

Theater of the Oppressed “Cop in the Head”

Improv Activity

A Simple, Effective, Low-Cost Activity to Use in Your Classroom

Author

Emily Bautista, CRCO Academy – South LA YouthBuild (Los Angeles, CA)

The activity

In this activity, students will be introduced to the concept of the “Cop in the Head”, which represents how external oppression impacts people at the personal level. Through this activity, students will gain a greater sense of personal and social awareness by exploring past and present experiences that discourage or hinder students from pursuing their desires, wants, and needs. Students will have the opportunity for agency and work towards self-empowerment and healing. This activity gives students the opportunity to communicate complex, socio-emotional ideas through physical movement.

Students will have the opportunity to safely interact with/push-back against external messages. They will be able to explore the internalized oppression that exists within themselves and have an opportunity to respond to different manifestations of internalized oppression)

Students will learn

- How to assess and project external messages and communicate how messages impact them internally (internalized oppression)
- How to communicate complex ideas through physical movement and expression
- How to articulate complex ideas in a visually accessible way
- How to use role-play to explore internal beliefs, feelings, emotions, fears, and agency
- How to raise awareness and understanding of power dynamics and its implications for society in a performance-based assessment

Here's what you do

Resources needed:

- People, trust, and willingness to express deep emotions with peers

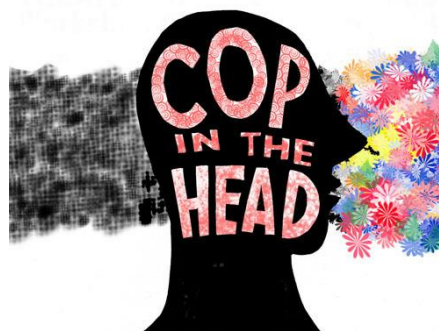
Approximate time:

- 30 minutes-1 hour

Instructions

1. **Intro:** Explain the concept of "Cop in the Head".

Internalized Oppression: The "cop in the head" represents the external oppression (interpersonal & institutional) that impacts people at the personal (internal) level. Note: You may either want to deeply discuss this at the beginning or the end of the activity, depending on whether or not you've already discussed this in your unit.



The "Cop in the Head" can represent any type of external messages (social messages, negative "self talk," peer pressure, etc). The "cop" can be authority figures, institutions, individuals, etc. Examples: "You're not smart enough," "One more ____ won't hurt," "You're just another kid, you don't have any power."

2. **Activity:**

1. Pair up students. One student will be "A" and the other will be "B."
2. Student "A" will reflect on the different messages the "cop" in their head tells them. Once they've reflected on a specific message, they will sculpt/instruct Student "B" to assume a sculpture/figure/position to represent the message the "cop" says in Student "A's" head. Once Student A is satisfied with Student B's assumption of the position/sculpture, Student A must spend 10 silent seconds examining Student B's sculpture of their "cop" in Student A's head.
3. Students will switch roles. Now, Student "B" will reflect on the different messages the "cop" in their head tells them. Once they've reflected on a specific message, they will sculpt/instruct Student "A" to assume a sculpture/figure/position to represent the message the "cop" says in Student "B's" head. Once Student B is satisfied with Student A's assumption of the position/sculpture, Student B must spend 10 silent seconds examining

Student A's sculpture of their "cop" in Student B's head.

4. Students will switch roles again. Student B will re-assume the sculpture of Student A's "cop" in their head. Now, Student A must sculpt themselves in reaction to Student B's sculpture of Student A's "cop" in the head. After Student A is satisfied with sculpting a reaction/response to their own "cop" in their head (through Student B), Student A and Student B must hold their sculpted positions for 10 silent seconds.
 5. Students will switch roles again. Student A will re-assume the sculpture of Student B's "cop" in their head. Now, Student B must sculpt themselves in reaction to Student A's sculpture of Student B's "cop" in the head. After Student B is satisfied with sculpting a reaction/response to their own "cop" in their head (through Student A), Student B and Student B must hold their sculpted positions for 10 silent seconds.
 6. Repeat steps 4-5 until you feel the students have deeply engaged with the "cop" in their heads
3. **Closing:** Debrief on the experience. Some possible guiding questions:
- What kinds of messages were the "cops" saying?
 - What did you learn about your peers?
 - Who are the "cops" in our lives?
 - Why do you think the cops say these types of messages to us? (Interpersonal & Institutional Oppression)
 - Why do we hear the "cops," even when they are not around? (Internalized oppression)
 - How did it feel to respond to the cop in your head?
 - How can you respond to the cop in your head in your daily life?
 - In which ways did we respond to our cops? How can we respond to the cops in our lives?

Success Tips

- Students will be required to be vulnerable during this activity. You must build trust and an open classroom environment in order to have students willingly participate.
- If willing, students will express deep, conflicting thoughts and emotions. You must be prepared to communicate with your students about the difficult experiences, thoughts, feelings, and emotions they may harbor.

- Encourage students throughout the process. This experience will push students to face some of their deepest “demons” and this is NOT easy. The “cop” in their heads are manifestations of the deepest messages that discourage and hinder students from meeting their fullest potential. Your support will encourage them to confront debilitating messages and heal!
- Prepare follow-up resources. You will probably learn things about your students that you did not know before. I highly advise that you follow-up with whatever information you learn and refer students to the appropriate resources/support systems to address their needs.