

Global Perspectives: Exercises: Lesson 1/2

Objectives: The purpose of this lesson is to convey the sorts of general problems that taking evidence entails.

A. Distinction between facts, arguments, eye-witness testimony, evidence-as-story

The distinctions here could be quite subtle. For instance, “IQ is an excellent predictor of success in school”. Is this a fact? Can it be measured? Does it need to be argued? Are we sure what IQ is? Is “success” a word we can agree on?

It may be debated whether this phrase is a fact or an argument. It may be that many facts are not as certain as we would like to think. (*‘In science, “fact” can only mean “confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional assent.” ’* Stephen J. Gould)

It would be interesting to explore with students the nature of eye-witness testimony. How good are we at sticking to facts. Could the students themselves tell us what happened yesterday sticking only to facts?

B. Hearing evidence: self-awareness to ward off seduction

Self-aware is an important aspect of understanding the potential weaknesses of others.

Consider and debate the following:

Our own interpretations tend to flatter us (that is, make us think we are clever, that we understand, that we are central to the circumstances in question: resist such self-flattery, beware of it in others)

Our own interpretations please us aesthetically (i.e., there is pleasure to be taken in a well-balanced, well-worked out narrative, leading us to reject less elegant interpretations, perhaps mistakenly)

Interpretations that fit all the known facts fill us with unwarranted certainty (i.e., interpretations that explain all the known facts may still be completely wrong, and not infrequently are).

Interpretations that reinforce our (not-directly related) “certainties” – values, judgments, “truths” – are more congenial than interpretations that threaten our certainties. This is a trap to watch out for.