

# “BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE” ACTIVITY

## Facilitation Guide

---

### Overview

This activity is meant to introduce participants to some basic theory to help get them thinking about the importance of pushing themselves outside their comfort zone and how they can do so (and offer you information about how you can help provide the challenge and support your participants need). It can be used with groups or individuals who are or will be participating in some type of experiential learning.

### Source

Exercise created by Tara Harvey, Ph.D. Based on the challenge and support theory from Nevitt Sanford (1966).

### Primary Intercultural Competencies Developed

- I. Increasing understanding and awareness of our own characteristic ways of making meaning and acting in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.
- II. Increasing understanding and awareness of others’ ways of making meaning and acting in familiar and unfamiliar contexts.

### Materials Needed

- ❖ “Beyond the Comfort Zone” Handout, 1 copy per participant
- ❖ White board or flip chart and marker

### Related Resources

Sanford, N. (1966). *Self and society: Social change and individual development*. New York: Atherton Press.

### Objectives

As a result of this activity, participants will:

- ❖ Understand the importance of getting outside their comfort zone.
- ❖ Understand what their own comfort, learning, and panic zones look like, and what they can do to move among them and maximize their learning.
- ❖ Begin to see (healthy) discomfort as a normal part of learning.
- ❖ Develop a common language to speak about their affective experiences.
- ❖ Consider how they may support one another’s learning.

## Time

30 – 40 minutes

## Facilitating the Activity

1. Draw and label the three concentric circles from the handout where everyone can see them (white board, flip chart, etc.). Before you say anything about it, ask participants, ‘What does this graphic mean to you?’ Solicit their thoughts.
2. Explain the following:
  - ❖ During this experience, you may experience these three different zones—the comfort zone, the learning zone, and the panic zone.
  - ❖ The **comfort zone**, as the name implies, is a space or state in which you are relatively comfortable. When we experience something new, we may seek comfort by engaging with the familiar— spending time with people who are like us (i.e. U.S. American study abroad participants who tend to stick together in a U.S. American “bubble”), frequenting establishments similar to those we are familiar with from home (i.e. going to Starbucks in a foreign country rather than venturing into a local café), seeking out opportunities to speak our native language, etc. While this is a comfortable and relatively easy place to be, we don’t typically learn or develop very much when in our comfort zone.
  - ❖ It’s when we push or stretch ourselves outside our comfort zone that we open up to greater opportunities for learning. When we allow ourselves to experience new situations and do things that make us slightly uncomfortable, we invite learning and personal growth. We move into the **learning zone**. Being in the learning zone entails being slightly outside our comfort zone, but not so much so that we panic, freeze, or shut down to learning.
  - ❖ Beyond the learning zone is the **panic zone**. This is when we are so far outside our comfort zone, or remain outside our comfort zone for so long, that we panic or shut ourselves off from opportunities to learn and grow, primarily out of fear (even if we don’t want to label it as fear). Usually when we find ourselves in the panic zone, we try to get back to the comfort zone as quickly as possible (and oftentimes then stay there longer than necessary).

---

### Note:

 This model is not suggesting anyone do things that are unsafe or dangerous. The idea is to get beyond our *emotional* comfort zone. It is very important to keep safety and security in mind, especially when in a new setting. 

---

- ❖ The comfort zone is not necessarily a bad place to be; in fact, allowing ourselves to move into the comfort zone from time to time is necessary to prevent burnout. However, we need to be careful that we don’t end up spending too much time in the comfort zone and risk missing out on some great opportunities to learn and grow.

- ❖ If you want to make the most of this experience, your goal should be to spend as much time in your learning zone as possible, moving back into the comfort zone when necessary to recuperate and recharge for more stretching. While it's good to do some things that might push you toward the panic zone from time to time, be careful you aren't stretching so far outside your comfort zone on a regular basis or for so long that you burn out.
  - ❖ These zones likely look different for each one of us. Something that pushes me outside my comfort zone and gets me learning might put you in the panic zone, or vice versa. [Facilitator note: If you can, provide examples or paint a picture of what each of these zones might look like for you in this particular experience. For example, you could share that interacting with store clerks in a foreign language pushes you outside your comfort zone into a learning zone, but the thought of being put in a social setting where you feel you need to eat foods that are very foreign to you in order to be polite gives you heart palpitations; what you do to help get back into your comfort zone is journal daily and talk with your family once a week. If you are hesitant to share in this way, remember that you need to model what you expect from your participants, and vulnerability is an important part of learning and growth through experience.]
3. Once you've explained the theory, ask participants if they have any questions or need further clarification.
  4. Optional Step: Tell participants you are going to do a visualization exercise so that they can think about how they will engage with this experience.
    - ❖ Ask them to close their eyes. With their eyes closed, ask them to visualize what their comfort zone would look like in this new experience. What situations make them comfortable, but probably do not give them much opportunity to learn? Repeat instructions to visualize their comfort zone. What are they doing? Who are they with? How do they feel? Give them a minute to visualize this.
    - ❖ After a minute or so, tell them to keep their eyes closed and to now visualize what their panic zone looks like. What would push them so far outside of even their learning zone that it would cause them to panic, stop learning, and want to get back to that comfort zone as quickly as possible? What does that panic zone look like? What are they doing? Who are they with? How do they feel? Allow them a minute or so to visualize. Then ask them to visualize what they do in response. What do they do that helps them get back into the comfort zone?
    - ❖ Finally, and most importantly, tell students to visualize what their learning zone looks like in the context of this particular experience. That is, what does it look like for them to be pushed outside their comfort zone during this experience? What are they doing? Who are they with? How do they feel? Tell them to take a minute to visualize what their learning zone looks like during this particular experience.
  5. Give participants each a copy of the "Beyond the Comfort Zone" handout. Ask them to reflect on the questions and write down their responses (independently).

