

# Punch Up/Punch Down

Jondou Chase Chen

## Introduction

Addressing social class in SEED seminars can be challenging as the combination of social class and race represent the strongest dividing line between our educational institutions. Taking on social class potentially challenges the very founding of many of our institutions and our communities. Is your group or institution ready to address class inequities and make changes toward justice?

Additionally, even if your group is willing to take this topic on, you must consider differences in how people define social class, what people believe causes social class, and what people think should be done about social class. Thinking about one's own and hearing other people's stories of social class can cause discomfort, tension, and even emotional trauma for some. We generally recommend that facilitators taking up social class consider these risks in deciding when and how to facilitate sessions on social class.

In this context, we have introduced Punching Up as an activity to help participants realize one aspect of class dynamics -- that we can intentionally change how we present ourselves socioeconomically depending on different social situations. *This is not an appropriate activity for groups where people in lower social classes do not want to name their identities or share about their identities with other people.* It also is important to name that this activity is not meant to complete conversations around social class but is rather an entry point to the deeper conversations where we identify the system of social class and the change that is needed toward class justice.

## Materials

- Writing materials for each participant (can be digital)
- Projected slides or scripted posters are not necessary but recommended for the journaling and sharing prompts.

## Steps

*Before the activity:* Have one or more introductory activities or even sessions on social class as this is a higher risk and intermediate level activity. Check in with individuals who are on either extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum to let them know about this structure of the activity and its risks. This is especially important for group members who are on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. If you do not know who this might be, you can communicate with your group before the session that anyone at either end of the socioeconomic spectrum can check in with you.

*During the activity:*

1. **Introduce the activity:** To better understand the system of social class that we are all a part of, we will now take part in an experiential learning activity that is designed to help us see social class as a system, understand our place in it, and understand how people make intentional moves within the system of social class.
2. **Provide content warning:** In this activity, we will be asking that we identify ourselves by our social classes by reflecting on and then sharing specific aspects of our lives that place us in a social class. Please consider the degree to which you are able to participate in this activity as a form of productive discomfort. Think about this in terms of your own reflection, your sharing, and listening to others in this room. Please exercise self-care in the spirit of social justice during this activity.
3. **Direct:** Please place yourselves into groups of three with two other people with whom you feel ready to share about your own social class and listen to their experiences of social class. Please practice consent culture in forming your groups, asking permission and respecting people when they say “no.” Please take a moment to form your groups. (Provide time as needed.)
4. **Direct:** Please take two minutes to journal about 3 statements you can make that identify your social class. For instance ... (create your own - think about your education, your home, transportation, your leisure time, what groups you belong to, what and where you eat, etc.). (After one minute, if people are struggling, you may say: If you are struggling to identify markers of your own social class, what are statements that you can make about how you identify other people’s social class. Use these statements to consider how other people might see you.)
5. **Direct:** Now please turn and share your statements with your group. You will each have a minute to share and explain your statements.
6. **Direct:** Now please take an additional two minutes to crosstalk. How did it feel to name your social class in such specific ways?
7. **Explain:** The three statements you shared are true. At the same time, there are additional truths we can tell about our social class to shift how we present ourselves and how we are perceived. We can describe ourselves in such a way to appear that we belong to a higher social class than we actually are, and we can describe ourselves in such a way to appear that we belong to a lower social class than we actually are. This can be described as “punching up” or “punching down” respectively. Punching up or down are terms that come from sports and comedy. In competitive sports, you can influence your standing or ranking based on the level of competition you play against. Punch up against better competition to show that you should be ranked as highly as

they are. Punch down against worse competition to score easy wins and to convince people that you much much better. Similarly in comedy, punching down refers to making jokes that people are already familiar with, which often involves playing on stereotypes of targeted groups. Punching up means making new jokes or taking on people in power to try to make a comedic point about power and to potentially change the system.

8. Direct: Now take two minutes to journal about three statements you can make that identify your social class as lower than your previous statements. For instance, for me ... (create your own). Now please take another minute to think about when, where, with whom, and why you might or have actually punched down. (Provide time for journaling, serial testimony sharing, and then crosstalk around response. Again, it is optional whether or not you allow participants to journal about how they have observed punching down in other people.)
9. Direct: Now take two minutes to journal about three statements you can make that identify your social class as higher than your previous statements. For instance, for me ... (create your own). Now please take another minute to think about when, where, with whom, and why you might or have actually punched up. (Provide time for journaling, serial testimony sharing, and then crosstalk around response. Again, it is optional whether or not you allow participants to journal about how they have observed punching down in other people.)
10. Debrief. This is up to you and your group. You can have large group crosstalk about the activity. Consider how punching up and down benefits people different across the socioeconomic spectrum. Who does it to survive? When does this reinforce the system or allow people to avoid responsibility for the system? If people make the effort to navigate the system, what will it take for people to deconstruct and reconstruct the system? What are the intersectional implications of this activity and the statements people make?

## **Variations**

Just as this activity reveals the way in which social class can have a performative aspect, consider the ways in which this activity framework can be used to understand performance, agency, and code-switching for other identities (e.g. gender, race, age).