

Facilitating Empathetic Conversation & Active Listening

Using Images to Express and Understand Ideas, Experiences, and Emotions

Empathy Training Series

BWBR Description: This exercise uses active listening techniques and photographs to facilitate empathetic discussion.

Overview: In two rounds, participants will choose a photo from a provided selection that they feel reflects their interpretation of a concept and an experience in their lives. For the purpose of this guide, the concept of “advocacy” will be used to facilitate empathetic conversation and active listening. The facilitator may use the same concept (advocacy) given in this guide or a concept of their choice (e.g. social justice, race relations). Participants will reflect as a group as well as individually on this experience.

Category: diversity; communication skills; dialogue; active listening; reflection

Level: Introductory; This exercise would be best for freshmen or new students.

Bonner Outcomes: Communication Skills
Diversity and Intercultural Competence
Empathy

Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- Participants will communicate their own points of view and beliefs about advocacy, using photographs as a prompt
- Participants will practice active listening and reflective response
- Participants will participate in empathetic conversation to deepen their understanding of each other

Materials:

Online

1. Fifty to sixty carefully chosen digital images, giving proper credit to creators
2. A padlet with the digital images mentioned above and a corresponding link
3. A document with tips on active listening skills and reflective response
4. A document with the group reflection questions
5. Zoom or other online video call platform
6. Pen and paper for reflection time (optional)

In-Person

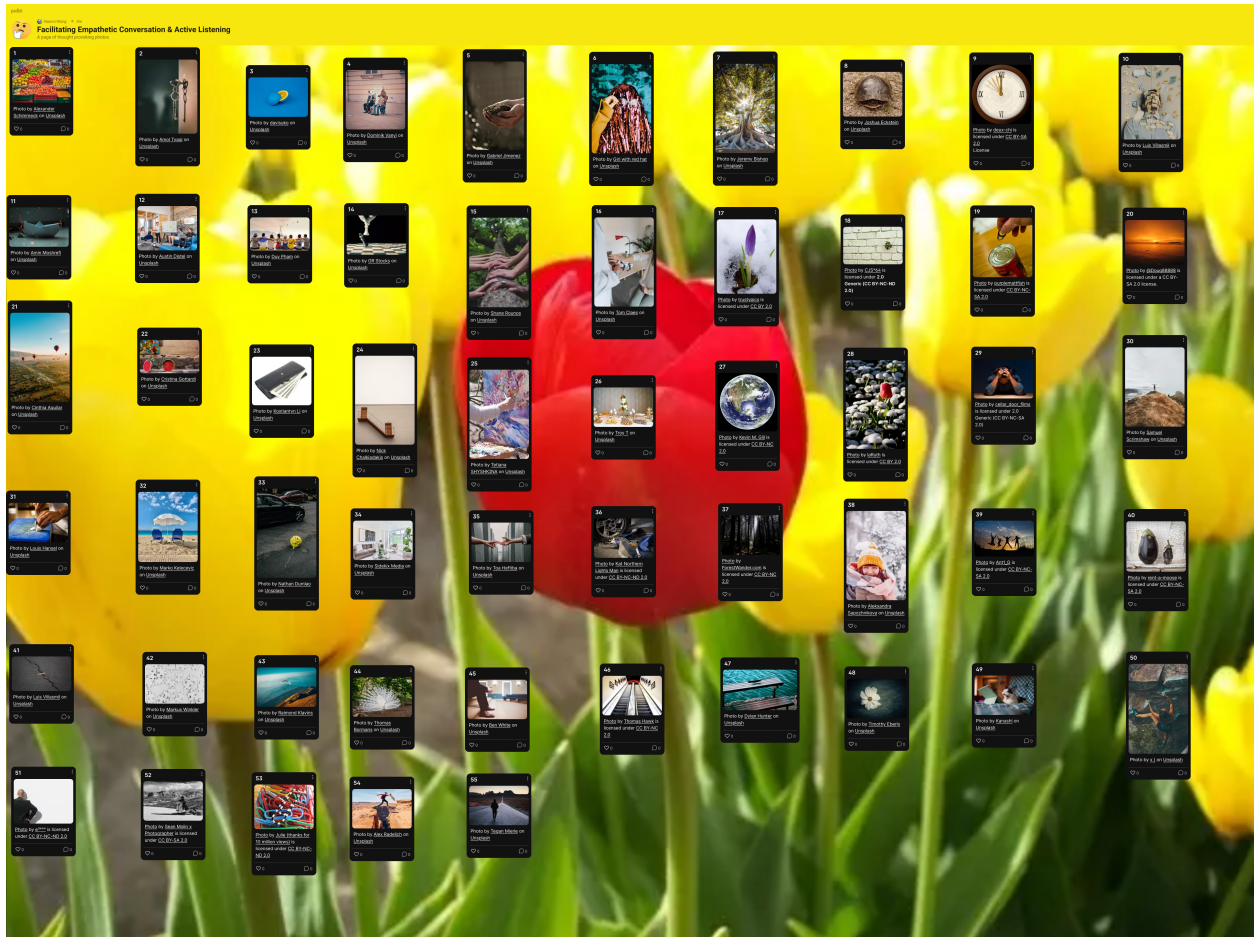
1. Fifty to sixty printed images, giving proper credit to creators (suggestions on where to get these are provided at the end of this document)
2. Handout with tips on active listening skills and reflective response
3. Handout with group reflection questions
4. Pen and paper for reflection time

