

Exploring Gender Norms Through the “Colour Blind” Initiative

By Blair Niblett and Leigh Potvin

Recently we’ve been collecting data for a research project entitled “Masculinity Goes to Class” that explores secondary school boys’ perceptions of masculinity. We hypothesized that these perceptions are significantly influenced by a “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2007) that polices boys’ socialization, and marginalizes boys who fall outside of the ideal norm, as well as girls who don’t fall in love with boys who strive for an “alpha male” identity.

We spent a week in Leigh’s grade 11 philosophy class discussing gender while observing and video recording students’ perceptions for analysis. The research was guided by critical ethnographic and teacher-research methodologies (Anderson, 1989; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Each of us took a different role in the data collection. Leigh served primarily as a participant-observer, occasionally stepping out of this role to facilitate and guide discussion, while Blair mainly facilitated initiative activities and discussion that would help to reveal students’ perceptions of gender, specifically masculinity. This research and our partnership are a part of Leigh’s master’s degree thesis research, and the project was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Lakehead University, and by the Lakehead District School Board.

Leigh planned four sessions to explore the nature of gender and gender differences, as well as gender performance and gender policing. Part way through the sessions, because the discussion was so rich, we added an additional session in order to delve deeper into the concepts discussed in the initial workshops. We discovered that the students were hungry to explore these issues, and it took more time than we expected for students to start talking about gender issues beyond a surface “boy/girl” level. For example, students had a hard time moving from thinking about gender as a male/female

binary toward thinking about gender as a continuum of behaviours from masculine to feminine. They also had difficulty conceptualizing that gender is imbued with power dynamics. To illustrate these ideas, we wanted to do an initiative with the class that might demonstrate that masculine traits are sometimes attributed to females and vice versa. One night when Blair was swimming lengths in the pool, it occurred to him that “Colour Blind” was probably the right activity to demonstrate these ideas. In retrospect, the initiative didn’t disappoint.

Colour Blind

Colour Blind is a group initiative task that involves a blindfold for each participant and a structured array of coloured shapes. Somewhere between 30 and 36 pieces is probably the right number. For example, your set might have five shapes (pine trees, teddy bears, eggs, triangles and bats) each in one of six different colours (red, blue, purple, green, orange, and pink). Essentially you need one shape in every colour. Adding a shape or colour to the set increases the challenge while removing a shape or colour simplifies it.

Before the activity begins, the facilitator removes any two of the coloured shapes from the set. For example, the facilitator could take out the red pine tree and the blue teddy bear. This is a critical step since forgetting to remove two pieces ruins the initiative and can make for frustrated and agitated participants (Blair has learned this the hard way). Once participants have closed their eyes or been blindfolded, the facilitator distributes the remaining pieces. Each participant should receive one piece and some participants may get more than one. If the group is large, it can also be effective to have some people act as observers so that players can hold more than one shape each. The task is for the participants to discover which two pieces have been removed from the set. A typical framing for

the activity will help readers to understand the rules:

This activity is called "Colour Blind," and once we get started I think you'll all see why. The central focus of the activity is a set of coloured shapes; the shapes come in an array of colours, but there is only one of each shape in each colour. A few moments ago, I removed two shapes from the set. The group's task is to discover which two shapes are missing, and what colour they are. In a moment, I'll ask everyone to put a blindfold over their eyes and then I'll pass out the shapes. Each person will be given one or two shapes, and they will need to hang on to their own shapes during the entire activity — you can't give any of your shapes to anyone else nor may anyone touch any of your shapes. Everyone will be blindfolded, so nobody will be able to see what coloured shapes they are holding. Once we begin, you may all talk as much as you like, but I will only answer the question "What colour is this?" If anyone has questions about the activity, please ask them now.

