

Module 3

MANAGING CONFLICT

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE LAB

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Module 3

MANAGING CONFLICT

At a Glance

This module provides an overview of the following topics:

- **Definitions of conflict**
- **Types and origin**
- **Proactive strategies for preventing conflict**
- **Structural approaches to understanding conflict**
- **Responsive strategies for addressing conflict**

Guiding Questions:

1. **What is conflict?**
2. **Why does conflict occur?**
3. **What classroom exercises and activities can help prevent conflict before it occurs?**
4. **What structural pressures fuel conflict, and how can we help students identify them?**
5. **What classroom strategies and activities can help address conflict when it occurs?**

What is conflict?

Conflict can present opportunities for engagement, value clarification, and problem solving. Chief Justice Emeritus of the Navajo Nation Robert Yazzie writes, "Not all situations are best resolved through the adversarial determination of winner and loser. Sometimes solving the problem presented by a situation is more important than determining right and wrong and imposing penalties."[1] The Anglo-European system of "vertical" justice, he argues, looks backward to assign blame, whereas the Diné system of "horizontal" justice looks forward to restore community well-being.[2] Still, Yazzie points out, "before good relations can be restored, the community must arrive at a consensus about the problem"[3] through a combination of ceremony and dialogue.

In his classic essay "Conflicts as Property," Nils Christie identifies what he sees as a Western tendency toward conflict aversion that further emboldens this Anglo-European system of vertical justice. Christie laments that "criminology to some extent has amplified a process where conflicts have been taken away from the parties directly involved and thereby have either disappeared or become other peoples' property."[4] In response, Christie urges citizens to reclaim conflict because it serves three important community-building functions:

1. Conflicts represent a *potential for activity, for participation*.[5]
2. Conflicts represent *opportunities for norm clarification*.[6]
3. Conflicts represent the possibilities for personalized encounters.[7]

The Western criminal legal system has alienated people from their own conflicts, which have now become the depersonalized territory of professional conflict navigators—attorneys, judges, and other legal authorities and administrators. As a result, Christie concludes, conflicts are not even stolen; we willingly give them away. Our conflict management skills have atrophied under a system that encourages us to outsource our conflicts to paid professionals.

Worse still, these paid professionals send people to prison, where conflict—which is ever present—is settled through coercion and control, brute force, and other transactional exchanges of power. Preventing and addressing conflict through restorative practices, especially within prison settings, requires a radical culture shift. It requires people to move away from conflict avoidance and also away from practices based on domination. It requires a shift in worldview—"changing lenses," as Howard Zehr puts it[8]—and a different approach to community grounded in Yazzie's notion of horizontal justice and in Christie's notion of engaged and personalized participation.

Conflict resolution skills have the potential to transform people and their environments. Studies show that people in prison benefit from peer-led mediation, which mitigates conflict through dialogue,[9] fosters healthy relationships, and reduces violence.[10] Even outside of prison settings, students in an undergraduate conflict resolution program in England demonstrated "fluidity and greater openness to different possibilities, committed engagement, growing reflexivity (awareness of self/other/discourses), and awareness of contradictions" within their previous cognitive framework.[11] Yet it can be difficult to implement restorative justice–based conflict strategies with fidelity in prison settings: one study suggests that these practices can be easily co-opted by facilities and used coercively to reinforce the prison's "control and security" framework.[12] Some programs, such as Common Good Atlanta, have helped

incarcerated students navigate these structural challenges by using critical theory and emancipatory pedagogy to frame restorative justice as a daily practice, which has given them a greater sense of autonomy.[13]

Conflict resolution strategies create culture shifts when they empower people in prison to prevent and manage their own conflicts through relationship and community building. The activities in *Module 2: Strengthening Relationships* lay the groundwork for the following exercises and activities, which use relationships and value clarification to prevent, understand, and address conflict.

> "Before this experience with RJ I saw conflict as only negative. I thought of it as something to be avoided at all costs. This program has changed my perspective about conflict and most other things as well. I now see conflict as an opportunity—not really something to be avoided but something to be managed. I have also learned that conflict, when handled appropriately, can strengthen healthy relationships. Through this journey I have learned that conflict, like diversity, is a strength when navigated the right way."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

Why does conflict occur?

Our friend Nikesha Tilton—the Circle Lady™—has created the following schema to help us better understand the roots of conflict.

Four Major Types of Conflict

1. Pathway Conflict

DEFINITION:

Everyone wants the same goal but disagrees on *how* to achieve it.

SAMPLE CONFLICT:

Inside a classroom, both the students and the instructors want to create a more peaceful, focused learning environment.

- The instructor believes stricter rules around talking and movement will help.
- Students believe that more flexibility and peer-led discussions will build respect.

Tension rises, not because the goals differ, but because the strategies do.

RESTORATIVE RESPONSE:

Facilitate a Circle focused on classroom community to identify shared goals and co-create behavioral agreements.

Ask: "What does a peaceful classroom look like for each of us? Which approaches help us learn best?"

Use the discussion to design joint classroom norms that honor structure and student voice.

2. Motivation Conflict

DEFINITION:

People have different reasons for supporting the same action.

SAMPLE CONFLICT:

A prison administrator and an educator both support expanding the college program.

- The prison administrator values the program for its potential to reduce fights and incentivize positive behavior. They evaluate the program's success based on these metrics.
- The educator values the program as an educational equalizer that provides access to college to a greater number of people. They evaluate the program based on metrics related to first-generation college status and completion rates.

They cooperate on implementation but occasionally clash over classroom autonomy, discipline, or attendance rules.

RESTORATIVE RESPONSE:

Facilitate a Circle focusing on dialogue around motivation between security and education staff.

Ask: "Why is this program important to you? What concerns come up when your goals conflict with others' methods? How does a correctional approach to education differ from a university's approach?"

Naming motives out loud builds mutual respect and prevents collaboration from collapsing into mistrust.

3. Distributive Conflict

DEFINITION:

Conflict arises when groups compete for limited (or what they perceive to be limited) resources such as time, space, materials, or recognition.

SAMPLE CONFLICT:

Two college programs both want access to the prison's only computer lab.

- One program needs access for conducting research and typing essays in a liberal arts program.
- The other program needs access for drafting and design in a trade program.

Each group feels it is being treated unfairly by staff and the other program.

RESTORATIVE RESPONSE:

Facilitate a Circle focusing on problem-solving with representatives from each program as well as prison staff.

Ask: "What does each program need? How do students benefit from both programs? What rotation schedule or resource-sharing agreement can we create?"

Working toward a shared solution can replace resentment with a sense of clarity, buy-in, and mutual support.

4. Values Conflict

DEFINITION:

A deep clash in beliefs, identity, or worldview that can't be solved through policy or compromise alone.

SAMPLE CONFLICT:

During a criminology class, a student expresses their opinion that people serving time for sex offenses don't deserve the same parole considerations or reentry services as those serving time for other crimes.

Another student (serving time for a sex offense) responds emotionally, feeling judged and dehumanized. The discussion quickly divides the class based on narratives of those who are "deserving" and "undeserving" of second chances.

RESTORATIVE RESPONSE:

Facilitate a Circle based on story-sharing or healing rather than allowing a debate to escalate conflict.

Ask: "What media and cultural messages have shaped your beliefs about justice and redemption? What experiences make this topic personal for you?"

Through storytelling and **active listening**, the focus shifts from argument to empathy and shared humanity. Sometimes, values conflicts arise from biases that can be addressed through compassionate listening.

Summary Table

CONFLICT TYPE	CORE TENSION	COMMON IN HEP PROGRAMS WHEN...	RESTORATIVE TOOL	TRANSFORMATIVE GOAL
Pathway	Same goal, different methods	Staff and students want order and learning but differ on the structure	Classroom community Circle	Shared norms and voice
Motivation	Different reasons, shared action	Staff and educators support programs for different motives	Motivation dialogue Circle	Trust and cooperation
Distributive	Competition for scarce resources	Time, space, or privilege access creates division	Problem-solving Circle	Fairness and transparency
Values	Belief or identity clash	Discussions about justice, faith, or morality get personal	Story-sharing or healing Circle	Understanding without judgment

The following exercise can help students deepen their understanding of conflict's roots. Improvisational theater is a great way to engage students around embodying and understanding the four different types of conflict.



Workshop exercise: Performing Conflict

Step 1. Divide students into small groups.

Step 2. Give them ten minutes to create a skit that models one of the four types of conflict.

Step 3. Ask each group to perform their skit for the rest of the class. Other classmates must guess which type of conflict the group is modeling.

Step 4. Debrief on the types of conflict they have performed and analyzed. Sample reflection prompts include:

- *Which type of conflict shows up most often in our program or facility?*
- *How do power dynamics shape the way conflict is expressed or suppressed?*
- *What structures already exist for dialogue and repair, and where are the gaps?*
- *How can restorative practices reduce the "us vs. them" mindset?*

> "I now see conflict as an opportunity for growth. Instead of scheming to accomplish my own agenda or 'get my way,' I see it as an opportunity for empathy and a way to try to understand the feelings and experiences of others."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

What classroom exercises and activities can help prevent conflict before it occurs?

Consensus Decision-Making

Dean Spade defines consensus decision-making as a practice "based on the idea that everyone should have a say in decisions that affect them."[14] While we are used to making decisions as "individual consumers" or as part of a majority (or minority) vote, we are not practiced in making decisions collectively in ways that allow everyone to be heard. Spade explains the difference between consensus and majority rule as follows:

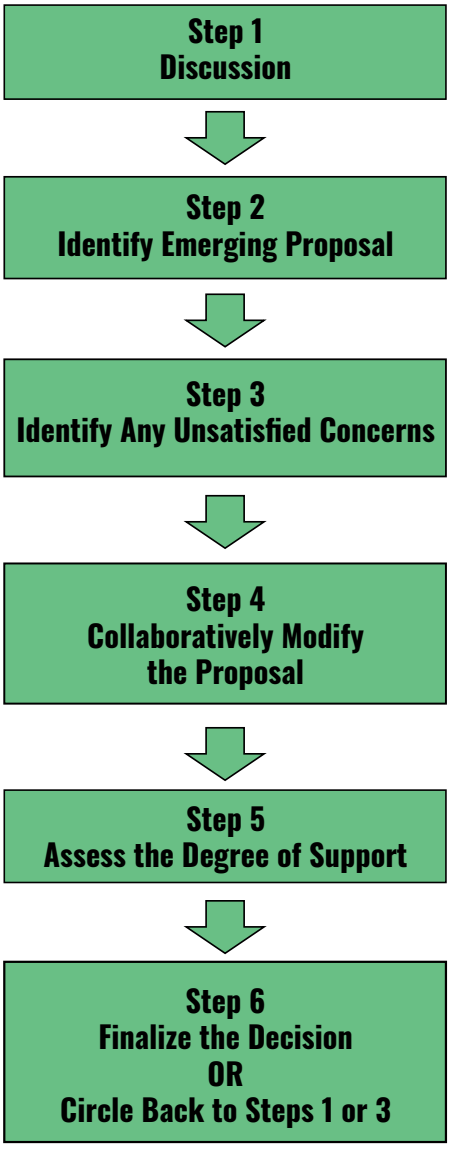
> *When we use "majority rule," the goal is to get as many people as possible to prefer your approach to another, and to "win" by getting things your way. That means that we disregard the needs and concerns of anyone who cannot muster majority support. Consensus encourages us to find out what each other's concerns are and try to create a path forward that addresses all the concerns as well as possible. It is based on the belief that people can cooperate and care about each other's well-being, rather than the myth that we are naturally competitive and greedy.*[15]

Consensus building aligns with restorative justice's focus on engagement, inclusion, and mutual care. The following graphic[16] displays how we use visual "fist to five" hand motions in our program to signify approval or disapproval when we make decisions together:



If students block a motion or express reservations by holding up several fingers, we modify and renegotiate the motion based on their concerns. If participants are routinely blocking motions, the facilitator should explore why. Spade suggests asking whether they still share our values and purpose, or they are "withholding their views earlier in the process," or they feel alienated in the group more broadly.[17] We don't all have to love a decision for consensus to work; we just have to agree to live with it.

