

## Educational Leadership: Citizens in the Making: The Power of the Right Vignette

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When teachers present scenarios focused on ethical or

social dilemmas, students can practice skills needed to be strong citizens.

I'm not going to even vote. What for? Everyone knows even though this school is mostly black and Latino, the president of the student council is always white. Why should I waste my time? My father says the same thing about the presidential election. He doesn't vote most times because he says that black people's votes don't count for nothing, so why should he wait on a long line for hours and miss time from work? Look at what happened in the last election. Trump won, and he didn't even get the most votes .... I think the best thing to do with politics is just don't get involved. We can't change anything by voting.

These words are from Matt, a 12th grade black student, commenting on an upcoming student election. His social studies teacher, Mr. Jones, asked this youth and his classmates to engage in an open discussion about the election and identify the candidates' platforms and which issues were personally important to them as citizens of the school.

The teacher, who is also black, was taken aback by the overwhelmingly negative reactions of his students toward elections in general. Most of them believed that voting in the student election was a waste of their time, that the candidates weren't representative of the diverse student body but were handpicked by the principal, that voting in general isn't an effective process for initiating positive change, and that voter fraud is so rampant that voters cannot even trust that elections are conducted with integrity.

Mr. Jones was troubled by this mistrust and apathy. He knew he needed to get his class thinking about voting—and citizenship—more deeply, so he used a tool called a *cultural and political vignette* (CPV). A CPV is a hypothetical situation presented to students in the form of a brief vignette. The situation helps students deliberate questions about ethics, society, and communal responsibility, developing skills that they need to be good citizens in today's diverse schools and communities. I developed this pedagogical strategy because I firmly believed that teachers needed better ways to address politically and culturally sensitive topics in their classrooms. There were few methods available that enabled students to do so thoughtfully and respectfully while still allowing them to express opinions on controversial social issues and view complex problem-solving situations from multiple perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

### The Right to Vote

Mr. Jones created the following CPV based on historical facts as part of a unit on the importance of civic participation and why citizens of a democracy should vote, as both a right and a responsibility:

Imagine the year is 1875, and you are a poor black American living on a farm in rural Mississippi. You and several of your neighbors head into town to cast your votes in the presidential election, but when you arrive, you are told by the white officials that there is a poll tax you must first pay and a literacy test you must pass to be allowed to vote. You do not have any money to pay the tax and do not think that you will pass the literacy test, since you had to leave school at a very young age to help your family work on the farm. Several members of the KKK surround the polls. What would you do then and what would you do later?

CPVs can be used in many ways; Mr. Jones used this one as a pre-reading exercise. He realized students would need to analyze this complex civic issue through several cultural and political lenses. To gauge their initial thoughts and feelings, he had students respond to the CPV in writing.

Responses varied, but most students wrote that they wouldn't try to exercise their right to vote in that moment. Reasons included fear of violence and repercussions from the Klansmen, not wanting to be embarrassed by not having money to pay the tax or not being able to pass the literacy test, and feeling that voting isn't important enough to risk being hurt or even killed.

Students' answers to what they'd do later were mixed. Some wrote that they wouldn't fight the racist system, fearing violence against themselves and their families. Other students wrote that they would try to leave Mississippi, since it was one of the most racist southern states. Finally, some students said they would fight for their constitutional rights by saving money to pay the poll tax, studying for the literacy test, and organizing the local black community—and the next time they would come to vote in large numbers. Students shared their responses to the CPV in small groups, and then several students read their answers aloud to the class.

Over the next several weeks, Mr. Jones exposed his students to texts, films, and discussions about the struggles surrounding the right to vote in America. They learned about Amendment 15, which gave black people the right to vote in 1870; Jim Crow laws; and President Lyndon Johnson's Civil Rights Act of 1964. The students watched footage of marchers protesting against segregation and being violently attacked by white segregationists. They listened to interviews of activists who marched to Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous address, and analyzed this speech as one of their primary source documents. Students learned about women's suffrage and the 19th Amendment.

At the unit's conclusion, students revisited their initial responses to the CPV and wrote about whether they would keep their responses the same or change them after learning about the history of voting in America and its role in being a citizen of a democracy. As these excerpts from students' post-reading responses show, almost all students said their view had been greatly affected by what they had learned in the unit:

After studying about the history of voting in America, I feel really different about it. I'm black and a woman, so all my people had to really struggle for the right to vote. ... To ignore that history would be disrespectful.

