

## Multi-level Activities for Students

### Activity: Sculpting

**Goal:** This activity serves several purposes. At the most basic level, it gets students out of their seats; it gets them to interact with one another without having to use words; and it feels like a break from the classroom setting and atmosphere.

Sculpting is conducive to reflection. It can defuse tensions around sensitive topics by moving discussions into another format. It allows people to express their perspective without having to defend that perspective. It is a question with no wrong answers, and one that reinforces not only the recognition that multiple perspectives exist, but also the understanding that language itself can mean different things to different people. For that very reason, sculpting can open productive discussions on concepts in ways that language alone cannot. Finally, sculpting allows students physically to take on perspectives they might otherwise not have had, experiencing concepts bodily.

This activity can be introduced simply as an interactive game. Once students are familiar and comfortable with it, sculpting can be used to start discussion on any topic, as outlined in detail below—faculty or peer leaders can pre-select words related to the topic of the day and have students create “sculptures” based on their impressions of those words. After students have toured the “gallery” of sculptures, the class can discuss how they understand the topic.

Sculpting can be used with words from the glossary that will accompany the Diversity in Practice guidebook, but can also be used to spark analysis of perspectives on any term or topic related to an individual’s course. Learning to recognize that even the most basic concepts are understood and experienced differently by everyone is an important step to inclusiveness and diversity.

**Number of people:** Any number greater than 6; divide into roughly even groups of 3-5.

**Time:** 15-60 minutes for the first time the activity is used, depending on how many words you choose to have students sculpt; once students are familiar with the activity, the sculpting itself tends to go more quickly.

**Materials:** None, but is best done where students can move around; if you choose to allow it, students can use items in the room as props.

**When:** This activity can be used at any time, depending on the level. It would be best to include Level One during the pre-semester full days of GPS, when you can spend more time with it, letting students have fun and get used to the activity. Other levels are then much

easier to incorporate during the semester. Level Three usually works best after students have begun to get to know each other a little—a few weeks into the semester.

**General instructions:** Divide students into roughly even groups, with at least three students in each group and no more than five students in any group.

Tell the students that the class is creating a museum of images. These images will be based on a word that you will give the students in a moment. Within each group, choose one person to be the first “sculptor.” The other students will be the “clay.”

The first time you use this activity, demonstrate how it works: the teacher and peer leader play the roles of “sculptor” and “clay.” Choose a simple, positive word—for example, “summer,” or “hope,” or “friendship.” The sculptor can sculpt by touching the “clay” and moving it into place, or by imitating the position the “clay” should take. (Imitation works particularly well to model facial expressions.) The sculptor cannot talk—the activity is silent.

The goal is to express one possible interpretation of the word or concept being sculpted. The goal is not to illustrate the word (as in charades)—it is to convey an idea. The image can be realistic, abstract, concrete, or symbolic—it is whatever the sculptor wants to convey. There are no wrong answers or images.

Before beginning, emphasize that there is no talking during the activity. Also stress that students must be respectful when touching one another, and ask whether students give their consent to be touched (they can raise hands to consent; if anyone prefers not to be touched, simply request that students sculpt their peers by modeling rather than touching).

Finally, stress that sculptors should not overthink their sculpture—they should simply use the clay to express the idea in their head when they hear the word. Again, there are no wrong answers! They can express thoughts, or just a feeling, through their sculpture.

Once all the sculptors are done, ask all the “clay” to remember their positions. Then “freeze” one sculpture at a time, “relaxing” everyone else to observe (as in a museum). Once people have looked at all the sculptures, debrief (see below), then have another student take a turn as sculptor. Continue until all students have had a turn sculpting.

**Level One:** At this level, you should use a series of simple words.

**Level Two:** Once students are familiar and comfortable with sculpting as a game, you can begin to link it to themes related to your class. This can work with any kind of subject matter, as part of what it does is to point out that the same concept can mean different things to different people. In addition, learning with the body is a very effective mnemonic device.

For example, in an engineering class, you could have students sculpt “access” or “user experience.” In a nursing class, you could sculpt “pain” or “health.” In a biology class, you could sculpt “evolution” or “life.” In chemistry—perhaps “reaction.” In physics? “Momentum,” “heat,” or “gravity” might be interesting. Et cetera.

**Level Three:** Sculpting can also be used either to introduce important concepts that are also potentially uncomfortable or divisive, or to deflect tension when those concepts come up during class discussions or conversations. For example, in one section of GPS, a student brought up Black Lives Matter and the question of police violence, and the faculty member was not sure how to handle the conversation. Rather than dive directly into conversation, group leaders could choose some relevant words (“fear,” “violence,” “neighborhood,” etc.), sculpt those, and use the differences as a jumping-off point for an important but potentially fraught conversation.

**Discussion:** You can always leave the sculptures as a purely visual experience and not talk about them much, particularly at levels one and two. However, you can also use sculpting to open broader discussions on the themes being represented.

If you want to talk about an image, ask what people see, and make a point of not guiding the context (for example, someone in that physics class might be a philosopher and interpret “gravity” in a very different way). Whatever responses people give are valid and valuable—they move students away from thinking there is only one correct response, and they encourage all of us to consider different perspectives, whether we are creating something (a product, a piece of writing, a speech, art) or simply recognizing others in the world around us.

We have found that once students are familiar with sculpting, they ask to use it in classes even when faculty don’t bring it up.

SOURCE: Adapted from similar activities by Augusto Boal, Michael Rohd.