The Blind Men and the Elephant

Class time needed: 20 minutes

Materials: One copy of "The Blind Men and the Elephant"

Objectives

• Students will develop sensitivity to others' points of view.
• Students will understand the importance of having as much information as possible before coming to conclusions.

This retelling of a traditional story from India illustrates how different people can have distinctly different perceptions of the same thing. Students will readily see the faulty thinking behind the blind men's arguments, but they may need some help understanding that even when presented with a real elephant, each man could "see" only what he already believed to be true. Use this story to encourage your students to develop perspective awareness--awareness that each of us creates a unique view of the world based on personal experience, language, and culture.

Procedure

Since "The Blind Men and the Elephant" is a folktale from oral tradition, you may want to rehearse the story several times and tell it rather than read it to your class. Before you present the story, ask students to give their interpretations of the word "see." Reinforce the idea that to see can mean to perceive something visually or to understand an idea. Ask students to listen to the story for examples of both definitions.

Debriefing

After students have heard the story, use the following questions to guide discussion of how differences in perspective can make it difficult for people to communicate. Students should be encouraged to apply the moral of the folktale to real-life situations.

1. How does it feel when another person doesn't "see" something the same way you do?
2. What happens in the story when each blind man "sees" the elephant? Why were there six different
ideas about the elephant? Were any of the men right about the elephant? Were any of them completely wrong?
3. What did the blind men learn from the Rajah? What does the storyteller want us to learn from this tale?
4. Do problems like this happen in real life? Think of times when arguments or misunderstandings have occurred because people see situations from different points of view. Describe what happened.
5. What if the men in this story were not blind? Would they still have different ideas about elephants?
6. Does the story give you any ideas about how these problems can be solved? What are some steps you can take to understand why another person doesn't see things the way you do?

**Extending the Ideas**

- Ask students to write an extension of the story that includes the conversation the six men might have had as they journeyed home.
- Have students write original stories that illustrate the importance of perspective-awareness.
- Ask students to write and perform a skit based on the story. The skit could be performed for other classes, and the performers could guide a debriefing with their audience.
- Have students work in groups of six to create group illustrations of the story. Alternatively, have them use recycled materials to create a sculpture of the elephant combining the perspectives of the six blind men.
- Encourage students to talk about misunderstandings they experience or observe that seem to be the result of clashes between points of view. Work with students to role-play behavior that resolves the misunderstanding.
- If your class is corresponding with a Peace Corps Volunteer, ask him or her to provide some examples of differences in how people in the host country view the world and the way Americans "see" things. What has the Volunteer learned from these differences?