

Activity 3.3 Awareness of Context, Bias, & Assumptions¹

“It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing he was never reasoned into.”—Jonathan Swift

Description

This activity will help participants to identify their own assumptions about an issue and put those assumptions in plain view of others during a discussion. This activity will demonstrate how these judgments affect how we communicate with others.

Learning Goals

- Gain skills in thinking critically and beyond normal constraints
- Encourage honest introspection about one’s beliefs, values, and biases
- Learn how to use the knowledge of biases and assumptions in a positive way

Practice (50 minutes)

Step One	Each small group will be given a controversial topic to discuss. For example: <i>The government should provide universal basic income to all citizens.</i> Before you begin, each participant will write down any preconceived ideas, biases, or pre-formed opinions about the topic on a large piece of paper. Then they will tape the piece of paper to the front of their desk.	5 min
Step Two	Participants are literally “suspending” their assumptions about the topic. Take a few moments to review all of the assumptions around the room. Constructively ask for clarification about any assumptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you mean by this?• Where does this assumption come from?• Can you give me an example or context for this?	15 min

¹ **Citation for this activity:** Lori Britt (2021). Awareness of Context, Bias, & Assumptions. In Hartman, Britt, & Byrd (Eds). *The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit*. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/module-3-critical-collaboration>

	Do not criticize or debate the value of the assumptions.	
Step Three	<i>Engage in a discussion with your group.</i> Discuss the prompt. Explore various dimensions or elements of the prompt. Examine it from multiple angles or perspectives.	20 min
Step Four	<i>Regroup and Debrief.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What impact, if any, did “suspending” your assumptions have on your own contributions to the discussion?• How did knowing the assumptions of others affect your own communication in the group?• Did you communicate differently with any individual because of their assumptions? Because of your assumptions?	10 min

Reflection Assignment

- How would knowing others' assumptions benefit discussions in your respective groups? How would such knowledge obstruct a group?
- Are there certain types of topics for which it would not be helpful to know others' assumptions?
- Do you think it is possible to know people's assumptions up front and not essentialize or stereotype them? Do you think others would stereotype you for your assumptions?

Practice Journal

This week, reflect on how we might discuss our assumptions in a way that encourages people to look at us as individuals whose perspectives on an issue have been shaped by the context of our lives. Practice sharing your assumptions about a topic with a trusted friend or colleague.

Additional Resources

- [William Isaacs on Dialogue and Suspending Assumptions](#)