The following chart, developed by Dean Spade,[18] illustrates the steps involved with consensus decision-making:



Decisions we make through consensus include:

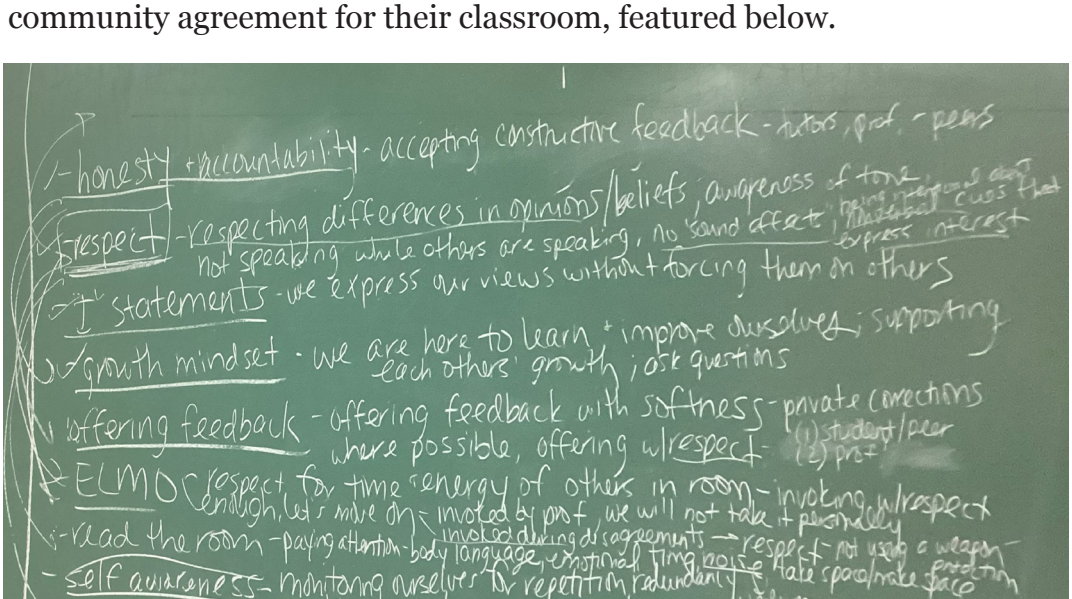
- Food and entertainment for celebrations
- Speakers for graduation ceremonies
- Topics for intersemester workshops
- Formatting and editorial changes to newsletters
- Changes to the program suggested by our student advisory council
- Community agreements

Community Agreements

In *Module 2: Strengthening Relationships*, we introduced group agreements as an essential component of Circle processes that engages participants in articulating and negotiating their shared desires, boundaries, and expectations. We develop community agreements with every new student cohort and revisit them at strategic points in the program. We also have community agreements in place for RJ Lab faculty and staff as well as another agreement for outside tutors. These are living documents that can be adjusted and renegotiated to meet each community's

ever-evolving needs. Most importantly, they draw our awareness to the needs of each participant and help us construct a plan for meeting those needs.

Recently, we visited a women's prison in Tennessee and helped develop a community agreement for their classroom, featured below.



Each agreement is unique and features language specific to the community that creates it. Here we learned a new acronym: ELMO (Enough, Let's Move On)! We also agreed that this acronym must be invoked with delicacy and respect.

We have developed a handout to guide other programs through this process. You can find the handout in Appendix A: Constructing Community Agreements. The handout includes the definition and purpose of community agreements as well as their relationship to **SMART goals** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound). It also includes four considerations for developing community agreements: values, needs, experiences, and balance.

Considerations for new cohorts:

We recommend using exercises from *Module 2: Strengthening Relationships* with a new cohort before attempting to construct a community agreement. These exercises help to lay a foundation for trust and open communication. It can be difficult to construct a meaningful agreement before cohort members get to know one another. For this reason, it is important to revisit the agreement at regular intervals for adjustments.



Considerations for existing cohorts:

The development of the agreement itself may amplify existing conflicts among cohort members. Facilitators should be prepared to de-escalate conflicts as they begin to emerge. Focusing on structural factors that contribute to conflict (limited time, competing needs) without naming individual people helps students focus on problem solving rather than seeing themselves in conflict with each other.



Considerations for effective facilitation:

- Maintain focus on proactive rather than reactive strategies.
- Focus on SMART goals and press students for specifics.
- Help students unpack assumptions (e.g., "everyone knows how to read the room").
- Ask students to explain their reasoning with follow-up prompts such as "tell me more" and "what does that look like?"
- Find points of compromise when tensions rise.
- Redirect from personal conflict toward structural constraints that fuel conflict.
- Consolidate and reorganize points for coherence when possible.
- Constantly check for consensus.

Debriefing Questions:

- How do you feel about the community agreement we have constructed together?
  - ◇ What was beneficial about constructing this agreement?
  - ◇ What was difficult or challenging?
- Do you think this community agreement will be useful for your classroom environment?
  - ◇ If so, why? Please provide examples.
- Was the act of constructing the agreement useful?
  - ◇ If so, why? Please provide examples.
- Will you be able to use what you have learned from constructing this agreement in your day-to-day experience?
  - ◇ If so, how? Please provide examples.

- How do you anticipate this agreement will be implemented?
  - ◇ Who will be responsible for implementing it?
- How do you anticipate this agreement will be maintained?
  - ◇ Who will be responsible for maintaining it?
  - ◇ How often, and under what circumstances, will it be revisited?
- What challenges will the prison setting present for the use of this community agreement?
  - ◇ How do you anticipate navigating those challenges?

When we don't have time to engage everyone in the full construction of a community agreement (e.g., during shorter workshops), we sometimes use a shortened version and ask for group consensus around preconstructed items. When our friends from Collective Justice visit, we combine elements from each of our organizations' agreements, which looks like this:

- Use "I" statements rather than speaking for others.
- Listen with full presence.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Honor all experiences.
- Be mindful of time and space.
- Own your impact.
- Stay curious and ask questions.
- Practice self-care.

> "In the last year we went over our community agreement two or three times. We edited and went back over it, and honestly I felt like just that alone was showing what type of community I am a part of. Because when we came to a problem, we always went back to the drawing board and came up with a solution. Then we are all on this college trip together. We all have similar goals: graduate, learn, and apply what we are learning to our day-to-day lives."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

Self-Assessments

Self-assessments help students become aware of their engagement in the classroom. We create self-assessments using rubrics that help to prepare students for the academic expectations of our program. Below is a rubric

that we use for in-class discussion. We ask students to address where they fall on this rubric in their weekly reflection assignments. As program faculty, we developed this rubric through consensus decision-making.

	HYPERENGAGEMENT	BALANCED ENGAGEMENT	STILL WORKING TOWARD ENGAGEMENT
Contribution to learning community	I think I spoke a lot today without leaving space for others. I will work on balancing speaking with listening.	I participated at least once today without dominating discussion. I respectfully engaged with other students' contributions. I balanced listening and speaking for an equitable classroom dynamic.	I participated during the check-ins and check-outs but did not participate during class discussion. I am still finding my footing when it comes to classroom engagement.

The goal for this assessment is "balanced engagement." We deliberately created a rubric for this measure in which the optimal column is in the middle. This layout visually demonstrates the importance of balance in terms of class participation and group dialogue.

What structural pressures fuel conflict, and how can we help students identify them?

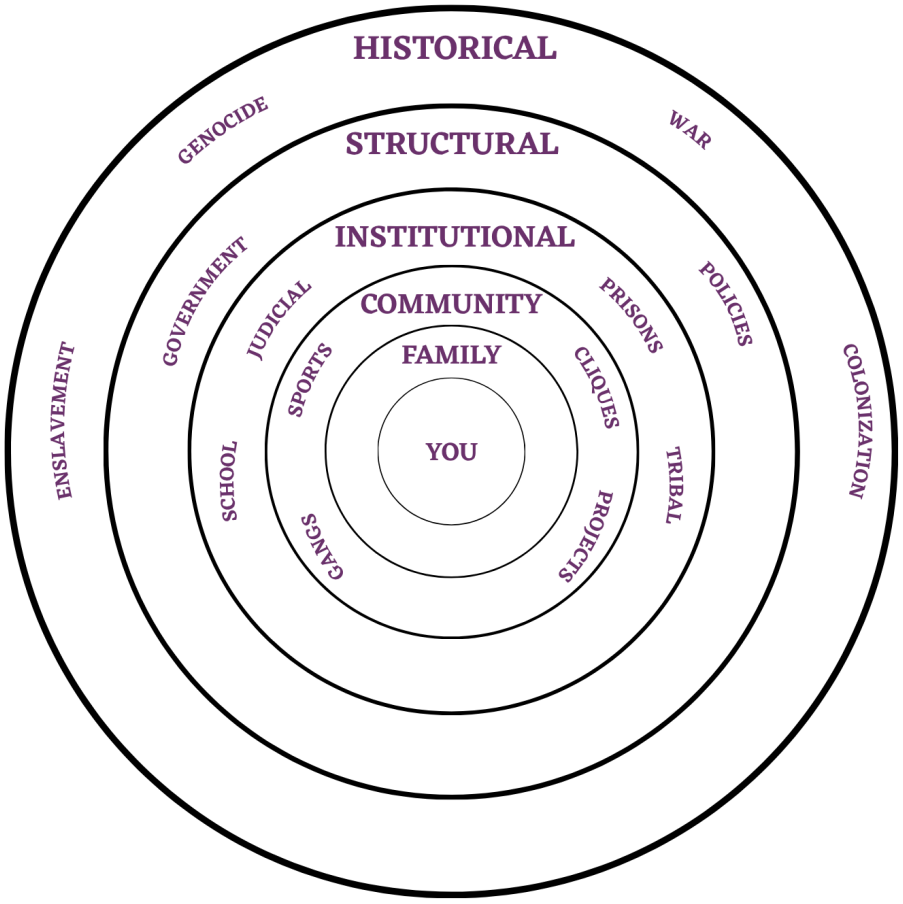
Understanding Socialization

Our current criminal legal system is largely based on the presumption that individuals freely make personal choices that lead to criminal behavior, yet our choices and actions are shaped by larger structural forces that we cannot always clearly see. Our friends at Collective Justice developed the following visual to help students conceptualize conflict through these various social lenses of historical, structural, institutional, community, and family influences.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIALIZATION

TO WHAT DEGREE DO OUR CIRCUMSTANCES LIMIT OUR CHOICES?

THIS VISUAL HELPS US REMAIN MINDFUL OF THE STRUCTURES THAT SHAPE OUR ACTIONS AND HOW WE NAVIGATE OUR PLACE IN SOCIETY.



The purpose behind understanding socialization is not to diminish our sense of accountability but to open up our awareness to how these invisible forces can make choices for us. When we are better able to identify and analyze the social forces that exert control over our lives, we are liberated to see a wider array of options and possibilities for ourselves. A blank version of the chart is included in Appendix B: Understanding Socialization. Facilitators can invite students to write examples from their own experience directly on the graphic.

