

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF ONE'S SELF-CONCEPT:
AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

This exercise provides a systematic framework for evaluating self-concept both in terms of how participants view themselves as well as how others view them. Incorporating a variety of pedagogical tools, students reflectively develop a greater understanding of themselves, their priorities, and impressions upon others.

INTRODUCTION

Self-concept is an important influence on human behavior. It is reflected in one's self-esteem and confidence, communication patterns, and responses to others. Despite its pervasive effects on thoughts and actions, self-concept often is poorly understood; individuals exert minimal focused effort identifying key aspects of their own self-image.

Mayerson (1979) reports that self-image actually consists of two components: (1) the picture that we have of ourselves, and (2) how others perceive and respond to us. This exercise addresses both parts. It is based upon ideas presented by DeVito (1996) and Harral (1996).

Experiential Exercise

Part 1

(A) Instructions to students: "At the top of a sheet of paper, write 'I am a person who...' Finish this sentence with ten different, significant phrases. Please answer honestly and thoughtfully. This paper will not be handed in and sensitive material need not be shared."

(B) After students have completed writing their ten significant phrases, they should partner with another and share their information with each other. Information considered private need not be revealed.

(C) Instructions to students: "You now must eliminate five of the things from your list of ten. Cross off your list the five things that you would choose to eliminate."

(D) Students again share with their partners what they kept on their lists as well as what they crossed off. Students also are asked to discuss how it felt to eliminate the five items and why.

(E) Instructions to students: "You must now narrow your list to *one* item. What is the one aspect you would choose to keep?"

(F) With their partner, participants are asked to share what item they chose and why and how they went about making this decision.

Through part I of this experiential exercise, students identify significant aspects of themselves. Their awareness of key dimensions of their values, personalities, and activities increases. By discussing their choices and processes with another, they articulate their feelings and reflections which leads to greater understanding.

In discussions after the steps of part 1 were completed, participants revealed that they learned a great deal about themselves and really struggled when they were asked to eliminate items because, "I didn't want to let go of anything." A number of students also shared that they were somewhat surprised after the exercise at the choices they made; the analysis process and discussion had caused them to probe

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and delve much more deeply and consciously than they otherwise would have.

Part 2

(Note to instructors: This part of the exercise works best where students in the class know each other at least on a first-name basis.)

(A) Instructions to students: "As a homework assignment, on a separate sheet of paper design a logo, license plate or bumper sticker for yourself proclaiming who you are. Put your name only on the back of your sheet lightly in pencil."

(B) On the day the assignment is due, each homework sheet is placed on the walls around the classroom and an envelope is placed under each. Every student is given blank slips of paper equal to the number of students in the class and a copy of the class roster. Students are instructed to go around the room and guess which design belongs to which class member by writing each student's name on a slip of paper and inserting it in the envelope corresponding to the respective artwork.

(C) After all students have finished guessing to whom each design belongs, the instructor examines the contents of each envelope and reveals who the class associated with the artwork and then the identity of the actual artist.

(D) Students are asked to respond in writing: Were you surprised about the choices others made for you? Why? What did you learn from this exercise about the image other people have of you?

Through the design of the artwork, students have a fun, creative avenue to express their identities. But *it* also requires self-analysis to decide upon the most appropriate design and expression.

By having the students guess to whom each piece of artwork belongs, participants are able to receive honest and open feedback regarding what other students associate with them or how they are

perceived. In the writing assignment in the final step of part 2, a number of participants indicated they were shocked by some of the choices others associated with them and commented that they must present to others different images than what they would have guessed. How and why this occurred received some evaluation.

SUMMARY

This two-part exercise provides an engaging yet reflective opportunity for students to pinpoint both aspects of self-image identified by Mayerson (1979): how we perceive ourselves as well as how others perceive us. It encompasses creativity through artwork, reflection and self-analysis, cooperative learning, and a brief writing assignment. Through performing these activities, students are led to a greater understanding of their own self-concept and priorities.

REFERENCES

Available upon request.