

Background Beliefs

Summary

We've all had that experience, the one where we start arguing with someone and find that we disagree about pretty much everything. When two people have radically different background beliefs (or worldviews), they often have difficulty finding any sort of common ground. In this lesson, students will learn to distinguish between the two different types of background beliefs: beliefs about matters of fact and beliefs about values. They will then go on to consider their most deeply held background beliefs, those that constitute their worldview. Students will work to go beyond specific arguments to consider the worldviews that might underlie different types of arguments.

Objectives

In this lesson, students will

- Learn to distinguish between beliefs about matters of fact and beliefs about values.
- Look at the arguments offered on a particular subject and consider what those arguments say about the authors' worldview.
- Compare the worldview of others to their own and discuss the ways in which their own worldview leads them to accept or reject new information.

Background

In order to avoid being spun by politicians or advertisers, we must evaluate the believability of their claims. As we do so, we unavoidably try to compare any new information to the background beliefs we bring to the [table](#). Sometimes it doesn't work. For instance, suppose we encountered the following pronouncement:

All brillig toves are slithy.

Most of us would be at a loss to evaluate this claim because, of course, we have no experience with toves or slithy-ness or brillig things. On the other hand, we might encounter the following:

The moon is made of green cheese.

Now this claim we can do something with. We will (one hopes) quickly reject the claim because we know that, for instance, the moon is actually made of rock, that it is not green at all, etc. In fact, everyone has a multitude of background beliefs, and we filter new information through the screen of those beliefs. This lesson will help students learn to think more objectively about their background beliefs.

Procedure

Make enough copies of student handouts #1 through #4 for each student. Make packets of student handouts #3, #4 and #5. Distribute student handout #1 at the beginning of the lesson. Distribute student handout #2 at the beginning of Exercise #1 and the packet at the beginning of Exercise #2.

Materials

1. [Student handout #1](#): Facts, Values and Worldviews.
2. [Student handout #2](#): Types of Disagreement.
3. [Teacher's Guide to Student Handout #2](#): Types of Disagreement.
4. [Student handout #3](#): Brownell, "Two-thirds Are Overweight and We're Still Debating."
5. [Student handout #4](#): Campos, "Homosexuality Was Once a 'Disease' Too."
6. [Student handout #5](#): Chart for Exercise #2.

Exercises

Exercise #1 – Matters of Fact v. Values

To the teacher: There are different ways in which we can disagree. The most common difference is between matters of fact and values. When we are unclear about how we disagree, we can sometimes talk past one another. Disagreements about matters of fact are often relatively easy to resolve: we need only look at appropriate references. Disagreements about values are harder to resolve. Students will sometimes need assistance in determining whether a disagreement really is over facts or over values.

Disagreements come in two different varieties. We might disagree about matters of fact (e.g., the final score of last night's baseball game) or we might disagree about values (e.g., which of the players in last night's game is the best hitter). What this means is that when we encounter a controversial topic, there really are four different relationships that can arise. For example, let's consider the positions we might take about the war in Iraq.

1. Agree on both facts and values. Alex and Britney might agree that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that wars are always wrong.
2. Disagree on both facts and values. For instance, Alex might believe that Iraq did not have WMDs and that the war is always wrong whereas Britney might think that Iraq really did have WMDs and that war is justified whenever it will benefit the U.S.
3. Agree on facts and disagree on values. Alex and Britney might both agree that Iraq did not possess WMDs, but might still disagree about whether or not it is ever moral to go to war.
4. Disagree on facts and agree on values. Perhaps Alex and Britney both agree that going to war can be morally permissible but disagree as to whether or not Iraq had WMDs.

When dealing with disagreements, then, it is important to be clear on what kind of disagreement is really at issue. Disagreements about matters of fact can often be resolved simply by looking at the relevant data. (See our lesson plan on Inappropriate Authority for an in-depth discussion of

good and bad sources of data.) Disagreements about values are deeper and cannot usually be resolved so easily.

Exercise: Pass out copies of Student Handout #2 to each student. Divide the class into small groups of 3-5 students and have them determine whether each pair of statements agree or disagree on facts and on values. Explain to the students that the answers aren't always black-and-white. Consider the following exchange:

James: The earth is approximately 6,000 years old.

Richard: The earth is approximately 2 billion years old.

