

Activity Suggestions: Grades 3-5

First Impressions

Class time needed: 40 minutes

Materials

“First Impressions” worksheet for each student

Objectives

- Students will recognize that a single observation can be misleading.
- Students will get to know one another.

Introduction

Young children often make assumptions and judgments about people based on quick impressions. For example, a little girl noticing a house with peeling paint and an unkempt yard told her aunt, “I bet the people who live in that house are ugly.” The girl had somehow learned to make assumptions about people she had never met based on her perception of their possessions.

Given our tendency to link appearances to personality or cultural traits, the little girl’s comment is not surprising. Each of us, regardless of age, has probably experienced the embarrassment of making a faulty assumption based on scant evidence. This exercise can be used to point out the importance of making careful observations and of avoiding judgment. It also serves as a community-building activity.

Procedure

1. To begin the activity, have students make lists of their favorite things. Tell them to keep these lists as they will be referring to them later.
2. Divide the students into groups of two. If possible, pair students who do not know each other well. Give each student a copy of the “First Impressions” worksheet.
3. Assign the following tasks.
 - Without speaking to your partner, think of at least five things you believe he or she likes (e.g., favorite color, activities, music, food). Base your ideas only on what you can learn about your partner from what you can see. List your ideas in the first column on your paper.
 - In the second column, write down the evidence that supports each of your ideas.
4. Once students have completed their lists, ask them to interview each other to find out if their observations are accurate. You may want to model the following dialogue.

Student A: I see you have a Pittsburgh Steelers sticker on your notebook. You must like football.

Student B: No, you’re wrong. My brother is the football fan. He put these stickers on everything in the house after his favorite team won the Super Bowl.

Student A: But you must like to read. You have two library books with you.

Student B: You’re right about that. I read a lot in my spare time. Since you’re a girl, I’ll bet you like to shop.

Student A: Shopping is fun, but I didn’t list it as one of my favorite activities. I’d rather play computer games.



As students conduct their interviews, they should use the third column to note corrections and to add more information about their initial observations.

Debriefing

After students have completed their interviews, bring the full class together to discuss the activity. The following questions can be used to focus the discussion.

1. How did it feel to know that someone was making guesses about the things you like without talking to you?
2. What happened when you talked with your partners about your observations? Were your original conclusions mostly right or mostly wrong? Did you find that you like similar things or different things?
3. What would you say are the important things to remember about first impressions?
4. What are some problems that can occur when people make assumptions without very much evidence?
5. What if you did this activity with someone much older than yourself or with someone from another country? How would you make accurate guesses about their favorite things?
6. What are some things you can do to make sure that your ideas about people and places are fair?

Extending the Ideas

- Ask students to use the information gathered during their interviews to introduce their partners to other members of the class.
- Have students design posters that illustrate their partners' lists of favorite things. Displayed in the classroom, these would serve as a visual reminder of individual traits and shared interests. These displays could be updated throughout the school year as students get to know each other better.
- Invite international exchange students or Returned Peace Corps Volunteers to the class to talk about their first impressions of people in their host countries. Did their perspective change over time?
- If your class is writing to a Peace Corps Volunteer, try to find out how experience in the host country changed his or her initial impressions.
- Ask the newest students in the class to share their first impressions of your school and the class. Have your class then brainstorm ideas to help new students have a positive beginning in your school. If there is a need to assist new students in their adjustment, this could be developed into a service-learning project. See the Introduction to *Looking at Ourselves and Others* for a Service-Learning Rubric.

First Impressions

What I Think My Partner Likes	Evidence to Support What I Think	What My Partner Said About My Observation



The Blind Men and the Elephant²⁵



Class time needed: 20 minutes



Materials

One copy of “The Blind Men and the Elephant”

Objectives

- Students will develop sensitivity to others’ points of view.
- Students will understand the importance of having as much information as possible before coming to conclusions.

This retelling of a traditional story from India illustrates how different people can have distinctly different perceptions of the same thing. Students will readily see the faulty thinking behind the blind men’s arguments, but they may need some help understanding that even when presented with a real elephant, each man could “see” only what he already believed to be true. Use this story to encourage your students to develop perspective awareness—awareness that each of us creates a unique view of the world based on personal experience, language, and culture.

Procedure

Since “The Blind Men and the Elephant” is a folktale from oral tradition, you may want to rehearse the story several times and tell it rather than read it to your class. Before you present the story, ask students to give their interpretations of the word “see.” Reinforce the idea that to see can mean to perceive something visually or to understand an idea. Ask students to listen to the story for examples of both definitions.

