

Masculinity Dialogues: A Theory to Practice Program

Vern Klobassa

This brief will explore the development and evaluation of a men's development program called Masculinity Dialogues, which was implemented at the University of St. Thomas in a first-year all male residence hall. The brief will provide an overview of the program logistics, review the literature which informed the program's development, discuss the results of the program, and reflect on how the program could be improved.

Program Overview

The *Masculinity Dialogues* program took place in two parts, preparation work and a facilitated conversation on each floor community. The first part consisted of preparing Resident Advisors (RAs) to facilitate the program. As part of this preparation, facilitators read the third chapter of Michael Kimmel's book *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. The chapter provided an overview of concepts such as gender role conflict, restrictive emotionality, homophobia and femininity as emasculation tools, and discussed how these concepts are reinforced by men and women. We then had in-depth conversations, both as a group and one-to-one, about the content of the chapter and focused on where we learn about masculinity, the advantages and disadvantages of being men, and how hegemonic masculinity is reinforced. Conversations on these topics then lead to discussions of how this information can be used in an all male building, how we can begin promoting critical thinking on these topics, and how to facilitate conversations about these topics.

The second part of the program was a facilitated dialogue done by each RA facilitator on their individual floor communities. Understanding that awareness is the first step in promoting understanding of the problems of hegemonic masculinity, the goals for the dialogue included challenging men to think critically about masculinity, interrogate where they have learned about masculinity, and discuss advantages and disadvantages of socially prescribed masculinity. Each facilitator was given a guide with sample questions to aid them in generating conversation. The facilitation guide included questions such as:

1. What does it mean to you to be a man?
2. How or from whom do we learn what it means to be a man?
3. What are we told about what it means to be a man/woman in our society today?

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a man/woman in our society?
5. What can we do about the disadvantages?
6. What can we do to make things in our society/communities more equitable?

We also discussed the facilitation component as a group, and brainstormed effective facilitation techniques that could be implemented to guide the conversation.

Literature Informing Practice

Kegan (1982), Laker (2003), and Davis (& Laker, 2004) have contributed literature which informed the approach taken by this program. Kegan wrote about the psychological positions of learners and how educators can effectively meet these positions. Kegan explained that educators should meet the position of defending with confirmation. For example, if a student argues about a judicial sanction, the corresponding response would be hear the students concerns, model respectful listening, and then identify misinformation and/or provide a new perspective rather than shaming the student for his frustration and/or defensiveness (Laker, 2003; Davis & Laker, 2004). The *Masculinity Dialogues* program sought to create an environment where men could share their experiences free from shame and where they could learn from others' experiences and the questions being posed. In preparing for the facilitation, RA facilitators and I discussed that the stories these men may (and did) share were their lived experiences, and therefore listening and validation are important in order to lower defenses, which is consistent with Kegan's model.

Davis and Wagner (2005) discuss male ally development and provided useful information that informed the development of this program. In their chapter, they wrote that "helping men understand that they both benefit from and are harmed by patriarchy can provide motivation for understanding and development of social justice perspectives" (p. 30). This statement informed the inclusion of questions in the facilitation guide that discussed both advantages and disadvantages of being a man. Davis and Wagner went on to discuss that

unacknowledged privilege is a considerable barrier for promoting social justice attitudes and actions with men...Since male privilege inhibits men from understanding themselves as men, understanding oneself as a person with multiple dimensions of identity is not even experienced as a developmental task (p. 31-32).

In order for men to acknowledge male privilege, masculinity must be on their radar screen. Therefore, the focus of the program was to begin a discussion about masculinity to do just that. The focus was also to start challenging men to think about themselves as gendered beings with the inherent privilege associated with being men living in a patriarchy, while maintaining the understanding that some men simultaneously experience privilege and oppression because of their multiple dimensions of identity (i.e. Jewish men, Black men, Gay men, etc.).

Results

Following the completion of the program I asked my Resident Advisor Facilitators to answer some questions about the program. One of the questions centered on what they personally took from the program. One RA responded: "At the second [discussion session] I realized the effect that masculinity has had in my own personal growth without even realizing it over the years."