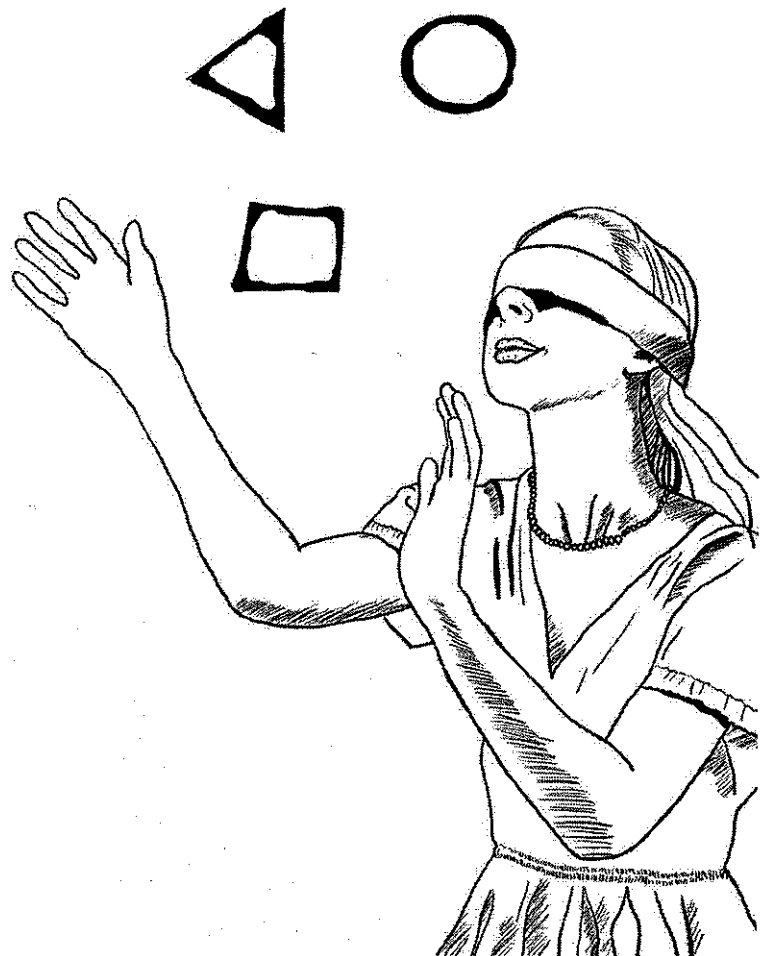
The initiative generally takes between 15 and 40 minutes depending on the group. Typically, the first few minutes of the activity look and sound a bit chaotic. The degree of the chaos will depend on a number of factors: group maturity, experience working together, stage of the program when the initiative is introduced, and the clarity of the instructions given. Depending on the desired challenge level for the activity, the facilitator can adjust the degree of detail provided in the briefing, as long as all the rules are clear. For example, if the group is functioning at a high level, it may not be necessary to spell out that the pieces form a patterned set; it may simply be enough to tell them that there are pieces missing and they need to figure out which ones.

Colour Blind and Gender Norms

After completing the blindfolded problem-solving task, our group was able to make a list of typically masculine leadership

strategies (loud voices, commanding presence, sarcasm and so on) that they attributed to the "dominant voices" that emerged during the activity. They also identified traditionally feminine traits that resulted in some people being "passive participants" (behaviours like being cooperative, staying quiet so as not to rock the boat, not interrupting and so on).

Immediately following the activity, the students had a hard time understanding the significance of what had played out during the Colour Blind activity — they resisted the notion that the initiative might be a metaphor that parallels how gender relations play out in wider society. The next day, however, the discussion about the activity was much deeper as students started to reconsider their thinking about gender norms; some acknowledged that an individual's capacity to engage in traditionally masculine social



behaviours gave him or her an advantage during the initiative. A few students even admitted that the social relations that played out during the activity mirrored the social relations they experience in their social networks at school. We propose that, as time goes by, the Colour Blind experience may help these students to name and challenge dominant gender norms that would otherwise go unquestioned.

Conclusion

In our research, we used Colour Blind as a vehicle for unearthing students' perceptions about masculinity. This, however, is only one possible direction that the Colour Blind initiative could take. The initiative can be used as an innovative experiential approach for exploring concrete or abstract concepts across the Ontario K-12 curriculum. For example, in Kindergarten, small groups of students using smaller shape sets could work on understanding words for talking about shapes and colours (Visual Arts, Expectation 4). Grade 7 students might undertake the initiative and debrief around strategies they used for sorting and organizing information and ideas (Language — Writing, Expectation 1.4). Students in a senior data management course might complete the activity, and use it as a springboard for discussing combinations and permutations (Mathematics Grade 11 and 12, MDM4U, Counting and Probability, Expectation 2.3).

Very nice shapes for a colour blind set can be cut from wood and painted or dyed, but a functional shape set can also be cut out of craft foam. Foam sets aren't quite as tactile, but they are light and compact for taking on trail. This activity has been conducted equally well in a classroom on a snowy day, or outside under the shade of a tree on a warm fall afternoon.

References

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