



# Identifying Personal Beliefs and Values Through Group Sense-Making

# 48

Christine Adams and Colin Jones

Intent - Investigating -Distilling

## 48.1 Learning Outcomes

Graduates increasingly encounter a world characterised by super complexity, where their ability to understand their environs and their own responses to situations is of paramount importance. In addition, the ability to articulate one's values, beliefs and feelings is crucial in the workplace to enable careful judgement, creative thinking and decision-making.

In this chapter we outline a process of group sense-making in which students can practice being vulnerable by examining and articulating their responses to situations, events or ideas.

Acknowledging the inherent challenge of drawing students into the uncomfortable space of questioning their assumptions, this exercise is designed to enable students to focus on their values, beliefs, feelings and experiences rather than trying to achieve the "right" response. After completing this exercise, the student will be able to:

- Identify their values, beliefs and feelings relative to a situation statement
- Compare and contrast their values, beliefs and feelings relative to the diversity present in their study cohort

---

C. Adams (✉)

College of Science and Engineering, University of Tasmania, South Hobart, Australia  
e-mail: [c.adams@utas.edu.au](mailto:c.adams@utas.edu.au)

C. Jones

Office for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, University of Southern Queensland,  
Toowoomba, Australia  
e-mail: [Colin.Jones@usq.edu.au](mailto:Colin.Jones@usq.edu.au)

- Articulate values, beliefs and feelings that incorporate a diversity of perspectives and adjust their judgement as required
- Critically reflect on the nature of any change in their values, beliefs and/or attitudes during the exercise

---

## 48.2 Teaching Context

We have successfully used his reflection exercise in undergraduate and postgraduate contexts. The provenance of this reflection process was a face-to-face exercise for nursing students, but as presented here, it is suitable for students in all discipline contexts and is developed for online delivery (Jones, 2009).

It is important to ensure the participants understand they will be objectively assessed on their level of engagement with the process (as opposed to being subjectively judged on the feelings they express or the outcome of the exercise). In many science-based contexts, this point needs to be emphasised to ensure students fully appreciate both the purpose and process of the activity.

Students can find this exercise confronting. It asks them to move from a position of certainty (and an unquestioning sense that their viewpoint is universalistic) to a more dialogical, multiple-understanding way of being and knowing. This may cause learners to experience excitement and/or apprehension. New ways of being and knowing (i.e. new frames of reference) may put the learner at risk of being out-of-step with colleagues, peers and cultures in which they have invested. The student's previous frames and connections will have sustained them, and they may continue to sustain them at some level. Thus, it is important for educators to highlight how investigating and distilling deeply held assumptions can help people articulate their frame of reference (and understand the frames of other people). In turn, this helps them create better guidelines for action, improve their professional practice and develop a more ethical and compassionate stance.

New educators working in cross-cultural learning environments may expect a diverse array of responses to situation statements and potentially some discomfort where students have not previously engaged deeply with their values and beliefs. Educators are encouraged to work with a mentor when first using this activity and consider debriefing techniques for themselves.

---

## 48.3 Overview of the Teaching Activity

To start the exercise, the educator designs a (provocative) *situation statement* to elicit a deep emotional response about a specific industry and societal situation. An example could be: "Carbon farming decreases greenhouse gases as pastures are closed to stock, letting native vegetation grow and absorb gas emissions. This will

generate income for farmers in the long term through carbon tax credits. However, many farmers question the viability of sustaining their livelihoods, farming traditions and the broader farming communities”. Having read the statement, students complete the following four phases:

**Phase 1:** Students document the personal feelings they recognise after they read the statement. Students can record multiple feelings. These should include both assumed and actual feelings.

**Phase 2:** Students review each other’s recorded feelings and compare and contrast their own feelings to others in the class. At this stage, the aim is to reflect on differences observed, and to arrive at an interim conclusion, as to how this situation statement relates to personal values and beliefs.

**Phase 3:** Each student validates their analysis of the situation by asking for feedback from other (external) participants or peers. This work is done to determine if the feelings they attribute to the situation statement are confirmed by reference to the ideas and perspectives of others (i.e. to “sense check” their feelings with a non-student audience). This phase may also elicit additional personal reflections that can help the student sense-make.

