

Teaching the Tough Issues

Problem Solving from Multiple Perspectives
in Middle and High School Humanities Classes

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Foreword by
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Contents

Foreword by Douglas Fisher	v
Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
The Need for CPVs in Secondary Classrooms	1
What Are Cultural and Political Vignettes (CPVs)?	2
The Birth of CPVs as a Pedagogical Strategy	4
A CPV Event in a Secondary Social Studies Classroom	6
The Role of CPVs in Secondary Arts, Literature, and History	10
1. The Four CPV Stages and How CPVs Help Teachers to Realize the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)	13
CPV Implementation as a Four-Stage Curricular Model	13
Bullying: An Example of a Teacher Working Through the Four Stages	16
Guidelines for Creating CPVs	20
Tailoring Content and Presentation of CPVs to Different Levels	21
How to Avoid Common CPV Pitfalls and Strengthen CPV Prompts	24
CPVs as a Means of Differentiating Instruction	26
Importance of Classroom Culture and the Teacher's Role	28
The Need for Collaboration with Others and Obtaining Parental Permissions	31
How CPVs Help Teachers Realize the CCSS and Develop Capacities of Literate Individuals	32
2. Stage 1 of CPV Implementation: Responding to Teacher-Created CPVs in Writing	35
Critical Literacy and Narratives of Experience Provide	
Theoretical Frameworks for Stage 1	35
Middle School Students Responding to "Behavioral" CPVs	38
Middle School "Behavioral Examples" and Links to the CCSS	40
High School Students Responding to "Content-Driven" CPVs	42
High School "Content-Driven" CPV Examples and Links to the CCSS	45
Closing Thoughts on Stage 1 of CPV Implementation	47
3. Stage 2 of CPV Implementation: Students Create and Exchange Their Own CPVs	48
Critical Literacy and Inquiry Learning Provide	
Theoretical Frameworks for Stage 2	49
Guidelines and Suggestions for Creating and Exchanging Student CPVs	50
Example: 7th-Grade Student CPVs on Overcoming Adversity and Facing Challenges	52

Three Variations on the Create-and-Exchange Process	53
Example: 10th- and 11th-Grade Student CPVs in Global Studies and American History	63
Closing Thoughts on Stage 2 of CPV Implementation	71
4. Stage 3 of CPV Implementation: Situated Performances of CPVs	72
Situated Cognition and Situated Performance Provide	
Theoretical Frameworks for Stage 3	72
Variations in the Situated Performances of CPVs	74
Example: Interracial Dating, Racial Pride, Profiling, and Police Brutality Explored in a 9th-Grade English Class	77
Example: Homelessness in America Investigated in a 12th-Grade Social Studies Participation in Government Class	85
Reducing Student Performance Anxiety	94
Closing Thoughts on Stage 3 of CPV implementation	96
5. Stage 4 of CPV Implementation: Read and Revisit	98
Narratives of Experience and Assessment Theory Provide	
Theoretical Frameworks for Stage 4	98
Variations in Duration of Read-and-Revisit CPV Activities	100
Example: Date Rape, Sexual Assault, and Peer Pressure Examined in an 8th-Grade Language Arts Read-and-Revisit Unit	103
Example: Understanding Islam and Preventing Religious Discrimination and Violence Against Muslims in an 11th-Grade Social Studies Read-and-Revisit Unit	112
Eleventh-Grade CPV Read-and-Revisit Activities and Links to the CCSS	120
Closing Thoughts on Stage 4 of CPV Implementation	122
6. Conclusion	123
How CPVs Have Improved My Teaching	123
Three Key Learning Gains Reported by Teachers Using CPVs	124
Beyond the CCSS	128
Appendix: Directory of CPVs by Grade Level, Subject, and Topic/Tough Issue	131
References	133
About the Author	138

Foreword

Awkward. In a word, that's what this book is about, or rather it's what this book addresses. We've all had those awkward situations in class when we know that we need to respond, but we're not sure how. Typically, the awkward situation arises from something a student says. At that moment, it's as if E. F. Hutton is ready to speak—everyone listens. The room is eerily silent and all eyes are fixated on the teacher, anticipating a response. In the past 30 days, I have been asked if the characters in *The Fault in Our Stars* (Green, 2012) had sex, and if they did, how did Hazel Grace breathe; if I believed in God, and if God could be made up, like Jason did in the book *Godless* (Hautman, 2004); and if I thought we should rename diseases, conditions, and procedures that were originally named after Nazi scientists, such as Wegener's granulomatosis.

These moments are awkward because we're unsure how to respond. We ask ourselves a multitude of questions, such as "Will I lose my job if I respond in one way or the other?" "Will we unduly influence young minds as we try to clarify our thinking on complex social issues?" and "What do I think about that issue?"

