

when I became more aware of the depth of reasoning my students were capable of. I had been teaching for many years, but now I really strived to provide my students with opportunities to think about their thinking. I tried to create a classroom where their thinking was given visibility and value. I didn't want to just give my students activities to do; rather, I wanted to create opportunities for them to think, to talk about their thinking with one another, and to value each other's thinking within our classroom community. Striving to make children's thinking visible—especially with WMYST?—really brought our group together. It was powerful.”

CIRCLE OF VIEWPOINTS

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Identify the different perspectives that could be present in or affected by what you have just read, seen, or heard. Record these in a circle with the issue or event at the center. Choose one of these perspectives to explore further, using the following prompts as a starting place:

1. I am thinking of [name the event/issue] from the point of view of . . .
2. I think . . . [describe the topic from your viewpoint. Be an actor—take on the character of your viewpoint]. Because . . . [explain your reasoning]
3. A question/concern I have from this viewpoint is . . .

When you are seated in a circle, around a table, or in a theater, it is easy to grasp the idea that those sitting somewhere else in that circle will literally have a different view of the goings on. Using this physical model as a springboard, we developed the Circle of Viewpoints (COV) routine to help students with the process of identifying different perspectives and viewpoints on an issue, event, or topic that they might then explore further. We then set out a few prompts to begin this process of exploration.

Purpose

This routine focuses on perspective taking. Before one can develop skills at perspective taking, one must be able to identify the different perspectives present. It is all too easy to fall into the pattern of viewing things from one's own perspective and sometimes even being oblivious to alternate viewpoints. This routine helps learners to identify and consider these different and diverse perspectives involved in and around a topic, event, or issue. This process creates a greater awareness of how others may be thinking and feeling and reinforces that people can and do think differently about the same things. This routine also provides a structure to assist in the exploration of one of these viewpoints. The ultimate goal of this process is to gain a broader and more complete understanding of the topic, event, or issue through this process.

Selecting Appropriate Content

The effectiveness of this routine depends on having source material that invites exploration from many different viewpoints. Therefore, an image, story, issue, or topic that

is rich with characters and/or possibilities lends itself immediately to considering the many and diverse viewpoints as opposed to something simplistic and obvious. Try to identify the different viewpoints yourself as you contemplate your selection. Whatever the case, the identification and exploration of viewpoints should help learners contextualize, problematize, and understand the topic, issue, or event being examined. As an introduction, a painting or other image can be useful, as it provides a chance to identify the perspectives within the image.

This basic idea of a circle of viewpoints can be introduced with a series of photos showing a building or landmark from many viewpoints, a still life set up with artists seated around it, or a series of YouTube video clips showing an event such as a home run in a baseball game from the perspective of the batter, the catcher, a fielder, and a spectator. Some of these clips show these different views side by side on the screen, emphasizing that this is all happening simultaneously. There are many examples, particularly from sports, that show the same event in slow motion or from different angles, which clearly highlight that there are many ways of seeing the same thing.

Steps

1. *Set up.* In introducing the source material—the image, story, issue, event, or topic—be sure and provide plenty of time for its examination. This may involve looking closely at the image or asking questions of clarification about an event. At the conclusion of this initial examination, identify and name the topic or topics that the class will be trying to understand better through the routine. Write the topic or issue on the board or on chart paper. (Note: You will need to decide if this will be an oral activity, one in which students make simple notes of their ideas, or a more formal written task. Keep in mind that younger students often produce less in writing than they can in an informal discussion due to the demands of writing.)

2. *Identify viewpoints.* Generate a list of viewpoints. The viewpoints don't need to be only people, though this is an obvious place to start. Students can also identify inanimate objects: parts from the setting, the tree at the side of the scene, the bird overhead, the grass underfoot, and so on. Students can identify actors and groups not immediately present in the story or image but affected by it. This can involve thinking forward to the future as well as in the present. Record these in a circle around the listed topic or issue.

3. *Select a viewpoint to explore.* Ask students to select a viewpoint that they want to explore. If students are working in small groups, you might ask that each select a different

viewpoint to explore to create a richer and more complete exploration of the topic or issue. (Note: You may want to select one to do together as a whole class initially.)

4. *Respond to the "I think..." prompt.* Ask students to take on the character of their viewpoint and describe the topic from this new perspective. What does this person or character think about the event or situation? What is their take? Why do they think of this? Give students time to think about and imagine what this person or thing could be considering. This think time may involve taking notes or more formal recording of ideas or it may just be done mentally.

