



Flip-Cup for Muted Group Theory and Intersectionality

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Abstract

This article provides an example of how to use party games such as flip-cup to teach about power and privilege in the undergraduate classrooms. Given that popular classroom exercises such as the privilege walk have been criticized for their invasiveness, this game provides ways to simulate social structures in the classroom to bypass the intrusiveness. This article in particular explicates an engagement based activity to teach about muted group theory and intersectionality. With the help of this game, students should be able to understand what muting can look like in different situations and contexts and the role of power. Students will be able to apply muted group theory and intersectionality in communication contexts.

Group activities like privilege walk have long been used to teach students about how social privileges shape life experiences and require students to disclose privileges or lack thereof to those involved. As such, it has been criticized for being invasive and uncomfortable for those in non-dominant groups, and as lacking in a long-term learning outcome for those in the dominant group (Dundon *et al.*, 2024). Instead of scenarios that may be too close to the truth for some students and far from their reality for others, using an experiential approach that simulates a scenario with a dominant and muted group can be helpful. This activity provides a novel way for instructors in introductory undergraduate courses to teach students about power and privilege using muted group theory and intersectionality.

Muted group theory, or MGT, is the idea that within every social group there is a subgroup whose access to public discourse is limited, and their con-

cerns are not taken as seriously as compared to those of the dominant group, subsequently called a muted group (Meares, 2017). MGT has been used as a tool to understand interactions and contexts of communication between different social groups and the power imbalances that occur in these settings. MGT is well suited to pair with conversations on privilege and intersectionality, as they all pertain to understanding and critiquing systems of powers and their influence on our social structures.

This activity uses pedagogies of engagement by actively involving students in the learning process and allows students to draw parallels to instances of privileges present in the world. It uses a game-based approach to critically engage students in the ways privilege permeates our society by mirroring the social contexts of muted group theory and intersectionality by asking students to play the same game with different rules. This dramatized simulation of muted and

dominant groups in a classroom allows participants and observers to note the discrepancy of rules under which the groups are asked to conduct a task, and how that dramatically influences their performances. By allowing students to observe how ease of access to public discourse and privilege heavily influences a group's performance, this activity helps them remember, understand, and apply the basic tenets of muted group theory and intersectionality.

This activity requires minimal resources – solo cups, a long table, and a handout to display the rules. Divide the room into 6-16 volunteers (depending on the size of the classroom) into two even groups: dominant group and muted group. The rest of the students must act as observers while volunteers play the game. It is important to demonstrate how to play this game and explain the rules as you see fit. The point of the game is for group members to flip cups in a relay-style race and beat the competitor group. Ask the players to stand behind the table with solo cups in front of them. At the cue, the first player will attempt to flip the cup and once the player succeeds the next player will attempt to do so, and so on until the last cup is flipped. Several tutorials, including video tutorials, for this party game can be found online, and the classroom version of this game should use non-alcoholic drinks or not use drinks at all. While flip-cup has been used to teach other communication theories and can be modified accordingly (see Liberman, 2023, for an example), this article will explicate the specific modifications that can be used to teach Muted Group Theory. In order to teach the students about muting of groups and the role of institutional powers, each group will have different sets of rules under which they must play flip-cup. For the purposes of observations, this activity should allow for one group at a time to play the game instead of competing with each other. Timing the group while they perform may help in quantifying the performance of each group to maintain the competitiveness. The main goal is to contrast the dominant group's performance with that of the muted group.

The particular rules of the game to be enforced are up to the instructor's discretion, with the objective being that students must be able to assess how ease of access to public discourse and privilege impacts a group's performance. To do so, the rules for the game must differ for each group, with the dominant group getting an obvious leg up in the game. I suggest making the rules about communication between groups

(for example, dominant groups can openly talk with each other to strategize and provide tips, while the muted groups cannot do so; dominant groups may ask clarifying questions to the instructor) and access to institutional support (for example, the dominant group is allowed to communicate with the instructor, while the muted group cannot; the instructor may sub in for a member of the dominant group but not the muted group). If scaffolding the lesson with intersectionality, the instructor can add on rules for certain members across both groups (for example, those wearing red shirts in both dominant and muted groups must flip with their non-dominant hands). This addition can complicate students' understanding of muting and privilege. The students that are acting as observers will be able to note that the clear discrepancies in the rules between the two groups mean that the performance of the two groups will vastly differ. I suggest asking the dominant group to go first, as the performance of the muted group under different rules will pale in comparison, which will then lead to class discussion.

After the activity, the instructor should hold a debriefing session. During this debrief, the muted group and the dominant group members should be asked to talk about their experiences. Students can be asked to talk about their own experiences of functioning within the rules set for their groups, as well as the performances of the other group. Students who are in the audience must also be asked to compare and contrast the performance of the group and to come up with factors that influenced these performances – often, rules about communication and interference from institutions (the instructor in this case) will come up. This can help reorient the discussion around structural privilege by highlighting the role of institutions through the role of instructors rather than individual hardships which has long been a critique of privilege walk (Dundon *et al.*, 2024). Students may raise concern about complications arising within their understanding of privilege and muting for instances where further rules are introduced across groups (for example, the red shirt rule mentioned above), which is a sign that they are considering the embodiments of their particular assigned identity on a deeper level. Students should be urged to think about how these instances are mirrored in our society and different factors that feed into the muting phenomenon and to try to come up with real-life parallels that shape their everyday experiences.

While the act of playing the game engages stu-

dents through application, the debriefing portion brings about fruitful discussions that move beyond the constrictions of the game. In my own experiences of using this activity, students often grapple with how interlocking identities can shape experiences, and I find this to be a helpful tool to launch into deeper discussions on intersectionality in the following lessons. Another key feedback that I have received is that students appreciate a non-lecture based approach to learning theory. Implementing games that they may already be familiar with can help them to reckon with concepts brought up in class outside of the classroom. Additionally, this activity can be modified and used for instructors who want to introduce concepts of power and privilege through activities-based approaches.

References:

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