

Project 360°

A Middle School Adventure in Self Awareness

**Developed by
Adam J. Cox, Ph.D.**

A unique way to bring psychology into the classroom

This article describes a group project for bringing psychology – especially self-awareness – into the classroom or related program. This project is especially recommended for students in grades 6 - 8, because some very important conclusions about identity, ability, and status are being drawn at these ages. Incredibly, by the time kids reach pre-adolescence, flexibility in how they think about themselves (abilities, strengths, challenges, etc.), and their future, is diminishing!

Project 360° is designed to build a young person's self-awareness by helping him or her gain a broader understanding of individual capabilities. Too often, students rely on only their own beliefs to gauge what they are good at, capable of, or what they could become as adults.

A brief history of Project 360°

The idea for this project emerged in the early 1990's, when I was working as a counselor for the *Career Discovery Program* at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. (This was a summer program, open to high school and college students, who were investigating careers in architecture or urban design.) As the program's counselor, I met with many students working hard to sort out their career aspirations. Although many were indeed interested in the possibility of a design career, many other students were simply exploring architecture as one of a great many options. Like most young people, they were anxious to know "where do I fit?"

It quickly became apparent that a big challenge for many students was having to make important choices, relying almost exclusively on personal instincts. More specifically, students lacked sufficient information - from enough sources - about their abilities, skills, and uniqueness to accurately gauge what might be the best career path for them.

So I began to prescribing an assignment that would require them to go out and interview others, people who had known them in different capacities, about how those people perceived them. Our goal was to build a knowledge base that was both deeper and more objective.

In part, this approach was based on a new development in the world of industrial psychology called the "360 degree evaluation." Basically, psychologists in industry had

learned that a person's performance evaluation was most meaningful when completed by a wide-range of people including one's subordinates and equals - *not just a supervisor*. This approach provided multiple perspectives of job performance and a more accurate understanding of the strengths and challenges of individual employees. It seemed reasonable to believe a similar approach might benefit the students with whom I was working.

I asked students to develop a list of questions about themselves they could ask seven or eight people who had known them in different capacities - perhaps former teachers, employers, friends, or extended family members. With this information we could adopt a more objective understanding of how other people perceived them, and where they might "fit" in the world of careers. In part, the aim was to help students reconsider their strengths and prospective contributions. Also, I wanted to reinforce the concept that *success is generated by making choices that are consistent with one's natural abilities*. Project 360° is targeted at gaining a more holistic perspective of what those abilities might be.

Focusing on students in Grades 6-8

A surprising thing to learn is that kids narrow their career expectations at a remarkably young age, typically by the time they are 12 or 13! Why? By this age, kids feel confident in assessing what they are capable of accomplishing in their life. To me, this is at least a little unsettling. How is it possible that someone so young could be so sure of longer-term capabilities?

It's important to recognize that what students are deciding has more to do with perceived capabilities (i.e., book smart, visual thinker, musical) than a specific occupation. But what if there are entire realms of ability that students remain unaware of and, as a result, they make poor decisions as to where their true capabilities lie?

If we are going to effectively empower students to think about themselves and their potential as workers, we need to intervene when they are "tweens." Waiting until high school or college to meet with a career placement counselor can have very detrimental consequences. At that point, we can do little more than react to increasingly rigid beliefs.

Project 360° gives students a chance to try out some unique learning roles: journalist, anthropologist, psychologist, and teacher. These roles give students an opportunity to be investigative and a chance to engage in understanding their own psychology.

How the project works

Phase One

In Phase One the project facilitator (teacher or guidance counselor) gathers students in a large room (typically an activity room or possibly a gymnasium). The students spread out, filling the room, and at least one arm's length from each other. One student is asked to volunteer to be the "person in the middle," standing in the center of the whole group. For example, "Amber" would stand in the middle of the room, with all of her classmates standing at different distances from her, spread out, all over the room. (*Each student should face Amber.) In other words, we are not forming a simple circle around Amber, but instead, filling of the room with some people standing very close to Amber, and others standing very far away from Amber. As everyone looks at Amber the facilitator makes some important comments:

Does everyone notice that they have their own perspective of Amber? Students will respond: YES.

Some people are very close to Amber and can see her very well, while others who are far away can't see Amber quite as well. However, everybody has a unique perspective of Amber. Do you agree? Students respond: YES.

