Confronting Inequity / Cultivating Problem Solvers in Shifting Cultural Contexts

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Let's prepare students to solve key life and social problems.

An important aspect of the work we do as educators is helping students build skills. Skill development spans a range of domains, including social, affective, cognitive, and behavioral. In terms of practices with students, we must be deliberate about developing students' skills in academic areas like reading, writing, mathematics, civics, and the sciences.

But skill development also involves students' ability to analyze and think critically about not only the academic dimensions of their work, but also the social world in which they live. Chief among the skills that students must develop are those that propel them to solve social problems—both social conflicts for which solutions can make a real difference in their personal lives and broader societal challenges. As Paolo Freire (1998) noted, cultivating problem solvers requires educators to understand that students must learn to read both the world (social issues) and the word (academic issues). Problem-solving skills are essential not only for students' experiences inside of school, but also for their experiences outside of school.

The Challenges of Cyberspace

At a time when students are actively engaged in shifting cultural contexts and social practices experienced through social media—such as Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and even text messaging—students' ability to handle problems can be a matter of life or death. Consider the growing number of students who report feeling unsafe or depressed because they've been bullied by classmates online. The American Society for Positive Care of Children reports that 16 percent of high school students (and 55 percent of LGBTQ+ students) have been cyberbullied in the past year—and that students who are bullied are more than twice as likely to consider suicide (ASPCC, nd).

Never before have we experienced the kinds of cultural practices in which students engage through social media, practices that influence both their academic and social development. To be sure, information-rich cultural contexts can enhance students' opportunities to learn. However, students' practices in the broader cultural landscape of technology can also be challenging—and dangerous—if they haven't developed tools to work through difficult situations such as conflicts with classmates. Even at very young ages, children are now engaging in cultural practices that can lead to serious challenges if they don't have the ability to understand the roots of an interpersonal conflict. Consider these data from Edudemic (2014):

- 81 percent of teens age 12–17 use social media, and 50 percent log in several times a day.
- 21 percent of children under 13 use a social networking site, and 38 percent of children age 8–12 use Facebook.
- Cyberbullying is the most common online risk for teens and tweens.

Thus, as educators, we must proactively develop learning opportunities for students to build skills they need to solve problems in their personal and social lives—problems that may be far more weighty than challenges faced in math or English language arts.

Solving Broader Social Problems

School is also an important space for students to develop the ability to identify and solve wider social problems. Educators should develop opportunities for students to build knowledge and problem-solving skills that propel them to

transform not only their own lived experiences, but also the experiences of their local and broader communities. Educators who are serious about helping students build problem solving skills with real-life implications should consider the following strategies.

Model exemplary problem-solving practices. When conflicts emerge within a school, or even in the community around the school, teachers should exhibit with and for students behaviors that help students understand how to work through those conflicts. For instance, if a teacher is having a conflict with a student in the classroom and the student gets upset and starts yelling at the teacher, rather than immediately resorting to sending the student out of the classroom, the teacher has an excellent opportunity to talk through the conflict. By posing questions and listening to the student, the teacher can demonstrate how to use social cues to work through a challenge to de-escalate it. Moreover, educators should introduce students to exemplary community members (in person, where possible) such as activists who work to address, fight against, and solve injustice as it manifests in real life.

Help students identify complex social problems and gather information. We should give students opportunities to identify problems in their local community—or even their state—so students can critique those issues and find possible solutions. Students also need guidance and opportunities to collect information from a range of sources in order to understand the complexity and nuance of social issues. This information gathering should focus not only on problems, but also on established solutions to problems, which may be transferable to other instances.

To illuminate, Haberman (1991) stressed that students should be challenged with understanding and solving questions like why some people are rich and others poor. Teachers might begin exploring such dilemmas with learners by using an analytic anchor like data on poverty. For instance, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a chart available showing its 2016 guidelines for families living below or above the poverty line. Looking over the chart and realizing that, for example, a single person earning $12,000 a year, or a family of three earning $21,000 *aren't*considered to be impoverished might be a catalyst for exploring nuances of poverty in the United States. Further, exploring the federal guidelines for poverty can help students think about families in their local communities. What are the reasons people live below the poverty line—and the potential consequences? What happens when people don't have access to decent-paying jobs and health care, for instance?

Draw out student voices. To transform how students look at problems and their abilities to solve them, encourage them to offer suggestions about how an issue can be addressed or solved, rather than telling them a solution. Creating a classroom ethos of shared communication can help students think through layers of societal challenges they identify.

Encourage ongoing problem solving. Encourage students to continue identifying social problems and tackling them as an ongoing aspect of their developing knowledge, understanding, and disposition. In other words, as teachers use society as an analytic text that students can examine, they should urge students to continue working towards social justice. In this way, students are developing skills that help them and others live in the world.

Educators must be conscious of shifting cultural landscapes around students. We have a powerful opportunity to use society and its complex challenges as analytic spaces that shepherd students into more deeply understanding how the world works (and for whom) and also ways for them to improve the human condition.

References

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