Below are six workshop exercises we have used to help our students better understand socialization in relation to structural constructs of gender and race.

Socialization and Gender

Because prisons separate people based on sex assigned at birth, it can be difficult for people in prison to see and analyze a spectrum of gender identities and to understand gender as a social construction. We facilitate the following art-based exercise to help students at a men's facility understand how their socialization into "masculinity" fuels their response to conflict.

"The RJ program has allowed for me to see how society places men under the constraint of toxic masculinity and that we need to become more attuned to our emotions and express those emotions in a healthy way. I have had my eyes opened to the importance of community and fellowship with others instead of focusing on being right in any given situation. Being more empathetic and connecting with the person is the 'restorative' way to point out actions and words of harm rather than condemnation or shame."

RJ Lab student

Workshop Exercise 1: Perspective Taking and Art Making



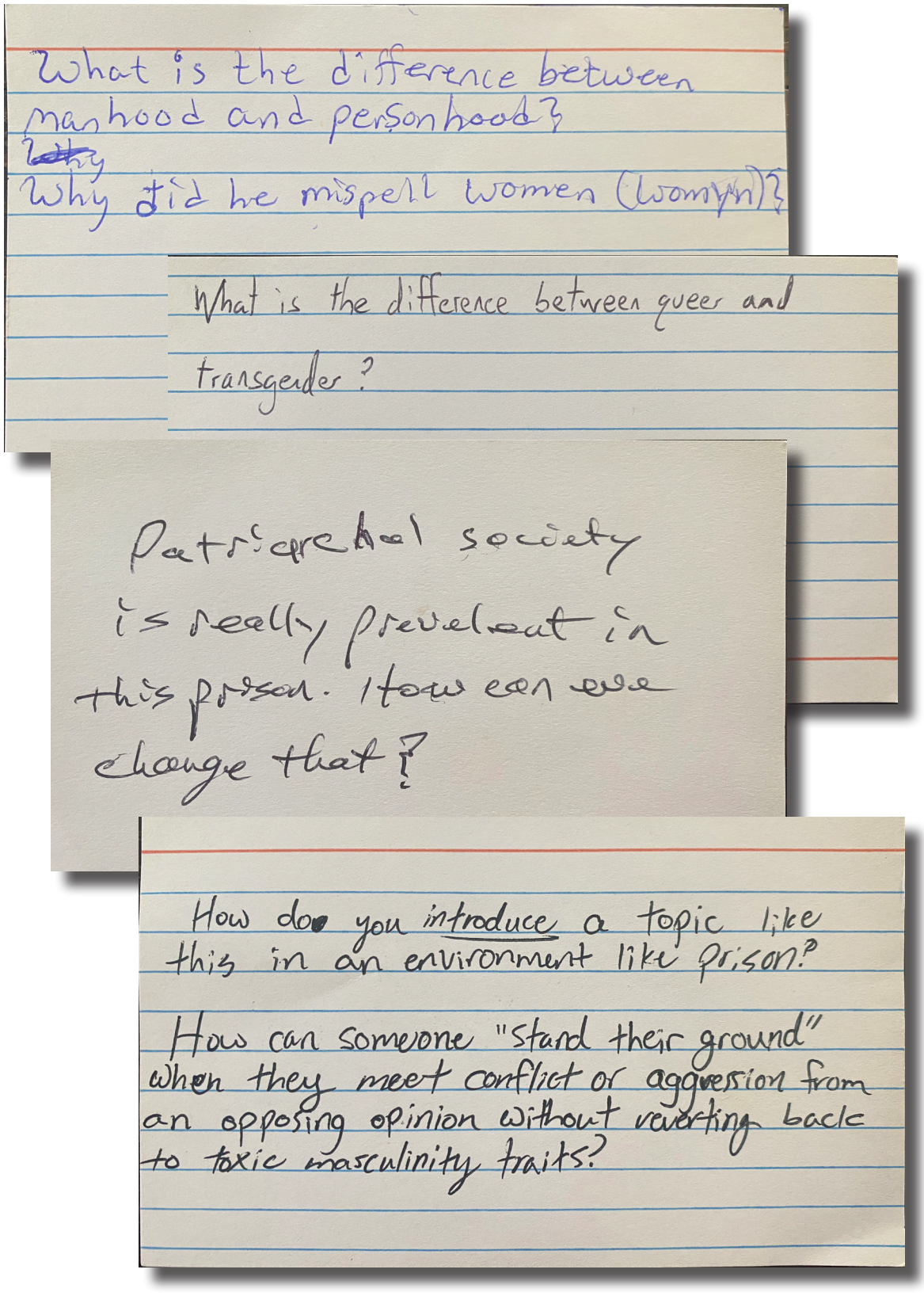
Overview: *This exercise, designed for a men's prison, encourages students to explore gender identity through the lens of art, to acknowledge and consider the experiences of women and trans men, to analyze the ways in which expectations of masculinity have shaped our lives, and to create art that models perspective taking. Community-based artist Kerrigan Casey helped develop this workshop for our students in the RJ Lab.*

Session Flow (over three days, about 7.5 hours)

First Day (2.5 hours):

Step 1. Screen "The Feminist on Cellblock Y" (2018).[19] *The documentary is available on YouTube and chronicles a feminist program at the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad, California. The program is facilitated by incarcerated men.*

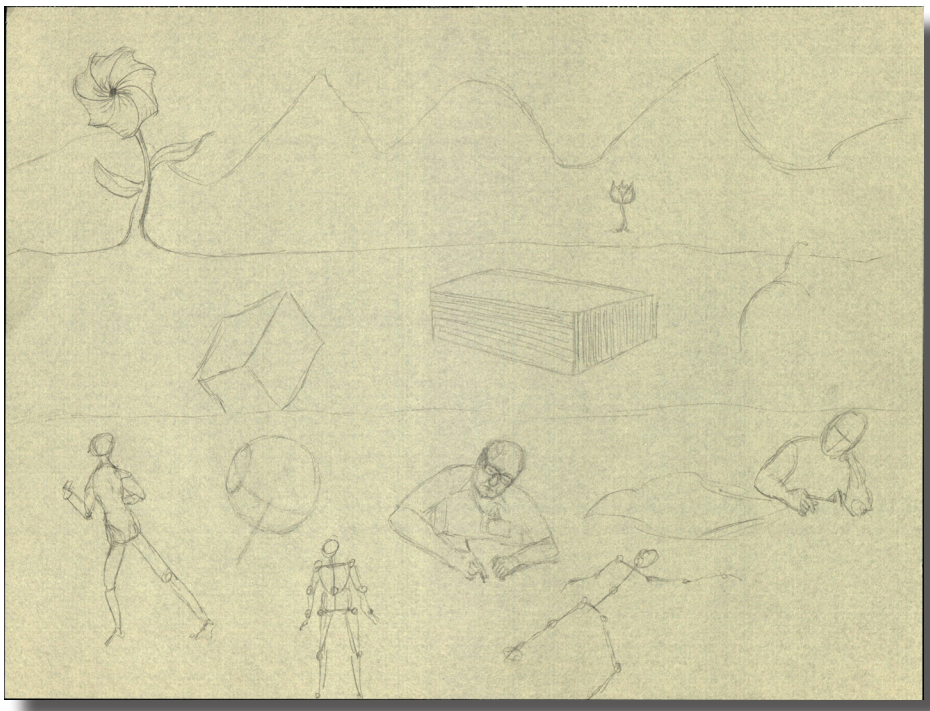
Step 2. Facilitate a discussion with people from a range of gender identities, including women and trans men, as respondents. Ask participants to write anonymous questions on index cards to be collected and addressed by the discussion respondents.

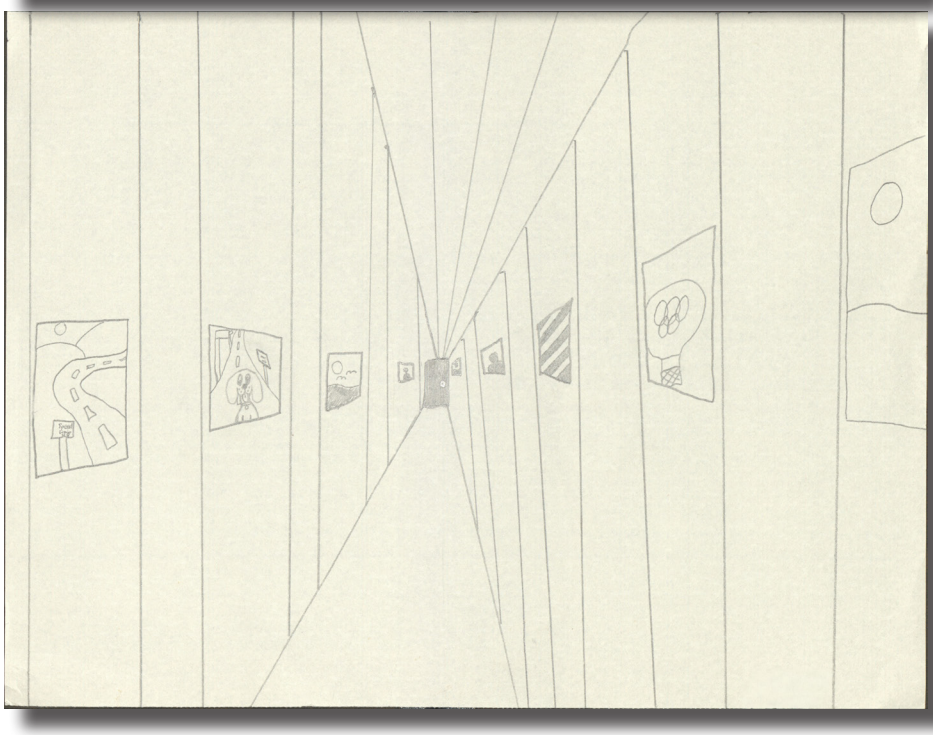


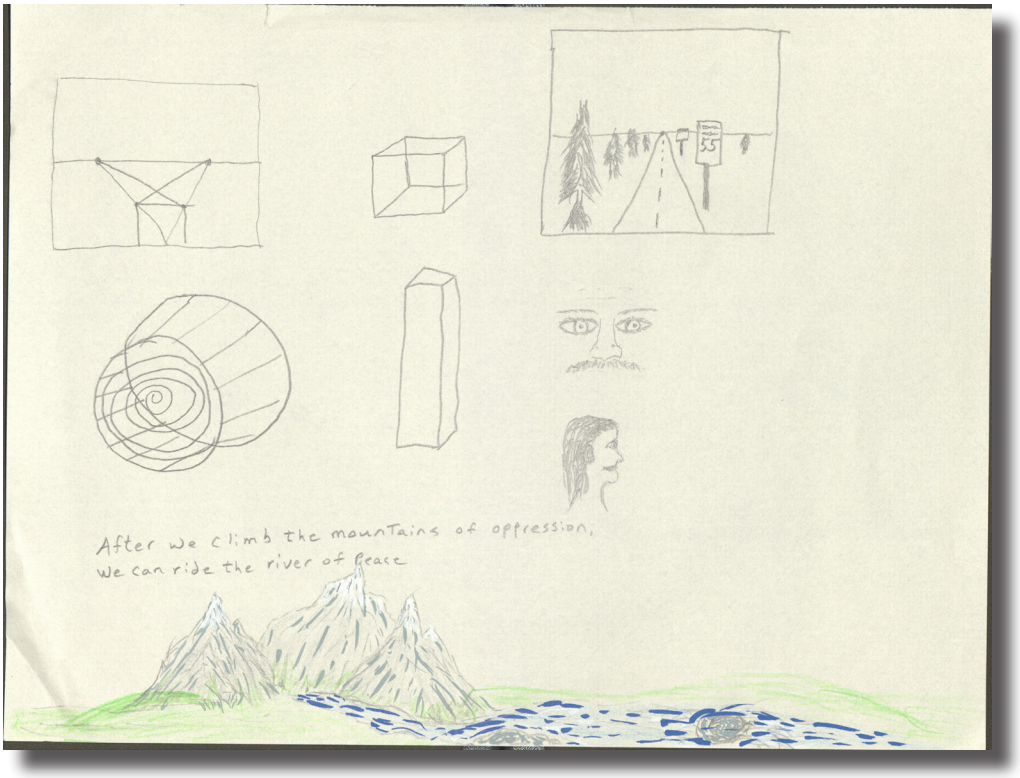
Second Day (2.5 hours):

Step 3. Show examples of feminist artwork and how artists use visual cues to subvert our expectations and play with our sense of perspective. Examples include Frida Kahlo's self-portraits[20] and Kara Walker's cut-paper silhouettes.[21]

Step 4. Invite students to experiment with perspective using sketches. Below are samples of sketch work by RJ Lab students.

