

THE BLUE EYED- BROWN EYED EXPERIMENT

A Guide to Use in Organisations

by Nora Lester

This guide may be used with any of the Jane Elliot films. 'The Stolen Eye

1. Introduction: Diversity Training Today
2. Background: Jane Elliott and the "Blue-eyed/Brown-eyed" Exercise
- 3 Jane Elliott's Unique Approach to Diversity Training
4. A Synopsis.
5. Using the films in Organisation Settings
6. Using Five Common Viewer Reactions to the films as Discussion Starters
7. Applying the film to Your Organisation: Eight Discussion Points
8. Bringing Closure to Your Screening: Four Paths for Personal Action Acknowledgement

1. INTRODUCTION: DIVERSITY TRAINING TODAY

Diversity is a hot topic in corporations, government agencies, schools and communities today. Immigration is increasing. Women are returning to the workforce in increasing numbers. People with disabilities and lesbians and gay men are demanding to be recognised and accepted, not stigmatised. Many organisations have decided that addressing diversity is critical to their continued success or their very survival. One tool they use to learn to work across lines of difference is diversity training. It is offered to educate people about similarities and differences among people and provide an opportunity to discuss new and better ways of interacting.

2. BACKGROUND: JANE ELLIOTT AND THE "BLUE-EYED/BROWN-EYED" EXERCISE

Jane Elliott, a pioneer in racism awareness training, was first inspired to action by the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968. As a primary school teacher in an all-white, all-Christian community, she struggled for ways to help her students understand racism and discrimination. She adopted the "Blue-Eyed/Brown-Eyed" exercise (in which participants are treated as inferior or superior based solely on the colour of their eyes) as a result of reading about the techniques the Nazis used on those they designated undesirable during what is now called the Holocaust. The purpose of the exercise is to give white people an opportunity to find out how it feels to be something other than white. The exercise gained national attention when it was featured on the *Johnny Carson Show* in 1968 and again when it aired on the ABC News show, *Now*, in a segment called *Eye of the Storm*. After 16 years of teaching, Jane Elliott began to offer her training to scores of corporations, government agencies, colleges and community groups. Millions of people have been exposed to her powerful message through her appearances on American television programmes, including *Today*, *The Tonight Show*, *Donahue*, *Oprah Winfrey* and PBS's *Frontline* series in a programme entitled *A Class Divided*.

3. JANE ELLIOTT'S UNIQUE APPROACH TO DIVERSITY TRAINING

An understanding of Jane Elliott's approach to diversity training, including ways that it differs from training more common in organisational settings, can help trainers use *Blue Eyed* more effectively. Jane Elliott brings ethics and mortality to the centre of the discussion about race. This is refreshing and compelling, especially in organisations that commonly frame discussions about diversity solely in business terms. The "diversity as a business issue" approach focuses on compliance with laws in order to avoid costly grievances or poor publicity. Or, employees may be taught about the bottom-line impact of diversity-related problems (e.g., high turnover among women and non-white people) or the cost of a lack of diversity (e.g., inability to reach certain markets). Diversity, when framed solely as a business issue, rationalises diversity efforts because they are good for the organisation. Jane Elliott's approach helps organisational functioning by appealing instead to people's sense of empathy and mortality. Her moral outrage is apparent as she talks about her work and she facilitates the exercise. It is likely to move and inspire the significantly large number of managers and employees who believe that organisations have a social responsibility to improve race relations. Jane Elliott does not intellectualise highly emotionally charged or challenging topics. She therefore feels its effects emotionally, not intellectually. She throws aside conventional wisdom about adult learning. Instead of respecting students' existing knowledge, affirming their sense of self, etc., she uses participants' own emotions to make them feel discomfort, guilt, shame, embarrassment and humiliation. Jane Elliott would say that protecting white people from the pain of racism only serves to perpetuate it. Her skilful use of confrontation is not always appropriate, watching Jane Elliott on video can achieve some of the same benefits vicariously. Jane Elliott focuses on white people as the targets of change. She sees white people as "owning" the problem of racism and having the power to eradicate it. For this reason, she does not look at "both sides of the problem" the way training programs about cultural difference, communication or performance often do. Facilitators should be aware that Jane Elliott's focus on white people can lead viewers to the wrong impression that non-white people are passively moulded by white people's behaviour when, in actuality, black and Asian people can and do respond to racism in a variety of ways.

4. SYNOPSIS

The films let viewers participate vicariously in the "Blue-Eyed/Brown Eyed" exercise. In the film, we see people, who

were invited by a local organisation or their employer, to take part in a workshop about appreciating diversity. We watch as the group is divided according to eye colour. Since the blue-eyed people are "on the bottom" they are crowded into a small, hot room without enough chairs and watched by strict security. Jane Elliott leaves them for a long while without any information while she prepares the brown-eyed people to be "on top". The brown-eyed people are given answers to test questions and instructed to demean the blue-eyed people. When the blue-eyed people are brought into the room, some are required to sit at the feet of the brown-eyed people as Jane Elliott is unrelenting treats them according to negative traits that are commonly assigned to people from ethnic minorities, women, lesbians and gay men, people with disabilities, and other non-dominant members of society. Jane Elliott is unrelenting in her ridicule and humiliation of the blue-eyed people. When participants express, sadness, shame, or tears, she drills in the point that participants only have to live this reality during the workshop, while non-white people receive this treatment for a lifetime. Despite the fact that the group is participating voluntarily and, to some extent, knows what to expect, it seems clear that the exercise is painful. The non-white participants watch as white people learn what they already know to be true. Later in the film, black and Asian talk about the stress of being denied housing, job opportunities, and dignity as parents. Interspersed between clips of the exercise we see Jane Elliott in her home and on the streets of her community describing the origins and consequences of the exercise. She describes, with great emotion, how her family has been harassed and ostracised as a result of her efforts to educate white people about racism.