How to Prepare:

Online

Set up a padlet on padlet.com by posting all of the pictures on it. Numbering each post in the "Title" field will help participants to keep track of which photo they would like to choose. Don't forget to credit the photographers when necessary! You can do this by mentioning their name and including links to their photo and/or their website in the "Comment" field of the post. Photos with flexible licensing can be found on sites

like unsplash.com or creativecommons.org, which offer many free photos for noncommercial use. See the example below to get an idea:



Tips for curating your photo selection:

- Choose photos that evoke a wide variety of human emotions and general experiences. This can be done by choosing pictures with different lighting, some with lots of shadows while others are very bright. If searching a database, try using search terms like "sorrow," "joy," "frustration," "disappointment," "busy," "successful," "celebrate," "friendship," "healing," et cetera.
- Make sure to choose photos with a good balance of subjects of different genders and races or ethnicities. You may also try including a few photos of subjects of different ages, however young people (perhaps especially college students) may find it easier to relate to photos of people who are closer to their own age.

- Choose photos with different kinds of color schemes, landscapes, and perspectives: outdoors and indoors, city and wilderness, nature-focused and technology-focused, close-up and distance shots.
- Try to have about ten times as many photos as participants so that they will have enough from which to choose with less likelihood of overlap.
- Rarely include photos with human subjects that contain a close-up, clear, frontal view of the face. It may be easier for participants to identify with photos that display less of the human subject's unique personality. Side profiles of faces, partial views of the face, the back of a person, and the hands of people may allow the viewer to identify with the subject while allowing the viewer to understand the photo on their own terms.

NOTE

- Prompts and discussion questions are organized to start with simple topics and progressively become more complex.
- **Accessibility:** To make this session accessible for individuals with visual impairment, you may want to consider including sounds or songs (link to songs) on the Padlet, and invite them to pick a sound or song that they would associate with the term "advocacy."

In-Person

Photographs should be laid out in rows on the tables where the participants are seated. While the photos are not assigned to anyone in particular, there should be approximately ten times as many photos as there are people.

Note: There will be a time reserved at the end of the exercise for individual reflection. For in-person participants, it may be helpful to provide pens and paper for this activity.

