Observation and the Elephant
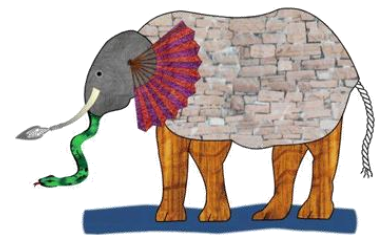
American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887) based the following poem on a fable which was told in India many years ago.

The Blind Man and the Elephant   by John Godfrey Saxe

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant~(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation~ Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side, ~ At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant ~ Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, "Ho! what have we here?
So very round and smooth and sharp? ~ To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant ~ Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands, ~ Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant ~ Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like ~ Is mighty plain," quoth her;
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant ~ Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most; ~ Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant ~ Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail ~ That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant ~ Is very like a rope!

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion ~ Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right ~ And all were in the wrong!

Moral
So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

Tasks:
1. Read the poem
2. Explain how the poem shows the importance of careful observation during experiments
3. What is the moral of the poem?
4. Think of an experiment that could result in errors being made in the conclusions if good observation methods are not used. Try to describe this in the form of a story or poem. (e.g. Ice cream