5. USING BLUE EYED- BROWN EYED FILMS IN ORGANISATIONAL SETTINGS

These are powerful tools to help groups discuss and learn about racism, white privilege, majority-minority relations and other diversity topics. Showing the film and facilitating a discussion in your organisation can help you achieve the following objectives:

Illustrate some of the overt and subtle ways that prejudice undermines people of colour and the consequences of that behaviour.

Provide a common framework for learning about racism and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, disability etc.

Open healthy dialogue about diversity-related topics that previously may have been considered "undiscussable"

Clarify the organisational costs of a work place culture in which some people feel devalued.

Initiate discussion about the role individuals and groups can play in creating more supportive and productive organisations. When used as part of a genuine organisational effort to examine the interpersonal and systematic aspects of racism, *They* can greatly further people's understanding of and commitment to change.

They can be useful in organisations as part of a longer, facilitated diversity training session, as a "break" in the evening of an off-site retreat or as a way to deepen the dialogue of a work group that is committed to exploring its relationships and systems on an ongoing basis. It is not recommended, however, that participants view *Blue Eyed* without facilitated dialogue afterwards since it is likely to stir up thoughts and emotions that need to be processed into meaningful learning.

6. USING FIVE COMMON VIEWER REACTIONS AS DISCUSSION STARTERS

Like most effective diversity experiences, the power of *the film* is that it touches viewers emotionally, not just cognitively. They may feel defensive, guilty, horrified, validated or a mix of many emotions. Therefore, it is suggested that facilitators listen for and respond to the emotional content, as well as the substance, of viewers' reactions.

Facilitators should be prepared to utilise viewers' reactions further, close down, exploration. As facilitators know, there is no one right way to do this. The goal is not to convince people to think the "right" way, but rather to support people to take the risk to look at themselves honestly. They may or may not come to the same conclusions about racism as Jane Elliott. However, if they are conscious of their own beliefs and the consequences of the way they behave, then they can be held accountable in a way that is difficult when people have not explored their beliefs and behaviour. These are some ideas for how a facilitator can use participants' reactions to deepen their understanding of the film.

6.1 White viewers may say, "Nothing like that happens in my organisation or community."

How do you know? Is it possible that many white people underestimate the extent to which discrimination is alive because they are not the targets of racist actions? [Help viewers see that, as Jane Elliott say, "We live in different worlds- one black, one white."]

The exercise exaggerated certain insults to make a point, like having blue-eyed people sit on the floor. This may not happen, but what does? [Get viewers to name relevant examples instead of trying to convince them that racism happens.]

What if it did happen? What would you say or do? How would you feel? If it did happen, what would it mean to you? What would it mean about the organisation? [This question cuts through the defensiveness and denial underlying the statement that "nothing like that happens here".]

6.2 White viewers may say, "The colour of one's eyes or skin is irrelevant to me. I treat everyone the same."

Do you think that people want to be treated the same? Do you want to be treated like everyone else? Why do many white people think that the only way to be fair is to treat everyone the same? [This is an opportunity to validate that many white people were wrongly taught that to notice difference is offensive.]

What happens to people with unique needs in a system that treats everyone the same? [This line of questioning is an opportunity to tap viewers' own experiences interacting with inflexible systems. This may help them to understand better the experiences of others.]

What is a respectful way to acknowledge and respond to people's differences? [If the group is of multiracial or multicultural, and if the people of colour choose to participate, this line of questioning can lead to a frank discussion of

new group norms that are acceptable to everybody.]

6.3 Viewers who are non-white may feel the video opens a previously closed dam of pent-up feelings and thoughts. They may express anger in ways that the white viewers are not used to or comfortable with. Alternatively, they may withdraw and become very quiet. This is likely if there are very few of them.

Be careful not to force non-white people to frame their ideas or feelings for the benefit of white people. Ask white people to stretch, if necessary, to hear people of other ethnicities, no matter what tone or phrasing they use. Consider having the discussion facilitated by a mixed-race team. Be sure the team members know and respect each other.

As Jane Elliott says, don't expect non-white people to bleed on the floor for white people. Do not make them responsible for educating white people.

Respect the choices people make about how candid to be in an organisational setting. They weigh the risks before they speak. They must live with the consequences of what they say.

6.4 For all viewers, the video may evoke painful memories of being mistreated, sometimes severely.

The facilitator should prepare viewers for the emotional content of the film and create an environment in which emotional reactions, including crying, are okay.

At the same time, since emotional reactions may compromise one's professional image in some organisational cultures, the facilitator should not necessarily try to move the group to an emotional level beyond the level the group chooses.