Debriefing

After students have heard the story, use the following questions to guide discussion of how differences in perspective can make it difficult for people to communicate. Students should be encouraged to apply the moral of the folktale to real-life situations.

1. How does it feel when another person doesn’t “see” something the same way you do?
2. What happens in the story when each blind man “sees” the elephant? Why were there six different ideas about the elephant? Were any of the men right about the elephant? Were any of them completely wrong?
3. What did the blind men learn from the Rajah? What does the storyteller want us to learn from this tale?
4. Do problems like this happen in real life? Think of times when arguments or misunderstandings have occurred because people see situations from different points of view. Describe what happened.
5. What if the men in this story were not blind? Would they still have different ideas about elephants?
6. Does the story give you any ideas about how these problems can be solved? What are some steps you can take to understand why another person doesn’t see things the way you do?

Extending the Ideas

- Ask students to write an extension of the story that includes the conversation the six men might have had as they journeyed home.
- Have students write original stories that illustrate the importance of perspective-awareness.
- Ask students to write and perform a skit based on the story. The skit could be performed for other classes, and the performers could guide a debriefing with their audience.
- Have students work in groups of six to create group illustrations of the story. Alternatively, have them use recycled materials to create a sculpture of the elephant combining the perspectives of the six blind men.
- Encourage students to talk about misunderstandings they experience or observe that seem to be the result of clashes between points of view. Work with students to role-play behavior that resolves the misunderstanding.
- If your class is corresponding with a Peace Corps Volunteer, ask him or her to provide some examples of differences in how people in the host country view the world and the way Americans “see” things. What has the Volunteer learned from these differences?



The Blind Men and the Elephant

Long ago six old men lived in a village in India. Each was born blind. The other villagers loved the old men and kept them away from harm. Since the blind men could not see the world for themselves, they had to imagine many of its wonders. They listened carefully to the stories told by travelers to learn what they could about life outside the village.

The men were curious about many of the stories they heard, but they were most curious about elephants. They were told that elephants could trample forests, carry huge burdens, and frighten young and old with their loud trumpet calls. But they also knew that the Rajah's daughter rode an elephant when she traveled in her father's kingdom. Would the Rajah let his daughter get near such a dangerous creature?

The old men argued day and night about elephants. "An elephant must be a powerful giant," claimed the first blind man. He had heard stories about elephants being used to clear forests and build roads.

"No, you must be wrong," argued the second blind man. "An elephant must be graceful and gentle if a princess is to ride on its back."

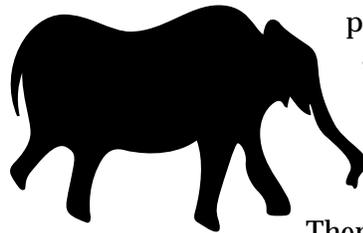
"You're wrong! I have heard that an elephant can pierce a man's heart with its terrible horn," said the third blind man.

"Please," said the fourth blind man. "You are all mistaken. An elephant is nothing more than a large sort of cow. You know how people exaggerate."

"I am sure that an elephant is something magical," said the fifth blind man. "That would explain why the Rajah's daughter can travel safely throughout the kingdom."

"I don't believe elephants exist at all," declared the sixth blind man. "I think we are the victims of a cruel joke."

Finally, the villagers grew tired of all the arguments, and they arranged for the curious men to visit the palace of the Rajah to learn the truth about elephants. A young boy from their village was selected to guide the blind men on their journey. The smallest man put his hand on the boy's shoulder. The second blind man put his hand on his friend's shoulder, and so on until all six men were ready to walk safely behind the boy who would lead them to the Rajah's magnificent palace.



When the blind men reached the palace, they were greeted by an old friend from their village who worked as a gardener on the palace grounds. Their friend led them to the courtyard.

There stood an elephant. The blind men stepped forward to touch the creature that was the subject of so many arguments.

The first blind man reached out and touched the side of the huge animal. "An elephant is smooth and solid like a wall!" he declared. "It must be very powerful."

The second blind man put his hand on the elephant's limber trunk. "An elephant is like a giant snake," he announced.

The third blind man felt the elephant's pointed tusk. "I was right," he decided. "This creature is as sharp and deadly as a spear."

The fourth blind man touched one of the elephant's four legs. "What we have here," he said, "is an extremely large cow."

The fifth blind man felt the elephant's giant ear. "I believe an elephant is like a huge fan or maybe a magic carpet that can fly over mountains and treetops," he said.

