

Step 1

How to Develop Student Perspectives

This assignment is designed to help students begin to surface their own perspectives.

Bill typically starts giving these assignments with an energetic admonition. In this admonition, he says:

"I am asking you to spend an hour focusing on this assignment. Not six hours or twelve hours – just one. One hour with your mind fully engaged, giving your all. And, while you are doing this assignment, you are not going to text your friends, or make plans for Saturday night. You are not even going to send a belated birthday greeting to your grandmother in Kansas. You are just going to do the assignment.

And, if in that hour of engagement, you think of a question; contact me. Remember: you don't know something, say something, text something, email me something. I am always going to assume you are okay and that you know what you are doing. But, if you don't know what you are doing, or have questions, and you just sit there with your questions, that is not engagement. Engagement is writing to me and saying, "Hey, Dr. Tobin, I don't get it and here's what I am thinking – is this what you had in mind, am I getting it?" So, if I don't hear from you, I am going to assume that you do get it and that I am the greatest teacher on the planet. I am going to assume that everything is clear as a bell. So, it is up to you to ask questions and to stop me from thinking that I am the greatest teacher by giving me the chance to communicate with you.

To get started, it is important to understand that each individual is responsible for his/her image and what he/she gets out of the class is equal to the effort put into it. Once that understanding is in place, it is time to have students focus on their first assignment.

Assignment #1: “Everyone has a story. This is mine.”

Ask your students to respond to the questions below and explain that you expect them to spend an engaged hour on an assignment that will get them thinking about three questions:

- *What is your personal story?*
- *What is the perspective that you have from living this story?*
- *What perspective and abilities do you bring to our work?*

Then, ask your students to make lists in response to the following prompts. It is not necessary for their answers to be written out in full sentences; bullets will suffice. What is important is that their answers are honest and thoughtful.

1) Personal Inventory. Make two lists in response to the following prompts:

a) Your most important **circumstances**—situations in which you were born into and didn’t choose, i.e. family, siblings, the race, religion of your family—**and how they shaped you.**

b) Your most important **life experiences**—things that you have done, that have happened to you-- and **what lessons or skills you learned from them.**

2) Now write two paragraphs that discuss the abilities and perspective you bring to our class.

a) In the first paragraph choose a couple of abilities or skills you possess and discuss how they might contribute to the work of community problem solving.

b) In the second paragraph choose two words that describe your perspective or way of seeing and explain what they are and how they might bring helpful perspectives to this class.

If students are not sure how to describe their circumstances and experiences, it is sometimes necessary for a teacher to self-disclose. Bill often uses himself as a model. Here is how he recently completed the assignment:

1. Circumstances (and how they have shaped me.)

- *Adopted at the age of two—made me worry, but thankful*
- *Raised in strict catholic family—helped me understand role of tradition*
- *One of five children, second oldest—know how to share and wait my turn*
- *White—have a sense of unearned advantage*
- *Middle class—know how it feels to almost always have money for needs.*

2. Experiences (and what I learned from them)

- *Married have three kids—know how hard it is to be a good father and husband.*
- *Taught people from age 5 to 25, from kindergarten to PhD thesis—know how to engage with a variety of people*
- *55 years of life experiences—know one big thing/person/idea won't change everything...small steps*
- *lived in two different countries—have learned that subtle differences between cultures can make all the difference*
- *civil right attorney--Know that arrangements that don't make any sense (i.e. towns in North Carolina where Black people are not hooked up to water and sewer system) are common.*

With your circumstances and experiences in mind: What skills, abilities and perspective do you bring to this project.

Paragraph 1: Because I have been a father, worked with community organizations that don't have a lot of resources here and in Europe and have lived for 55 years I am much more patient and willing to let things develop than I otherwise would be. I realize I need to let people talk, put up with some messiness and not try to control it. My experience has taught me that you can't control life, you can't control every detail, can't control how a project goes. This can be helpful

when we are trying to address a challenging question that you can't outwork, or control, but instead have to let people voice their views, even if it makes things more complicated, harder to control. Another word for this is humble.

Paragraph 2: The two key words that describe my perspective are: equity and hope. I am inclined to see the world as a place in which things aren't fair, in which good education and health care are scarce resources. Families who have more money and education usually are better able to get these scarce resources. BUT I am also hopeful. I tend to see the ability to figure out what to say and how to say it, and how to present yourself as critical to getting these scarce resources. I also think this can be learned, but it takes a lot of work. My perspective might help us identify problems that are often under the surface and/or messy, but very still very real and important.

What we have learned over the years:

Students in our classes have wanted to share their lists and paragraphs with classmates and there have been times in which a student has become publicly emotional. As a rule, we never require students to share their work here. But when students insist on sharing, what follows are rare teachable moments in which pretenses drop, other students realize that they are in the presence of an open heart, and the group dynamic transcends the teacher/student relationship. Often after these moments the class reforms as a team of researchers who share the need for truth.

(Suggestion: To further explore the interplay of circumstances and experiences and how they inform the development of a personal perspective, we have found that using the activity *What is in your backpack?*" (which can also be found on the resource page for step 1) is helpful. The activity can be a concrete aid to help students inventory their experiences and circumstance and a useful way to begin to see where the perspectives of classmates come from and shape how they see their world.)