

Contested chairs



Why use this activity?

This activity can be used to help a group explore issues of power, participation, inclusion, conflict, collaboration and problem solving.



A brief description

Participants are divided into three groups. Each group is given a different set of instructions which involve moving chairs. The groups then carry out the instructions. People's actions, group dynamics and power relations are observed by a facilitator and a few appointed observers. A discussion follows.



You will need

- Chairs (approximately one per person)
- Paper and pens



Timeline

Allow 30-45 minutes for this activity.



What to do

Preparation

- Write 3 different sets of instructions on pieces of paper (one instruction on one piece of paper). For example:
 - Put all the chairs in a circle. You have 10 minutes to do this.
 - Put all the chairs near the door. You have 10 minutes to do this.
 - Put all the chairs near the window (or tree etc). You have 10 minutes to do this.
- Put all of the chairs into the middle of the room (or outdoor space) where the activity will be taking place.
- Appoint a few observers. You could ask anyone who might find the activity difficult for some reason to be an observer. Explain that you would like them to observe how people within each group are relating to each other, as well as how the groups are relating to each other.

- Be culturally appropriate. In some cultures it may be appropriate to do this activity separately for men and women.

Facilitating the activity

- Divide the participants into three equal sized groups.
- Give a different set of instructions to each group, and ask them to carry out the task. If there are people who cannot read in the group, ensure that someone has quietly read out the instruction to them. Tell them not to share the instructions with the other groups. (Each group is following a different set of instructions for how to arrange the chairs, and they are unaware of the instructions other groups have been given).
- Observe what happens. Look at how people are working within each small group. Is everybody able to take part? How are the three groups interacting with each other?

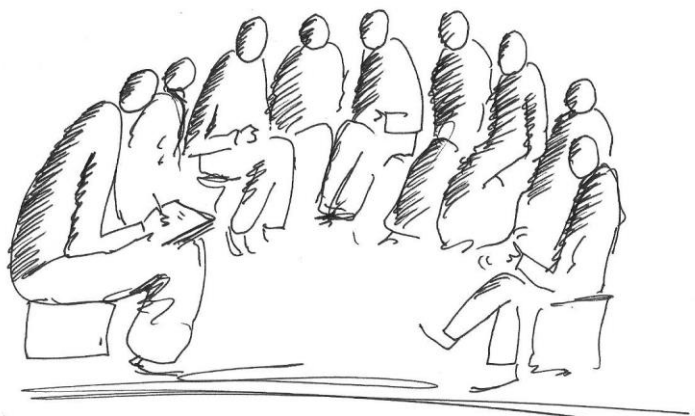
Optional: You could start by saying there should be no talking at all, but ensure that everyone has understood the instruction for their group. Then at a later stage allow talking within groups. Then talking between groups. It may be that through talking and negotiation a resolution may be found!

“This exercise has great scope for creative conflict resolution. Groups often burst into frantic action, use force and sometimes carry chairs with others desperately sitting on them to their corner. When some participants are trying to find a cooperative solution, others can be seen continuing to collect and defend their chairs. This, in turn, frustrates the cooperators, who forget their positive intentions and join the argument.”

Robert Chambers, *Participatory Workshops*, p122

Discussion and analysis

- After 15 minutes, bring the activity to an end, and bring the three groups together for a time of discussion and reflection on what happened during the activity.
- The discussion can focus on several different things. One area to explore might be the importance of the instructions – how necessary people felt it was to follow them, and how they were understood and interpreted. Another area to explore is how conflicts and disagreements between groups were resolved.



Suggested discussion questions:

- What happened during the exercise? What did you experience?
- How did people behave? Allow people to talk about how they themselves behaved and how they saw others behaving. Explore what happened within each group, and how the different groups behaved in relation to each other.
- How did you relate to those who wanted to do something else?
- If you confronted others, how did you do it?
- Did you follow instructions? Did you feel they had to be carried out whatever happened? Why (obedience, etc)?
- Was your behaviour influenced by your cultural background? Your gender or age?
- Who was 'left out' or 'left behind' during the activity? Why was this? What could have been done to help everybody take part?
- What has this activity revealed about power dynamics within the groups?
- How would you do this another time?
- Can you relate this to real life situations?

Notes for the facilitator:

In facilitating the discussion, it will be helpful to guide the groups to these conclusions:

- The instructions cannot be carried out without cooperation within each group.
- The groups cannot all carry out their instructions without cooperation between groups.

A surprisingly large number of solutions are possible, such as:

1. all chairs in a circle, between the door and window;
2. putting the chairs consecutively in a circle, then near the door, then by the window;
3. disobeying the instructions, and putting a third of the chairs in a circle, a third by the door and a third by the window
4. renaming places by hanging flip charts in the middle of the room, one saying DOOR and the other WINDOW
5. disobeying the instructions entirely and sitting down together

One or more of these solutions may have been identified during the activity. If not, you could read them out at some point during the discussion.

**Notes**

This activity was adapted from a game called 'Contested chairs' in a book by Robert Chambers: Chambers, R (2002) *Participatory Workshops*