6. After participants have reflected on the questions individually, have them get into pairs or small groups and discuss. You could simply have them discuss their responses to the questions on the handout, or post the following discussion questions as a guide:
- ❖ What do each of these zones look like for you personally?
  - ❖ How much time do you feel you personally need to spend in the comfort zone compared to the learning zone?
  - ❖ What challenges do you anticipate possibly preventing you from getting outside your comfort zone? How might you overcome such challenges? What supports can you draw on to help you?
  - ❖ What kinds of experiences do you feel would push you into the panic zone? Are any of those experiences you desire to have? If so, what might you be able to do to help you accomplish doing something that scares you so much?
  - ❖ Based on this exercise, what do you feel you can do to make the most of this experience?

### **Debriefing the Activity**

While this activity does not require as much debriefing time as some (since it involves so much reflection and discussion), you should still spend at least 5-10 minutes discussing the experience of doing this activity and synthesizing the learning. You can use the following questions to guide the debrief:

- ❖ What was the experience like trying to visualize and/or define what the different zones look like for you personally? Was it challenging? Easy? Were there any surprises?
- ❖ What did you learn through this exercise?
- ❖ Did you learn anything new about yourself in this process?
- ❖ What insights came from your small group discussions?
- ❖ How can we apply what we've learned here during this experience?

### **Key Insights and Learnings**

The key points to emphasize are:

- ❖ We could potentially hijack our own learning because we are focused on being comfortable.
- ❖ Learning deeply and fully from this experience will require some intentionality and will likely cause some discomfort. Part of learning from new experiences involves becoming more comfortable with being uncomfortable.
- ❖ We can actually expand our comfort zone. The more we venture into the learning zone, the bigger our comfort zone gets.

### **Additional Ideas**

The following are some ideas for ways to adapt and/or build off this exercise throughout the experience:

- ❖ Use this activity with international students on your campus, students studying abroad, participants in any type of experiential learning program or intercultural immersion experience, or even during new student orientation.
- ❖ Refer back to this exercise and these zones throughout the experience. For example, if you notice some participants may be in their panic zone, you might gently point this out (i.e., "It

seems this site visit may have pushed some of you into your panic zones. If that's the case for you, what do you need to do to get back into your comfort zone so that you feel ready for more learning?"

- ❖ Pair this activity with a discussion or exercise in which participants think about their own specific goals for the experience and how they can make those goals a reality.
- ❖ Ask participants to reflect on an average day and map it onto the concentric circles. How often and when are they in each zone? Use this to start a conversation.
- ❖ Draw the concentric circles on a white board or flip chart and ask participants to indicate with an X where they are on the graphic at any point in the experience. Use this to start a conversation.
- ❖ Have students repeat the exercise at the end of the experience. Compare their responses to those they gave at the beginning of the program. Has their comfort zone expanded?
- ❖ Have students take Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI). Discuss what their preferred learning styles are and how they can use this information to push themselves outside their comfort zone (by engaging more than one learning style in order to learn more deeply and fully).
- ❖ If working with potential study abroad participants, discuss how these zones might impact their choice of program. What types of location and programs would offer them the most learning zone potential?
- ❖ Invite alumni from the program talk with future participants about what each of these zones looked like for them over the course of the experience and how they used this knowledge.

## “BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE”



**Instructions:** *Take a few minutes to reflect on and respond to the following questions.*

1. What do each of these zones look like for me personally in the context of this program/experience?
  - a. Comfort Zone:
  - b. Learning Zone:
  - c. Panic Zone:
2. How can each of the following help me get in the learning zone?
  - a. The instructor/leader/facilitator?
  - b. My peers—the other participants?
  - c. What can I do to get *myself* into the learning zone?