Establish Roles: Superpower Activity

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*Adaptation note: This activity was adapted from the Project VOYCE Youth Facilitation Team.

60 MINUTES

Activity Rationale and Aims

Aims

01.
To identify the individual and collective strengths of the team

02.
To introduce a sense of play and create a space for robust engagement

Activity Summary

Collaborators design a superhero that allows them to identify needed strengths and challenges to address collective problems. The activity involves imagining, drawing (or otherwise representing), and introducing their superhero to the group. The activity concludes with a gallery-walk and a debrief.

Rationale

Developing shared understandings of individual and collective strengths is critical to establishing roles in the context of collaborative work. This activity supports collaborators in recognizing their own strengths and those of their collaborators. Identifying the strengths of the team supports the establishment of roles that are appropriately aligned with collaborators' skills and expertises.

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In Person Steps

As a whole group:

1. Introduce the activity by asking what collaborators know about superheroes

    a. What are some examples of superheroes?

    b. How are they a part of popular culture?

    c. What is the history of superheroes?

    d. What or who is often the villain? How is the construct of a villain important to the construct of a superhero?

2. Set the stage for the activity by providing the context that this group is a newly formed league of superheroes coming together to solve_____ (*insert big research question if already identified, if not, more generic reason why the team exists*). "But as we are so new, we need to figure out what our unique and combined powers are so that we are best equipped to tackle our 'villain'."

    a. Ask: What is the context where our superheroes will do their work? What might the villain be? How do we relate to it

Individually:

3. Prompt collaborators to reflect on their own skills, unique attributes, expertises, and gifts that they are bringing to the team and the collective work. Ask them to visually represent themselves as a superhero, illustrating their unique contributions. Invite them to draw themselves, or engage in other forms of visual representation, such as adding symbols, descriptive words, metaphorical colors.

As a whole group:

4. Affix the finished drawings around the space to create an impromptu art gallery.

5. Have the group stand up and engage in a gallery walk, where the team moves together from illustration to illustration. Have the author of each superhero give a short introduction and explanation of their depiction.

    a. Encourage questions and feedback from the group.

6. Engage in a collective discussion to debrief the activity. Start the discussion by soliciting general reflections and then move into more specific questions about the team:

    a. What stood out to you overall? Did you notice any themes or similarities? Conversely, any stark contrasts?

    b. Thinking now about working together on our real-world problem, what is possible with our powers combined? Are there certain conditions that will allow our powers to fully activate?

    c. How do we ensure that everyone's powers are celebrated and utilized? What do we need to watch out for to make sure we do not negate one another's power? How do we support each other's power and create a collective power?

    d. What external forces (like kryptonite) might weaken one's power and the collective work? How can we look out for that?

7. Wrap Up: Facilitator synthesizes the comments from the group coupled with their own observations and makes some connections to the larger project/research question. This wrap up is meant to serve as a way to explicitly connect the activity to the reason(s) the group has come together and the work they are set to do.

Modifications and Virtual Adaptations

•   If conducting this activity in a virtual environment, consider using breakout groups to share the superheroes. They can then be placed in a shared slide deck for all to see. Collaborators could either create the superhero digitally or take pictures of their drawings and upload them to a shared drive so everyone can see them.

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Facilitator Preparation

MATERIALS

- Paper

- Creative materials (pencils, paints, feathers, glitter, markers, wire, yarn, etc.)

- Masking tape or pushpins

Facilitation Tips

- Modeling is a key piece of this activity -- how might you model vulnerability and being creative (without fear of perfection)?
- Collaborators may need support to be creative when engaging with this artistic and imaginative activity. Consider playing music to help set the mood.
- Questions a facilitator might ask to get detailed superheroes include:
    - Their superhero's origin story - where did your super powers come from?
    - What are your superhero's super powers?
    - Do they have a theme song? Symbol? Crew?
    - What is their hero's weakness (e.g., Superman's kryptonite)? What are the constraints and obstacles?
    - Who is your villain?
    - What objects would a superhero in your community need in their toolbelt?
    - What image would a hero present?
    - Does your hero stand out in a crowd with bright colors, or does your hero look like someone in your school, your neighborhood, or your religious community? Or both?
- The facilitator should think about diverse examples of superheroes in advance, to help facilitate the conversation.
    - Marvel's Muslim Superhero
    - Eve L. Ewing and Evan Narcisse

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Example from the field

During the first orientation meeting of a community based research project composed of a mixed group of undergraduate and graduate students and faculty, this activity was selected as a means of both facilitating increased relationship building among team members and as a way to assess individual contributions to the team. The facilitator additionally selected this activity as a way of disrupting traditional higher education power dynamics via the introduction of imaginative and playful elements that draw out and encourage humanizing connections.

The activity began with an open-ended question asking participants to share who their favorite superhero is and why, eliciting smiles from most as they recalled childhood introductions to popular characters. After a brief discussion of the key traits of the examples offered by the group, the facilitator guided the group to the next part of the activity with a re-frame to focus on the shared purpose that brought them together. The team engaged in shared discussion before starting to work on their own superheroes. As the team started depicting themselves as superheroes, though the work was individual, the room was full of laughter and conversation. The very process of engaging in this creative activity broke down barriers and hierarchies and welcomed connections.

When the team turned to the gallery walk, there was lots of energy and excitement and some nerves (no matter the person's age or title!). As the sharing commenced, it was clear to see team members' pride in sharing their own strengths and engaging with questions from the team. After the gallery walk, when the team sat back down to engage in a discussion, the energy and dynamics of this newly formed group were notably different than at the start of the time together. Collaborators engaged in more talking to one another, as opposed to at or over one another. Collaborators shared more personal details about themselves and engaged in authentic listening to each other. Throughout the community based research project, this activity was referenced numerous times informally credited as a key part of the "glue" that made the group work so well together.

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Commitments to Equity and Wellness

Engaging in imaginative and metaphorical representational practices provides collaborators with multiple modalities to explore the focal content. Artistic representation provides a mechanism for engagement and expression that does not rely only on written or oral language and can invite collaborators more fully into the shared space.

This activity is premised on the commitment to relationship before task. It seeks to recognize and build connections amongst collaborators. Building relationships and connections from the start of the project helps to build a foundation of relationship, recognition, and shared value for each other and though it does not ensure equitable participation, it is an important component of building a team that is attentive to equity. This allows for collaborators to engage in activities across differences and provides access to participation for collaborators with diverse experiences and builds a foundation of connection that can help teams navigate challenging conversations with care.

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Additional Reading

All Parliamentary Group on Arts, H. & W. (2017). The Arts for Health
and Wellbeing: Inquiry Report. United Kingdom.

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Vasudevan, L., Schultz, K., & Bateman, J. (2010). Rethinking
composing in a digital age: Authoring literate identities through
multimodal storytelling. *Written Communication*, 27(4), 442-468.