Helpful Articles:

Harvard Business Review gives a biological explanation for why using photographs to facilitate conversation can lead to building trust among colleagues. Primarily, humans are hardwired to process information visually, and our brains release connection-building and trust-building hormones when we look at and interpret images. For best preparation for this exercise, read "To Build Connection on Your Team Skip Icebreakers and Talk About Photography" at the following link:

<https://hbr.org/2017/10/to-build-connection-on-your-team-skip-icebreakers-and-talk-about-photography>

If the participants have not yet been introduced to the basics of active listening, they may have questions for the facilitator about how that works. This article on active listening from positivepsychology.com is very helpful for brushing up on the basics: <https://positivepsychology.com/active-listening/>

Brief Outline:

The basic outline for this session is:

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|--|---------------------------------|
| 1) Welcome | suggested time 7-10 minutes |
| 2) Introduction to Active Listening | suggested time 5-10 minutes |
| 3) Round #1: Unique Views and Approaches | suggested time 15-20 minutes |
| 4) Round #2: Disappointments and Hopes | suggested time 15-20 minutes |
| 5) Group Reflection | suggested time 5-10 minutes |
| 6) Individual Reflection | suggested time 5-10 minutes |
| 7) Wrap Up | suggested time 5-10 minutes |
| | Total: Approximately 90 minutes |

Part 1) Welcome

Suggested time: 7-10 minutes

Welcome the participants. Make sure everyone knows everyone else's name. Feel free to use a short icebreaker question such as:

Welcome, everyone! To get us started today, let's make sure we all know each other. Let's go around one at a time and share our name and one of our favorite foods.

Then, you can begin to introduce the exercise. It would be a good idea, rather than simply starting with a dictionary definition of your theme (in this case, advocacy) to ask the participants what they believe advocacy to be.

Today, we are going to have a conversation about advocacy. What comes to mind when you think of advocacy?

Ask participants to free-associate, naming words or phrases that come to mind when they hear "advocacy."

Online

If the group is big, invite everyone to type their responses in the chat. Then, invite a couple participants to share verbally. If the group is small (5-7 participants), invite each participant to share.

In-Person

Pair-Share: Suggest people to pair-up (partner) with someone sitting next to them, and share their responses. Then, invite a couple people to share with the whole group. Affirm that all of the responses were great, then present the definition of advocacy that you will be working with for this exercise.

This is really great. You all have given some awesome responses. Today, we're just going to use a very basic definition of advocacy: the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal. [This definition is from Merriam-Webster]

State the goal of the exercise.

During this exercise, we will have the opportunity to share our own views of advocacy, our disappointments and hopes about it, and also to listen well to one another. We will be using active listening skills to deepen our understanding.

Part 2) Introduction to Active Listening

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

For the purpose of this exercise, active listening is simply a tool for empathetic conversation. Participants should be encouraged to listen attentively. They may need a reminder that body language is an important indicator of where one's attention is focused. This does not need to be a mini-lecture. A couple of sentences defining active listening and outlining its importance along with three "how-to" tips should suffice.

You can direct participants' attention to the handout (online hosts can bring up the relevant document and share their screen) and share these tips and examples with them:

- 1.** While listening, make sure to use attentive body language. Do not look at your phone or change tabs on your computer screen.
- 2.** Practice non-judgment, while listening.
- 3.** While responding, paraphrase the person to whom you were listening. This shows that you were paying attention and that you understood them.

4. Ask questions to further your understanding!

When formulating questions, stay away from clarification on historical facts and remain focused on the person to whom you are listening and their feelings. Ask for elaboration on subjects associated with feeling words or likes or dislikes.

Examples of statements followed by open-ended questions:

- It sounds like you really feel energized by advocacy and that it makes you feel more alive. What about advocacy makes you feel more alive?
- I heard you say that you are 'intimidated' by advocacy. Where do you think these feelings of intimidation come from?

Part 3) Round #1: Unique Views and Approaches

Suggested time: 15-20 minutes

This activity involves participants choosing a photograph that represents something unique about their feelings about advocacy or about their approach to it. For the online version, indicate that the group will be using a padlet to choose their photo and that participants should write down the number associated with the photo that they choose. Supply the link to the padlet in the chat. In-person participants will pick a photo from the selection available on the table.

Prompt: *Choose a photograph that represents something unique about your approach to advocacy or your feelings about it.*

Give 3 minutes to the participants to choose a photo. Then, walk them through the following steps:

Step 1: After three minutes, explain that participants will be divided into groups of four. Two of the participants will take the role of a "speaker" and two participants will take the role of an "active listener." Remind them about "Active Listening" tips.

Step 2: Explain that there are actually three parts to this group activity.

