



Guest Blog: YouthBank Online, Collaboration

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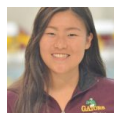
YouthBank Online, Collaboration (by Alice Zhang)

The topic of the meeting was privilege, and the goal was for our group to discuss times and places when we felt privileged and those when we did not. Prior to the meeting, I filled the worksheet designated for the activity we were going to do later. The activity involved writing about the identities that make up each of us, and I wrote about my identity as an Asian American, someone with healthcare, being bilingual, being able-bodied, an atheist, and a U.S. citizen. Filling out that activity, I initially felt unwilling to share my identity as an atheist and was tempted to substitute it for something I deemed "safer," like a student of the STEM field. But after looking through what I wrote again, I realized that I had to share this identity--regardless of how naked I felt doing it--because if I couldn't come forward and share with my team, then it was unlikely that my team members would. When it came time to do the actual activity with my team, I started off by introducing the activity and describing the purpose of it, talking about how this is a difficult discussion, but that I believed my team could absolutely approach it with respect. I then did a walkthrough of my answers, rushing a bit because despite deciding to put myself out there, I felt nervous. In this meeting, I had never openly labeled my religious beliefs with anyone.

My group members' reactions were very kind. They nodded along with what I said and listened with interest. After I was done sharing, one member chimed in relating their experiences with being part of two cultures with my own identity as an Asian American. They talked about how they felt they were a different person around their family members versus their friends at school and how that seemed like a disconnect to some, was completely natural to them. The other group member present (one was absent that day) was quiet this time. They didn't share the experiences of being a child of immigrants or a person of color but listened throughout the discussion to what we had to say. I encouraged them to share what they were comfortable with. As if they were waiting for the invitation, they went through their list of identities, starting out from the positions they held as an older sibling and leading up to their status as someone of the LGBTQ+ community but also their status as someone of a strict religious upbringing. I actually did not know how to respond to their comments. I'd never experienced this before. They continued, though, telling us about how they still struggled with being open about their identity with family members whose religious beliefs conflicted with them. In my moment of hesitation, our other group member remarked on how it must be difficult to have such conflict, thanking them for sharing with us. I followed their lead, thanking the whole group for sharing such personal experiences and telling them how proud I was of them for participating in such a difficult discussion.

Looking back, I wonder if I should not have first shared all the identities I wrote down. I wonder if sharing my own religious status pressured my group to discuss theirs or encouraged them to. Maybe my sharing such personal details made the group members feel as if they had to follow my lead even if they weren't comfortable doing so. However, the goal of the activity was to have a discussion about these difficult topics, so perhaps a bit of discomfort is necessary. But how much discomfort is too much? How can I tell? I also wonder if my response to the experiences my team members shared should have been better worded. Even preparing as I did, I was unsure of what to do when it came to the sharing of such personal experiences aside from listening. From this, I wonder if I'm looking for a strategy to approach these sorts of situations as a facilitator that maybe doesn't exist.

In working as a facilitator of small groups I've come to realize that there are times where even the most detailed plan isn't as helpful as simply listening and connecting with the group. In these moments, we get to see each other beyond the roles we hold in the group. When I talked about my struggles being Asian American, I wasn't the facilitator looking in from the outside, trying to track if the discussion was going well or seeing which group members were talking and which weren't, but another team member sharing my experiences. It was a side to facilitation that I had little experience with, but realize is incredibly important. Looking back, I've learned that the real strategy to approaching such situations is to trust and collaborate with my group members, knowing that even if I stumble, they can take the lead too.



About the Author: Alice is currently a first-year student at the UMN-Twin Cities and was one of the lead facilitators this past

summer for Youthprise's YouthBank Online. Alice is currently planning on majoring in computer science and hopes to one day help develop technology for anything from education to neuroscience. She's still exploring her options! When she is not focused on the school and the future, Alice enjoys reading, ice skating, watching kdramas, and bothering her cat.

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