

Workshop: “How does the colour of the eyes matter?”

Date, Time: Thursday, 30.09.2010, 10:00 - 13:00 and 14:30 - 17:15

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Workshop content/theme

The workshop “How does the colour of the eyes matter?” is a reproduction of Jane Elliott’s famous “Blue-eyed/Brown-eyed” exercise adapted and rearranged for the purposes of students and teachers attending the Kick-off Meeting 2010. The workshop could be defined as a social experiment in which a microversion of the (real) society is created. Participants are divided into two groups, according to the colour of their eyes (blue-eyed/brown-eyed), and the relationships between different individuals and groups are simulated, focusing mainly on the personal experience of discrimination (on the basis of the personal characteristic: colour of the eyes).

Aims

The main aims of the workshop are:

1. to recreate the atmosphere, dynamics and relationships (as similar as possible to the one in real society) in a short-term microenvironment (by creating a micro-society);
2. to reproduce relationships between different social groups (present in real society) in the controlled environment of the workshop;
3. to give the participants the opportunity to personally experience discrimination on the basis of personal characteristics;
4. to analyse and reflect the happenings, processes, relationships, feelings experienced in the dynamics of the workshop;
5. to gain the knowledge, skills, competences, tools and methods to overcome discrimination (in real life);
6. to encourage participants to transfer the knowledge gained in the workshop to their daily reality;
7. to stimulate the participants to hold and multiply the workshop in their schools and working environments (and to share the experience with as many persons as possible);

Method(s)/Approach

1. Students and teachers were invited in a provocative way to attend the workshop:

»In February 2010, two prominent American scientists, Dr. Judith Spacy and Dr. Timothy Beblarz, published the results of a study titled “How does the colour of the eyes matter”? The outcome of the research is that “blue-eyed people compared with brown-eyed clearly demonstrate significant forms of underdevelopment in several fields.” This controversial statement will be our kick-off for a social experiment, during which we will perform to learn the details of the exciting study. We’ll simulate real life situations where the line between good and evil will be divided just by the colour of the eyes. We’ll feel and reflect the consequences of this division and gain knowledge, skills, competences, methods and tools to share these findings in our societies. The unique experience will literally open our eyes. Please note! This social experiment is highly emotional so don’t forget to bring your heart and of course your eyes!«

2. Participants who signed up for the workshop were invited to come together in a »classroom-like« discrimination-free environment.

3. Some general questions about human rights and some general instructions for the workshop were given (at the beginning).
4. Participants were invited to leave the room and soon after to re-enter, signing an attendance list. It is at this point that the division was made and participants were separated according to the colour of their eyes. Brown-eyed participants were invited to enter and sit down on the chairs. Blue-eyed participants were asked to wait outside in the so called “blue-eyed zone” in silence. They were also equipped with a special badge showing a large blue eye.
5. After a couple of minutes and the rearrangement of the chairs in a circle, the brown-eyed participants were asked to sit on those chairs. The blue-eyed participants were asked to enter the room with the circle and sit on the floor in the centre of the chair circle. All the participants were given name badges, papers and pencils, but the blue-eyed participants received material of really bad quality.
6. A short presentation of the participants (using a soccer ball) was performed. Then a 20-minute power point was presented containing a short summary of controversial scientific findings about blue-eyed people. The findings claimed that according to recent discoveries blue-eyed people, compared with brown-eyed, are clearly and significantly underdeveloped.
7. A short break was made, but with special rules: The blue-eyed people's break was 10 minutes shorter; they were allowed to stay only in the “blue-eyed zone” and to take only one drink. They were not allowed to talk to brown-eyed people.
8. After the brake a short quiz was played, but results were manipulated so that the blue-eyed lost participants whatever they were doing.
9. Then it was explained to the participants that the game we were playing was a social experiment. That all the data, scientists, studies, researches, analysis, surveys, theories, information ... all they had heard during social experiment ... was invented, distorted and manipulated for the aims of the workshop. There is no “blue-eyed/brown-eyed distinction”. The colour of the eyes does not matter! Blue-eyed participants were asked to stand up, throw away the “blue-eyed” badge, to join the others and to sit on the chairs. “The game is over. We are all friends again!” – and the non-discrimination environment was re-established.
10. An intensive in.depth discussion (lasting almost one hour), analysis and evaluation of the social experiment (roles, feelings, reactions, relationships...of all the participants who wanted to share) was carried out, stressing the rule that whatever is said is not meant as criticism of how somebody has reacted to the challenges of the social experiment, but only a means to analyse how discrimination affects us all and to learn from this experience. The workshop was then closed with the invitation to apply what was experienced and learnt in everyday reality.

Further tips, sources, resource material or links

<http://www.janeelliott.com/>
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/>

Impressions, Outcomes of the workshop

Both workshops were fully booked by the participants (students and teachers, 2 x 25 persons). All participants were highly motivated and were willing to cooperate and to participate actively in the workshop. All the participants were following the imposed rules and were accepting their roles; most of the time almost forgetting that they were just part of the blue-eyed/brown-eyed social experiment.

But the dynamics and reactions of the participants in the two workshops were completely different. In the first workshop the discriminated blue-eyed participants were opposing during all the duration of the social experiment, trying to reject the claim that “blue-eyed people according to science, when compared with the brown-eyed, are underdeveloped in several fields”. They were fighting back with different strategies, from laughing, replying with rational and emotional arguments, trying hard to find inconsistencies in the presented “scientific facts”, challenging the trainer, asking questions, supporting each other, replying with sarcasm and anger. They made their clear point that they will not surrender easily. The non-discriminated brown-eyed participants in the first workshop were quite comfortable in their position. They remained quiet and calm, distanced and relieved as they were not the target.

The discriminated blue-eyed persons in the second workshop on the other hand, were completely passive. They were not responding to any provocation made by the trainer. After the break, however, they made a revolution. (They had planned and prepared themselves for the “riot” during the break). They refused to sit on the floor no matter how hard the trainer was pressing them and demanding them to take their seat on the ground. Moreover, they were supported by some brown-eyed participants who joined in the rebellion.

During the analysis and reflection of the social experiment there was a good and in-depth evaluation (in both workshops) in which almost all the main aspects of the experienced discrimination (and non-discrimination) were addressed. Almost all the participants were willing to verbalise their experience and the lesson learnt. All in all it was a very challenging and highly emotional experience which everybody involved, both participants and the trainer, enjoyed and learned from a lot.