In response, teachers often refuse to answer, or worse, punish students for asking questions. What I've learned about adolescents in the past 20 years is that they have questions, questions that they really want to find answers to. And, if they respect their teachers, they want to know what their teachers think about those same questions. At the school where I work, we have organized our curriculum around essential questions that the students nominate and vote on. The adults in the school get no vote on these essential questions. And they ask questions that allow us to explore a wide range of topics and ideas. For example, recent questions that we've investigated as a school include:

- How does where you live influence how you live?
- Do you avenge or forgive?
- Can you buy your way to happiness?
- Does gender matter?
- What sets your heart on fire?
- What does #YOLO mean to you?

Our students read a lot of different texts and interview people about their perspectives, and then write an essay in which they answer the question using the

sources they've collected and analyzed, as well as their new understanding of their own thinking. For example, Elizabeth, one of my students, wrote an essay over 1,000 words in length, in response to the question about where you live, based on her reading of two texts that explored the Vietnam War, as well as interviews of people in our community. An excerpt from Elizabeth's writing demonstrates her thinking and understanding of one of the texts:

In the novel *The Things They Carried*, the characters are introduced as kids, some fresh out of high school or college. But they were soon changed into hardened men who had to kill just to keep their "manly" image. O'Brien (1990) says, "Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to." The main character, Lieutenant Cross, was just a boy lost in love when he arrived in Vietnam. But as soon as one of his men was shot and killed under his command, he lost it. "They marched into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they called in artillery and watched the wreckage, then they marched for several hours through the hot afternoon, and then at dusk, while Kiowa explained how Lavender died, Lieutenant Cross found himself trembling." The pressure of living in a warzone dramatically changed Lieutenant Cross. In this case, where he lived impacted how he lived.

I thought that we were doing a pretty good job with inviting students into critical conversations about ideas that matter to them. But having read Jacqueline Darwin's book *Teaching the Tough Issues: Problem Solving from Multiple Perspectives in Middle and High School Humanities Classes* made me realize that I had some room to grow. At our school, we have the hard conversations that students want to have, but we don't actively pursue deep and meaningful conversations that allow for those awkward moments to arise. We react to students' inquiry rather than provoke it. Darwin gave me, and my colleagues, a way to change that. The Cultural and Political Vignettes (CPVs as she calls them) can be easily used to facilitate conversations around tough issues and provide expert guidance for teachers to navigate ebb and flow of these interactions in their classrooms. Having tried them on a few of these with my own students, I am pleased to report that they felt empowered, valued, and respected when we engaged in these topics that matter so much to them. Adolescence is a time when we figure out who we are and what we believe. Darwin has provided us all with a powerful tool for guiding students as they explore their identity, unafraid to explore what it means to be human. Further, she has provided educators with the confidence needed to steer, rather than squelch, discussions about controversial issues in the classroom. CPVs allow awkward silences to become reflective moments. Enjoy.

Douglas Fisher

Introduction

Every teacher has encountered situations in which class discussion takes a sudden, uncomfortable turn. One such situation occurred for me when I was a novice teacher, standing in front of a high school English class. We were studying *Billy Budd, Sailor*, the 1924 Herman Melville classic tale of a sailor who is falsely accused of conspiracy to commit mutiny and executed, when one of my 11th-grade students called out, “Was Melville gay or something? This book seems so gay to me.” Several students giggled, others put their heads down or looked away uncomfortably, while most stared directly at me, eagerly awaiting my reaction and response.

For what seemed like an eternity, even though it was only about 30 seconds, I said absolutely nothing. My face reddened as I struggled for words to address this student. I knew from my background in English literature that there were homosexual references and undertones in the story and that countless literary critics assumed from his writings that Melville was conflicted about his sexual identity, but standing in front of that class in 1992, I admit I was at a complete loss for how to discuss this topic thoughtfully and appropriately with a group of 16-year-olds.

THE NEED FOR CPVS IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

Although my teacher preparation program had given me the ability to write decent lesson plans and demonstrate effective classroom management, my training did not cover how to address culturally and politically sensitive issues such as sexual preference with a group of high school students. I knew that anything I said could be misconstrued or misinterpreted by my students, their parents, and administrators and that I was, in effect, facing a political minefield by discussing sexual preference in class. As I stood there speechless, conflicting thoughts and questions raced through my mind: What if I have gay students in the class who would be embarrassed by this discussion? What if I have gay students in the class who desperately want and need their teacher to address this issue? What if I have students from strict religious backgrounds who would be upset by this discussion? What would parents say about my discussing this subject in class? What would my administrator think? And so forth.

