

In Practice

Positionality for Reality

Getting Ourselves Oriented



Purpose

These discussion prompts (which accompany the blog post named above) are meant to spark curiosity about our disorientation, cultivate appreciation of why we need a deeper sense of “positionality,” and support the habit of situating ourselves within a bigger picture. Bear in mind, these are not “problem-solving” exercises, but ways to practice seeing ourselves differently and imagining the unfolding consequences of human thought and action.

They were created with college students in mind, but are adaptable to other settings. Adjust as needed according to available time, goals, and audience levels of historical, science, and socio-environmental literacy.

1. Mission Impossible

Devise a brief challenge (e.g., simple task, treasure hunt, scavenger hunt, destination to reach, problem to solve) that interests you and works well in your context. Then have students compete with each other, either as individuals or as teams, to see who can accomplish it first.

BUT your instructions should leave out or distort some piece or pieces of crucial information.

After their attempt, discuss:

- How far did they get? Where did they hit obstacles and what did they do to try to overcome them?
- What were (or could be) some of the short- or long-term consequences of trying to accomplish the task without complete or accurate information?
- What information or understanding would have been helpful? In what ways?
- Do the implications of missing or inaccurate information increase as problems and goals become larger and more complex?

Segue into a discussion of the imagined transition away from social and ecological devastation toward a way of life that supports healthy human and environmental systems over the long term (it may be helpful to also incorporate readings which deal with this subject explicitly).

- Ask for examples of particular goals related to that transition and some of the systemic societal changes they require.
- With those in mind, have students consider what specific biophysical realities (e.g., physical laws, ecological principles, current conditions) we need to acknowledge and/or better understand in order to achieve those changes and why?
- Discuss what can go wrong if we ignore or misunderstand those? (Ask for or offer real life examples to demonstrate.)

2. Working With What's at Hand

Ask students to think about themselves and others around them as runners in a relay race (as described in the blog post). Have them list some of the conditions and conditioning they've been handed, using *only* value-neutral descriptive terms (e.g., "elevated CO2 levels" as opposed to "a messed up atmosphere"). Have them brainstorm an extensive list together.

With that list in sight, ask them to describe the kind of conditions and conditioning (in similarly value-neutral terms) they would like to pass on to the next "runners." Capture those in writing, either next to the other items or in a separate list.

Now, in view of the list of what they have to work with *and* what they ideally want to pass on, have them suggest and discuss a number of concrete activities which they or others might undertake to work toward those aspired-to conditions. Encourage them to think creatively here.

Critically examine the list, eliminating or retaining items based on an honest discussion about what's possible and most likely not possible.

Finally, ask: what basic knowledge do people need, or need to understand better, to be able to achieve those items effectively and in meaningful ways? Do most have it already? If not, how could they pursue it? How could/should others (as individuals or institutions, formally or informally) help cultivate such knowing more broadly over the long term?

3. Best Runners?

Have students look back in time to identify people who have helped us in *some particular way* (small or large, at local community or larger societal levels, directly or indirectly) advance toward healthier human and environmental systems. They might be individual persons, organizations, or categories of people. Discuss (what did they do, why, how, how long did it take, what were the results? etc.).

Ask them to speculate about what might be different today had they not done what they did.

Wonder aloud together about some of the particular things future generations of students might view as welcome advancements toward healthier human and environmental systems. Imagine some of the specific activities and concrete steps undertaken by people in their recent past to bring those advancements into being.

Finally, highlight the fact that *we* are the people in question from the future students' recent past. Consider and discuss the real forms such activities and steps (mentioned above) might take right *now*—in our lives, collective efforts, and particular contexts. In other words, what could or perhaps should we do now to help bring those welcome advancements into being?