

Activity 1.15 An Image Tells a Thousand Words

Module: 1. Identity and Culture

Duration: 60 Minutes

Social Development Themes: Arts, Core

Summary:

To build on the idea that there are lots of ways of communicating and expressing ourselves, this activity explores how we can use our bodies to tell stories. Participants create images ('statues') of words, feelings, people or ideas that are then viewed and interpreted by the rest of the group.

Learning Outcomes:

Self Confidence

Value different perspectives

Approach:

'The creation of images produced by ourselves rather than by nature or a machine, serves to show that the world can be recreated. The creation of Images of the world as we want it to be, is the best way to penetrate the future.' Augusto Boal

This kind of exercise often tells us more about the people commenting on the image than the image itself. The way we interpret the images reflects our own stories and experiences, so it's a safe way of understanding more about the different values, attitudes and beliefs within the group. It could also be a useful tool to help communities look at difficult issues or ideas that they might find hard to talk openly about, such as gender, power or family.

It may be useful to have done some energiser exercises that use the body before this.

1. Ask the group to stand in a circle and tell them that they are going to create statues using their bodies. Ask them if they understand what a statue is. Can they give any examples of statues they know?
2. Tell them that you are going to call out a word and they are going to create a silent, still, statue that represents how that word makes them feel, or what that word makes them think about. This is not about

getting it 'right' or 'wrong' and participants should use their whole body. Ask them to be expressive, be imaginative, be brave, and to not think about it too much or worry what other people are doing.

3. As facilitators, demonstrate a statue of a word – 'power', 'hope', 'family', 'strong', 'brave', etc. You could include words from the Active Citizens vision such as 'peace', 'community', 'trust', 'understanding'. Be bold with your demonstration – the braver you are the braver they will be.

4. Ask the group to turn and face the outside of the space. Tell them that you are going to count down from 5 to 1 and when you've reached 1, they should all turn back into the circle so that they can see each other and create their individual statue of the word that you call out. Then ask them to stay frozen.

5. Each time, invite the group to have a look around, just with their eyes, at the other statues in the circle. Are there similarities? What does this tell us about how the group feels about the word.

6. Facilitators can focus on one statue or two statues next to each other and tell the rest of the group to relax out of their statues. Ask the group what they see? What words do you think of when you look at this statue? Who might they be?

Alternate Approach:

To build on this exercise, you could ask the participants to get into pairs and label themselves A and B. A is the sculptor: the artist who has been making some of the world's finest pieces of art for decades. B is a lump of clay, ready to be made into a brilliant statue. Following similar instructions to the activity above, A has 30 seconds to create a statue of the word that's been given by the facilitator, using B, their partner in front of them, as the clay to make their statue. A creates whatever the word means for them. If the word is 'power', they might mould B into a statue with the arms held high and the fists closed tight, with one leg in front of the other.

Once the statue has been created and is frozen, the artist should step back and take a walk around the space to look at some of the other sculptures that have been created in the 'museum of power'. Encourage participants to take the exercise seriously and commit to it as it requires some real focus.

It's important to handle this activity with cultural sensitivity and awareness. For some groups and in some cultures it may not be appropriate to touch each other, and therefore physically moving the body of your partner, might not be OK. In some contexts, it may not be appropriate for men and women to partner together.

Approach 3

Another variation of the exercise is to ask the group to stand in a circle and ask someone to enter the space to make a still image, without having thought too much about what they're making or the story they're trying to tell.

Ask the rest of the group: what do you see? Ask this a few times, then ask what else they see.

Encourage participants to say whatever comes to them: 'I see a woman carrying a bag, I see an old footballer walking off the football pitch' Accept what comes from the group: 'Ah, OK, you see an old footballer walking off the pitch, and what else?'

Then invite another participant into the space in the middle of the circle to make another image in the circle that responds somehow to the first image. Again, encourage participants not to think about it too much – they don't have to have an idea of what the image might mean when they enter the space. This exercise is about responding instinctively. Once the two images are in the space, ask the group again: what's the image? What's the story? What do we see now? What else?

After the image has been explored, ask for another participant to come and touch one of the statues on the shoulder which 'unfreezes' them and the incoming participant then makes another statue that creates a new image and with it a new story. Repeat the process exploring what's changed and what the group now sees in the image using same questions.

Debrief:

How did the group find the activity? Was it uncomfortable? Did we learn anything about ourselves or the group? How did it feel expressing ourselves without words? Did you gain any insights about the topics we explored through creating and looking at the images in the room?

Through image theatre we can introduce the idea of multiple perspectives and using the body as a way of communicating and telling stories. Was this an interesting way of using our imaginations to tell stories? How could we apply what we have learned in our communities?

Facilitators can use image theatre with groups who might struggle with reading and writing. It could be used at different stages of delivering the workshop. It can also be developed to create images in small groups, or as a whole group.

Facilitators can encourage the audience to think about what the images/characters might be thinking, or if there was a sound and an action that summed this up, what might that be?

Image Theatre is a useful tool for facilitators and can be the foundations for lots of creative activities and will be referenced elsewhere in the arts approach.