The sixth blind man gave a tug on the elephant's fuzzy tail. "Why, this is nothing more than a piece of old rope. Dangerous, indeed," he scoffed.

The gardener led his friends to the shade of a tree. "Sit here and rest for the long journey home," he said. "I will bring you some water to drink."

While they waited, the six blind men talked about the elephant.

"An elephant is like a wall," said the first blind man. "Surely we can finally agree on that."

"A wall? An elephant is a giant snake!" answered the second blind man.

"It's a spear, I tell you," insisted the third blind man.

"I'm certain it's a giant cow," said the fourth blind man.

"Magic carpet. There's no doubt," said the fifth blind man.

"Don't you see?" pleaded the sixth blind man. "Someone used a rope to trick us."

Their argument continued and their shouts grew louder and louder.

"Wall!" "Snake!" "Spear!" "Cow!"
"Carpet!" "Rope!"

"STOP SHOUTING!" called a very angry voice.

It was the Rajah, awakened from his nap by the noisy argument.

"How can each of you be so certain you are right?" asked the ruler.

The six blind men considered the question. And then, knowing the Rajah to be a very wise man, they decided to say nothing at all.

"The elephant is a very large animal," said the Rajah kindly. "Each man touched only one part. Perhaps if you put the parts together, you will see the truth. Now, let me finish my nap in peace."

When their friend returned to the garden with the cool water, the six men rested quietly in the shade, thinking about the Rajah's advice.

"He is right," said the first blind man. "To learn the truth, we must put all the parts together. Let's discuss this on the journey home."

The first blind man put his hand on the shoulder of the young boy who would guide them home. The second blind man put a hand on his friend's shoulder, and so on until all six men were ready to travel together.

Retold by Donelle Blubaugh



Opposites



Class time needed: 30 minutes

Materials

Pencils and paper

Objectives

- Students will recognize that their classmates hold a variety of opinions.
- Students will identify factors that influence perspective and opinion.

Introduction

This activity is designed to illustrate the variety of perspectives and opinions represented in the class. It will help students understand that perceptions are influenced by personal experience and taste as well as cultural background. This is a good opportunity to help students get to know each other better by recognizing the variety of cultures and talents represented in their community.

Procedure

Tell your students that you would like them to explore their opinions about a topic of current interest.

1. Ask the students to choose a category such as school, music, food, television, or a theme currently being discussed in a curricular area.
2. Present the students with a list of opposites describing a variety of opinions and perspectives such as rich/poor, beautiful/ugly, easy/difficult, delicious/disgusting, boring/interesting.
3. Ask each student to write down the name of an activity, a thing, or an idea (not a person!) that represents each concept. Encourage students to respond according to their honest feelings, not according to what is cool or funny.
4. Once students have completed their individual lists, have students share some of their responses. As a group, look at the variety of perceptions represented by the students' lists.

Debriefing

Use the following questions to help students reflect on the ways we form opinions.

1. How do you feel when someone disagrees with your opinion about something?
2. How many different examples of things that are delicious did we collect? Is there any one thing that we could all agree is delicious?
3. Why do you think there are so many differences of opinion about these ideas? What did you learn about our class when we compared our opinions?
4. What might happen if we asked every student in our school to do this activity? What would our community be like if everyone had the same preferences and opinions?
5. What are some ways differences can be used to make a community work better?

Extending the Ideas

- Use this activity as a starting point for building a class service directory similar to those found in community newspapers and telephone books. Students can work together to develop a questionnaire that probes individual student interests and talents. Then have students design advertising pages for each other based on responses to the questionnaire. (For example: “Need help with math? Contact Tonya Johnson, our class expert.” “Ron Nguyen is a terrific artist! Let him know if you’re a writer with a story to illustrate.” “Maria Rodriguez has an amazing collection of baseball cards. Call her when you’re ready to trade.”) Be sure to help those students who may have trouble identifying special skills or interests and encourage students with complementary talents to develop group advertisements.
- Invite a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer or someone from your community who has spent time in other countries to talk to your class about how perceptions of rich/poor, beautiful/ugly, delicious/disgusting, etc. vary from culture to culture. Contact World Wise Schools for a list of Returned Volunteers in your area (e-mail: <dpinfo@peacecorps.gov>; phone: 800-424-8580).
- If you are corresponding with a current Peace Corps Volunteer, ask for comments on how his or her perspective on concepts such as good/bad, rich/poor, or easy/difficult has changed in the host country.