**Phase 4:** Each student reflects on the extent to which the process has influenced their approach to and/or perspective on the specific issue. Students note any shift in their values, beliefs, attitudes or general understanding.

---

## 48.4 Runsheet and Lesson Plan

Preface: A situation statement outlines a *current problem* or dilemma *to be solved* or *explored*. The situation statement should be designed to be provocative to ensure that different responses are elicited from the class cohort. It could be written (as described below) or in video form.

Before the exercise begins, explain the purpose of the exercise with students. Share the task description and marking rubric with students as well.

The instructions below are written directly to the instructor and the students; the instructions assume the class has an LMS (Learning Management System) with a Discussion Board and/or Blog function. You may also choose to run elements of this activity in a face-to-face format.

<b>Pre-activity</b>
<p><i>Instructor:</i> Develop the context-specific Situation Statement (1).</p> <p>Here is another example:</p> <p><i>“Public engagement must happen in places and on issues that are inconvenient, emergent, or marginal rather than in well-defined scientific communities”.</i></p> <p><i>Resources:</i> Post this statement and the exercise instructions on the class LMS.</p>
<b>Phase 1: identify Feelings</b>
<p><i>Students:</i> After reading the Situation Statement, reflect on your THOUGHTS and FEELINGS when reading the Situation Statement (2).</p> <p>In the open (Phase 1) Discussion Board area of the class LMS, document the nature of your THOUGHTS and FEELINGS and provide a short explanation of each feeling. The following questions may be useful for your reflections. Please remember to focus on your actual thoughts and feelings, not the things you assume you <i>should</i> be thinking and feeling:</p> <p><i>What are your personal thoughts, feelings and comments regarding this statement?</i></p> <p><i>Thinking beyond your first response, what other thoughts and feelings do you have?</i></p> <p><i>What specific values and beliefs do these feelings and thoughts represent?</i></p> <p><i>Your thoughts and feelings may change over time, why could this be so?</i></p> <p><i>Resources:</i> Open Column in Discussion Board on LMS</p>
<b>Phase 2: Search for Meaning</b>
<p><i>Students:</i> Read the contributions of about 20+ class members in the open column of the Discussion Board. Then, COMPARE and CONTRAST your values, beliefs and feelings with your class members in the private area of the Discussion Board of the class LMS. Conclude by writing your explanation of:</p> <p><i>What are the values, beliefs, thoughts and feelings of your class members in relation to the situation statement?</i></p> <p><i>How do others’ beliefs and experiences relate to your own?</i></p> <p><i>What does the contrast or congruence with the class members mean to your perspective?</i></p> <p><i>Resources:</i> Private Column in Discussion Board on LMS</p>

<b>Phase 3: Validate</b>
<p><i>Instructor:</i> Ask your students to seek validation of their thoughts by sharing the original Situation Statement with persons external to the class (3).</p> <p><i>Students:</i> Show the Situation Statement to someone not in your class. Ask them:</p> <p><i>Do they agree or disagree with the situation statement based on their values, beliefs and feelings?</i></p> <p><i>How did they explain their ideas to you?</i></p> <p><i>Consider, does their reply validate your beliefs, values and feelings in relation to the statement?</i></p> <p><i>What do you think about your responses to the question now?</i></p> <p>In the private (Phase 3) area of the Discussion Board of the class's LMS, explain why you are "sticking" with your original sense of what your thought or felt when you read the situation statement means, or why you might have modified your stance.</p> <p><i>Resources:</i> Private Column in Discussion Board on LMS</p>
<b>Phase 4: Identify Change</b>
<p><i>Students:</i> In the private (Phase 4) area of the Discussion Board of the class' LMS, conclude by commenting on the extent to which your attitudes, values, beliefs or general understanding have been altered whilst completing the group sense-making task.</p> <p><i>Resources:</i> Private Column in Discussion Board on LMS</p>
<b>Assessment</b>
<p><i>Instructor:</i> Mark the student submissions using the provided rubric (4).</p>
<p><b>Total duration in-class = 60 minutes + 180 minutes</b> for activity to be completed outside of class time.</p>

### Notes

- (1) Provocative situation statements are more likely to create or stimulate divergent views within and between student groups and encourage "unsettling" experiences that drive learning.
- (2) The goal here is to get students to consider what they are feeling and why they are feeling it. Some additional prompts for students could be: Why do you feel this? Do you actually feel this, or do you think you *should* feel it? Did you feel this and then reconsider? Do you think this feeling is appropriate?

