

# First Thoughts exercise

## Use

The 'First Thoughts' exercise can be used at different stages of a workshop, either to establish 'facts' early on about how people see the topic or group in question, or later on to deal with a block where people are refusing to acknowledge a particular issue exists. By taking some of our thoughts from the 'unconscious', 'subconscious' or 'culturally formed' parts of our mind – rather than just the conscious thoughts which we present to the world – it can show us quite powerfully aspects of our minds, not least perhaps that we are not as unprejudiced or progressive as we would perhaps like to think.

The topic taken can include groups of people (ethnic minorities – or ethnic majorities, gays, poor people, Christians, Muslims), nationalities (Irish, English, US American, Afghan, Pakistani, Dutch), or topics (men and violence, women and violence, racism, the price of turnips in Ballyjamesduff etc).

The exercise is usually done in pairs but if you have an 'odd' number of people either the facilitator can make up a pair or you could have a group of three people do it in turn.

It is important in doing the exercise that confidentiality in the pair is respected and that the facilitator emphasises that in sharing on the exercise in plenary session, participants should share on their own thoughts and not those of their partner.

The point of providing each person with a written list of their first thoughts is to assist personal reflection, and so that they have a record of what they came up with. If, for example, my first thoughts on the topic of 'Women and violence', while covering different aspects of the topic, present a 'passive' picture and do not adequately cover the reality of women taking action against violence against women, that is saying something important to me about my innermost perceptions and indicates an area of knowledge and concern which I need to address.

The most valuable aspect of the exercise is that it is difficult to fake answers. Unless we are extremely well prepared (and devious!) we can only hold a few 'conscious' ideas in our heads, and under pressure to answer we are likely to come up with thoughts which are deeper down, after we have used up the few conscious thoughts we have remembered. In this regard, it is best to only give the actual topic for 'First thoughts' after the exercise has been explained but immediately before people start to do it.

## Doing it

The exercise itself is quite short and, allowing a little time for reflection in pairs, can still be done in 15 or 20 minutes. Additional time is needed for reflection in plenary; this can be simply to allow people to share briefly on the experience or it can be used as a springboard for further work (e.g. "What did this exercise indicate we need to work on in terms of our own feelings and prejudices?"). So the very minimum length of time required is 30 minutes.

Introduce the topic to the group briefly (you can if you like adapt the explanatory text at the end of this piece either to put on a flipchart or screen). This may include an example of how it is done using a member of the group to ask you (the facilitator) the question (or a sample question) a few times to illustrate the time pressure you are trying to set up for the answerer; as soon as one answer is given, the questioner asks the same question again, quickly and forcefully. The answerer is not to take time to think but simply to come out with the first – short – thought that

comes into their mind. The topic one person answers on remains the same throughout the ten or so questions.

In getting people to form pairs, you can use the criteria of choosing someone people know less well (as well as perhaps making people less concerned with what they will come out with, it also helps to mix the group). Other criteria can also be used, e.g. in a gender workshop which is mixed, women can be paired with women and men with men. In a multilingual group people can pair off according to their preferred language, if this will make it easier for them to work. In the context of a 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' mixed group in Northern Ireland, Catholics could pair with Catholics, Protestants with Protestants, even if the topic set is 'the other' (i.e. 'Catholics' for Protestants, 'Protestants' for Catholics).

The person stating the topic or 'asking the question' jots down the speaker's answer but does this while asking the same question/topic again to keep up the pressure to answer (the facilitator needs to ensure everyone has paper and something to write with). This is done ten times (or even a few more if the facilitator says so in advance). People then swap roles. It is possible to do the same topic for both people, or to take variations on the topic (e.g. the first person answers on 'Men and violence', the second on 'Women and violence', or vice versa in terms of order). When finished, the pair can discuss how it was for them and in particular whether there were things they came up with that surprised them.

Different pairs will take different lengths of time to finish, including immediate discussion, so the facilitator can check around the room how long people need to finish up in pairs – this can be judged partly by the level of animation. People then come back into plenary session for immediate discussion of the exercise and further work. This can also include a brainstorm on the same, or a similar topic, which becomes a public listing of ideas or associations relating to a topic (as opposed to the First Thoughts exercise which is relatively private).

## **Origins**

This exercise has been used for at least a couple of decades and, so far as we are aware, comes from Cherie Brown of the USA who has done 'Prejudice Reduction' workshops which included this tool. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Coalition\\_Building\\_Institute](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Coalition_Building_Institute) or do a web search for 'Cherie Brown'. This is INNATE's explanation of using the exercise, not Cherie Brown's.

## **Information for participants**

This is possible information you can adapt for flipchart or data projector display in order to explain the exercise:

- Confidentiality – please share in plenary your experience and what you have shared, not on what your partner has shared.
- Form pairs – [[plus any additional information about how the facilitator wants this done]]
- Questioner and answerer – and reverse
- State same topic 10 times
- Answer as soon as possible – questioner puts on pressure
- Questioner writes down other's answers; when finished, give to answerer for private reflection
- Reverse roles when the question has been asked the requisite number of times
- Discuss in pairs when both have completed the exercise; any surprises regarding things included or not included?
- In plenary, there will be an opportunity to share on your own comments and experience.
- The topic(s) is (are) ..... [[We suggest this is hidden until immediately before people do the exercise. Also explain if both people in the pair will answer on the same topic, or different]].