5. *Respond to the "A question I have from this viewpoint..." prompt.* Ask students to imagine what this person or thing might be puzzled or curious about and create a question from this viewpoint, as if the person or thing was asking this question aloud. Again, provide time to generate and/or record ideas.

6. *Share the thinking.* Decide whether sharing will happen in small group or as a whole class. Initially, a whole group will provide everyone with lots of models and give you a chance to assess everyone's efforts. Ask each person to introduce her or his viewpoint, state her or his thinking from that viewpoint and her or his questions. Document the main threads that permeate the discussion, particularly noting the differences in viewpoints.

Uses and Variations

This routine can be used at the beginning of a unit of study to help students brainstorm new perspectives about a topic and imagine the different characters, themes, and questions connected to it. Particularly, the routine can be useful when students are having a hard time seeing other perspectives or when things seem black and white. For example, after watching *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Emma Furman asked her grade 5 students at Bialik College to consider the part of the film where Molly, Gracie, and Daisy were taken from their mothers. The class identified the trooper, Molly, the window of the truck, the fence that was run over, the mother, the truck driver, Gracie, and the grandmother as holding different perspectives. Students then sat in small groups and discussed their different viewpoints and raised new questions and insights, thus "complexifying" the situation.

Perspective taking helps to build greater empathy and understanding. When planning for school camps, David Reese asked his students at Bialik to identify and then take on the viewpoints of all the people involved in the camps. This experience helps them to understand the complexity of all the issues involved and why all their requests and ideas can't always be followed.

The prompts following the identification of viewpoints are just suggestions. They can be useful in helping students to actually take a different perspective than their own. However, you might want to add to or change these prompts to better fit your students and the content being explored. Another way of helping students to explore perspectives is to ask questions that help them determine who has similar and different perspectives. For instance, "If we were to rearrange the perspectives we have generated so that those having opposite perspectives were actually across the circle from each other, which positions would you place where? Which positions should be next to each other because they are similar? Who would you place yourself next to?"

Assessment

It can be difficult to look at issues from another perspective, especially if one is strongly attached to a particular point of view. Noticing how clearly students differentiate the viewpoints demonstrates an understanding that more than one viewpoint is possible and can indeed be valid. Typically this step is done in a group. However, once the routine has been learned and students have had some exposure to identifying multiple perspectives, you might consider asking students to do this individually before group sharing. These individual responses can inform you about students' ability to identify different perspectives.

When students take on a viewpoint and begin to think from that perspective, notice whether students are merely stating their own positions or they are expressing thoughts and ideas different from what they themselves hold. By the same token, take note whether students are imbuing their character with stereotypical or stock responses, for instance, ascribing evil intent to someone whose position differs from the student's own in a clownish or mockish way. In addition, attend to the complexity of the questions they pose from that perspective. Is it a simple clarifying question—"What is . . . ?"—or a more probing question with several layers? Notice whether the questions are broad and general, or are they honing in to the essence of the subject or identifying puzzles of particular significance? Are they surface questions or are they probing deeply?

Tips

With initial uses of this routine, the generated list of possible viewpoints is usually very predictable. Model other possible viewpoints, for example, with a newspaper photo of soldiers marching. Expected viewpoints could include those of the soldiers themselves, any onlookers, the photographer, and perhaps also the person reading the newspaper. Other viewpoints that could be modeled or suggested could include the earth on which

the soldiers are standing—what is it thinking, what questions would it ask? Or perhaps that of the battle-worn boots or the nearby trees that have witnessed many troops of soldiers marching past. It does not take long for students to suggest many different viewpoints once they know that this is encouraged and valued.

Likewise, you may need to draw attention to and/or model what it would mean to "think" or "ask questions" that go beneath the surface of the topic in order to encourage more thought-provoking insights and intriguing questions. Don't expect this to occur right away. However, students are always trying to figure out "what we want from them." If they get the impression a superficial or comical response will do, they will give us more of the same. Continue to push students' thinking. If you teach multiple classes, you might type up students' responses from one class (without attribution) and give them to another class to sort according to the level of thoughtfulness and insight the responses reveal about the character whose viewpoint is being examined.