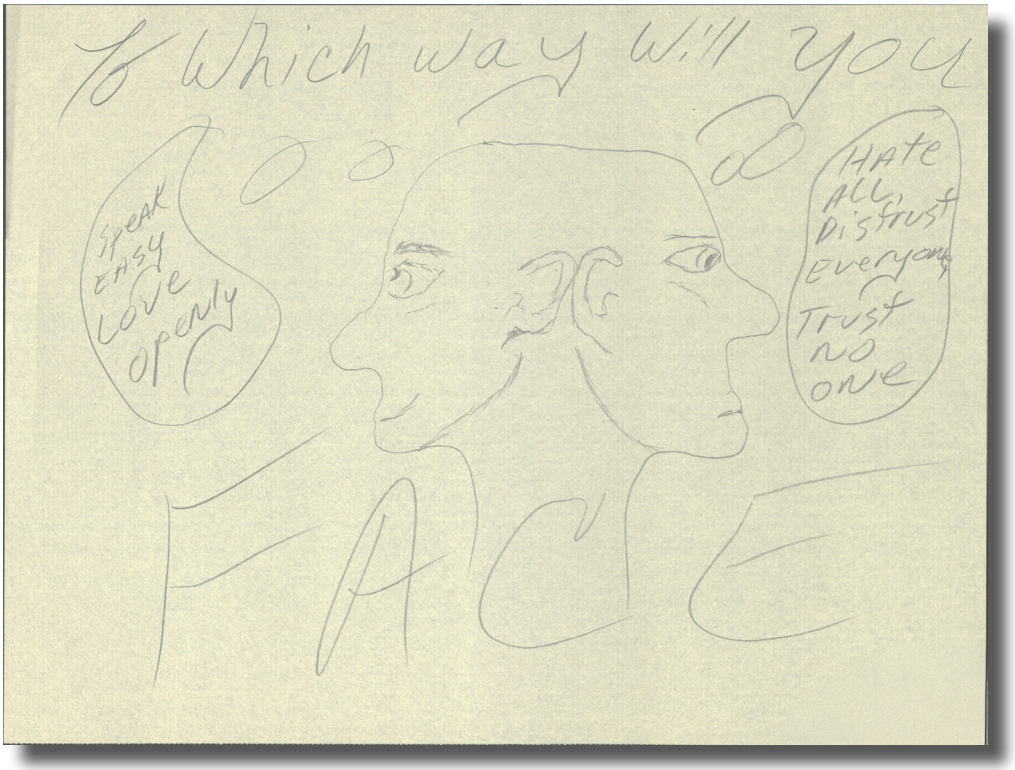






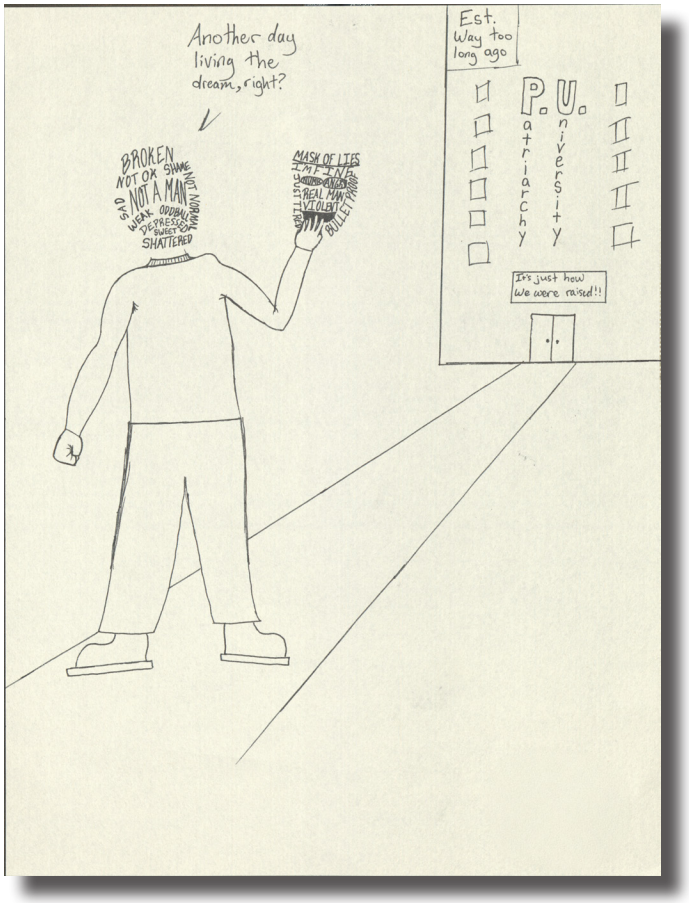
Third Day (2.5 hours):

Step 5. Invite students to create their own pieces using themes from the documentary. Below are some pieces created by RJ Lab students.



"I have become more inclined to listen empathetically, be less bias oriented, and I'm more open to hearing viewpoints that are at odds with my personal worldview. I used to either argue in an effort to dominate or draw within or away from conflict I viewed as 'unhealthy.'"

RJ Lab student







Workshop Exercise 2: The Man Box

Overview: *Our friends at Collective Justice contributed this exercise to the RJ Lab. The "Man Box" creates a visual for understanding the gendered expectations that are placed on us and the consequences we fear when we fail to conform to those expectations.*

Session Flow (1 hour)

Step 1. Draw a large box on a white board. Across the top of the box, write the purpose of performing the behaviors that contribute to patriarchal thinking.

Step 2. Inside the box, describe how men are stereotypically expected to behave.

Step 3. Along the left and right sides of the box, list the verbal consequences of not conforming to the stereotypes.

Step 4. Along the bottom of the box, list the physical consequences of not conforming to the stereotypes.

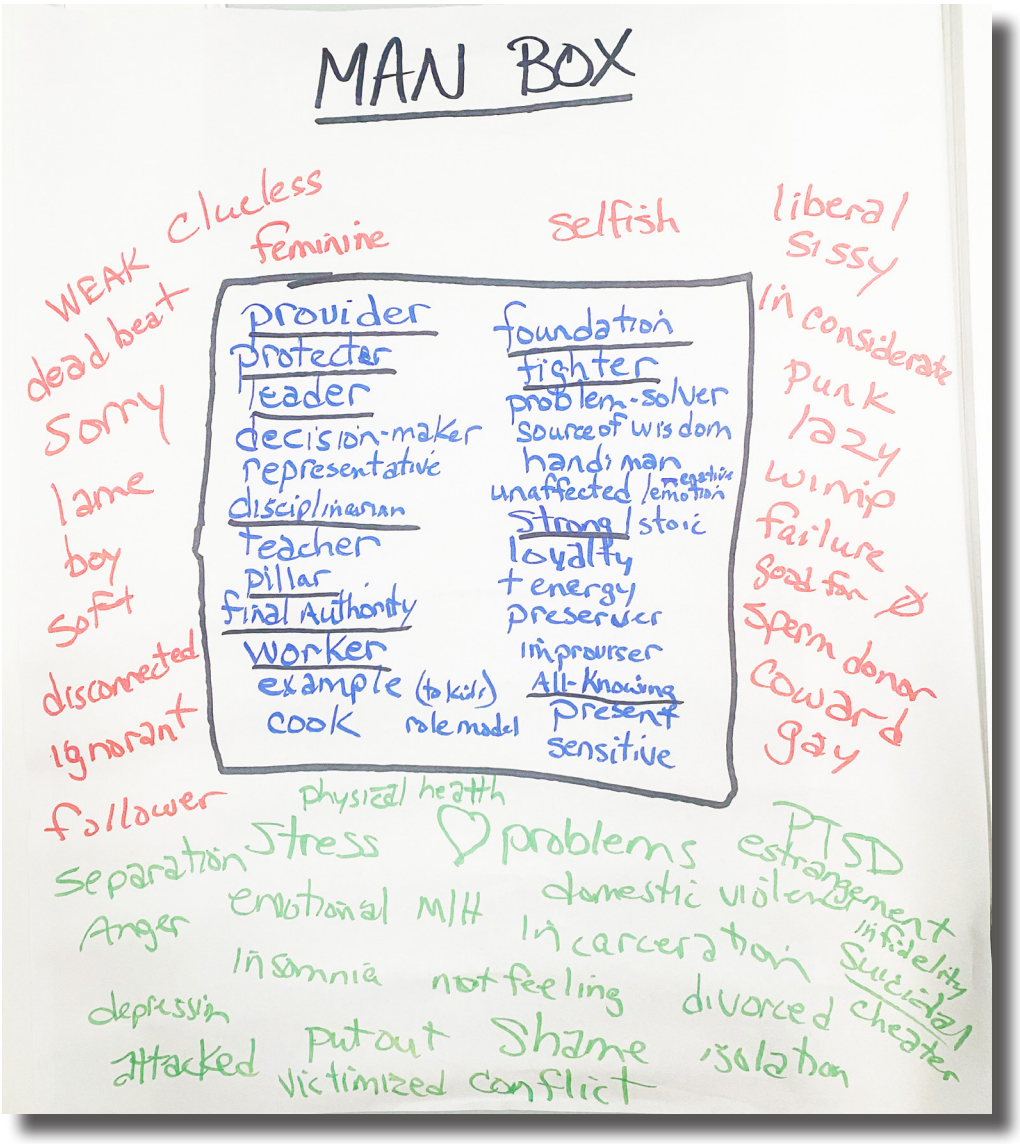
Step 5. Debrief about the box. Ask:

- *Why does this exercise take the shape of a box?*
- *When have I felt "boxed in" by gendered expectations?*
- *What impacts from this box have I personally experienced or witnessed?*
- *How does the "Man Box" also impact women, LGBTQIA+ people, and other communities that exist outside of the box itself?*

A blank graphic with instructions appears in Appendix C: Man Box Exercise.

