truth itself is relative, depending on the cultural environment.).

Do's and don'ts

As this activity can be a sensitive subject and can become emotional, it is important to keep the debate calm and open for all the participants. If the group is diverse, for example European and African participants, be very careful not to offend anybody during the activity. This activity is a challenge to people's perception of cultures and it can be difficult and challenging to the participants but pay attention to the participants reactions in order not to take it too far.

Innovative aspects for the promotion of interculture

This activity promotes interculture by working on our own stereotypes and pre-concepts of people and cultures. It usually makes the participants portrait a completely opposite profile of the real one and creates a shock on their own perception. It allows the participants to open their mind for the problems of following pre-concepts and stereotypes and that they can be completely wrong.

Possible follow up and link with other activities

This activity can be implemented after the Anti-rumor short story contest and before Joana.

Bibliography

“The life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African.”, 1789



