

Step 1

What is in your backpack?

This is a warm-up activity. This activity connects the work of developing an engaged perspective with a brief introduction to the research process that students are embarking on. A backpack is an artifact that sheds light on who students are: how they spend their time, what they care about, what has been chosen for them in their life, and what they have chosen for themselves. Having students examine the contents of their backpacks in class can help them inventory their experiences and circumstances and therefore make it easier to consider their point of view or perspective and those of others.

The activity also lends itself to collecting and analyzing data in one class period. The activity enables each student to share information about him or herself and write a short explanation that describes how what they have written relates to the experiences of other students. As students go through this exercise they develop an understanding of what an open-ended inquiry means. For example, they learn that the answer to what *this group* of people have put in their backpack and what that says about them cannot be found on the Internet. The only way to know the answer to that question is to ask the question and analyze the answers.

We have found that making the distinction between open inquiry and what most teachers call research--essentially Internet searches--takes time for students to grasp. After a lot of exposure to research as an Internet search, it is usually a challenge to redefine research as the creation of new knowledge. The activity of collecting and analyzing a small amount of data quickly and informally helps students to actually “get” what research actually is. Put differently, it is simply easier to describe the methods used in research—in large part because students are more receptive--if students actually have direct experiences engaging with data. And, it is at this

point that the work of developing a perspective of one's own, and that of others, can be connected to the methods used in a social science research process. Once students understand that their individual experiences and circumstances are more powerfully understood within the context of those of others, it is possible to dig more deeply into how essential it is for them (as emerging social scientists) to consider experiences, circumstances and ultimately perspectives within a broader social context. This is the essence of social science research.

Two ways to run the “What is in your backpack?” activity:

Purposes of the backpack activity:

Option #1: *Inventory of Contents*

- a) Tell students that because a backpack provides a glimpse of who they are it can be used to help them remember their circumstances and experiences and surface their perspectives.
- b) Ask students to inventory their backpack by making a list of everything it contains that day. Then ask them to group these items into one of two groups. Some items might be placed in both groups, but ask students to choose the best fit; other items simply won't go in either group, and should be inventoried on a third list marked *miscellaneous*. The two primary lists of what is in their backpacks are:
 - i. Items that are related to or evidence of their circumstances—things they have no control over—i.e. pictures of family.
 - ii. Items that are related to or evidence of their experiences—things they do—i.e. running shoes for track practice.¹

¹ This exercise can be used to help students complete or add to what they have done in the “what is my story exercise?” above.

- c) To probe more deeply into circumstances and experiences that influence their values and beliefs, add these steps.
- i. Ask your students to share some of the items they actually have in their backpacks and explain why those items are there. Record students' answers on a visible list. Then engage your students in a discussion about the "data" that their belongings represent and how patterns and themes begin to tell a story about who they are.

Option #2: *Inventory of Experiences*

- a) Using the backpack graphic below on p. 78 ask students to label the pockets with different experiences in their lives and how those experiences have shaped or influenced them. The sizes and placement of the pocket should indicate the degree of importance of each influence. Once your students have labeled the backpack graphic, have them write responses to the following prompts:
 - i. Who and what are the major life influences that are in your backpack?
 - ii. What are the underlying values and beliefs that are expressed through those influences? Example: If your grandmother influenced you to care for others, how did she do that? Did you cook together while she told you stories about family history? Did she take you with her to church?
- b) Analysis, ask students to respond to these questions, which serve as a preview to **Step 6** in the research process below:
 - i. What trends or commonalities did you hear/see in the class responses?
 - ii. Can you come up with three headings—just make them up—and group the responses under these headings?

iii. What **two** key findings do you take from this activity? For example: “Most of the students in our class value family as a major influence and grandparents have been the most active passing on family traditions. It also looks like the students in our class value education. Nearly everyone had materials from school in their backpacks.”

c) Social Studies/ELA Assignment (Optional):

- i. Where do the contents of your backpack place you in the context of history?
- ii. If someone from the far future were to look at your backpack, are there ways that the artifacts of your life might be misunderstood?
- iii. What else would you need to know in order to understand the contents of your backpack and make a correct analysis of the life and times in which the owner lived?

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ORIENTATIONS	TEACHER'S STRATEGIES	STUDENT ENGAGEMENT OBJECTIVES
<p>Set the tone:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes physical things help us recall experiences and circumstances and how they have shaped us. • What experiences have influenced you? • What are your beliefs? • What are your values? • How do we identify and define beliefs and values in a social environment? 	<p>Model the activity/ tone:</p> <p>I was born in an urban area. As a kid my friends were black, white and Hispanic. My parents were always working and I spent a lot of time with my Italian grandparents. In my back pack I have friends from different backgrounds and a traditional Italian family How have these influences shaped my beliefs, values and decisions?</p>	<p>Make distinctions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circumstances—things you have little control over—and experiences • How do your values and beliefs influence your life? • How have values and beliefs shaped your perspective? • What has been modeled by people in your environment? • What questions do you have?
<p>Questions that probe and clarify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you want to take with you? • What do you want to move beyond? • What surprised you? • Who else here feels the same? 	<p>Guide student responses:</p> <p>How does self-disclosure help to bond a group and foster understanding?</p> <p>What is the importance of compassion and empathy in social environments?</p>	<p>Students begin to identify the differences between opinions (What annoys me?) and perspectives derived from the direct and indirect communication of values and beliefs.</p>