Considerations: *This exercise was developed for a men's facility but can be transformed into a "Woman Box" by focusing on cultural expectations that are attached to women (e.g., housekeeper, cook, errand runner, chauffeur). Alternatively, women can explore the impact of the "Man Box" on their own lives and labels (e.g., if men are expected to be aggressive, then women are expected to be nurturing). Nonbinary participants can reflect on how these binary roles and "boxes" do not leave room for nuance and pressure us to assume a single gender identity.*

Additionally, the facilitator should be selective in what they record and should clarify that only stereotypes should appear in the box. Below is a photograph of a "Man Box" exercise we conducted at another facility where we treated this exercise as more of a brainstorming session and wrote down all student contributions. We tried to highlight stereotypes by underlining them. During our debriefing, however, it became clear that not all participants understood the box to be unhealthy. Facilitators should reinforce the box as a shape that is meant to confine.



Workshop Exercise 3: Practicing Pronouns

Overview: *This workshop series guides students through a series of scaffolded lessons that helps them understand pronoun use first as a function of grammar, then in terms of self-identification. Finally,*

it connects language and power by exploring the difference between labels and self-identification. These exercises were inspired by an RJ Lab student who continuously insisted that he had "no pronouns." These short, scaffolded lessons can be broken up and integrated into study hall periods.

Session Flow (about 2 hours):

Lesson 1: What Is a Pronoun? (30 min)

Learning objectives:

- *Understand the purpose of pronouns in English grammar.*
- *Practice forming sentences using pronouns.*
- *Identify different types and uses of pronouns (personal, possessive, etc.).*

Lesson 2: Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Grammar (30 min)

Learning objectives:

- *Understand the differences between descriptive and prescriptive grammar.*
- *Identify the potentially restorative functions of descriptive grammar.*
- *Analyze the impacts of prescriptive grammar usage in our own lives.*

Lesson 3: Pronouns and Subject–Verb Agreement (30 min)

Learning objectives:

- *Understand the grammatical significance of subject–verb agreement.*
- *Apply descriptive grammar approaches to subject–verb agreement.*
- *Analyze places of tension between descriptive and prescriptive grammar in pronoun use.*

Lesson 4: Best Practices for Pronoun Use (30 min)

Learning objectives:

- *Explore the difference between labeling and self-identification.*
- *Analyze the relationship between language and power.*
- *Create strategies for building more conscious language use into our community agreement and daily practice.*

The full exercise appears in Appendix D: Practicing Pronouns.

Socialization and Race



Workshop Exercise 4: Difficult Conversations Needs Inventory

Overview: *Building on the needs inventory supplied in Module 2: Strengthening Relationships, Appendix B, this exercise prepares students for difficult conversations about race by asking them to identify and rank their needs in advance. Students learn how to prioritize, visualize, and manage competing needs and provide the facilitator with a more tailored and nuanced understanding of what needs must be met before these conversations unfold. The exercise also introduces students to basic research methods and prepares them to approach the unfolding conversation with curiosity.*

"I have learned to view conflicts that I am exposed to from multiple angles, which include that of others who are also involved. I have come to realize that many conflicts can be resolved through open dialogue between all involved. I now try to look at conflicts from other people's perspectives and backgrounds, which to me seems to be in the backdrop of many conflicts. I use what I have learned in RJ to take a moment before being critical in order to think things through more clearly and review others' perspectives that may be in conflict with my own."

RJ Lab student

Step 1. Using a sequential Circle, ask students to use the needs inventory to name what they need to feel safe in engaging in difficult conversations about race and racism. Record these needs on a white board or chalk board. (Note: The number of needs generated = n.*)*

Step 2. Ask students to rank these needs using rank order methods. Students will write a number next to each need with 1 = most important and n *= least important. Clarify that students may use each number only once.*

Step 3. Ask students to tear a sheet of paper into n *pieces and to place into* n *piles in the middle of the Circle. Each pile represents a ranking with 1 = most important and* n *= least important. This helps students visualize the rank order.*

Step 4. Create a table and record each need and ranking.

Step 5. Create a frequency chart that provides a summary count of each need and its rank order.

Step 6. Visualize the data using a chart and discuss the results.

Below is a list of needs generated by our second cohort of students during their first semester in the RJ Lab:

- Honesty and open expression
- Growth mindset
- Mindfulness of body language and verbal language
- Patience and grace
- Cultural humility
- Recognizing and working through bias
- Acknowledging historical and structural racism

Case study

Working with our friend Jarrod Wall on data visualization and analysis, we used an X to indicate a rank order result and used colors to show a gradation from least to most important, as shown below.

Needs	Least Important			Mid-Range		Most Important	
	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Honest/Open Expression	X	XX	XX	XXX	XXX	XXXX	XXXXX XXXXXX
Growth Mindset	XXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXX	XXXXXX	XXX	XXX
Mindful Language	XXXXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXX	X	XXX XXXX	X
Patience/Grace	XX	X	XXX	XXXXXX	XXXX	XXX	XXX XXXX
Cultural Humility	XX	XXXXX	XXX XXXX	XXX	XXXXXX	X	XX
Recognize/Work Through Bias	XXXX	XXXXXX	XXXXX	XXXX	XXX	XXX	X
Acknowledge Historical/Structual Racism	XXXX XXXXX	XXXX	XX	XX	XX	XXXX	XXX

We found that students in this cohort were most concerned about *honesty* and *patience/grace*. When discussion unfolded, we learned that students did not trust one another to be honest and open; at the same time, they feared that they would not be given patience or grace if they were honest. This showed us that we needed to continue to work toward establishing and prioritizing trust building before advancing to more difficult conversations.

Workshop Exercise 5: Avoidance Bingo

Overview: *This exercise was inspired by the frustration of program faculty when discussions of race and racism continuously landed in the same talking points, such as "I don't see color" or "we don't have that problem in our classroom." We created a bingo card as a lighthearted way of "calling in" members of our cohort to recognize the predictable patterns in our stalled discussions. At the center of the*

card is the "Compass of Shame,"[22] a graphic created by psychologist Donald Nathanson to describe our scripted aversive responses to shame, with "avoidance" circled. It serves as a reminder that these responses are avoidance strategies to navigate around, rather than through, difficult topics such as racism.

Considerations: *Our bingo card is tailored to our Alabama context and centers on anti-Blackness. Other programs may need to adjust the bingo responses for regional differences in racial dynamics. The bingo card is distributed before difficult conversations with a set of considerations and rules of engagement developed by our friend Nikesha Tilton. You can find the full instructions in Appendix E: Avoidance Bingo Facilitation Guide.*

It's up to the new generation to solve racial issues.	If we don't have an issue with each other, there is no need to discuss race.	My European ancestors also experienced racism.	What about Black on Black crime?	I have Black friends/ family members.
I don't see color.	We should look forward, not backward.	Discussions about race are too uncomfortable.	What does race have to do with Restorative Justice?	Black people can be racist, too.
Racism is a thing of the past.	We don't have that problem here.		My ancestors never owned enslaved people.	Slavery is in the past.
The U.S. has had a Black president.	White people have struggles, too.	I'm not racist.	Why can't White people feel pride in their heritage?	I'm tired of talking about race.
We should all be united.	The only race is the human race.	Why is there no White history month?	I should not be punished for what my ancestors did in the past.	White people are just as oppressed as people of color.

Session Flow (2 hours):

Step 1. Conceptual framing (30 min). Use the bingo card's talking points to introduce students to concepts such as "colorblindness" and other microaggressions that function as avoidance strategies.

Step 2. Reflection (15 min). Encourage students to use the bingo card as a self-assessment tool. Ask students to journal about what they recognize on this card and why it is classified as an "avoidance" strategy. Ask them to consider times they have repeated or experienced these talking points.

Step 3. Think-pair-share (15 min). Ask students to process and respond to the talking points on the bingo card: what quotations are you surprised to see labeled as "avoidant"?

Step 4. Small-group discussion (30 min). Cluster the class into group caucuses based on racial affinity groups. Ask students to reflect on things they have said or heard that appear on the bingo card and how it impacted them. Then bring the class together to debrief.

Step 5. Large-group discussion (30 min). Why do we avoid having conversations about race in HEP classrooms?



Considerations: *Initially, our students did not fully understand that this bingo is not actually a game to be played. Students were confused about how to engage with the bingo card. Some asked if we should try to achieve bingo or "call out" bingo when we heard someone repeat a phrase on the card. We clarified that this is not a tool for shaming but for reflection. Nikesha Tilton built the facilitation guide to clarify. Programs can incorporate the bingo card into their community agreements to set their own norms around how to engage with this tool and what their accountability practices will look like.*



Workshop Exercise 6: Racial Identity Caucusing

Overview: *This exercise, designed by our friend Nikesha Tilton, helps move students toward more honest discussions of race and racism. Racial caucusing creates safer, affinity-based spaces for honest reflection, emotional processing, and truth telling about race, power, and lived experience. In multiracial spaces, especially where power dynamics and historical trauma exist, caucusing allows participants to do the following:*

- *Name internalized messages without fear of judgment*
- *Reflect on how race has shaped their worldview and behavior*
- *Prepare for more authentic cross-racial dialogue by grounding in identity*
- *Process difficult emotions (shame, anger, grief, confusion) with others who may hold similar racialized experiences*

This is not segregation. This is strategy!

Session Flow (1.5 hours)

Step 1. Opening grounding (5 min): Begin with a breath, a poem, or silence. Acknowledge that this may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable, and remind participants that growth begins with discomfort.

Step 2. Framing (10 min): Explain why we are caucusing, that honesty (not perfection) is the goal, and that this space is not for fixing each other, but for listening and reflection.

Step 3. Discussion (60 min): Use the curated questions below. Follow the energy. Silence is okay. Emotions are okay. Avoid debate; this is not about "proving" anything.

Step 4. Journaling/reflection (10 min): Allow time for quiet writing or personal processing.

Step 5. Closing prompt (5 min): Ask, "What's one truth you're leaving with?" or "What do you want to carry into the next session?"

Group Instructions

You will be splitting into two groups based on self-identified racial identity:

- ***Black, Brown, and Indigenous Participants*** → *Led first by a Black/Brown/Indigenous facilitator, then by a White facilitator*
- ***White Participants*** → *Led first by a White facilitator, then by a Black/Brown/Indigenous facilitator*

The facilitator switch is intentional; it helps participants explore what shifts (internally and externally) when the racial identity of the guide changes.

You're asking a set of questions that invite deep personal reflection for White participants without resorting to blame, shame, or guilt as the starting point. Instead, you want to create space for participants to explore their humanity, hurt, conditioning, disconnection, and desire to understand, even if they've arrived in the room defensive, confused, or resistant.

