

River Stories: Our Gender Histories & Herstories

The Bonner Community Engagement Curriculum

BWBR Description: *Bonner Curriculum workshop guides participants to reflect on and share the stories of how they developed their gender identities and perceptions.*

Overview: This workshop provides a creative and artistic way to build community through the sharing of stories. It sets a foundation for participants to share their own paths (personal and professional), using the metaphor of a river to describe life experiences. This activity is designed to help build context and cohesion in a group, as well as help people practice their communication and listening abilities. This particular version of River Stories is modified to guide participants in reflecting and sharing the stories of how they developed their gender identities and perceptions.


Category: Reflection; visioning; identity development; communication skills; diversity; community building; gender; diversity

Level: Suitable for all levels (introductory to advanced). It can be done more than once.



**suitable
for all
levels**

Recommended Bonner Sequence: This training is recommended for Bonner students as part of a mid-year or program retreat, or in All-Bonner Meetings, perhaps involving some mixing of class groups and mentoring (Bonner Buddies or families). It is also recommended as part of the Dialogue Across Diversity and Inclusion 4x4 model, Stage 1: Exposure.

Dialogue Across Diversity and Inclusion <i>4x4 Student Developmental Model</i>			
Stage 1: Exposure	Stage 2: Understanding	Stage 3: Application and Discussion	Stage 4: Adaptation
			

Learning Outcomes:

- Provide individual participants with opportunities to reflect on their personal histories and herstories in regards to gender, and how they would use the metaphor of a river to describe their lives.
- Deepen interpersonal skills, including the ability to reflect, listen, articulate oneself, and develop relationships.
- Build a feeling of collaboration and sharing among the participants as individuals and as members of different programs and communities.

Materials:

- Big flip chart paper
- Markers
- Tape
- Space for participants to spread out
- Our Gender Histories and Herstories: Guidelines to Creating Your River Story Handout (page 9)
- Listening and Sharing Your River Story Handout (page 10)

How To Prepare:

This workshop is characterized by significant individual reflection and sharing of personal stories by participants. Though the River Stories prompt is fairly open-ended and open to creativity, it is important for the facilitator to create their own River Story through a lens of gender perceptions so that participants have a sense of the task at hand.

Additionally, the facilitator should be sure to print out the two handouts prior to the start of the session and have big flip chart paper, markers, and tape on hand.

Brief Outline:

This session may need longer than an hour to be done successfully. It could possibly be done in that time frame with a small group (class cohort) if sharing is done in pairs.

We recommend having a bit longer (90 minutes).

90 minute plan:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 2. Warm Ups (Name Game: I Don't Know) | suggested time 15 minutes |
| 3. Context for River Story | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 4. Personal Rivers and Sharing | suggested time 35 minutes |
| 5. Gallery Walk | suggested time 15 minutes |
| 6. Closing | suggested time 10 minutes |

60 minute plan (only for small groups):

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Introduction | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 2. Create a short pair warm up | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 3. Context for River Story | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 4. Personal Rivers and Sharing | suggested time 30 minutes |
| 5. Gallery Walk | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 6. Closing | suggested time 5 minutes |

Part 1) Introductions

Suggested time: 5 minutes

As facilitator, plan your introduction to set a tone. You may want to say:

- Name
- Your role
- Something that communicates what you hope happens through the activity and sets a tone of relaxed and comfortable sharing.

Part 2) Warm Up: I Don't Know (Longer version)

Suggested time: 10-15 minutes

if doing the shorter version, find or invent a 5-minute warm up. Use Games, Games, Games for ideas.

If people don't know each other's names, do a brief name game or introductions.

Then, do the following warm up, illustrating it first. There are three rounds. Use a watch or timer.

I Don't Know

Purpose: This warm up game is a great thing to use with a smaller group of people (or in triads in a large group) when people already know each other a little bit (names, roles, etc.) but haven't taken the next step to learn more.

Materials: A watch. No other materials are needed, but there does need to be sufficient time for each round (roughly 3 minutes per person or 10 minutes total).

Attributes: Works well with a group who has begun to know each other but perhaps not had the opportunity to slow down and learn more. Examples include (1) a group in the middle of a retreat, (2) at the middle of a project for a group that meets only periodically, (3) as a refresher for a group that is stuck. Tone should be inquiring and respectful. Space needs to allow for triads to not be overwhelmed by noise from other groups. This can also be done as a brief warm up for a pair (for example in a meeting), perhaps between project manager and volunteer, two colleagues, or mentor and mentee. Usually is very refreshing and interesting.

