

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Building Inclusive Classrooms: Equipping Educators with an Introductory Social Justice Lesson Plan

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# Building Inclusive Classrooms: Equipping Educators with an Introductory Social Justice Lesson Plan

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## Overview

Many scholars have called for the necessity of social justice frameworks within K-16 classrooms for decades (e.g., Friere; hooks; Walton et al.; Muhammad). Specifically, in the first-year writing classroom, we know that neither writing nor our writing classrooms are neutral, apolitical spaces, but instead these are spaces that can reinforce and re-create systems of power and privilege. Alongside this, we continue to live in tumultuous social and political times in American higher education, such as authoritarian politicians, mandates for book bans, and the removal of critical race theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Ultimately, this leaves us—as writing studies teachers, tutors, researchers, and professionals—grappling with what to do right now and how to make our classrooms a space for criticality and working to address societal and institutional oppression.

Jones and Walton discuss how we must have targeted diversity and social justice resources for educators or they will “continue to struggle—or, worse, fail altogether” (242). To resist that possibility of struggle and failure, we suggest that writing instructors incorporate readings, activities, and conversations about diversity, intersectionality, identity, and privilege within their classrooms. Necessary prior readings for this activity include the Cornell University’s “DI Toolkit: Preface (Recognizing Privilege & Definitions)”, Crenshaw’s “Why intersectionality can’t wait”, Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex”, and Pattanayak’s “There Is One

### Correct Way of Writing and Speaking.”

Below is an entry-point activity for students to engage early in the term. While it builds on previous iterations of activities that identify privilege used within professional development and higher education contexts (e.g., “privilege walks,” “put a finger down”), this activity diverges and resists those previous versions that re-traumatize (multi)marginalized students that make them an object of education for their privileged peers. Instead, this activity uses metaphorical building that does not place students in a position to disclose their identities to others, nor does it use students’ positionalities to educate their peers. We recommend that this activity be completed early in a term and then followed with readings, activities, and assignments that ask students to delve further into systems of oppression and their relation to writing. These future activities could include learning about writing myths and the societal harm of perpetuating White Mainstream English (Baker-Bell 3-4) as well as critically analyzing everyday designs, visuals, and writing for their accessibility. There are many examples of such lessons plans on analyzing accessibility (Vermont SILC). These activities could lead to assignments such as critical literacy narratives or rhetorical analyses of everyday rhetoric.

### Time Commitment

One class session

### Materials

For a face-to-face version of this activity, the instructor will need a tape measure and timer. Students will be divided into groups of 3-4 and be given a basket. Each basket should contain varied amounts (including the possibility of none) of building materials, such as straws, popsicle sticks, tape, paper clips, scissors, etc. For instance, one basket may have many straws, popsicle sticks, scissors, and tape whereas another basket may have a handful of straws and popsicle

sticks only.

For the virtual version(s) of this activity, the instructor should prepare lists with photos of supplies to provide to student pairs via their online meeting platform, depending on the course modality. The lists should vary amongst pairs, as indicated above, and contain photos for reference and visualization of materials (with textual descriptions of photos to meet various needs).

### Activity Process

Before class, students will read the suggested readings on intersectionality and privilege. **For a face-to-face section**, follow these instructions:

- Students will be divided into groups of 3-4. Each group will be given a basket of building materials.
- Next, deliver the task to the students: “In your groups, you will work to build the tallest tower you can, which should be upright without human interference, and it will be measured from the surface you build it on to the tallest point of the tower itself. You may only use items from the provided basket. You have 10 minutes. Please note as you build that every group has different supplies in their baskets. You may want to think about how this relates to the readings on privilege and intersectionality.”
- Then, students will work in their groups to build their towers for the next ten minutes. Once the time is up, all groups must stop building. They may no longer touch the build. The instructor will measure each group’s tower and announce the winner.
- Finally, students will re-group for a full class discussion. The discussion will include:

- Why do you think different groups had different items? How might that relate to the concepts from our readings about intersectionality, identities, and privilege?
  - How does this relate to the reading from Cornell?
- What does this activity demonstrate about society's systems of power? What groups were best suited to build the tallest tower based on their items?
  - What would Crenshaw or Lorde have to add to this idea?
- Why are the topics of identity, power, and privilege important to writing classrooms and writing?
  - How does this relate to Pattanayak's chapter?

**For a virtual synchronous class**, follow these instructions:

- Students will be paired up and provided a list of building materials and a photo of the quantity of the materials. The list will vary from pair to pair. For instance, one pair may receive a list that reads, "5 popsicle sticks, 1 roll of tape, 1 pair of scissors, 15 straws" whereas another pair would receive "1 popsicle stick, 5 straws, 3 rubber bands, and 1 roll of tape". The list should have a photo of the materials for reference and visualization (include a textual description to meet different visual needs).
- Next, deliver the task to the students: "You will plan how to build the tallest tower you can, which should be upright without human interference. If you were going to build it, it would be measured from the surface you built it on to the

tallest point of the tower itself.”

- In breakout rooms, pairs will review their provided list and create a plan with their partner for how they would build their tower without actually building the tower. They will have 10 minutes to do so. Students should write down or record their plan in some way to share out with other pairs. This can be done using a collaborative document such as Google Docs, a handwritten document which a student would read from, a platform such as Miro, etc. Once the time is up, all students must stop planning.
- The instructor will close breakout rooms, bringing students back together. As a class, using the chat feature, unmuting, or working in a collaborative document, they would hypothesize about which materials would work best to build the tallest tower. The length of time spent on hypothesizing is up to the discretion of the instructor; we’d recommend 15 or so minutes.
- Finally, the instructor will transition to a debrief and reflection of the activity overall. The discussion will include:
  - What is the significance of being given different materials? When you were planning your builds, what materials would have made it easier for your group that you didn’t “have”?
    - How does this relate to the reading from Cornell?
  - Which pairs may have been best suited to build the tallest tower based on their items? What does this activity demonstrate about society’s systems of power?

- What would Crenshaw or Lorde have to add to this idea?
- Why are the topics of identity, power, and privilege important to writing classrooms and writing?
  - How does this relate to Pattanayak's chapter?

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Collaborate with peers to problem-solve
- Model the importance of intersectionality, identity, and privilege
- Connect a metaphorical situation to real-life effects of systems of power and privilege
- Think critically about how intersectionality, identity, and privilege affect writing classrooms and writing

## Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose to engage with the reflection and discussion in writing or audio record for participation later.
- The materials and building site may be modified (e.g., table height, materials' tactile feel, contrast of materials, extra time, etc) to meet different needs.
- Directions are provided in multiple modalities (written and audio/visual).
- This activity can also be done in an asynchronous format. The students would be given a list of materials, similar to

the synchronous modality above, and work independently to create a plan for their build which they would share with the class through the Learning Management System's (LMS) discussion board, a collaborative document such as Google Docs or Slides, or a community app such as Slack, FlipGrid, etc.

- o Ideally, the platform would allow for students to share their explanations and visuals of their build plans (i.e., through photos or videos or written).
- o Alternatively, students could present their plans via a recorded video presentation on a platform such as Loom.
- o The class would then engage in first, hypothesizing the best materials for building the tallest tower, and second, on the debrief and reflection as detailed above. Both the hypothesizing and discussion can be done with the same platforms listed above. This version of the activity can span a week or longer to allow for asynchronous engagement and flexibility of time needed to plan, discuss, and reply to peers to fit the schedule of the course.

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