These prompts center self-awareness, dignity, and emotional honesty (not accusation)*, while still naming race, power, and structural harm.*

Prompts for the Black, Brown, and Indigenous Caucus:

1. *What wounds have I carried quietly because I was told they weren't valid or were "too much"?*
2. *When did I first learn that my truth made others uncomfortable? How did I adjust to survive?*
3. *Where have I swallowed or softened my pain to protect White feelings or keep the peace?*
4. *What lies about my people or myself did I once believe, and where do those lies still live in me?*
5. *What parts of myself have I judged, disowned, or hidden to "get ahead," stay safe, or be accepted?*
6. *Where have I turned my anger inward, or toward my own community, because there was no safe place to put it?*
7. *Who taught me that silence was strength? What did it cost me to believe that?*
8. *If I spoke my whole truth without apology, what would I say and to whom?*

Prompts for the White Caucus:

1. *What is it like to be asked to talk about race in a setting like this? What comes up (emotionally or physically) for me when I hear the word "whiteness"?*
2. *What thoughts or preconceived notions have I been carrying around race that I've never been able to say out loud, not because it was hateful, but because it felt unsafe, taboo, or unfinished?*
3. *What does "being a good person" mean to me, and how has that shaped the way I respond to conversations about race or privilege?*
4. *What did I learn about race growing up, not just in words, but in silences, looks, jokes, or neighborhood boundaries? (*No blame, just pattern recognition.*)*
5. *What did I not learn growing up that I wish I had? What would it have changed?*
6. *What does it mean to me that I was not asked to think deeply about my own racial identity until adulthood, if ever? How has that shaped me?*
7. *When I hear people talk about racism or oppression, do I feel like I'm being accused or invited in? Why do I think that is?*

8. *What do I fear will happen if I say the "wrong" thing about race? What am I protecting: my reputation, my comfort, my belonging?*

Deepening Prompts (Optional for Both Groups)

These can be used during journaling or as closing reflections:

- *What truth have I been most afraid to admit to others or to myself?*
- *If I stopped performing and started telling the truth, what would change in me?*
- *What have I mistaken for humility that was actually fear or comfort?*
- *Where do I need to be called in, not out?*
- *What legacy am I continuing, and what legacy do I want to leave behind?*

"I handle conflict differently because of the RJ program because I understand that the other person's story and history is relevant to how they respond to conflict. I now am inclined to listen to the other person and empathize with where they stand within the conflict before addressing the conflict. I understand that other people do not think or view the world the exact same way I do, so it is easier to hear them out and place myself in their shoes to try to understand why they are responding the way that they are."

RJ Lab student

What classroom strategies and activities can help address conflict when it occurs?

Conflict in HEP Programs

In *Module 2: Strengthening Relationships*, we introduced the International Institute for Restorative Practice's "Restorative Continuum" visual. Not all conflict requires **formal conferencing**. We are frequently approached by RJ Lab students in our program who want to hold a formal conference when something happens in our classroom environment. However, there are instances in which community conferencing would not be appropriate

or effective. What is more, as program facilitators, we want to empower students to resolve their own conflicts when possible, rather than asking program administrators or faculty to resolve it for them.

Managing conflicts that disrupt classroom dynamics is tricky work and requires program administrators and faculty to be able to assess the situation and which approaches on the restorative continuum would work best. There are also times where it is best not to step into conflict at all but to let it unfold organically and allow students to work it out.

Here are guiding questions for facilitators in assessing where they should land on the continuum:

- ***Ask:*** What do I know about the situation? What do I need to know? How can I learn more? Try to balance versions of events with multiple sources and to refrain from making assumptions.
- ***Ask:*** What are the motives and desired outcomes of the person requesting a more formal approach? Could they be weaponizing the process for the purpose of public shaming?
- ***Ask:*** Does the conflict revolve around one or two people? If so, an **impromptu conference** using **affective questions** around feelings and needs may be sufficient.
- ***Ask:*** Does the conflict involve a broader group dynamic? If so, a Circle may be needed.
- ***If the conflict involves harm, always ask:*** What does the harmed party need to make things right? It is important not to presume what they need.

Using Conflict as a Teaching Tool

In restorative learning communities (and especially inside prison settings), conflict is inevitable. When it surfaces, it can be used as a lens to examine where needs, values, or perspectives collide and where dialogue can build stronger relationships. The following tips are designed to help practitioners integrate conflict work into their learning environment.

1. Normalize Conflict as Learning

Start every semester or cohort with a discussion on the role of conflict in growth. Encourage students to view tension as part of intellectual rigor and relational honesty.

2. Create Structures for Repair

Establish consistent restorative processes such as Circles, peer mediation, and debriefing sessions so that when conflict arises, everyone knows the framework for addressing it.

3. Empower Students as Co-facilitators

Peer leadership strengthens community accountability. Train students to lead Circles and model dialogue grounded in respect, curiosity, and responsibility.

4. Reflect and Document

Integrate journaling and reflection prompts to deepen understanding.

Sample prompts for students include:

- What type of conflict am I experiencing?
- What unmet need or value might be underneath it?
- What action could transform it into a connection or understanding?

> "Before RJ, I had a very vague idea of the concepts that make up RJ without actually knowing what it was. Unfortunately, I did not practice these concepts. A lot of it seems to be common sense after you learn it because why would you want a conflict to end in violence and completely ignore any chance that may have been for repairing that relationship? Conflict now to me is simply a bump in the road that can actually lead to a healthier relationship rather than a bridge being burned to the ground."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

Sample prompts for facilitators include:

- Which type of conflict do I instinctively avoid, and why?
- How can I use tension as a teaching tool rather than a disruption?
- What systems within the prison create distributive or values conflict for students?
- How can restorative practices sustain the dignity of everyone involved, including program staff?

Integrating Conflict Management into HEP Settings

1. Academic Integration

- Embed these conflict types in ethics, sociology, or communication courses.
- Assign reflective essays: "*Which type of conflict do you experience most, and how might you approach it through nonviolence?*"

2. Facilitation Practice

- Train instructors and peer mentors in Circle processes using *Module 2: Strengthening Relationships*.
- Use pathway and motivation conflicts for team projects; use distributive and values conflicts for dialogue labs.

> "There are more ways to reach a peaceful outcome than just my own way of looking at conflict."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

3. Policy and Culture Shift

- Wherever possible, replace punitive responses to conflict (e.g., removal from class) with responses from the restorative continuum.
- Incorporate restorative practices into program handbooks.

4. Evaluation

- Measure outcomes by:
  - ◇ Student retention rates
  - ◇ Student satisfaction with and participation in decision-making
  - ◇ Qualitative data on students' sense of belonging, agency, and hope

Conflict in Prison Settings

The prison environment itself is a source of conflict. Extreme temperatures in housing units that are not air conditioned reach levels that contribute to spikes in prison mortality rates nationwide.[23] Overcrowding, noise, violence, and other environmental stressors fuel and exacerbate conflict.

Residents at one prison in Alabama break down conflict into the following categories: peace, possessions, and space. All three are versions of

distributive conflicts, so we will expand on that conflict structure here.

Distributive Conflict for Students

These conflicts are tricky to navigate in prison settings, especially when escalation can lead to serious consequences for students in programming. We provide scenarios with suggested questions ("*before you engage, consider…*") for students to explore before taking action. We also provide sample reactive and proactive restorative responses for each scenario.

> "I didn't deal well with conflict before the program. Conflict led to fights and I stayed in trouble. This program put me around positive people and I looked forward to coming up here. I don't feed into conflict anymore. I can walk away."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

A. Peace

CONTEXT:

Peace is understood as a limited resource that generates conflict when it is disrupted. If someone is trying to sleep, study, or just keep to themselves, and noise or interaction is interfering, tensions are likely to escalate.

SAMPLE CONFLICT:

You return to your housing unit to study and do homework. Other people who are not in the program keep asking you what you are doing, preventing you from making progress.

Before you engage, consider: What is the goal? If the goal is peace, does escalating conflict achieve or undermine that goal? What are the consequences of reacting in the way you would normally react? Could it cause you to fall behind on work or even to be removed from the program? Use Appendix C: Managing Anger in *Module 2: Strengthening Relationships* for help.

RESTORATIVE RESPONSES:

Try an impromptu conference.

Reactive: Explain to the person outside the program why you need time and space to focus on your schoolwork and that you can set aside time later to discuss the program.

Proactive: As soon as you enroll in the program, try to let your neighbors know in advance that you are in classes that will require concentration and that, if they see you studying at a table, they should try not to interrupt your focus.

> "I have found that if I can keep control of my emotions, then I can make rational decisions in the middle of conflict. The main thing about staying calm is that it is much easier to remain humble and de-escalate situations if you are not splashing fuel on the fire."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

B. Possessions

CONTEXT:

Alabama is one of a number of states[24] that, outside of limited correctional industry opportunities, does not pay incarcerated people for their labor. As a result, it is difficult for people to earn money to buy even basic hygiene products. Theft, as well as economies of credit and debt, are a major source of conflict.

SAMPLE CONFLICT:

You return to your bunk to find that your deodorant is missing. You see someone else in the next bunk with what appears to be your deodorant stick.

Before you engage, consider: What is the need that underpins the theft or debt? Is there a different way that people in a housing unit can help that person meet that need so that it does not happen again?

RESTORATIVE RESPONSES:

Try an impromptu conference or a Circle focused on problem-solving.

Reactive: Approach the person with care and try some "needs guesses" to help the person identify what they need and ask how those needs could be met differently. Use Appendix B: Needs Inventory in *Module 2: Strengthening Relationships* for help. To build community, we must meet peoples' needs without the expectation that debt will be incurred.

Proactive: Create a plan for **mutual aid** where the community can help address the needs of individual people who may be struggling.

For example, some people put together care packages with toiletries for people who are new to a housing unit and may not yet have access to personal funds.

C. Space

CONTEXT:

Most prisons in the U.S. are overcrowded. People who are incarcerated have limited personal space. "In my dorm, 126 people share four toilets," one resident shared. Maintaining personal boundaries in a setting that offers such limited personal space is a challenge.

> "Before the RJ program, I assumed conflict was something that was uncontrollable. Something unavoidable. For instance, if someone approached me with aggression, I had to react in kind. Since RJ, I now see conflict still as something, at times, unavoidable; however, I get to choose whether or not to engage in the conflict."
>
> *RJ Lab student*

SAMPLE CONFLICT:

Many people want to access the shower, but there are limited shower heads, and people may not feel comfortable showering at the same time. You have just finished a workout, are sweaty, and would like to shower before you go to class.

Before you engage, consider: How important is it? What is the solution to the problem?

RESTORATIVE RESPONSES:

Try an impromptu conference or a Circle focused on problem-solving.

Reactive: You can ask for an accommodation so that you can shower and attend class on time. If you can't get a spot in the shower, you may decide that the problem is not important enough to escalate.

Proactive: Work with your neighbors in your housing unit to create a scheduled rotation where different people have shower access at different times.

Takeaways from Distributive Conflicts in Prison Settings:

- In order to reestablish peace, we must be in the right relationship with our neighbors.
- The central strategy for both preventing and resolving conflict is community building.
- Questions such as "how important is it?" and "what is the goal?" remind us that we can also choose to let things go.

Recap of Module 3: Managing Conflict

Key takeaways:

- **Conflict presents opportunities for engagement and value clarification.**
- **Proactive practices such as constructing community agreements can prevent conflict before it occurs and can be a powerful tool for working through active conflicts.**
- **Identifying and understanding the structural causes of conflict can help with conflict prevention and management.**
- **Conflicts often emerge from underlying unmet needs.**
- **Different types and degrees of conflict require different approaches.**

In the next module, we will explore how we support students in developing a more robust sense of accountability.

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Appendix A: Constructing Community Agreements

Community agreements are living documents that set social norms and expectations for a group. They are distinct from institutional policies in that they reflect how members of a given community decide they want to interact with one another to co-construct the learning environment. Agreements are drafted by and for the community and require full participation from group members for maximum buy-in and collaboration. An agreement is considered complete when a group reaches a consensus about the items on the list. It can (and should) be revisited, revised, and continuously tailored to the group's evolving needs.

Agreements should reflect the group's values and needs as well as specifics about how they will be modeled, upheld, and balanced. The following questions, based on the concept of SMART goals, can be used to guide the construction of a community agreement:

S **Specific**—Are the items clear and specific? Do they define or unpack concepts that may look different to different people? Are the roles of community members clear?

M **Measurable**—Is it clear how community members would demonstrate alignment with the items on the agreement and determine the success of the agreement?

A **Achievable**—Can the items on the agreement be carried out? Has the community defined who will implement them, and how they will be implemented?

R **Realistic**—Can the agreement be implemented, given the constraints of the prison setting? Is the community setting itself up for success by acknowledging these constraints?