1. Once participants are in their groups, they will need to decide within the groups which two participants will be the first "speakers" and which two participants will be "active listeners."

2. Then, one speaker will pair-up with one listener. The speaker's role will be to share their interpretation of the photo they have chosen, and the listener's role will be

to listen actively, paraphrase what the speaker said, and ask them a question for a better understanding. The speaker will respond to the question.

3. With the same partner, participants will then switch roles and repeat this step of sharing, listening and asking a question, and responding to the question. All four group members should complete this process.

Step 3: Depending on the number of participants of the entire gathering, create groups (in-person) or breakout rooms (online). For example, if there are 20 participants, create 5 groups or breakout rooms.

NOTE:

Group Size: Try to have smaller group (no more than 4 participants per group), so everyone gets enough time to share. This process helps build a sense of community.

On-line Meeting: If possible, change your meeting settings to allow participants to share their screens, so they can show the photo from the padlet. If that is not possible, then, let participants share the number that is linked to the photo, and others will use the padlet link to check the photo associated with that number.

Before you send the participants into groups, make sure that each participant is clear about next steps. Allow a minute or two for questions or clarifications.

Sharing should progress at roughly 3 minutes per person, although there are a few minutes built in here for buffer. Participants should answer the prompt by describing how the picture represents one unique aspect of their approach to advocacy or what is unique about their feelings about it.

After approximately 10-12 minutes, send a signal to wrap-up their conversation in a minute. Then, bring everyone back to the whole group. Thank them for participating in the activity, and ask them if they have any questions. Then, prepare them for the second round.

Part 4) Round #2: Disappointments and Hopes

Suggested time: 15-20 minutes

This activity involves participants choosing a photograph that represents *either* a disappointment or a hope they have regarding advocacy. They may take about three minutes to make their selection. Depending on your meeting settings, online

participants may either write down the number associated with the photo that they choose for later reference or they may share their screens to display the photo they choose. In-person participants will pick a photo from the selection available on their table.

Give 3 minutes to the participants to choose a photo. Then, walk them through the following steps:

Step 1: After three minutes, explain that participants will return to their groups of four. Remind them about “Active Listening” tips.

Step 2: Remind the participants that there are three parts to this activity.

1. Once participants are in their groups, they will need to decide within the groups which two participants will be the first “speakers” and which two participants will be “active listeners.”

2. Then, one speaker will pair-up with one listener. The speaker’s role will be to share their interpretation of the photo they have chosen, and the listener’s role will be to listen actively, paraphrase what the speaker said, and ask them a question for a better understanding. The speaker will respond to the question.

3. With the same partner, participants will then switch roles and repeat this step of sharing, listening and asking a question, and responding to the question. All four group members should complete this process.

Step 3: Before you send the participants into groups, make sure that each participant is clear about next steps. Allow a minute or two for questions or clarifications.

Sharing should progress at roughly 3 minutes per person, although there are a few minutes built in here for buffer. Participants should answer the prompt by describing how the picture represents a hope or a disappointment they have about advocacy.

After approximately 10-12 minutes, send a signal to wrap-up their conversation in a minute. Then, bring everyone back to the whole group. Thank them for participating in the activity, and ask them if they have any questions.

Part 5) Group Reflection

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

Indicate to the group that we have reached the end of the photo activities. It is time to debrief. You can use some or all of the questions on the handout, depending on time. These questions are organized to lead from surface-level responses to a deeper analysis or conversation. Feel free to skip the simple questions and move to the complex questions more quickly, if the participants seem ready for that.

Here are some questions for group reflection:

- How was that for everyone? What was it like to describe your feelings using a photo?
- What was it like to try some active listening for this activity?
- What were some things you enjoyed? What were some challenges?
- Were there recurring themes in people's sharing of ideas about advocacy?
- What strikes you about the different ways people understand advocacy?
- What are some of the ways that having a diversity of views of, feelings about, and approaches to advocacy can be beneficial? What are some of the challenges?
- [This question is ideal for a group or a team that works together regularly] What did we just learn about each other that we can take back to our advocacy work?

