

# POETRY IN COMMON

This is a mind-mapping activity that starts with a free-write and ends with a decision about what issue to focus on that everyone has a personal stake in. The process provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on their lived experiences regarding the research topic and discover what they have in common in order narrow their focus.

## PURPOSE

To reflect on personal experiences and identify what people have in common.

To collectively name and question the challenges related to an issue.

## OUTCOMES

A narrowed down issue or topic to work with.

More trust and understanding among group members.

An understanding of the common causes and impacts of an issue.

## TIME

20-60 minutes

## MATERIALS

1-2 sheets of paper for each participant

A pen or pencil for each participant

Flipchart paper for each small group, and one for the facilitator

Markers

## SOURCE

Developed by Levana Saxon, with contributions from Tele'jon Quinn, Joshua Bloom, Kelley Abraham and Tatiana Chaterji, through workshops with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Castlemont High School and East Salinas Building Healthy Initiative. The writing prompt "If the streets of \_\_\_\_ could talk" comes from Youth Speaks.

## PREPARATION

The most critical and influential part of this process is selecting the writing prompt as it will impact the outcome of the research project. In deciding the prompt you need to assess the level at which they may share common experiences.

Come up with a creative prompt that can invite personal reflection about those experiences. You also want to develop a prompt that is related to the broad goals of the group.

For example, if everyone comes from the same neighborhood, and similar socioeconomic status, cultural, and racial backgrounds, and you are discussing a plan for that neighborhood - the prompt could be "If the streets of \_\_\_\_ could talk". If the participants come from different geographies, backgrounds and challenges in their lives, you will need to give a prompt that invites reflection on something they do share, but is still related to their broad goals. Do they worry about a particular natural disaster occurring? You could use, "When the water rises..." for example.

You may also want to set the room up for small groups sitting in circles, with one flipchart paper and markers at each group, and enough paper and pens for each group participant.

Additionally you could set up background music.



Prior to this process, it's helpful, but not necessary, to do some kind of Image Theatre activity such as *Milling into Images* or *Complete the Image*.

## PROCESS

- 1. Form at least two small groups** of 3-10 people in each group. The only limit to how many groups you can have is how much time you have for each group to share out at the end.
- 2. Ensure each participant has paper and a pen** to write with. Leave a pile of paper and extra pens in the middle of the room so that fast writers can get more paper if they want it.
- 3. Share the goals of the activity.**
- 4. Engage in a free-write:** Explain that we will do a free-write, which means you are free to write whatever comes to mind after you hear the prompt. Spelling and punctuation don't matter - your only responsibility is to keep writing. You will end up sharing what you write with your entire small group. Don't worry about being a "good" writer, or a poet here. If you can only think of "I can't think of anything," write that until something else comes to you. It could come in the form of a poem, a story, anything - the key word here is FREE!
  - Additionally, explain that they will be encouraged to cheat! Please look over the shoulder of the people next to you, and copy down words that you like onto your own page. If you wrote something that you like - go ahead and say it out loud and then everyone else try to incorporate that word into their own writing.
- 5. Display the prompt visibly on a wall.** Instruct everyone to write it at the top of their papers: e.g. If the \_\_\_\_\_ could talk.
- 6. Give the group 2-5 minutes to write** (check in half-way and let participants know their remaining time). When there are 30 seconds left, tell them to bring their thought/idea to a close and finish up their last line. Ask them to put their pens down when time is up.
- 7. Share out the writing:** Share with the group that in order to find what we have in common with each other, each person will pass their paper to the person to their left. Then, everyone will circle the lines or phrases they can relate to. Don't circle what sounds good, or is well written, only circle what you have also experienced, or a feeling you also feel; something that you have in common with the author. After everyone has had a chance to circle everything they relate to on the paper in front of them, they pass it again to the left. This process continues until the original papers have made their way back to their authors.
- 8. Create a group poem:** Next, ask each group to choose a scribe. And ensure that each scribe has a flipchart paper and markers.
  - In whatever order people feel inspired, have each person share the line that was most circled by others. As they share their line, the scribe writes the line on the flipchart paper to form one complete poem that everyone has contributed to (the scribe should also contribute their line where they think it makes sense). The group now has a group poem!

9. **Create 10-second performance.** Ask each author to be the “director” of their line and create a very simple image, or silent skit using the rest of their group to convey the meaning of that line as its read. For example - if the line was “the fire truck lights cast a red shadow on my wall at midnight” the director could have everyone stand behind them with their eyes closed and head tilted as though asleep, while one person walks by and wakes up each sleeping person while the director speaks their line. It can be as creative or literal as they want. Ask them to do this as quickly as possible without much discussion. Each director has one minute to develop their piece.
10. **Create a one-minute performance.** Once each director has had a turn to create their 10 second performance, give the group another 2-5 minutes to practice transitions from each line, in the order of their poem so that they have one solid performance that lasts about 1-2 minutes.
11. **Perform the poems.** Once the groups are both ready - go ahead and have them each perform for each other, leaving time right after each performance to reflect on what happened. Ask each audience questions like:
  - What did you relate with?
  - Why do you think so many people mentioned the same things?
  - What do you think are the causes of these issues?
12. **And finally to close the exercise, after both performances, finish with the question,** “What specific issue should we focus on that is connected to both our broad goal, and connected to each of us?” Use whatever decision-making process the group has decided on to then make a decision.



### THINGS TO CONSIDER

Participants may want to name issues that they observe impact other people. If you allow this, it can skew the entire project toward charity, instead of community-driven change. The issue addressed should be always something that the participants have a personal stake in, even if what they see other people going through seems more dire or more important.