T **Time-bound**—For how long will this agreement be in place? When, how often, and under what circumstances will it be revisited?

Considerations for drafting an agreement:

- Values
  - ◇ What are the core values that anchor our experience and shared purpose? How do we negotiate differences in personal values in order to identify shared values?

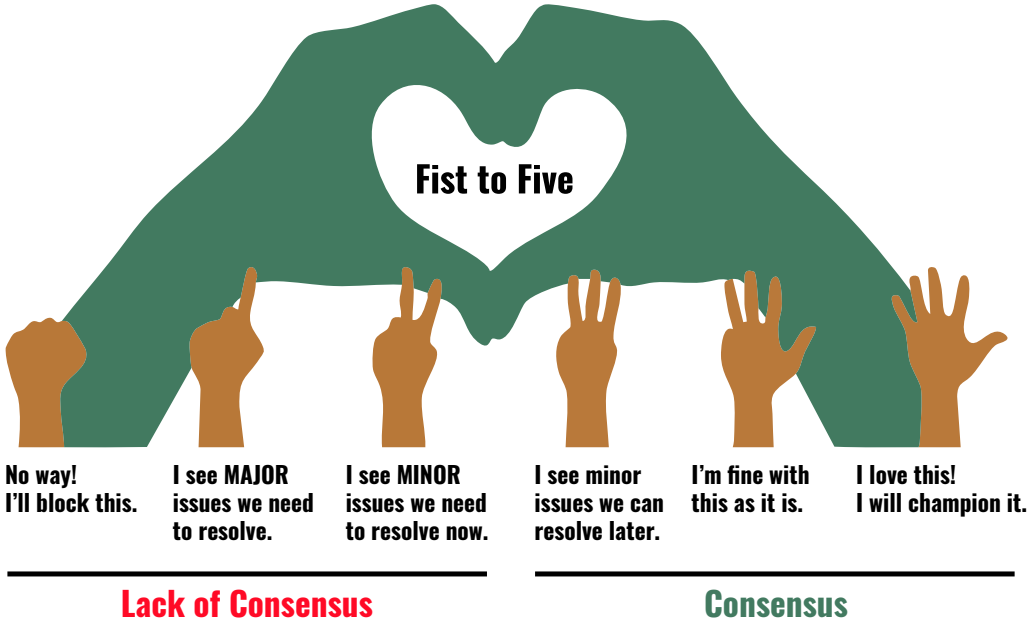
- Needs
  - ◇ What do we need from a healthy classroom environment? How does it feel when those needs are not met? How can we articulate what we need in advance?
- Experiences
  - ◇ What are our previous experiences with conflict? What are our previous experiences with classroom environments? How do our experiences shape our values and needs?
- Balance
  - ◇ How will we balance conflicting needs, values, and experiences? Where can we negotiate areas of tension to reach a consensus?

Examples:

Speaking in first drafts: We may be speaking about some difficult topics out loud for the first time, and we will offer grace if those "first drafts" seem messy and require correction.

Offering and receiving corrections: We will offer and remain open to gentle corrections from peers in the spirit of education and mutual respect, remembering that we are all here to learn and grow together. We will offer correction in the moment rather than harboring resentment.

Reaching Consensus using Fist to Five:



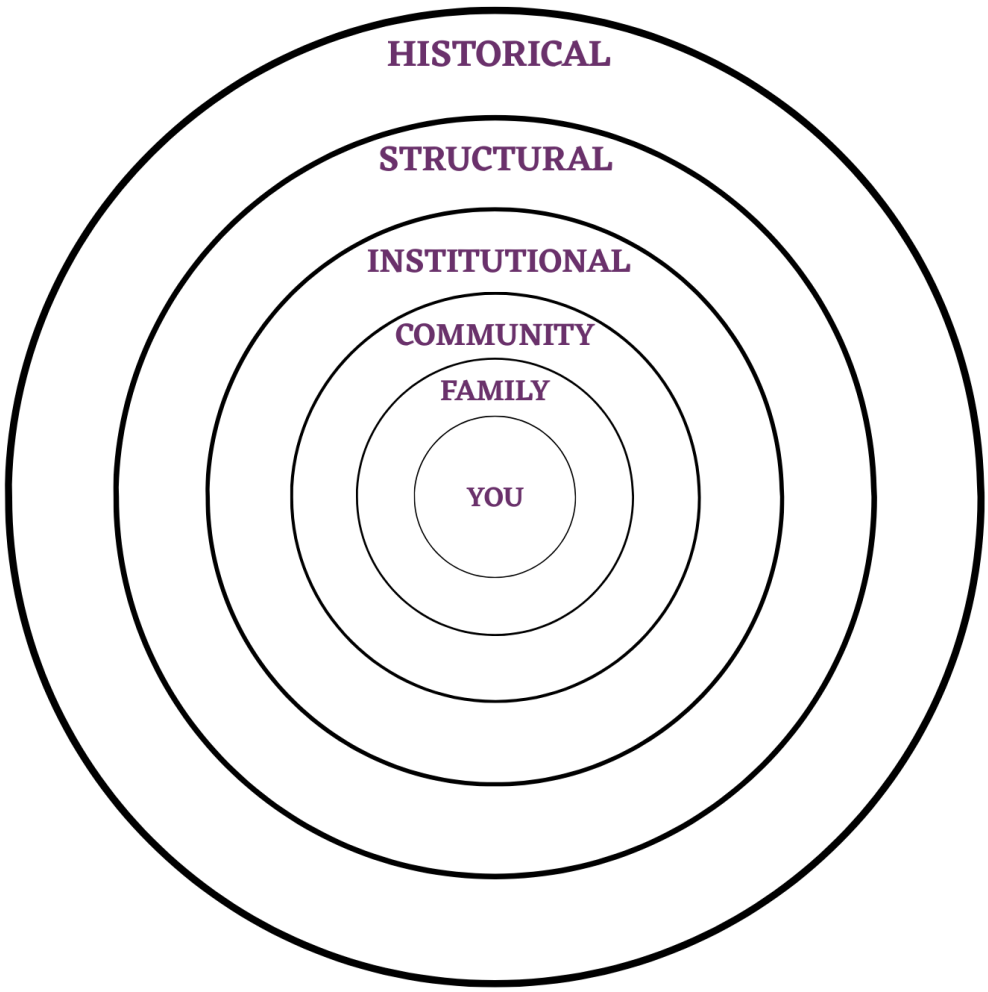
Source: www.lucidmeetings.com/glossary/fist-five

Appendix B: Understanding Socialization

UNDERSTANDING SOCIALIZATION

TO WHAT DEGREE DO OUR CIRCUMSTANCES LIMIT OUR CHOICES?

THIS VISUAL HELPS US REMAIN MINDFUL OF THE STRUCTURES THAT SHAPE OUR ACTIONS AND HOW WE NAVIGATE OUR PLACE IN SOCIETY.



Appendix C: Man Box Exercise

THE MAN BOX EXERCISE

ON TOP OF THE BOX, EXPRESS THE MAIN PURPOSE OF PERFORMING THE BEHAVIORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO TOXIC PATRIARCHAL THINKING.

ON THE LEFT AND RIGHT SIDES OF THE BOX, LIST THE VERBAL CONSEQUENCES OF NOT CONFORMING TO THE STEREOTYPES.

INSIDE THE BOX, DESCRIBE HOW MEN ARE STEREOTYPICALLY EXPECTED TO BEHAVE.
EXAMPLES: STRONG, STOIC, BRAVE

EXAMPLES: WEAK, INFERIOR, LAME

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BOX, LIST THE PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES OF NOT CONFORMING TO THIS STEREOTYPE.
EXAMPLES: ASSAULT, BULLIED, POLICED

Appendix D: Practicing Pronouns

Lesson 1: What is a Pronoun?

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the purpose of pronouns in English grammar.
- Practice forming sentences using pronouns.
- Identify different types and uses of pronouns (personal, possessive, etc.).

A pronoun is...

a word that can be used to replace a noun phrase and that refers either to the participants of a conversation (e.g., *I*, *you*) or to someone or something mentioned elsewhere in a conversation (e.g., *she*, *it*, *this*).

Different Types of Pronouns

TYPE	WHAT IT DOES	EXAMPLES
Personal	Refers to specific people or things directly	I, you, he, she, they, we, it
Possessive	Indicates ownership or possession of something	mine, yours, his, hers, theirs, ours its
Demonstrative	Describes specific people or things nearby or far away	this, that, these, those
Interrogative	Used to ask questions	who, whom, whose, what, which
Relative	Provides additional information about a noun	who, whom, whose, which, that
Reciprocal	Indicate two or more people or things are acting on each other	each other, one another
Reflexive	Refers back to the subject or the sentence to indicate an action performed on oneself	myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves
Indefinite	Refers to nonspecific people or things	anyone, someone, everyone, nobody, everything, anything, all, some, any, none, each, few, many, several, both
Distributive	Refers to members of group separately	each, either, neither

Let's Practice!

Below is a list of sentences that identify subjects (specifically people/animals, places, things, or ideas). Fill in the blanks using pronouns from the list provided on page 1. After each sentence, identify which type of pronoun you are using.

1. Justin likes to sing, but _____ has terrible stage fright.
2. The teacher believed that _____ students were capable of performing well on _____ exams.
3. The cat loves playing with _____ toy mouse.
4. Sam checked _____ watch and realized _____ was late for school.
5. My brother enjoys watching movies during _____ downtime.
6. Florida is known as the "sunshine state" because of _____ warm climate.
7. _____ did not get much sleep last night, so _____ do/does not feel as energetic today.
8. "_____ is not how you should do the dishes," said _____ mom.
9. Can _____ please put _____ key in a safe place so _____ will not lose it?
10. The group of friends _____ took a seat at the table.
11. Ashley, _____ enjoys crafting, made a lovely scrapbook.
12. _____ from the lesson started to make sense once the teacher explained it to the student a second time.
13. _____ should all be kind to _____ _____.
14. _____ in the DMV looked as if _____ had been waiting for over an hour.
15. The bridge _____ leads to the other side of the river looks unstable.
16. Remember to treat _____ _____ the way _____ would like to be treated.

17. Double-checking _____ answers is a good way to ensure you score high on _____ test.

18. _____ can tell which drink is _____ because it has my name on _____.

19. If _____ works together, _____ will get the job done faster.

20._____ looks like there will be rain today.

Lesson 2: Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Grammar

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the differences between descriptive and prescriptive grammar.
- Identify the potentially restorative functions of descriptive grammar.
- Analyze the impacts of prescriptive grammar usage in our own lives.

Descriptive vs. Prescriptive Grammar

The above article by Eli Hinkle describes the differences between descriptive and prescriptive grammar.

Hinkle defines **descriptive grammar** as:

> *"a study of a language, its structure, and its rules as they are used in daily life by its speakers from all walks of life, including standard and nonstandard varieties. ... A descriptive study of grammar is non-judgmental, and it does not have the goal of determining what represents good or bad language, correct or incorrect structures, or grammatical or ungrammatical forms (Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad, 2006)."*

We use descriptive grammar every day whether we realize it or not. For example, the declaration "Someone forgot **their** keys!" uses **their** to reference someone whose identity is unknown. Descriptive approaches to grammar are restorative when they honor the language already used by communities and incorporate a plurality of language uses.