Part 6) Individual Reflection

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

Invite participants to reflect on one of the various views about advocacy that they encountered during this exercise.

Online participants may choose whether to reflect using pen and paper or a word processor on their computer.

Today, we have heard many unique views, disappointments, and hopes about advocacy. Take the next few minutes to reflect on a view you encountered during this exercise that encouraged you, challenged you, or confused you. This does not have to be an essay; just jot down a few thoughts about why you might be able to learn from this point of view or what further inquiries you might have had if you had been in a longer conversation today.

Part 7) Wrap Up

Suggested time: 5-10 minutes

As the facilitator, it would be worth affirming the diversity of views that have been shared as well as how different perspectives can enrich and strengthen a community. Include any other observations and encouragement here.

Credits:

Developed in 2022 by Naomi M. Wong, Princeton Seminary Field Education Intern to Bonner Foundation

Resources:

Plouffe, Tammie. "To Build Connection on Your Team, Skip Icebreakers and Talk About Photography," in Harvard Business Review, October 16, 2017. Accessed February 4, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2017/10/to-build-connection-on-your-team-skip-icebreakers-and-talk-about-photography>

Ohlin, Birgit. "Active Listening: The Art of Empathetic Conversation" on [positivepsychology.com](https://positivepsychology.com/active-listening/). Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://positivepsychology.com/active-listening/>

Sutton, Jeremy. "Developing Empathy: 8 Strategies & Worksheets for Becoming More Empathetic" on [positivepsychology.com](https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/). Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>

Yates, JoAnne. "Comparative Media Studies/Writing MIT Sloan Communication Program Teaching Note" in MIT OPEN COURSE WARE. Accessed February 11, 2022. https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/comparative-media-studies-writing/21w-732-science-writing-and-new-media-fall-2010/readings/MIT21W_732F10_listening.pdf

Places to buy physical facilitation photographs:

<https://facilitationphotos.com/products/facilitation-photographs>

<https://revealedpresence.com/story-cards/>

Tips for Active Listening and Reflective Response:

1. While listening, make sure to use attentive body language. Do not look at your phone or change tabs on your computer screen.
2. Practice non-judgment, while listening.
3. While responding, paraphrase the person to whom you were listening to show that you were paying attention and that you understood them.
4. Ask questions to further your understanding!

When formulating questions, stay away from clarification on historical facts and remain focused on the person to whom you are listening and their feelings. Ask for elaboration on subjects associated with feeling words or likes or dislikes.

Example of a paraphrase followed by an open ended question: "It sounds like you really feel energized by advocacy and that it makes you feel more alive. What about advocacy makes you feel more alive?" OR, "I heard you say that you are 'intimidated' by advocacy. Where do you think these feelings of intimidation come from?"

Relevant Resources:

Ohlin, Birgit. "Active Listening: The Art of Empathetic Conversation" on [positivepsychology.com](https://positivepsychology.com/active-listening/). Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://positivepsychology.com/active-listening/>

Sutton, Jeremy. "Developing Empathy: 8 Strategies & Worksheets for Becoming More Empathetic" on [positivepsychology.com](https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/). Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://positivepsychology.com/empathy-worksheets/>

Yates, JoAnne. "Comparative Media Studies/Writing MIT Sloan Communication Program Teaching Note" in MIT OPEN COURSE WARE. Accessed February 11, 2022. https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/comparative-media-studies-writing/21w-732-science-writing-and-new-media-fall-2010/readings/MIT21W_732F10_listening.pdf

Questions for Group Reflection:

- 1.** How was that for everyone? What was it like to describe your feelings using a photo?
- 2.** What was it like to try some active listening for this activity?
- 3.** What were some things you enjoyed? What were some challenges?
- 4.** Were there recurring themes in people's sharing of ideas about advocacy?
- 5.** What strikes you about the different ways people understand advocacy?
- 6.** What are some of the ways that having a diversity of views of, feelings about, and approaches to advocacy can be beneficial? What are some of the challenges?
- 7.** [This question is ideal for a group or a team that works together regularly] What did we just learn about each other that we can take back to our advocacy work?

Padlet Example:

