

Step 1

Surfacing Perspectives in Diverse Classrooms

This case study illustrates how one group of students in New York leveraged the diverse perspectives in their seminar.

The students in this seminar were taught the first four mini-lessons. These students intellectually understood how different perspectives might come to bear on a community issue, but that understanding was largely superficial.

Students from these three high schools convened in the large library of the most affluent school. Many of the students of color often arrived after the seminar began because they depended on transportation from a local community center. By the time these students arrived, the other students (whose parents drove them or who had their own cars) had filled many of the seats at the front. We did not assign seats and so, even with encouragement to mix in, students of color who arrived late tended to sit at the far end of the large conference table. Early arriving students did most of the talking in both the large group discussions at the table and when we broke up into teacher assigned small diverse groups.

In a number of different ways, we checked in with students both individually and in groups to remind them that attending a particular school or even being more confident about speaking during the seminar was not a sign that they could solve community problems and made sure to break into smaller curated groups and we continued with the seminar.

Two sessions went by and the students of color were clearly engaged but rarely spoke. At the third session, the students discussed possible research topics, one possible topic was the lack of employment opportunities for teens in the larger community. It was at that point that the students of color began to speak up. It became clear to all of the students and to Bill and Valerie

that life circumstances sharply influenced how students thought about this topic and the difference in perspective that these life experiences provided gave a voice to the students who might have previously been intimidated to speak up. The students of color knew a lot about how hard it was to get a job, especially when one was needed. By choosing a topic that was of concern to all of the students, what emerged was the difference between *needing a job and wanting one*. As a result of engagement on a topic that had meaning to them, several Hispanic girls began to express their opinions on research design in emails to Bill. As Bill responded and encouraged further conversation, they began to speak out more in class. What is worth emphasizing is that perspectives can be surfaced in a variety of ways, many of which have nothing to do with standing and delivering on the benefits of diversity. Here the value of the perspectives in the room only became clear once the work shifted from “perspectives talk” to the work of identifying and addressing a challenge.