I hear rappers talk about Jim Crow in their songs, but I didn't know who he was or what Jim Crow laws were until this class. Now that I know so much more, I think voting is a way to fight against racism and sexism and all that bad stuff. It's a way to show people that we all have a voice in America ... I think when I turn 18, I will vote because my brothers and sisters fought so hard to get something that I have.

As a follow-up, students wrote about one action, large or small, that they would take in the future as a result of completing the CPV unit on voting rights. One of the most compelling responses came from Matt:

I've decided to not only vote in the student election next month, but I'm going to see if it's too late for me to run for president myself. I never really thought about participation in government as being a right and a responsibility until this class. Why shouldn't a black senior like me run for president of a mostly black school? I may not be the smartest kid in the senior class, but I know a lot of people, and I can find out what's important to everybody in the school ... Maybe my parents were wrong for not voting, even if they didn't like the two choices. ... I'm not ready to give up my voice yet.

## Teaching Civic Literacy Skills

CPVs help promote civic literacy because they're designed to influence not only students' thinking, but also their subsequent actions. Working with these provocative vignettes supports students in learning key history and background related to their nation's system of government and its civic processes. Thinking critically and exchanging perspectives about complex questions related to living in society, social justice, and similar issues help learners develop skills and dispositions that are essential to full participation in a democracy.

CPVs work well for teaching specific skills for civic literacy. Consider how Mr. Jones's students improved their skills in writing and speaking articulately about issues tied to voting. Other skills needed for citizenship that can be developed or improved through studying these vignettes include sharing resources, working cooperatively, listening respectfully to others, and speaking effectively in public.

## Strengthening Dispositions

CPVs can also foster *dispositions* needed for good citizenship, such as empathy and a strong work ethic. One of my graduate students, Ms. Sams, who is a 7th grade language arts teacher in an affluent district, used a CPV as part of a unit to develop her students' cultural sensitivity.

Ms. Sams wanted her students to think about the importance of accepting differences between cultures in preparation for her students' upcoming travels abroad over spring break. She explained:

As members of the "touchscreen generation," my students have trouble approaching situations with empathy. Empathy and the ability to evaluate and understand situations from perspectives different than one's own are crucial to developing civic literacy. In a world that requires more empathy and understanding than ever, our pedagogy must meet this need. I also wanted them to ... start to pose their own critical questions, inquiries, and problems that they feel need solving.

This teacher wanted students to connect the ideas of prejudice, cultural insensitivity, and ignorance to their own lives and to the text they were reading, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho (HarperOne, 2015). In this novel, the protagonist is traveling and comes across a group of Muslims praying. His initial reaction is that they are all infidels; his perspective later shifts as he becomes more culturally aware of the people he encounters. Ms. Sams had her students consider this CPV:

You're on vacation in a foreign country, where you don't really understand the culture or language. One day, as you are wandering around with a couple of friends you made on your trip, one of them points at a group of native residents and states that "these people are uncivilized." Another one of your group members chimes in, saying that "they are total freaks." You want to keep hanging out with these friends, but you feel uncomfortable with what they are saying. How do you handle this situation?

Here's an excerpt from the ensuing class discussion:

Annie: The first thing I would do is ask why they think that these people are freaks and whatnot, to understand where they're coming from. [I've heard] that people say things like this because they don't know any better or different.

Alexis: Yeah, I said the same thing because I think people make judgments like that when they're uncomfortable with themselves and they just don't know any better.

Joshua: I would talk [the native residents] up so my "friends" could see how great they really are. When people are negative, I think the best way to fix the situation is to kill them with kindness.

Lisanne: I agree with that. I said I'd do the same thing. The truth is also that I wouldn't want to be friends with people like that.

Joe: Exactly, I wouldn't want those people as my friends. But ... I think I'd ask them how they'd feel if those people came to America and started putting *them* down. Our culture is weird, too, to people who aren't a part of it.

Mary: Yeah, we do some really weird stuff. The point is that neither culture is weird; they're both just cultures. They're specific ways of living, so they're going to seem weird to anyone who doesn't live that culture.

Bernie: Going off of what Mary just said, I want to pose a question. Would anyone speak to the native residents in this case and get to know them and show your "friends" what acceptance really looks like?