How to: Explain that the group is going to do a brief warm up activity called "I Don't Know," designed to learn more about each other. Ask the group to break into groups of 3 (2-4 can be done as well). Explain that there are rounds for each member of the group. During each round, the other members of the group will focus on one person. Each person will have time (30-60 seconds, as called by facilitator) to get to know the other person better by alternating with statements beginning with "I don't know..." Give the following example:

"I don't know if you have any pets."

"I don't know what is your favorite color."

"I don't know if you like your job."

"I don't know what sign you are."

"I don't know where you live."

"I don't know if you like Chinese food."

"I don't know what things you like to celebrate."

Reassure the group that this isn't hard - don't think too much; it's just a stream of consciousness flow. The person listening doesn't have to remember everything, just pay attention. Then she or he will have the opportunity to say things back. It doesn't matter if you can't remember all of them, just share what you feel comfortable sharing. That would be like:

"I have a dog. I like blue. I love my job, but sometimes I feel tired by it. I live in the south of the city. I like Thai better than Chinese. I love to celebrate my team's accomplishments, especially over dinner and dessert."

As facilitator, you cannot participate, since you need to keep time and make sure that for each person, there is a round of "I don't know" statements followed by the person's responses.

That's it. Do the rounds. Then, if you'd like, bring the groups' attention back together and ask for comments ("What did you learn?").

Part 3) Context Setting for Exercise

Suggested time: 5 minutes

This segment of the workshop aims to provide context for the exercise to come.

Complete the following items during this time:

- Review the agenda and goals (if didn't complete earlier)
- Introduce that the river metaphor is about stories, particularly how we developed our own sense of gender and perceptions of gender in the world around us
- Introduce a few definitions that may be helpful in discussing gender
- Set appropriate tone of enjoyment, relaxation, reflection, learning

Share quotes below (or others) or otherwise engage people in connecting with the metaphor of a river. You can also use YouTube to find some relevant songs and images of a river.

"There are roads out of the secret places within us along which we all must move as we go to touch others." ~ Romare Bearden

"A river passes through many countries and each claims for its own. But there is only one river." ~ A Sufi Master

Ask Me

Some time when the river is ice ask me mistakes I have made. Ask me whether what I have done is my life. Others have come in their slow way into my thought, and some have tried to help

*or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.*

*I will listen to what you say.
You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.*

Share the following definitions that may be helpful in discussing gender (directly quoted from Planned Parenthood):

- **Gender:** Gender is complex: It's a social and legal status, and set of expectations from society, about behaviors, characteristics, and thoughts. Each culture has standards about the way that people should behave based on their gender. This is also generally male or female. But instead of being about body parts, it's more about how you're expected to act, because of your sex.
- **Gender Identity:** Your gender identity is how you feel inside and how you express those feelings. Clothing, appearance, and behaviors can all be ways to express your gender identity. It's a feeling that begins very early in life.
- **Gender Role:** Expectations society and people have about behaviors, thoughts, and characteristics that go along with a person's assigned sex.
- **Gender Expression:** Clothing, appearance, and behaviors can all be ways to express your gender identity

Part 4) Personal Rivers: Individual and Pair Sharing

Suggested time: 30-35 minutes

1. Explain the concept of a personal river story, using illustration on big flip chart paper. *Make sure to make your poster of your River Story before that.*
2. Guide people to think especially about their story of gender. Use or modify the following scripted prompt:
"Think about significant experiences, conversations, or interactions in your life that have shaped the way you think about gender. Draw out your river story with this lens. What tributaries or drains does your story have? Perhaps begin

when you first heard about the word... how did you come up with this concept? what influenced you?"

3. Encourage participants to think about incorporating the following symbols. Share the examples below each symbol to provide context for what the participants could be reflecting on and portraying in their river. The prompt and examples below are also provided on the *Our Gender Histories and Herstories: Guidelines to Creating Your River Story Handout* (page 9).

- **HAND = SERVICE**

- e.g. serving at my site was the first time I was exposed to ideas about gender (gender roles, gender identities, gender expressions) that were different to me
- e.g. while serving at my site, I was confronted by people who did not share my beliefs about gender, and it required me to examine my relationship to service

- **HEART = RELATIONSHIP (mentor, parent, friend)**

- e.g. an important person in my life helped me discover my gender identity/role/and/or expression
- e.g. an important person in my life is of a different gender than I am, and our relationship has been formative because....

