

Expand your World through Perspective Taking

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Opening Convocation, August 26, 2021

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I came to Juniata College in 2015, but I was introduced to the Liberal Arts mindset when I stepped foot on my own alma mater campus, Beloit College, more than a decade before. Whatever it was, I knew I liked this liberal arts thing. Not that I could explain it; it took me a long time to find the words to describe what it is that the liberal arts brought to my life. There are many dimensions, many ways to look at it, but today I'll focus on one that I think has served me best in all aspects of my life and career: perspective taking.

I'm a geologist. You may be aware that we spend a lot of time out in the field looking at rocks, fossils, minerals, landforms, water, the earth, other planets: that kind of stuff. But simply looking, simply measuring, is not really the heart of how we study the earth. A geologist's superpower is visualizing the shapes and movements of these parts of the earth to understand how it all works together.

Let me give you an example: when I look at the hills that surround this campus, I can see in my mind oceans and shorelines filled with ancient creatures, slowly encroaching island chains that collide somewhere off to the east, eroding and shedding sediment that fills in the basin here and then a looming huge continent that crashes into ours and causes the layers beneath my feet to bend and crumple. Somewhere above my head (because I'm underground now), dinosaurs are running around on the surface for a while. Then the earth around me starts to strain and stretch, little cracks form here and there, and off in the distance, that other continent splits away, beginning to form the Atlantic Ocean. Slowly the sediments above me erode away, rivers wind through, and eventually I can see daylight again as the rocks around us are finally revealed by this erosion.

I've sometimes remarked to my classes that if I could have a holographic projector show what's going on in my head, my teaching job would be much easier. But would it?

I'm also a budding education researcher, and the research I've read says no. Just because you see it, it doesn't mean that whole system is in your head. Darn. But the research also says we can learn these super powers, known as spatial reasoning skills, through practice.

That's right, skills, plural: the superpower is actually a bunch of different skills,¹ many of which are vital for learning in all kinds of science, engineering, mathematics, and even art fields. Some of these are: disembedding: trying to pick out important details from a complicated image or scene; mental

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rotation: visualizing an object rotated to a different angle; and then there's visual perspective taking: imagining how an object or scene would look from another viewpoint.

Let's try an example of this last one. Imagine what this room will look like if you're standing up here at the podium. Go ahead, try to picture it. You can close your eyes if that helps. Which way would you have to look to see where you are sitting right now? Actually point the direction you would look. Where would the doors be? The windows? (If you're watching online, where in the room is the camera?).

The less you know about this space, the harder it is to accurately imagine it from another point of view. I have a really good idea of what it looks like from over there, because I've sat in this room for opening convocation five times before. You need experience, that's one part of the equation, but you also need to test your mental model, the picture in your head. I'm not going to invite everyone up here right now, but you can try it later. Maybe join Choral Union: we practice up here Tuesday nights.

The point is, it's not enough to imagine a possible viewpoint. We want to imagine what it really looks like from that perspective. And to get better at that, we need feedback. We need to check the image in our mind with reality.

So yeah, practice and test yourself on your spatial skills and they will improve.

But this visual perspective taking is not the only kind of perspective taking. Actually, the more common use of this phrase has more to do with interpersonal relationships than physical spaces. And it's this social form of perspective taking that has aided me in honing my skills as a teacher and colleague. It has also helped me feel more connected to the world as a human being.

In a social sense, perspective taking is visualizing or understanding another person's experience of the world. Just like with spatial perspective taking, none of us do this perfectly, but we can get better at it. And just like with spatial thinking, I'll bet that we do better the more we know about another person's experiences, and the more we practice. For example, you can probably guess how your sibling or close lifelong friend feels about you moving away to college. You've had a lot of shared experiences together and you know a lot about their outlook, their desires, their life. Your new teammates, classmates, or roommates, on the other hand, might still be kind of a mystery to you. That's fine, that's normal. You don't know as much about their experiences and values, at least not yet.

Why is perspective taking so important? This is a key component of how we relate to others, how we form deep connections, communicate, find common ground, and understand more about the world. In your career, perspective taking might help you work effectively in a team, negotiate with your boss or clients, work through interpersonal conflicts, or develop products that others will want to buy. Studies have shown that perspective taking has the potential to improve empathy and creativity while reducing implicit bias.² If you work at this, it can be your interpersonal superpower.