Daria: I honestly didn't think to do that before, but now that you say that, I think that's a really cool way to handle the situation. Also, it gets you out of the whole weird peer pressure situation, and sends the message to your "friends" that you're above that. Also, you would benefit in this situation by speaking to and getting to know the native residents .... You'd be exposed to another culture and get to know the person, not just what people say about them.

Ms. Sams: Does anyone know what Daria is getting at here when she talks about getting to know the person and not what people assume about them?

Pete: Stereotypes?

Ms. Sams: What's the problem with stereotypes?

Pete: They're not true, and they're often really hurtful things to assume about people.

Ms. Sams: So, how do stereotypes play a role in this scenario?

Elizabeth: Well, like, your "friends" are ... deciding to act the way they are based off of stereotypes, which is wrong, obviously. We're always told that stereotypes aren't true, even when they seem like a good thing.

Elena: Wait ... how can a stereotype be a good thing?

Elizabeth: Like certain groups of people are really smart, or certain groups of people are really good with money ...

Joshua: So, wait, based on this, can I add to my response? I would also point out positive things about them that are individual to, like, who they are. Because before, I just said I'd bring up positive things and talk them up, but after what Elizabeth said, I realized that could also be bad.

As the class ended, Ms. Sams asked students to share three things they'd learned and two people in the discussion who helped them gain those insights. Students eagerly shared insights like "I learned that there's not just one way to handle [a situation where intolerance surfaces]. You have to see it from different people's shoes." Ms. Sams was pleased that by listening to peers, Joshua and other learners rethought their own feelings and beliefs about a particular thing—just what she had hoped.

## Changing Mindsets

Ms. Sams used another CPV to increase students' ability to participate respectfully in conversations about sensitive topics and refrain from using terms like *retard* and *gay* to describe people or things they dislike. Another dealt with cyberbullying. Toward the end of the school year, she reflected on how CPVs had helped students become strong citizens:

The CPVs ... encouraged students to empathize and to use this multidimensional, real-world problem posing and solving to inform their decisions. ... A huge part of civic literacy is taking [work] done in class and applying it to real-life situations. ... I overheard students correcting their peers as they used not only the r-word [retard], but also other inappropriate, offensive terms in the hallway while "kidding around."

After completing this mini-unit, these learners took actions, large and small. Many told Ms. Sams that on their vacations they'd been more aware of their own unique lenses, biases, and understandings of the world, and they tried hard to step out of them. "I had one student tell me that her challenge for her vacation abroad was to keep an open mind and think about how people would feel with an outsider American coming to their country and judging it," she recalled. "Her action manifested itself as a change of mindset."

This teacher called CPVs "the most valuable pedagogical tool in my toolbox to promote civic literacy. ... Requiring students to ... respond to a situation from another's perspective becomes what I call 'radical empathy training.'"

To meet the challenges created by the information overload and this current age of infinite connectivity and very little connection, teachers need strategies that help students apply critical thinking while simultaneously promoting values. Thought-provoking vignettes are one such strategy, whether used to sharpen skills related to being strong citizens or to nurture dispositions like empathy. CPVs also make civic education engaging by teaching students to reflect on their own values and beliefs, while problem posing and problem solving. If schools are going to do a better job preparing young people to participate in a democracy, we'll need tools like CPVs.

*Author's note:* All names of teachers and students are pseudonyms.

The following guidelines will help to create effective CPVs. The important thing to remember in creating CPVs is that they are invitations to explore a problem or issue from multiple perspectives.

- Be sure that any questions within a CPV are open-ended and do not have a clear-cut correct response. There should be several appropriate, defensible responses. The topic of the CPV should be sufficiently complex to stimulate reflection by whomever is responding to it, and encourage readers to consider several cultural and political factors when giving responses.
- Use language that is appropriate for whomever will be using and responding to the vignette. Don't over-complicate the CPV with language that is too difficult or may prevent respondents from understanding the central problem or situation being presented. Keep it simple!
- Try to make the situation described as realistic as possible.

- A thought-provoking CPV will compel respondents to consider aspects of culture and politics with which they aren't totally familiar or comfortable. This is an integral part of CPVs.
- If a CPV is well-constructed, it will stimulate debate, discussion, and perhaps even anger on the part of students responding to it. Respondents may feel frustrated or confused in this process; this is a normal and even desirable part of the process.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on CPVs, see my book *Teaching the Tough Issues* (Teachers College Press, 2015).

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