Overview:
Learning to understand and appreciate different perspectives is a vital part of a functioning society. This activity prompts students to reflect on the value of considering different perspectives and encourages recognition that multiple stories can be true at once.

Part 1 of the activity involves reading a short parable about six blind men trying to describe what an "elephant" is. Teachers can end there or use the parable as a jumping-off point for **Part 2,** an activity that asks students to consider multiple stories from the same time period.

By studying several different perspectives, students understand that even if people lived in the same place at the same time, their individual experiences could be very different, and that no single story can encapsulate or explain an entire time, movement, or event. Furthermore, students learn that many stories can be true at one time, that stories are not mutually exclusive, and that good and bad often exist simultaneously.

Learning Outcomes:
- Acknowledge that perceptions are influenced by various socio-cultural aspects.
- Develop understanding of difference, cultivating empathy, and building cross-cultural competencies.

Information for Instructor:
Student handout included, "Six Blind Men and the Elephant". The moral of the parable is that stories and conflicts are the same – composed of several perspectives, none of which are dominant and all of which must be considered to achieve an accurate understanding of an issue or event. This reflection could be applied to multiple historic or contemporary events of the teacher's choosing.

Instructions:
Part 1:
This Parable can be applied to any history or social studies lesson the teacher chooses. Applying the lesson from the parable aims to teach students that history, policy, and decision-making must be looked at through several lenses.

Students read the parable about the six blind men and the elephant. When finished, they will discuss debrief questions either in groups or as a class. Ask the class if they have any initial reactions or comments, then present them with debrief questions. Possible discussion questions include:
- What happened in the story? Why could the men not agree on what an elephant is? What would have happened if only one man's perspective had been taken into account?
- What happens when we only listen to one account of a story? Of history?

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- What are some factors that affect our individual perspectives or points of view?
- Have you ever felt like your perspective was considered unimportant or invalid? How did that feel?
- Does it ever feel challenging to change your perspective, or expand your understanding of something? If so, why do you think it can be challenging?
- What is your usual reaction upon hearing a perspective that is new or different from your own?

Part 2:

The teacher selects an event, time period, and characters. Students are asked to write a short statement piece (blog post, op-ed, letter to the governor's office, or similar) explaining the perspective held by the role they are assuming on a given topic. The piece should indicate support for their perspective and make a persuasive appeal for others to understand their point of view. An example of time/topic might be:

- *Time Period: Industrial Revolution in the United States, late 1800's*
- *Character Profiles: an immigrant, a native-born laborer, a successful businessman, a native American, a person recently freed from enslavement, a party boss, etc.*
- *Example topic: length of the work week*

The teacher identifies a forum for ideas to be shared, such as an online blog or a bulletin board where letters can be posted and reviewed, or a town hall meeting where statements are shared. Following the sharing of perspectives, students will be asked to reflect on the parable and jot down thoughts about how the story impacted their interpretation of everyone else's statements.

The teacher can bring closure to the exercise by reconvening the class and debriefing the exercise with reflective questions. Possible questions include:

- Which stories did you find particularly compelling or caused you to respond empathetically?
- Did you identify with any particular story? Did any story feel like a threat to your own?
- Which of the perspectives were represented in policies of the time and which were not? How so?
- Why is it important to consider other perspectives? Can different stories be true at the same time?

Applications:

This activity is applicable to units in social sciences, government, and history. It is especially applicable to units that involve topics exploring democracy and decision-making, governance and policy, migration and diversity, civil war, post-war reconstruction or reconciliation, problem solving, or any situation when multiple stakeholders with different perspectives are involved.

This lesson can also be used to demonstrate the importance of incorporating multiple disciplines into a political decision-making process such as historical, cultural, and economic perspectives.

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Six Men and the Elephant Parable

This story has several versions. This version is adapted from jainworld.com.

Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, “Hey, there is an elephant in the village today.”

They had no idea what an elephant is. They decided, “Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway.” All of them went where the elephant was. Every one of them touched the elephant.

“Hey, the elephant is a pillar,” said the first man who touched his leg.

“Oh, no! it is like a rope,” said the second man who touched the tail.

“Oh, no! it is like a thick branch of a tree,” said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant.

“It is like a big hand fan” said the fourth man who touched the ear of the elephant.

“It is like a huge wall,” said the fifth man who touched the belly of the elephant.

“It is like a solid pipe,” Said the sixth man who touched the tusk of the elephant.

They began to argue about the elephant and every one of them insisted that he was right. It looked like they were getting agitated. A wise man was passing by and he saw this. He stopped and asked them, “What is the matter?” They said, “We cannot agree to what the elephant is like.” Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, “All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently because each one of you touched a different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features.”

“Oh!” everyone said. There was no more fight. They felt happy that they were all right.

The moral of the story is that there may be some truth to what someone says even when it differs from our own experiences. Sometimes we can see that truth and sometimes not because they may have a different experience that gives them a different perspective.

https://jainworld.com/education/jain-education-material/jain-stories/elephant-and-the-blind-men/

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