I don't remember the exact words I used to respond to my student that day, but I do remember basically sweeping his question under the rug and redirecting

the conversation elsewhere because I was too uncomfortable and lacked the pedagogical tools to address the issue intelligently. I felt, even then, that I was doing my students a terrible disservice by choosing not to discuss something that was central to both the theme of the work and the author's life and could be related to serious issues of identity with which some of the class members might be struggling. I had read about increased drug and alcohol abuse among gay teens and knew that they committed suicide at a much higher rate than straight teens. I had circumvented a topic that was essential not only to the work we were reading but to the lives of the students and the shaping of their perceptions about sexuality and, even more subtly, what constitutes "appropriate" discussion in a high school English class. I knew that in the future, to be the kind of teacher that I wanted to be, I had to find ways of teaching the tough issues in my classroom. I didn't know then that this theme of finding ways for teachers to better address culturally and politically sensitive issues with students would be one that would later become central to my research and work as a teacher educator.

WHAT ARE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL VIGNETTES (CPVS)?

Although most teachers know the content that they teach and how to develop lesson plans, and have some command of classroom management, few teachers feel comfortable and confident facilitating conversations about culturally and politically controversial and sensitive issues with their students in ways that honor the students' diverse voices and lead to critical, transformative thinking and, more important, action. One of the greatest challenges facing teachers today involves working in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. Although much has been written about this challenge and its impact on the field of teacher education (Ben-Peretz, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Darvin, 2010, 2012; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995), the majority of the research in this area has focused on the attitudes and lack of knowledge of preservice teachers, not on pedagogical practices that help teachers be successful (Darvin, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Sleeter, 2001).

In short, although there are countless pedagogical processes and teaching strategies available to teachers, few are designed to facilitate higher-level thinking, problem posing, problem solving, and reading, writing, talking, and listening about culturally and politically complex and controversial issues. This book presents a pedagogical model that can help secondary teachers to meet these important but often overlooked goals with their students, while concurrently assisting them in addressing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other curricular directives.

In this book, I describe a series of pedagogical practices or processes that I have termed Cultural and Political Vignettes (CPVs). I have chosen the word "vignette" because CPVs encompass aspects of all of the definitions for vignettes, but also stretch the meaning a bit to describe something new. Vignettes are short, descriptive, graceful, and powerful literary sketches, accounts, scenes, episodes, or

snapshots that focus on one moment and/or give an impression of a character, idea, setting, or object and evoke emotion from the respondent.

The pedagogical processes described in this book are termed Cultural and Political Vignettes because cultural and/or political variables must be taken into account by both the CPV creators and respondents. Although we often think of vignettes as being very brief, and the term sometimes connotes a delightful flight of fancy, I use it here to refer to more involved examples that often reference very serious subject matter. Rather than sticking to the traditional meanings or definitions of vignettes, CPVs expand on them to include more developed storylines and details than those normally associated with the term.

CPVs are potential cultural and/or political situations, real or imagined, that are presented to students so they can practice the complex decisionmaking skills they need in today's diverse classrooms, schools, and communities. They invite students to engage in dialogue, problem pose, and problem-solve through the use of controversial issues that they need to evaluate critically and view through multiple perspectives or lenses. CPVs can be used as part of prereading, or during reading and postreading and writing activities. They are designed to aid students in both developing their own viewpoints on critical, contentious issues and actively listening to and critiquing the viewpoints of others.

CPVs often deal with the kinds of sensitive cultural and political issues that teachers identify as being the most uncomfortable to address with their students, such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sex, sexual preference, bullying, and politics, to name a few. They are designed to ask students to reflect on and talk about their values, ideologies, biases, philosophies, and actions.

CPVs ask students to consider problematic situations and to practice or rehearse the thought processes involved in addressing the problems at hand, so that when they are later confronted with similar situations in real life, they have virtual or simulated problem-solving experiences on which to base their decisions and actions. CPVs can be used by secondary teachers of any content area, but they are particularly useful in middle and high school humanities classes. CPVs are flexible. Teachers can adjust them to the interests, needs, and skills of their students, and design them to address classroom content or social issues that their students encounter. CPVs invite teachers to create organic, context-specific, situated activities for their classrooms that enable their students to discuss, read, write, listen, and role-play about difficult topics.

CPVs are designed to influence not only students' thinking about CPV topics but their subsequent actions as well. CPVs ask students to practice and refine complex communication skills and to do so in ways that make sense in the context of authentic situations that occur in real life. Although many teachers have used techniques such as role-playing to address difficult or controversial issues, CPVs offer opportunities that go beyond the scope and sequence of traditional role-plays. The dialogue that occurs before, during, and after the CPV activities and the ways in which the CPVs emerge from the classroom contexts are just a few of the elements that set them apart from similar methods.