Obviously James and Richard have a disagreement about a matter of fact (namely, the age of the earth.) But let us suppose now that the James in question is Dr. James Dobson, the influential evangelical minister, and the Richard in question is actually Dr. Richard Dawkins, the prominent biologist and outspoken atheist. James might well claim that his belief in the age of the earth is grounded in his not-inconsiderable understanding of the Bible while Richard would claim that his belief is rooted in his own understanding of evolutionary biology. The disagreement about a matter of fact is, in this case, really a disagreement about what sorts of things count as appropriate evidence (i.e., revealed religion vs. scientific evidence). Thus James and Richard's disagreement could be one of fact, but it could also be classified as a disagreement in value. After students have completed the exercise, have them report their answers back to the class. Record students' answers on the board, then discuss any areas of disagreement between the students and/or the different groups.

Exercise #2 – Identifying Worldviews

To the teacher: We all have worldviews, but few of us stop to really consider what our deepest background beliefs are. Until we take the time to consciously ponder our worldview, we will not be able to objectively consider new information. This exercise will help students to look beyond specific claims and consider the deeper commitments that might underlie those claims.

Worldviews consist of our most deeply ingrained beliefs, the kinds that are most resistant to questioning or amendment. They become so much a part of us that we frequently screen other information through them without being consciously aware that we are doing so. We tend to reject information that conflicts with them almost automatically. Our worldview is particularly important because it enters into decisions about what to do or what to believe, decisions that we need to make regularly to live our lives. Some examples of beliefs of this kind: it's wrong to betray one's country; everyone is mortal; the laws of physics don't change from day to day; killing is morally wrong.

Most of our worldviews are of this general sort, but some of them are also very specific: belief (or disbelief) in God is a pretty specific belief, but for many it is a central part of their worldview.

Exercise: Divide the class into small groups of 3-5 students each and ask them to spend a few minutes discussing some beliefs that might count as part of someone's worldview. Then have the individual groups report their findings back to the class. If you haven't done so already, pass out the packet containing student handout #3, #4 and #5. Ask the students to read the articles in each of the two handouts. Have them return to their groups. Students should analyze the two arguments, focusing their analysis on the following questions:

1. Do the authors disagree about specific matters of fact?
2. Do the authors have disagreements about values?
3. What do the disagreements about values tell you about the authors' likely worldviews?
4. How do your own worldviews compare to those of the two authors?

Students can use the chart on student handout #5 to organize their responses. Have the students report back on their results. Discuss the students' worldviews. Ask students to discuss whether (and how) they think their own worldviews made them more or less receptive to the arguments that Brownell and Campos present.

About the Author

Joe Miller received his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Virginia. He is a staff writer at FactCheck.org, a project of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. Prior to joining FactCheck, he served as an assistant professor of philosophy at West Point and at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where he taught logic, critical thinking, ethics and political theory. The winner of an Outstanding Teacher award at UNC-Pembroke and an Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant award at the University of Virginia, Joe has more than 10 years of experience developing curricula. He is a member of the American Philosophical Association and the Association for Political Theory.

Correlation to National Standards

National Social Studies Standards

X. Civic Ideals and Practices Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.

Essential Skills for Social Studies

Acquiring Information

A. Reading Skills

1. Comprehension
2. Vocabulary

B. Study Skills

1. Find Information

2. Arrange Information in Usable Forms

C. Reference & Information-Search Skills

2. Special References

D. Technical Skills Unique to Electronic Devices

1. Computer

Organizing and Using Information

A. Thinking Skills

1. Classify Information

2. Interpret Information

3. Analyze Information

4. Summarize Information

5. Synthesize Information

6. Evaluate Information

B. Decision-Making Skills

C. Metacognitive Skills

Interpersonal Relationships & Social Participation

A. Personal Skills

C. Social and Political Participation Skills

Democratic Beliefs and Values

B. Freedoms of the Individual

C. Responsibilities of the Individual

National Mathematics Standards

Process Standards

Reasoning and Proof Standard

National Educational Technology Standards

2. Make informed choices among technology systems, resources, and services.
7. Routinely and efficiently use online information resources to meet needs for collaboration, research, publication, communication, and productivity.
8. Select and apply technology tools for research, information analysis, problem solving, and decision making in content learning.

Information Literacy Standards

Information Literacy

Standard 1 assesses information efficiently and effectively.

Standard 2 evaluates information critically and competently.

Standard 3 uses information accurately and creatively.

Social Responsibility

Standard 7 recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

Standard 8 practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

Standard 9 participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

English Language Arts Standards

Standard 1 Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary work.

Standard 3 Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Standard 5 Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standard 6 Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

Standard 7 Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Standard 8 Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

Standard 12 Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).