

**Introduction:**

We use “mental maps” every day to guide ourselves through space, whether we are running around campus, planning our weekly errands, or showing friends or family around our hometown. These mental maps develop based on our experiences and perceptions of a particular place, so they may not appear as “complete” or “objective” as those maps we might find on a campus map, in a travel guide, or on Google Maps—nor should they! Most importantly, however, the mental map of a single city, campus, or other space will look different for every person who inhabits or traverses that space.

In this activity, participants gather in small groups to draw, share, and compare their own mental maps of a shared space in order to better understand how other people experience the same space differently. Through the discussion of their maps, participants are not only positioned to increase self-awareness of their own trajectories through that space, but they become aware of (and hopefully empathetic to) the experiences of others.

**Objectives:**

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Identify spaces and places important in their daily lives.
2. Compare and contrast their experiences of a single space with others who are different from them.
3. Appreciate the role of social differentiation and power in everyday experiences.
4. Recognize how their culture and identity influence how they see and use spaces.

**Time:**

45 minutes.

**Group Size:**

Small Group.

**Materials:**

Participant Instructions (in [Downloads](#)); Paper and a writing utensil.

**Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:**

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

**AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:**

Cultural Self-Awareness

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

## Empathy

- To interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview.
- To demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group.

## Other Skills:

Friendship; Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion.

## Activity Instructions:

1. Divide participants into groups of 6–8 members. Make sure each participant has a blank sheet of paper and a writing utensil (usually a pen or pencil, though more colorful tools can be used for more colorful maps).
2. Instruct participants to draw a map depicting their experiences and perceptions of a shared space. In classrooms at a large university, this usually means asking students to map their experiences and perceptions of campus. In other contexts—for instance, a small urban campus or a non-student group in a major city—you might instruct participants to map their experiences and perceptions of an entire city. (If there is no shared space among participants, you can ask them each to map their own hometowns and adjust the discussion questions accordingly.) Ask them to work silently so they can focus on their maps.
3. After 15 minutes, ask participants to present their maps quickly to the other members of their group. Each participant should only present for about one minute and be allowed to present without discussion or interruption from other members of the groups. Instruct participants to show their mental maps to their groups and to explain what they have mapped and why they believe those things—whether buildings, outdoor spaces, paths, landmarks, boundaries, or other features—form part of their mental map of that space. (If group members are meeting for the first time and you would like to add quick introductions to these presentations, you can do so.)
4. Groups should be able to present their maps within about 10 minutes (perhaps a bit longer if including introductions), at which point you should instruct participants to now analyze their maps collectively, guided by the following questions, for the final 20 minutes of the activity. Notes for the facilitator are included with each question so that you can help groups gain the most from each question. If leading a single group, you may decide to join the group and hop into the discussion as needed, or if there are multiple groups, you may wish to rotate around the room and help facilitate discussions as required.
  - When analyzing your group's mental maps as a whole, what patterns do you see? What *types* of places did your group members tend to map and why?



*Note to facilitator:* This is a “warm-up” question to get participants thinking spatially and to make them more comfortable talking and thinking together.

- In what ways are your maps of the same space similar? In what ways are they different? *Identify together at least three of the most significant similarities and three of the most significant differences.* (Note: you may notice these through clusters of your mappings or through outliers on your maps!)

*Note to facilitator:* This question has participants really dig into the details and engage directly with the experiences of their group members. As is often the case, participants are drawn more quickly to similarities than differences; however, perhaps because they are so visual here, they tend to have less trouble identifying differences than usual. Still, it is important to ask them explicitly to think about both.

- What do you think explains the similarities and differences across your group’s mental maps? How do one or more of your identities influence how you use or perceive this space? What have members of the group learned about the space or others’ experiences of it through their mental maps?

*Note to facilitator:* For this prompt, participants move from identifying similarities and differences to interrogating and understanding them. As such, while participants rely mostly on the maps in the previous questions, this prompt facilitates a discussion not of the map but *off* the map. While helping them identify uses and perceptions of the space they hold in common, it also asks them to think about why their experiences of the same space may be different. They are encouraged to think, in particular, about their many identities, as this activity helps reveal ways that gender, race, class, and other aspects of our identities inform the ways we inhabit and imagine the spaces around us. For example, a group of students may find that women in their group avoid walking down fraternity row to get across campus, even though it may be the most efficient route, while the men may cross through without a second thought. Another group may find that international students in the group have an entirely different geography of their college town than their US/domestic counterparts due to housing options, grocery stores, social activities, and/or transportation access. Similarly, in the context of mental maps of a city, the maps of participants of color may reveal they avoid a certain area because they feel unsafe or surveilled, while other participants may have identified that area with trendy amenities based on what they have heard or experienced. The final part of this prompt asks participants to identify what they have learned about others’ experiences of the same space as a practice in self- and other-awareness and a means of cultivating empathy.

- In what ways do you expect your mental maps of this space will develop or change in the weeks and months ahead? What factors or experiences do you expect will influence their development?

*Note to facilitator:* This “cool-down” question can be eliminated if time requires, but it does provide a useful context for group members to reflect on what they have learned and to see if the discussions have inspired them to use or think about the spaces around them any differently. It encourages them to leave the activity still actively thinking about the spaces they traverse and their relationships to others within them.

5. If there are multiple groups and time allows at the end of the activity period, you can ask each group to report their responses to one or more of the discussion questions to the larger group. You can use these responses to emphasize the importance of being aware that we all use, experience, and perceive the same spaces differently from those around us—and that those differences reflect our backgrounds, identities, and cultural norms. Given that they may also reflect differences in privilege or marginalization, there are also openings to discuss other-awareness and empathy for the perspectives and experiences of others. (If this activity is being used as a class assignment, you can also ask groups to prepare a brief narrative or bullet-point summary of their discussions for each question. This can give the instructor/facilitator an even better understanding of the dynamics of the group discussions for any follow-up comments or debriefing questions during the next meeting.)