

## **Section Two: Facilitator's Overview**

"I'm a lot more aware of sexual harassment, and I now know how to react to any behavior of a sexual nature that is unwanted and unwelcome."

*-Girl House girl Lily, from her follow-up feedback form one year later*

# Creating a Safe Space

**Contemporary Issues:** 1) Sexual harassment (see "What Is Sexual Harassment?" p. 16) causes complex, confusing emotions that affect a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions. 2) When discussing the topic of sexual harassment, a person may recall or momentarily relive a time when she was harassed, causing considerable distress. 3) A person who is severely traumatized from being harassed may feel vulnerable, scared, and anxious about her future. Below are some examples:

- A mortified middle school girl changed schools after boys lifted up her blouse in a school hallway. The incident and outcome upset and confused her. Why do boys do that? Why did they do that *to her*? Why did *she* have to change schools in order to feel okay about herself? Would rumors about what had happened to her start up at her new school?
- A college student abruptly left a Women's Studies class during the screening of *North Country* because the film had triggered a memory of a time when she was sexually assaulted. She left the class to take care of herself, yet she ended up feeling like a lonely outcast in the hallway.
- A young woman felt traumatized years after an acquaintance tried to have sex with her. His cornering her and insistent verbal pressure, a tactic called "working a Yes out," frightened her. How did she "let" the threatening situation happen? Does she have the ability to make good decisions about men? Next time, would she be raped?

**Project Description:** Advance reading and writing exercise for facilitators. Discussion questions and journal options for students.

**Goal:** To familiarize yourself (as the facilitator) with the topic of sexual harassment and to create a safe space for students to explore the topic.

## IN ADVANCE--FACILITATOR WRITING AND READING:

- Whether you are female or male, explore your own feelings of being sexually harassed or witnessing sexual harassment. One way to remember past incidents is to write your own story about sexual harassment. What happened and when, where have you healed, and where are your tender spots? Getting in touch with your memories will help you reclaim buried parts of yourself, heal deep wounds, and resonate more empathically with your students. You may want to talk to someone about uncomfortable memories that arise.
- Read through the entire guide so you're familiar with it, especially "Sexual Harassment Intersections," p. 19, and "Contributing Cultural Factors," p. 24.

## TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES TO PROMOTE A SAFE SPACE:

**Set-Up:** Suggestion box, index cards, pens, butcher paper, marker, and lined paper or journals. If appropriate, have materials from a local sexual assault/rape treatment center and/or a list of hotlines (see "Other Resources," p. 50) available.

- Use an opening and closing circle for each session (see "Opening and Closing Circles," p. 13). These circles promote a sense of unity, safety, and common purpose.
- Place a suggestion box somewhere that's easily accessible to students. Review the contents periodically.
- Pass out index cards during each session so students can write down anything they may want to ask or express in class but don't want to say out loud. Ask everyone to submit a question or comment at the same time, anonymously, so that it will not be obvious who has written any particular one. Review the cards and address the students' questions and comments during the session. (This idea comes from the Rape Treatment Center at the Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center.)
- Use feedback forms (see "Ideas for Student Feedback Forms," p. 43).
- Ask students to journal a few minutes at the beginning of each session to "locate" themselves in the class, especially if they're coming from a class on a really different topic, like science. Journal writing at the end of each session helps students process their feelings and determine for themselves whether they have further questions.

- Tell students at the beginning of the session that you're going to wait three to five seconds before calling on or responding to students who raise their hands so that everybody, even shy students, gets a chance to think and respond. (This technique, which is from David Sadker's film *Gender Equity in the Classroom*, promotes an atmosphere of inclusion, safety, and equality.)
- At some point I like to ask, "Is there someone who has not shared very much who would like to share now?" This promotes a sense that everybody has value.
- Do not ask students to recall their worst experience, since this is not a therapeutic setting. Their worst experience may come to mind anyway, but it's best not to encourage it.
- If appropriate, refer students to a school counselor or a crisis center (for college students).
- Ask at the beginning of the next session (no matter what the topic) whether there are any thoughts about the previous week's discussion on sexual harassment. The reason for this is that one or more of the issues may warrant further discussion and "processing," or a student may be worried about something that was mentioned in the last session (for example, is the person who was mentioned in the discussion of rape okay now?).

### WORKING WITH STUDENTS TO CREATE A SAFE SPACE:

**Say to Students:** *Let's create a Safe Space Contract. What ground rules can we all agree to so that we will have a safe space for everybody in the workshop? I'll write your responses on the paper.*

The italicized words below are possible student responses and/or suggestions to get them talking.

*Listen respectfully without interrupting. No put-downs. Opt out of sharing if desired. Agree to confidentiality. Speak from your own experience (I think, I feel, I believe) rather than talking about someone else's. Try not to judge why someone is "holding on" to an incident of sexual harassment that happened a long time ago. Try to forgive yourself for situations you think you could have dealt with better; you did the best you could in the moment. If need be, step into the hallway with a support person after telling the facilitator. Stay after class to talk to the facilitator.*

✓ **Note to Facilitator:** Talk to the girls about anything on the list above that they have not mentioned. Everything on this list is extremely important, especially the issue of confidentiality. Then, have the girls signify their agreement with the Safe Space Contract by signing the butcher paper contract. You can sign it, too!