Rather than have each student stand and read, you might have one student share and then ask others who have that same viewpoint to add to that response until the class has built up a good understanding of that viewpoint. Then invite someone "on the opposite side of the circle of viewpoints," that is, who has a markedly different perspective, to present his or her ideas. Next, invite someone to speak from a position more in between those two perspectives. This will encourage more active listening and processing of the information rather than students just waiting their turn.

A Picture of Practice

Nicky Dorevitch was exploring the topic of poverty with a group of grade 5 students at Blaik College in her creative writing seminar. While the discussion was lively and interesting, Nicky was concerned that the children were not really delving into the issues. "After overhearing a heated discussion about the phrase 'Make Poverty History,' I realized that after listening to the children, many of their views of poverty were basically clichés, and I felt that this could be a really interesting and valuable topic," Nicky commented.

She decided to use the Circle of Viewpoints routine in order to ascertain exactly what the students knew about poverty and encourage them to think more broadly and from other perspectives about this topic. Nicky shared her thinking about the choice of COV: "I chose this routine to explore the children's perspectives of poverty. . . . I feel that this routine will help the children consider different and

diverse perspectives and that it will also encourage them to confront this topic with sensitivity and humility.' None of the students had done this routine before, and each was intrigued with the idea of choosing a viewpoint.

As the stimulus for this exploration, Nicky chose a photo of a Mongolian family crammed into the front seat of a bright blue, but battered, old jeep that looks more handmade than factory produced. On the roof what appear to be household items are stacked precariously, blankets draping over the edge and partially covering the side windows. Seven family members, all with the same jet-black hair, are visible in the picture, some with faces nearly pressed to the front glass. A shirtless man, perhaps the father, drives. A girl in a red shirt in the center of the photograph smiles at the woman (the mother?) behind her, dressed in bright plaid and grinning broadly. The vehicle sits in a barren, flat landscape devoid of trees or buildings. Only the smallest tufts of short grass can be seen to one side of the frame. It is impossible to tell if the jeep is on a road or traveling cross country. In the background, a darkening sky turning a purplish pink caps the scene. The image isn't particularly sad or depressing and, while it shows a certain level of hardship, it avoids some stereotypes about poverty. Not wanting to lead students to think in certain ways, Nicky choose not to share any information about the photo with her students. Time was given for the students to look carefully at the photo. Then students named and noticed what they observed before identifying the various perspectives. Students were then asked to each choose the viewpoint of someone or something in this photo and respond to the question prompts of the routine from the viewpoint that they had selected.

One student chose the mother's perspective, writing, "Oh my husband is so good, trying to keep the kids so calm when all of us are scared. With not even butterflies in our stomachs, they're more like leeches. I wonder when the fuel is going to run out. I hope we have enough to last at least the night. I think by then we will be able to get to the little village. I really hope that we'll also have enough food because I have a whole family to feed and I can't bear to see them suffer. If one of us is hungry I really hope it's not the children. Oh no, the enemy is catching up. I must make sure the children don't look back. I see my husband's face as he bashes down the accelerator and now I know it's bad." This was followed by a briefer response concerning possible questions: "What will happen to us if the fuel runs out?"

Several other students took the perspective of inanimate objects in the picture, such as the car, the blankets on top, the road, the wheels, and so on. Perhaps these

students felt this choice would allow them to be more creative and free in their writing.

Writing from the car's viewpoint, a student responded to the prompts with "I'm an old battered car. I think my bonnet will blow any second, and the wheels are on the verge of falling off. Why oh why did they cram seven people into me? I'm nearly out of fuel. There is a long road ahead, and there has been no fuel point for 210 miles. My lights have no globes and my steering wheel is dysfunctional. And to make matters worse, they have dumped about 20 kilos of tents and rugs on my roof. It's hot and squishy inside, but it's late afternoon and cool outside. My tires are barely holding up, and I desperately need a repair. A question I have from this viewpoint is: Will I survive?"

The students became deeply engaged in their choices. They took on the persona of the new viewpoint very seriously, and Nicky felt that their writing was evocative and powerful in response to the "think" prompt, perhaps less so with the "questions." The students were interested and excited to hear each student read his or her response, and this triggered new questions and further discussion. The structure of the routine enabled the students to approach the image in a way that asked them to take more than a cursory look at it, took them out from their everyday lives, and enabled them to make new and different connections about the concept of poverty.