BEYOND "US AND THEM"

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PURPOSE
This activity encourages reflection on how each of us creates mental barriers between ourselves and those we see as "them" and how that lens can be a barrier to humane education or changemaking work; and to share strategies for realigning our "compass of compassion" to include everyone.

GRADES
9 and up

TIME
30-45 minutes

MATERIALS
• white board and markers
• compassion compass

SUBJECT AREAS
Language Arts and Social Studies/History

COMMON CORE STANDARDS
Forthcoming
PREPARATION

Create a large compass, with an arrow pointing north. Label N as "Compassion."

PROCEDURE

1. Write the words "us and them" on the board in the center of a cloud circle or mind map (see photo above).

2. Have participants pair up. Ask them to talk with their partners for a few minutes about this question: "What are some examples in our world, in your life, in our roles as changemakers of "us and them"s -- where there's an "in" group and there's an "out" group? Also consider what that does to our communication together.

3. As people are talking in pairs, quietly move around and listen to some of the "us and thems" you hear; write those on the board in mind map or similar form.

4. After you've written down several of their examples, call the pairs back together as a full group and share with them what you heard and wrote on the board. Ask participants to share any other categories or types of "us and them" that you didn't capture and add those to the map. Point out that
there are almost an infinite number of examples of "us and them."

5. (For this next part, use language appropriate to the make-up of the group: humane educators, solutionaries, changemakers, activists, etc. We'll use the example of a group of changemakers.) Say: "Even we as changemakers, people who focus on being very compassionate, perpetuate 'us and them' thinking." Ask participants to reflect on this question: "Where in the realm of changemaking do you see examples of 'us and them' thinking?"

6. Have participants pair up and talk about this question. Give them about two minutes each.

7. Bring the whole group back together and invite volunteers to share "us and them" examples they talked about in their pairs.

8. Share that one of the things that you’ve noticed is that as we become more educated about humane issues, we start to make personal choices that are different. And we desperately want the people we care about to listen to what we have to say and to change. When we learn about a new issue, it’s easy to become angry or frustrated at the people who are making what we perceive as “wrong” choices – choices that cause harm. It’s important for us to maintain a compass of compassion.

9. Show an image of a compass with north labeled as "compassion." Invite participants to reflect briefly on this question:

   "How do you maintain an attitude of compassion, even and especially towards others who participate actively in cruelty and injustice?"

10. Ask participants to think about: "What story, quote, mantra, etc., do you use to recalibrate yourself to maintain compassion?" Give them a minute to reflect, and then invite them to share.

11. Discuss the concept of a compassionate compass and ask people to share some of the ways that they maintain (or regain) compassion.