**Explain to Girls:** The only exceptions to the confidentiality agreement would be if a girl in the workshop said that she might do harm to herself or to another person or that someone is/was abusing her. You, as the facilitator, might want to -- and may be legally required to -- report this. Also, if you sometimes talk with staff about things that come up in workshops, say so to the girls. If other exceptions apply for your particular teaching situation, inform the girls of these exceptions.



The girls drew a picture of a band-aid on the House of Healing sign.

After viewing the Girl House Art Installation (big house), guests could visit the House of Healing (small house).

Inside the House of Healing were signs describing possible actions to take if harassed. Guests could also write in a journal. ⇒ ⇒ ⇒



# Opening and Closing Circles

**OPENING CIRCLE:** In an opening circle, which is based on the ancient tradition called council, individuals seated in a circle have an opportunity to talk, one at a time, on a suggested topic. The opening circle helps to bond a group together and focus their attention. When a person talks she holds a *talking piece*, such as a rock, a stuffed animal, or a rain stick, and everyone gives her their attention. The talking piece is either passed around clockwise so that everyone gets a turn or is placed in the center of the circle for people to take, one at a time, when they feel “called” to do so.

Start by sharing the history of council with the students (use Internet sources or see “Council Book List,” p. 51) in order to honor its origins. Council is a very old tradition and is even referenced in Greek literature. In the United States, the Iroquois, Plains Indians, and Southwestern Pueblos were some of the tribes that used council. Later, it was adopted by the Quakers and others.

After sharing the history, begin the opening circle by asking everyone to go around and say her name. For the second go-around, ask students to respond to a specific topic or question in a few sentences. Suggest that students speak briefly so that everyone has a turn. Students can “pass” to opt out of speaking or can speak on a related topic.

Encourage students not to plan ahead of time what they’re going to say as they wait their turn. It’s difficult but empowering for students to take a breath when their turn comes around, repeat the question out loud, then speak honestly from the heart, without advance preparation. (This idea comes from the Ojai Foundation, in Ojai, California.)

Council is not a conversation. Ask the students to share their own thoughts and experiences rather than piggybacking on what the previous person has said. Their sentences will likely start with “I feel that...” or “In my experience...” or “When I was little, I...”

Ask the students to finish up if they’re taking too long unless something significant is being shared that warrants more time. I gently interrupt and say, “One sentence, one thought” in order to encourage a student to finish.

In the past I’ve used the following topics and questions, but students can also suggest their own.

- Starting this new project makes me feel...
- Something that I think is beautiful is...
- I feel most confident when I...
- I like my body most when I...
- The best compliment I received from somebody was...
- A time when I needed to say NO! was...
- I feel powerful when I...
- If I were a boy I could...
- Were you ever at a disadvantage in some situation because of something that you couldn’t help? (For example, because you’re disabled, you didn’t know the rules, you couldn’t speak the language, etc.)
- Were you ever at an advantage in some situation because of something that you couldn’t help? (For example, you had more money than other people or more talent in a certain area, such as singing.)
- Describe a time that you took a risk with positive results.
- Talk about a personal experience that you feel comfortable sharing and tell us what you learned from it.
- [To be asked in the last session of the entire program] How are you feeling about the fact that this is our last class?

**CLOSING CIRCLE** (see photos on cover and on p. 6):

✓ **Note to Facilitator:** This quick exercise can be done at the close of each session.

*Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theater activist, created the following closing circle exercise:*

Students stand in a circle with their right arms outstretched, palms downward. **Their left arms are always down at their sides.** The right hand is closed in a fist except for the right thumb, which is extended. The person on the left uses her outstretched **right** arm to take the extended thumb of the person on her right in her fist and gently hold it. Everybody turns her head and body slightly to the left. One at a time, each person says her name out loud. When everyone has said her name, the group members raise their joined hands, for a moment, then drop their joined hands and break the connection.

## Using Art

You don't have to be good at art to offer it. In fact, your students would love being better than you at something! Explain to the girls that each of them has a creative spark in her, whether it shines through in the way she decorates her room, prepares a meal, solves a math problem, designs a science project, expresses herself on Facebook, paints a mural, or simply lives her life. The only expectation from the facilitator will be for the girls to let their imaginations soar and to have some fun.

Praise each girl for her artwork, both because doing art can be intimidating and because receiving sincere compliments can be a wonderful boost to a student's confidence and sense of self. I like to linger over a student's artwork for a moment and make general positive comments such as these: *You are so imaginative! Very creative! You show lots of passion! Courageous design choices! Wonderful colors!* Make sure that you do not say that one student's drawing or other skills are better than anyone else's!

If you can feel relaxed and loving and can connect with the whole person – that is, with each girl's heart and spirit as well as her effort and technique -- you will be more likely to find the right words to say for any particular student.

- Art makes dealing with difficult subjects more palatable by adding a splash of color.
- Art can be used to educate or protest.
- Art can help to connect people.
- Art can help people express difficult emotions.
- Art can mirror aspects of reality so these can be seen more clearly.
- Art can soothe the soul, promote healing, and restore self-confidence.
- Art integrates the left and right sides of the brain so intuition and intelligence can work together.
- Art opens up a world of possibilities through the imagination.



*(l to r) Angelica, Amanda, and Kaitlyn at the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, California, where the girls worked on their digital mural.*