

## Understanding Marginalization: The Privilege Walk Activity

by [Rachel Adams Goertel](#)

English learners (ELs) bring diversity to a classroom. Becoming familiar with the backgrounds of ELs allows a teacher to engage students in literacy experiences that connect with these backgrounds, thereby building on relevant meaning for language learning and cultural awareness. Many teachers have used the Privilege Walk as a language teaching tool and as a cultural lesson to demonstrate how people benefit or are marginalized by systems in our society. The Privilege Walk requires risk taking and trust among your students, so it is better conducted once your classroom has built a sense of community and students have a high level of comfort with each other. It is an activity that your students *will find* personally moving. It is a good tool for students learning about privilege, marginalization, social justice, or intersectionality.

This activity, best suited for secondary through adult students, demonstrates how power and privilege can influence our lives without our awareness. The objective of the Privilege Walk is to learn to recognize what personal experiences and factors have led to a privileged or marginalized life. This activity provides an opportunity to identify both obstacles and benefits experienced to better contextualize diversity within our society.

It is a simple and easy activity, about 40–60 minutes. You need only a large space (preferably outdoors) and the list of questions provided in this article.

### Directions

To begin, this lesson will be a quintessential example of teaching “whole to part,” so you will not introduce vocabulary or preteach concepts. ELs will participate in the Privilege Walk and then break down the meaning of the activity while building their knowledge together. If vocabulary is pretaught, ELs’ perspective of their responses may be influenced.

Have students line up in one straight line facing forward. Stand facing the students. There must be enough space for the students to take at least 10 steps backward and 10 steps forward.

Specifically instruct the students to

- listen to each statement;
- follow the instructions given (e.g., if you read “If you are a White male, take one step forward,” only White males will move—everyone else will stand still);
- take steps of average length;
- take a step if they feel they qualify to do so, and to stay where they are if not; and
- refrain from judging others—this is a very personal exercise, and each person decides how to respond and whether or not to take a step;

Advise the students that this lesson may become uncomfortable. Tell them, “If you feel that your step movement reveals something you are not comfortable revealing, then do not take the step. Make your own judgment.”

Read each [Privilege Walk statement](#) slowly, allowing students enough time to take a step. After all of the statements have been read and the students have spread out according to the steps they have taken, allow students a few minutes to observe who has moved forward, who has generally stayed in the middle, and who has moved back. Ask the students:

- How do you feel where you are?
- How does it feel to be in front, in the back?

Have everyone gather into a circle and facilitate debriefing and a discussion. Some students may be surprised or upset at the position in which they find themselves. Start by asking a few questions and encouraging others to respond:

- What statements surprised you?
- What statements had the most impact?
- What does this activity tell us about American culture?
- How does it relate to your culture(s) and experiences?

Finally, to diversify instruction and meet the needs of learners who may be reticent to share their thoughts, have students write a reflective response on this experience using the prompt, “How did you feel about participating in the Privilege Walk, and how did you feel about your location at the end of the activity?”

## **Follow Up**

Students could work in small collaborative groups addressing marginalization, the implications, and possible ways to bring awareness. They could share their main points with the class.

## **Caveats**

There are many possible Privilege Walk statements. The following list contains the more common ones. Nevertheless, some questions are very personal. And, all of the students’ responses will be visible to others. Therefore, it is important to clarify to students before the activity begins that if they are not comfortable answering a question (taking a step) they may stay in place for that question. Also, some students may not want to participate at all; however, their input as observers should still be considered valuable.

After the activity, be sure students have time to debrief, discuss, and write about their experience. If students want to talk further, offer an online forum or discussion board to keep communication open.

## **Privilege Walk Statements**

Read the following statements in any order and modify as necessary for age appropriateness.

- If you are a White male, take one step forward.
- If you grew up in an urban setting, take one step backward.

- If you have more than 50 books in your household, take one step forward.
- If there have been times in your life when you skipped a meal because there was no food in the house, take one step backward.
- If you have visible or invisible disabilities, take one step backward.
- If you attended (grade) school with people you felt were like yourself, take one step forward.
- If there have been times when you or your family have not had health insurance, take one step back.
- If your work (school) holidays coincide with religious holidays that you celebrate, take one step forward.
- If you often feel that your parents are/were too busy to spend time with you, take one step back.
- If you feel good about how your identified culture is portrayed by the media, take one step forward.
- If you have been the victim of physical violence based on your gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation, take one step backward.
- If you are an international student, take one step forward.
- If you are an immigrant, take one step backward.
- If you can find Band-Aids at mainstream stores designed to blend in with or match your skin tone, take one step forward.
- If you have ever felt passed over for an employment position based on your gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation, take one step backward.
- If you were born in the United States, take one step forward.
- If English is your first language, take one step forward.
- If you have been divorced or impacted by divorce, take one step backward.
- If you came from a supportive family environment, take one step forward.
- If both your parents completed college, take one step forward.
- If you rely, or have relied, primarily on public transportation, take one step back.
- If you wear a headscarf of any kind for religious or cultural reasons, take one step back.
- If you always assumed you would go to college, take one step forward.
- If you come from a single-parent household, take one step back.
- If you are a citizen of the United States, take one step forward.
- If you took out loans for your education, take one step backward. If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or violence, take one step forward.
- If you have ever felt unsafe walking alone at night, take one step backward.
- If you attended private school, take one step forward.

After participating in this activity, students will be able to recognize some inequalities that exist in society. They will be able to better acknowledge their disadvantages and privileges, contextualize their own experiences, and learn about their peers. Through the final discussion and processing, students will be able to apply this activity to their lives to support social awareness.

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