



LIFE MAPS

Purpose

In this exercise, participants surface underlying concerns, commitments, and motivations through exchanging formative life experiences. Sharing these personal stories enables participants to start to see what matters most to each other and the experiences that shaped each person. **This activity strengthens strong connections within a community, creates a strong container for sharing and listening, and builds scaffolding for getting into more charged conversations in the future.**

Activity Breakdown

- Introduction & Writing Exercise (10 min.)
- Sharing in Groups of 3 (30 min.)
- Full Group Debrief (8 min.)
- Conclusion (2 min.)
- Closing Reflection (8-10 min.)

Note to facilitators: this text is meant to serve as an example of framing. It is not meant to be a script. Make it your own!

INTRODUCTION

 10 MIN.

Framing on Why Share Life Experiences

We're going to spend the next hour getting to know each other better through exchanging formative life experiences. Often when we enter into political conversations or conversations where strong differences are present, we start with positions and exchanges of fact. So much of what truly matters to each other is obscured - how we're related to the issues at hand and why we care. **Today, we are going to share formative life experiences that have shaped our moral and political outlook in an exercise called Life Maps. Stories help us be known in ways we can't otherwise be known.**

Prompt

Think about three formative, specific moments from your life that have shaped your political and moral lens.

Instructions on Writing Exercise

*Encourage your participants to think about **specific, concrete moments**.*

You may sometimes be thinking of a whole era, but try to think about experiences that might capture that era, as tangible moments let people in in a different way. You don't need to go in chronological order or capture your whole life story. These might be conversations, 'aha' moments – anything that has had an impact on your political lens. This initial list is just for you – no one else will look at it directly, though you'll share some of what's on your page.

***Give participants 3-4 minutes to brainstorm.** You may want to play soft music in the background. After participants have had a few minutes to write down moments, offer the following instructions for participants to carry out in groups of 3.*

LIFE MAPS IN GROUPS OF 3

 30 MIN.

Instructions for Small Groups

Each speaker will have a 9-minute stretch focused on them.

1. Select a time-keeper and the order in which you'll share (1 min.).
2. Speaker A shares 1-3 moment(s) from their Life Map (3-4 min.).
3. Listeners each ask 1-2 questions to the Speaker (2 min.).
4. Speaker A chooses one question to answer (2-3 min.).
5. Rotate roles and repeat the process for each speaker.
6. Open conversation (time-permitting).

I want to say a word about the questions you're asking each other in this process. After the speaker shares, listeners will have 2 min. to ask the speaker a few questions **without the speaker answering them initially**. We know this is unconventional. Keep in mind that your sole objective in asking questions should be to encourage the Speaker to say more about what matters most to them about what they've shared and what significance these moments had for them. Your questions should not be "gotcha" or rhetorical questions intended to challenge, or problem-solving questions intended to offer suggestions (i.e., "Have you considered x"). **Your intention should be to understand the speaker's lens better.** Each listener should ask at least one question, but you can ask as many questions as you have time for.

Send participants into groups of 3.

FACILITATOR TIPS

Making Groups

If you know the participants, you can make groups of 3 ahead of time and assign them to those groups. This exercise is most effective when participants are in groups with people they either don't know well or with whom they have political differences. If you do not know the participants well, you can ask participants to self-organize into groups, asking them to find people in the room they know less well. Make sure that everyone has a group and moves into the process relatively quickly. **If the group is not divisible by 3, it is fine to have groups of 2 but groups of 4 will not have enough time to complete the exercise in this time-frame.** We encourage you to divide any group of 4 into 2 groups of 2 and tell them they will have more time for questions and back-and-forth.

Facilitators' Role During Small Groups

Feel free to walk around the room to answer questions that come up or listen in while participants are in groups. It can be helpful for you to keep time and announce the transition points when groups should move on to the next speaker (at the 9 and 18 min. marks).

DEBRIEF

 8 MIN.

Sample Questions for Debrief

- I'd like to check in with everyone to see how that went. How was it to share your story? How was it to listen?
- I invite you to reference what you or others said and asked. Keep in mind, if you're going to share something someone else in your group said, please check in with your conversation partners to make sure it's ok with them.
- Did anyone gain new insight into your own story? Did anyone get a great question that clarified something new for you?

FACILITATOR TIP

If people stay at a meta level offering abstract generalities about the process, we encourage you to ask follow up questions to draw out concrete experiences/examples without people fully retelling their stories. Doing so will give you material with which to work as you explain the importance of surfacing people's life experiences and commitments in order to understand their positions and views. See p. 5 for FAQs for this section.

Conceptual Framing on Life Maps as a Foundation for Dialogue

When we hear each other's life experiences, we begin to understand what matters to one another, what our respective concerns and commitments are, where they come from, and why.

If we don't know that [use one or two examples that came out in the debrief, e.g., "Jason grew up the child of ____ activists," or "Emma spent formative years living abroad"], we often can't understand each other's positions analytically, let alone empathically. **A few minutes of exchange about formative moments often can improve the likelihood we'll care about what others are saying and even understand what they're saying and what it means to them.**

Notably, these experiences, these formative moments give tremendous insight into our true motivations and commitments, but are usually not shared explicitly in conversations on charged topics.

Research shows that formative life experiences tend to be connected to our deepest motivators and commitments. And we all have these profound, underlying moral commitments. When communicating, especially but not only about charged topics, we have a tendency to gravitate toward things that validate those commitments and reject ideas, information, and people that don't out-of-hand. This phenomenon is often called Confirmation Bias or Motivated Reasoning, which produces a very rigid way of listening.

If we're going to communicate productively across differences, we *must* shift ourselves and each other out of that rigidity into what we call receptivity – the capacity to take each other in even in the face of strong differences.

That can often be much easier when talking about life experiences. It can be harder when we're discussing substantive issues and there are real differences on the table. This is the riddle of these conversations, what we call the million-dollar question:

How do we replace rigidity with receptivity, even in the face of strong differences?

Seeing the experiences that have shaped each other can lay a foundation for doing so. And I invite you moving forward – even if you are in a conversation where there are strong and passionate differences present – to slow down, attentively listen, and ask into things that seem to matter most the speaker.

CLOSING REFLECTION

 8-10 MIN.

To close, each person will have a moment to share in one breath **one thing that you found valuable, learned, or appreciated in today's session?**

FACILITATOR TIP

If you are low on time, consider having just 3-4 people share aloud “popcorn style” their response to the prompt. Feel free to vary this closing prompt to fit your group's needs.

FAQS

In the debrief, many participants express gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to share their stories and listen and be listened to in a meaningful way. The following is the most common piece of pushback we receive during the debrief portion of Life Maps, and potential framing for a response:

Q: The structure was hard for me. Having to listen for a full 3 minutes and then ask questions without an immediate response felt unnatural.

A: This *is* a highly structured process. In the ways most of us communicate in our everyday lives, **we're often not aware of how much we're missing the meaning that others are sitting with.** A few minutes of structured conversation can often take us *further faster* in terms of drawing out what really matters to each of us in a way we might not just share without being listened to in this way.

When we address topics where real differences are present, common patterns of conversation can produce frustration and miscommunication, and often we end up talking past one another. We use this structure to: **a) inquire into and surface more of the underlying commitments our conversation partners are sitting with, and b) pause some of our own reactions.** We strongly recommend these two practices when engaging in difficult conversations across differences, even when not doing a formal, structured exercise.