‘The Poor Pay More’: An activity to challenge assumptions about poverty
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The challenge

Teaching controversial topics can be a difficult task. Students may scorn ideas that oppose closely held beliefs, even when acquiring this knowledge is a stated learning outcome. These lessons can be viewed as ideologically-driven rather than legitimate knowledge central to disciplinary mastery. This activity provides a starting point for students to draw conclusions about poverty independently. The technique described below can be adapted to address other potentially contentious matters or debates.

The activity

The activity is simple. It begins with a brief introduction to the topic and then a prompt; the instructor challenges students to identify all of the items for which somebody living in poverty would pay more money. Students are invited to make their lists alone or in small teams (this can also be done as a traditional think, pair, & share). The aim is to be creative and collectively, as exhaustive as possible. After ~4 minutes of brainstorming and/or small group discussion, the class reconvenes and students share responses collectively. The instructor may ask students to shout out answers, share team responses in succession, or write their lists on the board. Following the discussion students may also write a reflection that connects their learning with broader course themes and/or asks them to consider the implications of the ideas shared.

The benefits

The activity works well for two main reasons. First, it fosters creative thinking about an important social problem. Students generate long lists with varied examples. Often ideas spark others, particularly when the class engages in a discussion as a whole. Second, it solidifies a broader idea in a tangible way: to assist leaners, some of whom will be from fairly privileged backgrounds, to focus on how conditions in modern life systematically reinforce poverty in often surprising ways. Typically one or more students will remark that poor people are disadvantaged financially because they pay more for everything (in both real and relative dollars), and that this represents an ongoing and considerable barrier for them. Many students have described the learning that happens from this task as ‘eye-opening.’ They admit not fully understanding how poverty creates persistent disadvantage, even if they knew things weren’t ‘quite fair.’ Thus, the activity fosters unique thinking patterns that can also open up other interesting lines of discussion (such as examining why popular narratives around this issue suggest the opposite).

References
