True Reports

This activity reminds students about the selective nature of all reports of evidence.

Materials

Identify a place that all your students can go to see more or less the same thing. Invent a claim that is easy to support with evidence observable at that location. A good example is the typical college bookstore. If yours is like most, apart from its textbook section, it will give far less space to books than to memorabilia and souvenirs. Give them a claim something like this: Judging by what you see in the bookstore, YOUR SCHOOL is more interested in promoting itself than in promoting learning.

Process

1. Assign students to observe all the evidence they can that supports the claim you’ve given them. They should write up that evidence in a page or two and bring six copies to class.

2. In groups of four or five, have students compare their reports of the same evidence, noting every difference, large and small. Ask them to figure out why they differed.

3. Reconvene the class to discuss the degree and sources of variability in their reports of evidence.