

# Peace Learner

## Cultivating Peace and Nonviolence in the Field of Education



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## Privilege Walk Lesson Plan

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#### Introduction:

Many educators and activists use privilege walks as an experiential activity to highlight how people benefit or are marginalized by systems in our society. There are many iterations of such walks with several focusing on a single issue, such as race, gender, or sexuality. This particular walk is designed with questions spanning many different areas of marginalization, because the goal of this walk is to understand intersectionality. People of one shared demographic might move together for one question but end up separating due to other questions as some move forward and others move back. This iteration of the privilege walk is especially recommended for a high school classroom in which the students have had time to bond with each other, but have never taken the time in a slightly more formal setting, i.e., led by a facilitator, to explore this theme. It is a good tool for classes learning about privilege or social justice and could also be used to discuss intersectionality in classes that have the danger of singling out a single aspect of social injustice. It is important that the students or group members are already acquainted and are not doing this activity as strangers, since an immense amount of trust in the people and the environment are needed to help people feel comfortable with acknowledging that certain statements apply to them.

Many people with certain privileges never notice them, because they are so woven into the mainstream that those who have them cannot see them. For youth, understanding and acknowledging privileges is key to understanding why and how they react and perceive their surroundings. The capacity for youth to objectively reflect on their interactions with the world will be invaluable. The focus on intersectionality in this practice will allow practitioners and students alike to understand that having one privilege does not make up for another marginalization and that every privilege or marginalization exists on a different but intersecting plane from another. This focus will help to avoid having positive developments being derailed by debates over who is more oppressed. It also helps youth understand ideas of intersectionality and be aware of marginalized groups within the marginalized group. Privilege walks have previously

been criticized for being most beneficial to straight, white, able-bodied men, since it is supposed that they learn the most and that more marginalized students are made to feel vulnerable. The particular walk posted on this page works to avoid falling into these issues and has given detailed reasoning for recommended debrief questions, since the nature of the debrief discussion can either exacerbate or alleviate some of these issues. Even though it is not a perfect exercise, the privilege walk is a less confrontational way to discuss privilege and promote reflection. It helps people to open up, literally, in steps instead of difficult to articulate words and relate to each other in a different way.

**Goal:**

To discuss the complicated intersections of privileges and marginalizations in a less confrontational and more reflective way.

**Time:**

15~20 minutes for the Privilege Walk

45~60 minutes for the debrief

**Materials:**

- A wide open space, e.g., a classroom with all chairs and tables pushed back, an auditorium, or a gymnasium
- Chairs to form a circle for the debrief
- Painter's tape to make an initial line for participants
- Optional: tape or other materials to draw lines to indicate where to step back or forth

**Procedures:**

- Have participants line up in a straight line across the middle of the room with plenty of space to move forward and backward as the exercise proceeds.
- Have participants hold hands or place one hand on the shoulder of the person to their left or right depending on space constraints. Important: Make sure to ask participants if they are comfortable touching and being touched by others. If some are not, do not make them and do not make a big deal out of it.
- You may give an explanation about the activity, how it is intended to educate about privilege, and what exactly is privilege, or you can send students into the activity with no such background.
- Read the following to participants:
- I will read statements aloud. Please move if a statement applies to you. If you do not feel comfortable acknowledging a statement that applies to you, simply do not move when it is read. No one else will know whether it applies to you.
- Begin reading statements aloud in a clear voice, pausing slightly after each one. The pause can be as long or as short as desired as appropriate.

- When you have finished the statements, ask participants to take note of where they are in the room in relation to others.
- Have everyone gather into a circle for debriefing and discussion.

### **Privilege Walk Statements:**

1. If you are right-handed, take one step forward.
2. If English is your first language, take one step forward.
3. If one or both of your parents have a college degree, take one step forward.
4. If you can find Band-Aids at mainstream stores designed to blend in with or match your skin tone, take one step forward.
5. If you rely, or have relied, primarily on public transportation, take one step back.
6. If you have attended previous schools with people you felt were like yourself, take one step forward.
7. If you constantly feel unsafe walking alone at night, take one step back.
8. If your household employs help as servants, gardeners, etc., take one step forward.
9. If you are able to move through the world without fear of sexual assault, take one step forward.
10. If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school, take one step forward.
11. If you often feel that your parents are too busy to spend time with you, take one step back.
12. If you were ever made fun of or bullied for something you could not change or was beyond your control, take one step back.
13. If your family has ever left your homeland or entered another country not of your own free will, take one step back.
14. If you would never think twice about calling the police when trouble occurs, take one step forward.
15. If your family owns a computer, take one step forward.
16. If you have ever been able to play a significant role in a project or activity because of a talent you gained previously, take one step forward.
17. If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or violence, take one step forward.
18. If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food, take one step back.
19. If you feel respected for your academic performance, take one step forward.
20. If you have a physically visible disability, take one step back.
21. If you have an invisible illness or disability, take one step back.
22. If you were ever discouraged from an activity because of race, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation, take one step back.