CPVs can fulfill many curricular functions and are appropriate in a wide range of classroom contexts. In some instances, CPVs are used to explore cultural differences and/or controversial social issues, such as homophobia or racism. In other instances, a CPV topic might be sensitive, rather than controversial, and deal with the various political nuances of a situation. On other occasions, CPVs can be used to meet behavioral objectives with students. I have termed these “behavioral” CPVs because they deal specifically with behavioral goals that contribute to students’ academic success. Behavioral CPVs can be designed, for example, to improve students’ abilities in working cooperatively with one another, to help them learn to become better active listeners, or to teach them how to be more effective public speakers.

Other CPVs relate directly to course content. I have termed these “content-driven” CPVs because they are linked to particular content objectives and course texts. Finally, in some cases CPV topics might not be at all controversial or problematic but used primarily to help respondents practice problem solving from multiple perspectives. Examples are CPVs that ask students to consider large, overarching themes that are present in literary works and informational texts, such as honesty, friendship, or overcoming adversity.

In short, there are many ways in which CPVs can work to illuminate different perspectives, and that they can be used in such various ways is a testament to their flexibility and usefulness across contexts, grade levels, and ability levels.

THE BIRTH OF CPVS AS A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY

My first in-class CPV-related activity occurred by complete accident. We were reading Sonia Nieto’s book *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (1999), a text I use in an undergraduate education course that I teach at Queens College called Language, Literacy and Culture in Education. In the book, Nieto posed a “cultural problem” to her students, who, like mine, were preservice teachers:

A new student from India comes to your school and on her first day in the cafeteria, she begins eating rice with her hands. Several of the children make fun of her. You are her teacher and you happen to be in the lunchroom when this happens. What do you do? (Nieto, 1999, p. 74)

When I posed Nieto’s “cultural problem” to my own students and asked them to respond to it in writing, I was pleasantly surprised by the range of responses that I received and even more intrigued by the enthusiasm of the verbal class debate that ensued. An apparently simple situation such as this cultural problem inspired an intricate dialogue that revealed the students’ increasing awareness of the convoluted system of cultural, political, and social forces that intersect in schools. Immediately, my class became divided over whether the teacher on lunch duty in the cafeteria should intervene. Additionally, the students’ suggested interventions

and the rationales behind them differed dramatically. Some students believed that it was a teacher's responsibility to intervene and protect the Indian girl from the other students' taunting, citing tragedies like the school shootings that occurred in Columbine, Colorado, as a result of bullying that was ignored by faculty. Others emphatically argued that the teacher would only make the situation worse for the girl by calling more attention to her and making her feel that her cultural values and Indian customs were not respected by the school and faculty.

As the class dialogue continued to evolve, this cultural problem took on even more of a life of its own and was divided into two separate issues by the students. The first question became whether and/or how the teacher should address the girl. The second was whether and/or how to address the mob of children making fun of her. Several students recommended that the teacher act as sociocultural mediator and talk with the Indian girl about American ways of eating, while still transmitting respect toward her way of eating rice and allowing the girl to decide whether she wanted to reject or retain this aspect of her culture. Other students suggested that the teacher should use this event as a springboard for a lesson about cultural differences in eating habits and that the students would make the connections themselves without the teacher needing to call attention to the teasing that had occurred in the lunchroom. Others advocated that the teacher should sit down at the same table as the child and start eating rice (or some American finger food, such as fries, pizza, or a burger) with his or her hands to quietly demonstrate that eating with one's hands is acceptable.

Regardless of the ways in which my students first responded to Nieto's cultural problem, the majority changed or broadened their responses as a result of the sharing and discussion that followed. We later revisited the cultural problem after we completed Nieto's text, and by that point in the course, the students' viewpoints had evolved even further as a result of reading the text and engaging in the accompanying class discussions. I learned that day how important it was for me, as the facilitator, to make it clear to the students that there were no completely right or wrong solutions to the problem, and that all opinions represented reasonable approaches that someone might take in the situation. Many students became visibly frustrated by the cultural problem because they walked away with more questions than answers. It is this very feeling of disequilibrium that is effective in making CPVs powerful because it closely mirrors the feeling that people have in real life when confronted by complex problems.

CPVs were first introduced into secondary classrooms as part of a homework assignment in which I asked my students, who are middle and high school teachers, to create CPVs for use with their own students. As part of this assignment, they collected and shared several of their students' responses to their CPVs and wrote brief reflections on whether they believed the CPV was effective in helping them to address a culturally or politically sensitive topic with their students. The class discussion that resulted from this homework assignment was the first indication that CPVs could be positively utilized in secondary classrooms due to their versatility and, in particular, their strong connections to the tenets of critical literacy.