Another RA responded:

I think some things that I learned from our meetings were that the manhood we see on TV and that is represented in society is not the manhood that should truly exist. The world teaches that we are supposed to be big, burly men that don't struggle with anything, but that is not the truth at all. We do have problems in our life and it's ok to represent those in our daily life.

One response focused on the impact the program had on his relationships on the floor when he stated "I was definitely impacted by the fact that residents wanted to come to my room after the meeting to further discuss the topic. I was greatly impressed and surprised by their willingness to chat about it."

Another question focused on the preparation for the community masculinity dialogues. Many of the responses indicated the conversations we had leading up to the programs were helpful in preparing them. One RA responded by saying

the personal experiences that I thought about during the conversations definitely helped with the facilitation of the dialogue. I knew that some of my residents would relate to some of my experiences, which would get them talking more.

Another RA responded with saying "the talks at our staff meeting furthered my basis. I didn't ever really think about how we try to impress other guys rather than impressing girls."

One of the final questions focused on the impact the program had on their residents. One RA responded by saying "it created an environment for the residents to think critically and speak their mind without having anything really holding them back. It also helped further my relationship with them and hopefully allowed them

to further become more comfortable with talking to me about anything on their mind." Another RA response focused on a story shared during the facilitation of conversation with his floor, sharing

one of my residents said that he gained masculinity from his brother beating him. He started laughing about it and I asked him if he thought that was okay. He answered yes and that it made him a man faster. I continued to ask him why he thought that and he didn't respond, but you could tell he was thinking about it.

One of the Resident Advisor Facilitators indicated having a poor experience with the program. He responded by saying the following:

There were literally no impactful parts of the conversation. It was like pulling teeth to get the littlest bit of information out of them. I really don't think they learned or gained anything at all from this dialogue/discussion. I felt that my residents were not in an environment or at a maturity level to fully commit to the dialogue. They acted very immaturely throughout the whole conversation even though I constantly led them through the questions to try and illicit a response.

Reflections and Improvements

Overall, I believe the program was successful in achieving the goals of putting gender on men's radar screens, challenging them to think critically about gender and masculinity, interrogating the advantages and disadvantages of being male, and becoming aware of some of the inherent privilege of being a man. However, more in-depth facilitation training could lead to richer discussions within the individual floor communities. Some resources I have found that will shape how I do facilitator training in the future are: *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation* by Nash, Bradley, & Chickering (2008), *Transformative Conflict Resolution and Mediation: A Sociological Approach* by Ashton (2006), "Faculty Development for Facilitating Civil Discourse" by Ashton and Clausen in *Quick Hits for Educating Citizens* (Perry & Jones, eds). Also, brainstorming possible responses to facilitation topics and questions and role playing those conversations could help facilitators become more comfortable in their facilitation and more competent to address the dynamic nature of the conversation.

References

Ashton, P. J. (2006). *Transformative conflict resolution*

- and mediation: A sociological approach.* (10th Ed.).
Fort Wayne, IN: Indiana University Purdue
University Fort Wayne.
- Ashton, P. J. & Clausen, J. (2006). Faculty development
for facilitating civil discourse. In J. L. Perry and S.
G. Jones, eds., *Quick hits for educating citizens*.
Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Davis, T. L. & Laker, J. (2004). Connecting men to
academic and student affairs programs and services.
In G. Kellom (ed.) *New directions in student
services: Designing effective programs and services
for college men*.
- Davis, T. L. & Wagner, R. (2005). Increasing men's
development of social justice attitudes and actions.
In Reason, R.D., Broido, E. M., Davis, T.L., &
Evans, N.J.(eds.) *New directions for student services:
Developing social justice allies*.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: Problem and
process in human development*. Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press.
- Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where
boys become men*. New York: HarperCollins
Publishers.
- Laker, J. (2003). Bad dogs: Rethinking Our
Engagement of Male Students. In P. Brown (ed.),
Men: On campus series. Washington: American
College Personnel Association Standing Committee
for Men.
- Nash, R.J., Bradley, D. L., Chickering, A. W. (2008).
*How to talk about hot topics on campus: From
polarization to moral conversation*. San Francisco:
Jossey-Bass.