23. If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerisms, or behavior to fit in more, take one step back.
24. If you have ever been profiled by someone else using stereotypes, take one step back.
25. If you feel good about how your identities are portrayed by the media, take one step forward.
26. If you were ever accepted for something you applied to because of your association with a friend or family member, take one step forward.
27. If your family has health insurance take one step forward.
28. If you have ever been spoken over because you could not articulate your thoughts fast enough, take one step back.
29. If someone has ever spoken for you when you did not want them to do so, take one step back.
30. If there was ever substance abuse in your household, take one step back.
31. If you come from a single-parent household, take one step back.
32. If you live in an area with crime and drug activity, take one step back.
33. If someone in your household suffered or suffers from mental illness, take one step back.
34. If you have been a victim of sexual harassment, take one step back.
35. If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, religion, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation, take one step back.
36. If you are never asked to speak on behalf of a group of people who share an identity with you, take one step forward.
37. If you can make mistakes and not have people attribute your behavior to flaws in your racial or gender group, take one step forward.
38. If you have always assumed you'll go to college, take one step forward.
39. If you have more than fifty books in your household, take one step forward.
40. If your parents have told you that you can be anything you want to be, take one step forward.

### **Debrief Questions:**

During and after the Privilege Walk, participants might experience an array of intense feelings no matter their position in the front or the back. While the point of the Privilege Walk is indeed to promote understanding and acknowledgment of privileges and marginalization, it would be detrimental to end the activity with potentially traumatic or destructive emotions. The point of the debrief session is twofold. First, through the reflection provoking questions, help participants realize what exactly they were feeling and muster the courage to articulate it to each participant's acceptable level. This process will relieve possible negative emotions, preventing possible damage. Second, as negative emotions are relieved, the debrief will help participants realize that either privileges or marginalizations are integral to the person's being. Instead of casting off either privilege or marginalization, participants can learn how to reconcile with themselves, and

through the utilization of newfound knowledge of the self, have a better relationship with themselves and others around them.

1. What did you feel like being in the front of the group? In the back? In the middle?

At the end of the exercise, students were asked to observe where they were in the room. This is a common question to use to lead into the discussion and allows people to reflect on what happened before starting to work with those idea in possibly more abstract ways. It keeps the activity very experience-near and in the moment.

2. What were some factors that you have never thought of before?

This asks students to reflect in a broader sense about the experiences they might not think about in the way they were presented in this activity. It opens up a space to begin to discuss their perceptions of aspects of themselves and others that they might have never discussed before.

3. If you broke contact with the person beside you, how did you feel in that moment?

This question focuses on the concrete experience of separation that can happen during the activity. For some students, a physical aspect like this can be quite powerful. There are many iterations of the privilege walk that do not involve physical contact, but this extra piece can add another layer of experience and be an opening for very rich student responses.

4. What question made you think most? If you could add a question, what would it be?

The first part of this question asks students to reflect more on the activity and the thoughts behind it. The second part of this question is very important for creating knowledge. Students might suggest a question about which instructors had not thought. Asking students how they would change the activity and then working to incorporate those changes is an important part of collaborative learning.

5. What do you wish people knew about one of the identities, situations, or disadvantages that caused you to take a step back?

This question invites people who would like to share about the ways they experience marginalization. It is a good question to ensure that this part of the conversation is had. That being said, it is also important to not expect or push certain students to speak, since that would be further marginalizing them and could cause them to feel unsafe. It is not a marginalized person's job to educate others on their marginality. If they would like to do so, listen. If they would not like to do so, respect their wishes.

6. How can your understanding of your privileges or marginalizations improve your existing relationships with yourself and others?

This question is based on the idea that people can always use knowledge and awareness of the self to improve how one lives with oneself and those existing within one's life. It also invites

students to think about ways that this understanding can create positive change. This is not only for the most privileged students but also for marginalized students to understand those in their group who may experience other marginalizations. This can bring the discussion from the first question, which asks about how they are standing apart to this last question, which can ask how can they work to stand together.

*This activity was developed by Rebecca Layne and Ryan Chiu for Dr. Arthur Romano's Conflict Resolution Pedagogy class at George Mason's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. Some walk activity questions are commonly seen on other privilege walks while others were written by these students for this specific walk. Procedures were written from experiences participating in other walks. Debrief questions, excepting question one, were written by these students with the goal of this walk in mind. Question one is fairly universal for this activity.*