- **ROCK = OBSTACLES OR TURNING POINTS**

- e.g. my first conception of gender came during pre-school, when all of the boys' school uniforms were pants and shirts, and all of the girls' uniforms were dresses.
- e.g. my family/friends were supportive/unsupportive of my exploration of what my gender identity/role/and/or expression is

- **TREE = IDEAS OR IMPORTANT GROWTH**

- e.g. I have developed as an ally to people of different genders
- e.g. I have undergone a lot of personal growth related to my gender identity/role/and/or expression

- **DREAM FOR FUTURE (whatever symbol)**

- e.g. I want to explore my gender identity/role/and/or expression
- e.g. I want to advocate for and support others in exploring their gender identity/role/and/or expression

4. Each person should have a big flip chart paper and access to markers. Pass out the *Our Gender Histories and Herstories: Guidelines to Creating Your River Story Handout* (page 9). Allow people to spread out and draw their river story quietly

(music?) for 10 minutes or so.

5. Then have people break into pairs. Give out the *Listening and Sharing Your River Story Handout* (page 10) with Guidelines for Partner A and B, regarding sharing. Basically, each person should have the opportunity to share his/her river story and for the partner to “listen back” to the story. Facilitator may note that this exercise functions not only as reflection (in drawing) but also as reflection in communication/ listening. Roughly 10-15 minutes.
6. Transition participants to hanging up their River Stories.

Part 5) Large Group Gallery Walk and Insights

Suggested time: 10-15 minutes

1. Have people take about 10 minutes to roam around the room and read other River Stories posted on the walls. Explain that this should be a silent activity.
2. Bring the group back into a circle and open it up for reflections, insights, and questions.

Part 6) Closure or transition into next activity (if there is one)

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Bring the group back together to wrap up. Some suggested closing questions for the group:

- What insights do you have about this group?
- What did you learn about yourself and your gender history/herstory that surprised you?
- Did you learn something about someone else that you didn't expect to?
- How did it feel to articulate to someone else your gender story? What effect did that have on you?

This workshop can also be followed by an extended group activity involving creating a larger river that connects the participants and/or the campus, organization or efforts they are involved in.

Our Gender Histories & Herstories

Guidelines to Creating Your River Story

Think about significant experiences, conversations, or interactions in your life that have shaped the way you think about gender. Draw out your river story with this lens. What tributaries or drains does your story have? Perhaps begin when you first heard about the word... how did you come up with this concept? what influenced you?

Feel free to incorporate the following symbols:

HAND = SERVICE

- e.g. serving at my site was the first time I was exposed to ideas about gender (gender roles, gender identities, gender expressions) that were different to me
- e.g. while serving at my site, I was confronted by people who did not share my beliefs about gender, and it required me to examine my relationship to service

HEART = RELATIONSHIP (mentor, parent, friend)

- e.g. an important person in my life helped me discover my gender identity/role/and/or expression
- e.g. an important person in my life is of a different gender than I am, and our relationship has been formative because....

ROCK = OBSTACLES OR TURNING POINTS

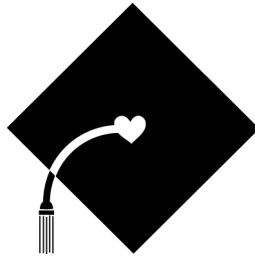
- e.g. my first conception of gender came during pre-school, when all of the boys' school uniforms were pants and shirts, and all of the girls' uniforms were dresses.
- e.g. my family/friends were supportive/unsupportive of my exploration of what my gender identity/role/and/or expression is

TREE = IDEAS OR IMPORTANT GROWTH

- e.g. I have developed as an ally to people of different genders
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DREAM FOR FUTURE (whatever symbol)

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- e.g. I want to advocate for and support others in exploring their gender identity/role/and/or expression



Listening and Sharing Your River Story

Guidelines

When sharing, you want to:

- Give a brief (3-minute) “guided tour” of your river, its tributaries and drains.
- Share one affirming and one challenging experience and what you learned from each of them.
- Share your symbols:

HAND = SERVICE

HEART = RELATIONSHIP (mentor, parent, friend)

ROCK = OBSTACLES OR TURNING POINTS

TREE = IDEAS OR IMPORTANT GROWTH

DREAM FOR FUTURE (whatever symbol)

Partner B

When listening, you might reflect on:

What patterns you sense...

What moved or touched me was...

What I heard as your values were...

Switch roles and make sure that each partner has enough time to share.