So how do we work on this? As I said before, it's hard to visualize a place you have very little experience of. The same goes for people. If you spend all your time around people with the same

experiences, backgrounds, and expectations, you'll have more trouble relating to or taking the perspective of someone different from you.

My challenge to you today is to expand your world during your time here at Juniata. There are two big ways I want you to do this:

1. **Branch out** in your studies. You may be super excited to take your classes in your POE and that's fantastic, but if you only took courses in one subject, you'd be missing out on a huge breadth of interesting and meaningful experiences! At some point in your years here, you really ought to try a course on something you know nothing about: maybe it's "Medieval Medicine" or "The Afterlife" or "Mathematics and Democracy." Take a language. Study abroad. Join a choir or get involved in the theater. Take courses that will push you beyond the familiar and comfortable so that your world gets bigger, so that the possible perspectives you can imagine encompass more of humanity's lived experiences. I think this is a central piece of what it means to study at a liberal arts college. Through the arts, narratives, and many different ways of knowing you explore here, you have the opportunity to develop a multi-dimensional approach to looking at any problem, question, or area of study. That's pretty cool on its own, but it will also give you an edge in your career, as you'll be able to make connections and find creative solutions based on your broader perspectives.

2. **Seek out** people who come from different places, have different interests and beliefs, and are studying different fields. Get to know them, share your own experiences with them, and make sure to truly listen, with generosity not judgement, to what they choose to share with you.

This campus brings together a beautiful range of experiences and backgrounds. We have folks who are avid hunters, dedicated vegans, content creators, and backyard compost enthusiasts, people whose front door at home opens onto forest, farmland, quiet streets, and bustling cities. Among you are folks that have competed in badminton, released an album, gotten a pilot's license, and participated in a mock congress session at the state capitol. Some have been members of robotics teams, rugby clubs, sewing clubs, or girl scouts. You came here from 28 different US states and 13 different countries. I hope you're as excited as I am to meet you all and learn more of your stories.

Our community is only as strong as the care with which we treat each other. That means working hard to see the humanity in everyone, even when you disagree with them. I'm not saying you need to change your mind, but no one is defined by one single opinion or idea. Rather than reacting to what's on the surface, take the time to learn more: if you feel safe to do so, ask "what do you mean by that?" if something someone says seems hurtful or misinformed. By seeking their perspective first, you'll be better equipped to share your own perspective in meaningful ways and build much deeper connections with others.

Each of you come here with your own valid and valuable perspective built on your life experience. What you do with this will determine how much your world expands while you are here. Will

you stick to your POE department as much as possible and befriend only the folks most like you? Or will you branch out to courses and experiences outside your comfort zone and seek out to engage with any who will talk with you to learn how the world looks from another perspective? If you do the latter, I promise your world will get bigger. You'll see new ways of looking at situations and at the same time have a stronger foundation for your beliefs and values as you've practiced communicating your own perspective with others. By investing time in these deep connections, you become an integral part of our community.

Welcome to Juniata! You ARE Juniata. There is so much ahead for you to experience. Take it in, enjoy it, and engage with it. And do so from an ever-increasing range of perspectives.

NOTES

1. Nora S. Newcome and Thomas F. Shipley, "Thinking about spatial thinking: New typology, new assessments," in *Studying visual and spatial reasoning for design creativity*, ed. John S. Gero (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), pp. 179-192.
2. C. Daniel Batson, Shannon Early, and Giovanni Salvarani, "Perspective taking: Imagining how another feels versus imaging how you would feel," *Personality and social psychology bulletin* 23, no. 7 (1997): 751-758; Inga J. Hoever, Daan Van Knippenberg, Wendy P. Van Ginkel, and Harry G. Barkema, "Fostering team creativity: perspective taking as key to unlocking diversity's potential." *Journal of applied psychology* 97, no. 5 (2012): 982; Andrew R. Todd, Galen V. Bodenhausen, Jennifer A. Richeson, and Adam D. Galinsky, "Perspective taking combats automatic expressions of racial bias," *Journal of personality and social psychology* 100, no. 6 (2011): 1027.