By contrast, Hinkle defines **prescriptive grammar** as:

> *"specif[ying] how a language should be used and what grammar rules should be followed. A prescriptivist view of language implies a distinction between 'good grammar' and 'bad grammar,' and its primary focus is on standard forms of grammar and syntactic constructions. Among native speakers of practically any language, a prescriptivist approach to grammar often encompasses many ideas, opinions, and judgments about how and when grammar rules should be used."*

Using overly prescriptive language, including only understanding pronouns as singular (he/him, she/her), ignores how people already use language.

Prescriptive grammar can be used judgmentally as a way of policing other peoples' language.

In actuality, language use changes over time: The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, adds new words each year. Consider the brand names (Kleenex, Tylenol) that now stand in as nouns and others (Google, FedEx) that stand in as verbs.

Let's Reflect...

Now that we know the difference between these two approaches to grammar, try to think of moments in your life when you might have used either descriptive or prescriptive language and times when it has been used toward you. Make a reflective list in the space below.

My list:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Discussion:

- Have there been times when prescriptive grammar was used to make me feel uneducated, small, or powerless?
- What were my experiences like in English classes when I was in school? What was my relationship to grammar, and what might I still be carrying from those experiences?
- How does my language community (however I define it) use grammar (including African American Vernacular English)? In what ways can grammar be used to empower and affirm our identities?

Let's Brainstorm!

In your learning pods, think of ways that you can work toward using more descriptive (nonjudgmental) language in conversations with each other and those outside of class. Record your ideas, and share them with the larger group during our closing Circle.

Lesson 3: Pronouns and Subject–Verb Agreement

Learning Objectives:

- Understand the grammatical significance of subject–verb agreement.
- Apply descriptive grammar approaches to subject–verb agreement.
- Analyze places of tension between descriptive and prescriptive grammar in pronoun use.

What does subject–verb agreement mean?

Subject–verb agreement generally means that the verb being used in a sentence should match the number of subjects (singular or plural) in that sentence. However, as the Chicago Manual of Style Section 5.48 points out, singular uses of "they" (like singular uses of "you") take a plural verb. When writing or talking about people who use nonbinary pronouns (they/them) or multiple pronouns (she/they or he/they), the verb should agree with the pronoun being used, even if the subject is singular.

- For nonbinary pronouns (they/them), a sentence could look like this: **Kieran (they/them) said that they prefer to walk rather than drive to the store.**
- For people who use more than one pronoun, a sentence can alternate between/among pronouns, and could look like this: **Kieran (he/they) said that they prefer to walk to the store. He can drive, but they don't always like to.**

Different Types of Verbs

TYPE	WHAT IT DOES	EXAMPLES
Action Verbs	Describes an action that someone or something performs in a sentence	Run, walk, jump, eat, speak, think, touch, look, sing
Linking Verbs	Connects the subject of a sentence to a word that describes/identifies it	Forms of "be" (am, is, are, was, were); become, seems, look, feel, taste, sound, smell
Auxiliary (Helping) Verbs	Work together with the main verb in a sentence to express tense, mood, and voice	• Forms of "be" (am, is, are, was, were) • Forms of "have" (have, has, had) • Forms of "do" (do, does, did) • Modal verbs (will, would, shall, should, may, might, can, could, must)

Below are sentences that include a **missing subject/pronoun or verb**. Choose the option that best fits each sentence and be prepared to discuss why.

1. Jackson and I _____ (has/have) the same hobby: bird watching.
2. Can you _____ (ran/run) to the store and pick up more milk?
3. Someone left _____ (his/her/their) coat behind.
4. Rachel said they _____(was/were) not looking forward to _____ (write/writing) their paper for class.
5. Everyone _____ (work/worked) really hard to finish the project yesterday.
6. They _____ (are/is) excited for the gathering later on today.
7. He usually likes to read before bed, but last night they _____ (was/were) too tired to even pick up a book.
8. I _____ (am/are) going to work later.
9. He enjoys _____ (watch/watching) movies more than he enjoys_____ (reading/reads) books.
10. The teacher _____ (grades/graded) papers while the students _____ (worked/works) on their assignments.
11. Write a sentence about a person who uses she/her pronouns and enjoys nature:

    _____
12. Write a sentence about a person who uses they/them pronouns and dislikes coffee:

    _____
13. Write a sentence about a person with unknown pronouns who hates bugs:

    _____
14. Write a sentence about a person who uses he/they pronouns and loves cars:

    _____

15. Write a sentence about a person who uses she/he pronouns and dislikes storms:

    _____

Discussion

1. What was challenging about this exercise? Why was it challenging?

2. Where did you experience tension between "descriptive" and "prescriptive" approaches to grammar during this exercise?

3. What is the purpose of subject–verb agreement?

Lesson 4: Best Practices for Pronoun Use

Learning Objectives:

- Explore the difference between labeling and self-identification.
- Analyze the relationship between language and power.
- Create strategies for building more conscious language use into our community agreement and daily practice.

Examining the Power of Language Through Eddie Ellis's Letter

An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language

Ellis writes, "In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to simply refer to us as PEOPLE. PEOPLE currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, PEOPLE in prison, PEOPLE with criminal convictions, but PEOPLE."

Consider how the concepts discussed in Eddie Ellis's letter relate to pronoun usage.

Questions for Consideration:

- What intentional and unintentional power does language hold?
- What is Ellis saying about identity and its relationship to language?
- How does this reading relate to your own experience with labels and labeling?
- How can we invite people to make their preferred pronouns known in our classroom? What would it look like to normalize pronoun identification and/or to build pronoun use into our community agreement?

In-Depth Discussion

Let's expand on the conversation of labeling. As a cohort, discuss how you feel when someone places a certain label on you. This could take the form of dehumanizing language or the wrong gender identity.

Discussion Prompts for Learning Pods:

- Have you overheard or participated in conversations involving

labeling? How might you imagine stepping into these conversations differently?

- Does labeling matter only when it's being done to you? How often do you think about how your words affect others?
- Why is self-identifying/self-expression important?

Discussion Prompts for the Whole Group:

- Discuss two main takeaways about pronouns that we have gained after this workshop series.
- What are some ways we can practice normalizing pronoun use inside of class?
- In what way is learning and respecting people's choice of pronouns restorative? How does it relate to the values listed in our community agreement?
- Evaluate how we have responded to discussions regarding preferred pronoun usage. What can we do to continue to improve our practice?

Appendix E: Avoidance Bingo Facilitation Guide

What Is This Card, and Why Are You Holding It?

This is not a game.

This is not a competition. This is a mirror.

The *Avoidance Bingo* card is a real-time self-awareness tool designed to help us recognize how often we use certain phrases or reactions to avoid the discomfort of difficult conversations, particularly those related to race, identity, power, and harm.

You may hear these statements come up in this week's sessions, or you may find that you've said or believed some of them yourself. That's okay.

The purpose is not to shame but to see and to catch ourselves in the act of avoidance so we can choose courage instead.

Why "Avoidance" Matters

Avoidance is a survival tactic.

It's how many of us have been taught to respond when things get uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or challenging.

But when we avoid:

- We silence important truths.
- We protect the status quo.
- We trade growth for comfort.
- And we risk causing more harm.

This card is a quiet nudge toward accountability, reflection, and responsibility in conversations that matter.

How to Use the Card

- Mark a square silently each time you hear one of the listed phrases spoken during today's session by anyone, including yourself.
- Mark a square if you *think* one of those statements, but don't say it out loud. Internal avoidance counts, too.

Together, we will take time to reflect—not to call anyone out, but to call ourselves in.

Rules of Engagement

1. No Shame. No Scorekeeping.
   This isn't about judgment. It's about noticing.

2. Mark Quietly. Reflect Deeply.
   You won't be asked to explain your card. Your reflections are your own. You'll be invited to journal or share voluntarily during the debrief.

3. If You Feel Defensive…Pause.
   That feeling is not a signal to retreat. It's a signal to go deeper.

4. Stay Curious.
   Ask yourself: "Why did that statement show up? What am I trying to avoid, protect, or preserve?"

5. Use the Card as a Mirror, Not a Weapon.
   This is not about catching others. It's about catching yourself.

If you're more focused on *who* said what, you've missed the point.

Why We're Doing This Together

Conversations about race, identity, power, and justice bring up deep, layered reactions, especially when we've been taught to prioritize politeness over truth.

Avoidance shows up when fear, guilt, confusion, or shame take the wheel. But so does transformation.

This card helps us interrupt that pattern.

If you find yourself feeling exposed, irritated, or unsure… pause, breathe, and remember: Growth is not a performance. It's a practice.

Avoidance Bingo: Debrief Talking Points

The statements on the card are commonly used to deflect, minimize, or avoid conversations about race, power, and systemic injustice. While they may feel comfortable or neutral, they often uphold the status quo, diminish

lived experiences, and prevent honest dialogue. Let's review each statement and examine how they are avoidant.

It's up to the new generation to solve racial issues.

This mindset absolves current generations of responsibility. It's a convenient deflection that delays action and suggests that systemic change is someone else's burden, usually the very people most harmed by it. Justice requires intergenerational accountability, not passing the buck.

If we don't have an issue with each other, there is no need to discuss race.

This assumes interpersonal harmony equals systemic fairness. It ignores the larger context of institutionalized inequity, historical trauma, and the ongoing impact of racism beyond personal relationships. It's not just about getting along; it's about dismantling structures that harm entire communities.

My European ancestors also experienced racism.

This conflates oppression with prejudice and erases the specific, systemic, and generational nature of anti-Black racism. While many European immigrants faced hardship, they were eventually absorbed into whiteness and gained access to its privileges. That's not true for everyone.

What about Black-on-Black crime?

This question deflects from the topic of systemic, state-sanctioned violence and ignores that crime typically occurs within racial groups due to segregation and economic conditions. It's often weaponized to invalidate Black pain and sidestep accountability.

I have Black friends/family members.

Having proximity to Black people doesn't mean you understand their experiences or confront your own biases. This statement often serves as a shield from engaging with deeper truths about racism and complicity.

I don't see color.

This statement erases identity and ignores the very real impact of race in people's lives. Refusing to see color is a refusal to see injustice. Equity requires us to see, name, and address difference, not deny it.

We should look forward, not backward.

You can't build a just future without acknowledging the past. This sentiment avoids the discomfort of historical accountability and denies the enduring consequences of slavery, segregation, and systemic inequality.

Discussions about race are too uncomfortable.

Discomfort is a necessary part of growth. If conversations about race are uncomfortable, that's not a reason to avoid them; it's an invitation to lean in. Avoiding the topic sustains harm.

What does race have to do with Restorative Justice?

Everything. You can't restore what was never equitable to begin with. Racial injustice is baked into our institutions, and ignoring it undermines any attempt at true repair or transformation.

Black people can be racist, too.

This is a misapplication of the term. Prejudice can come from anyone, but racism is about power. In a society structured by white supremacy, Black people do not hold systemic power to oppress White people. This response is often used to derail real conversations.

It's up to the new generation to solve racial issues.	If we don't have an issue with each other, there is no need to discuss race.	My European ancestors also experienced racism.	What about Black on Black crime?	I have Black friends/ family members.
I don't see color.	We should look forward, not backward.	Discussions about race are too uncomfortable.	What does race have to do with Restorative Justice?	Black people can be racist, too.
Racism is a thing of the past.	We don't have that problem here.		My ancestors never owned enslaved people.	Slavery is in the past.
The U.S. has had a Black president.	White people have struggles, too.	I'm not racist.	Why can't White people feel pride in their heritage?	I'm tired of talking about race.
We should all be united.	The only race is the human race.	Why is there no White history month?	I should not be punished for what my ancestors did in the past.	White people are just as oppressed as people of color.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