

# Privilege Walk

**Educator:** Nathan Canney, Instructor, Civil & Environmental Engineering

**Context:** In-class; Residential Design

**Keywords:** sustainability, design process

**Student Activity Time:** 50 minute class session

*At the mid-term of a core civil engineering course, students reflect on their individual privilege and discuss with classmates how it may influence engineering designs.*

## Introducing the Reflection Activity

Examining one's experiences and worldview is an important reflection for engineers working in social contexts. In a Residential Design course, the educator engaged students in an in-class activity called the "Privilege Walk" to consider their own life advantages and disadvantages. The purpose of the activity was to prompt students to consider their own background and how that may influence their work and perspective as engineers.

About two-thirds through the term, the educator took one class session to conduct the Privilege Walk activity. Students were asked to stand in a line in the hallway. The educator explained that for each question asked, students would take a step forward if the question applied to their life. If the question did not apply to their own life and experience they should take a step backwards. If the question was uncomfortable, or the student felt unsure, they would stand in place. The educator read through a list of 30 questions related to students about their own life, family, educational opportunities, socioeconomic status, race, and other topics that relate to privilege. After the activity was completed, the educator conducted a debriefing conversation with students to share their thoughts and feelings about the activity, and how it was related to sustainability and social justice.

The outcomes of the activity vary based on the class, timing, and established trust level within the class. In general, students are prompted to consider the social context in which they were raised, and the ways in which their identities impact their work as engineers, particularly those whose work will impact people in diverse contexts and communities. After the activity, students are more able to assess and acknowledge the social impacts of engineering work.

## Recreating the Reflection Activity

	Description
1	Explain the Privilege Walk activity and the approach or rules of engagement for the activity.
2	Facilitate the activity in class.
4	Lead a debriefing discussion immediately after the activity.
5	Revisit the activity as needed throughout the term.
6	Explain the Privilege Walk activity and the approach or rules of engagement for the activity.

### **In the Words of the Educator: Tips and Inspiration**

*Time the activity right.* Doing the Privilege Walk about 2/3 of the way through the term is a good time because it requires a certain level of trust and comfort with the class and instructor. I think if students didn't trust each other or you to some degree, the exercise wouldn't work. It takes time to build that rapport, but you also want to be able to revisit and use it again.

*Set the context and facilitate a valuable debrief.* The United Nations strongly ties sustainability to social justice, and students who are doing development work, or interact with diverse communities would really benefit from this kind of activity. In some contexts or through certain lenses, you don't readily recognize that your truth is not a universal truth. Setting the context about how their view of the world affects their work as an engineer is valuable. The activity primes students for an in-depth conversation afterwards. Some of the comments may be superficial, but some do go pretty deep, talking honestly about experiences with discrimination or privilege. I'm proud of the depth of discussion that came afterwards. Students that were generally quiet contributed to the discussion. Multiple students had military experience and so they brought that in, talking about sources of privilege or experiences of differential treatment. I was really pleased – it was probably the best discussion we had in the class the whole quarter.

*What was the inspiration for the reflection activity?* This came out of work done at the Colorado School of Mines from Juan Lucena and Jon Leydens, so I took it from them. They use it in the context of their humanitarian engineering program, and I used it in the context of a course about sustainability and design. It also comes from the work that I've done with developing communities and my graduate studies in the area of social responsibility and identity. My own experiences in working with developing communities really highlighted the importance of engineers collaborating with the public, the other, and seeing their knowledge as an asset. That inspired me to bring this into this class dealing with sustainability – the approach can't be from a deficit-only model.