- (3) Students report that having the opportunity to see their own values through a third person perspective is very useful to overall learning.
- (4) Rubric

	<b>Distinction 100% - 71%</b>	<b>Pass 70% - 50%</b>	<b>Fail 49% - 0%</b>
<b>Phase 1 Identify Feelings</b>	Several feelings derived from deep consideration of the situation statement are noted. Short explanation provided for each feeling linked to values and beliefs. Thinking about feelings is very clear.	One or two feelings derived from considering the situation statement are noted. Short explanation provided for each feeling linked to values and beliefs. Thinking about feelings is present.	Little if any attempt to identify personal values, beliefs and feelings.
<b>Phase 2 Search for Meaning</b>	All noted values, beliefs and feelings are compared and contrasted with those noted by peers. Student makes a clear and concise statement around what this contrast or congruence with others means to their own perspectives. Thinking about others' feelings is very clear.	Most noted values, beliefs and feelings are compared and contrasted with those noted by peers. The student provides a statement around what this contrast or congruence with others means to their own perspectives. Thinking about others' feelings is present.	Little if any attempt to compare and contrast values, beliefs and feelings and/or state what this contrast or congruence with others means to their own perspectives.
<b>Phase 3 Validate</b>	An interpretation of the situation statement by an external person is provided. The degree of validation of the post-Phase 2 thinking is clearly explained with reference to external opinions. Thinking about others' thinking is very clear.	An interpretation of the situation statement by an external person is attempted. Some degree of validation of the post-Phase 2 thinking is presented with reference to external opinions. Thinking about others' thinking is present.	Little if any attempt to seek and/or explain external validation.

<b>Phase 4 Identify Change</b>	The nature of any change (or otherwise) to attitudes, values, beliefs or general understanding is explained. Thinking about thinking is very clear.	The nature of any change (or otherwise) to attitudes, values, beliefs or general understanding is addressed. Thinking about thinking is present.	Little if any attempt to explain the nature of change (or otherwise).
--	---	--	---

## 48.5 Top Tips for New Instructors

1. The exercise requires that students engage with—and bring their values, beliefs and feelings to—the learning experience. It encourages learners to become aware of others’ values and beliefs whilst also challenging their own pre-existing assumptions and ways of viewing the world.
2. For this exercise to succeed, it is important to nurture the students’ sense of critical reflection (O’Loughlin & Griffith, 2020). This includes an awareness of how one’s values, beliefs and experience may influence knowledge-making, decision-making and behaviour.
3. Collaboration helps learners shift their frame or incorporate more ideas into their framing (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). When students collaborate, their group-level frame is built of individuals’ frames. Thus, students’ individual frames and interactions may shift the group framing, potentially moving the activity closer or further from sense-making. You may want to ask students to consider whether they are engaging in “groupthink” as they adjust their ideas. There are many useful online resources to help you and your students consider the groupthink phenomenon.
4. Student frames may even interfere with one another, and so students may have to verify their individual frames in order to progress in their task. They can do this by validating their frames against those of others and, ultimately, by negotiating and co-constructing a shared or new frame. This practice of external validation helps reduce groupthink. The negotiating work is more easily done in person—you may wish to include an in-person workshop at some point in this exercise.

## References

- Jones, C. (2009). Enterprise education: Learning through personal experience. *Industry and Higher Education*, 23(3), 175–182.
- O’Loughlin, V. D., & Griffith, L. M. (2020). Developing student metacognition through reflective writing in an upper level undergraduate anatomy course. *Anatomical Sciences Education*, 13(6), 680–693.
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and psychology of choice. *Science*, 211(4481), 453–458.

**Christine Adams** is a teaching and learning academic in the College of Science and Engineering at the University of Tasmania. She researches in work-integrated learning and graduate employability and is an active member of the *International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (ISSOTL).

**Colin Jones** is an Associate Professor of Academic Development in the Office for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (OALT) at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Colin works alongside academics, supporting, promoting and modelling contemporary approaches to university teaching. He is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and is an Expert to TEQSA in the domain of entrepreneurship/business education.