Imagine if the people standing closest to Amber were the people who knew her best in her life, perhaps her family or closest friends, and suppose the people standing farthest away from Amber were people who hardly know her at all. They were people who had delivered a pizza to her house, or people who she had only met once briefly on a trip somewhere. Do you understand what I mean? (Note that this aspect of the project is typically appealing to visual and/or kinesthetic thinkers.) Students respond: YES.

Great! Well here is the point that we need to understand. Everyone has a unique perspective of Amber based on how they have known her. This is represented by where you are standing. But nobody's perspective is any "truer" than anyone else's. What I mean is that one person's view of another person – in this case, Amber - is simply based on the unique way they have known that other person. And the only way that we can fully appreciate the "wholeness" of a person is if we could somehow combine all of those perspectives into one 360 degree perspective. Then we would know the whole truth of what other people think about Amber. Do you understand? Students respond: YES, but may be hesitant if they need additional time to assimilate this formative idea.

*Facilitator can review the idea of multiple perspectives one or two more times to make sure that students grasp the concept.

Phase Two

Facilitator explains it will be important for us to learn about ourselves through the eyes of other people. We can do an investigative exercise which will help us appreciate the wholeness of who we are – our strengths, abilities, and what makes us unique. We will need to interview others who have known us about how they see us. We will want to choose people who have known us in different ways and for different lengths of time. The key will be to ask everybody the same set of questions so that we can honestly and

usefully compare the type of information given to us. We will be kind of like reporters, preparing to write a story about ourselves. We will go out and interview other people about how they see us. We will be studying ourselves like an anthropologist or psychologist might.

Phase Three

In this phase, students receive assistance in developing a set of questions to go out and ask other people. There is some latitude in how the facilitator guides the development of the questions. My suggestion is that students are required to ask at least eight questions of everyone they interview. Seven of these questions could be questions that all students in the class ask each person they will interview. However, the eighth question can be one that is unique for each student. (But should still be consistent for each of the student's interviewees.) Students should then brainstorm about what the seven core questions will be.

*(Some sample questions might be: "When you knew me, you thought I would be a great _____"; "The one thing you never expected me to try was _____"; "What do you predict I'll study in college?" **Please encourage students to come up with their own verbiage and focus.)*

Most kids will benefit from doing a couple of practice interviews within the context of the classroom to learn about interviewing other people, how to take notes, what to write down, and how to ask for clarification. Shy students, especially, appreciate the opportunity to practice in a safe environment, and to watch others who may be more confident carry out the interview.

Phase Four

Students should be given an allotment of time to complete the interviews; 2-3 weeks is reasonable. All students should submit a list of who they will be interviewing for facilitator approval prior to beginning the interviews. It will be important to assist students in making sure that they have a diverse group of people to talk to for the assignment to be meaningful. Ideally, students will check-in about their progress so that the facilitator can ensure that the interviews are productive.

Important – allowing students to choose interviewees ensures an acceptable level of safety. We wouldn't want to assign students to interview someone with whom they have a conflict. Please encourage students to select interviewees that will be constructive.

Phase Five

In the final phase of the project, the facilitator organizes an opportunity for students to present the interview results. Emphasis might be placed on what was most surprising and least surprising. In some cases, a group presentation poster that looks a little like a

“MySpace” website, featuring photos of group member and their interviewees, will be effective.

In other cases, it will be more useful for students to do an individual presentation. In all cases, it will be helpful for students to have ample interaction with one another about the experience of interviewing other people. What was it like to talk to other people about themselves? What did they learn from this project? Did they feel surprised by the insights of others? Did the people interviewed demonstrate any type of consensus? Organizing students into small groups may be a useful way to proceed for the sake of providing adequate supervision during this phase.

A few final thoughts...

Having helped schools implement this project, I am confident you will find Project 360° an interesting way to bring psychology into the classroom. Like all people, tweens never fail to be interested in themselves, and of course students this age are intensely interested in what other people think about them. I believe that Project 360° empowers students by helping them to understand more about themselves, and by broadening their horizons with respect to what they might become in their lives.

It is my hope to ultimately help schools and students to share their experiences with one another. Perhaps, at some point, I will have online capability in this regard. At the present time I can only suggest that you send me summaries or examples of what students learned.

Please feel free to e-mail me if you have any questions about this project, or comments once it has been completed. Thank you for considering the inclusion of Project 360° in your program. Good luck!