

Cultivating and Nurturing Collaborative Civic Spaces

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September
2015

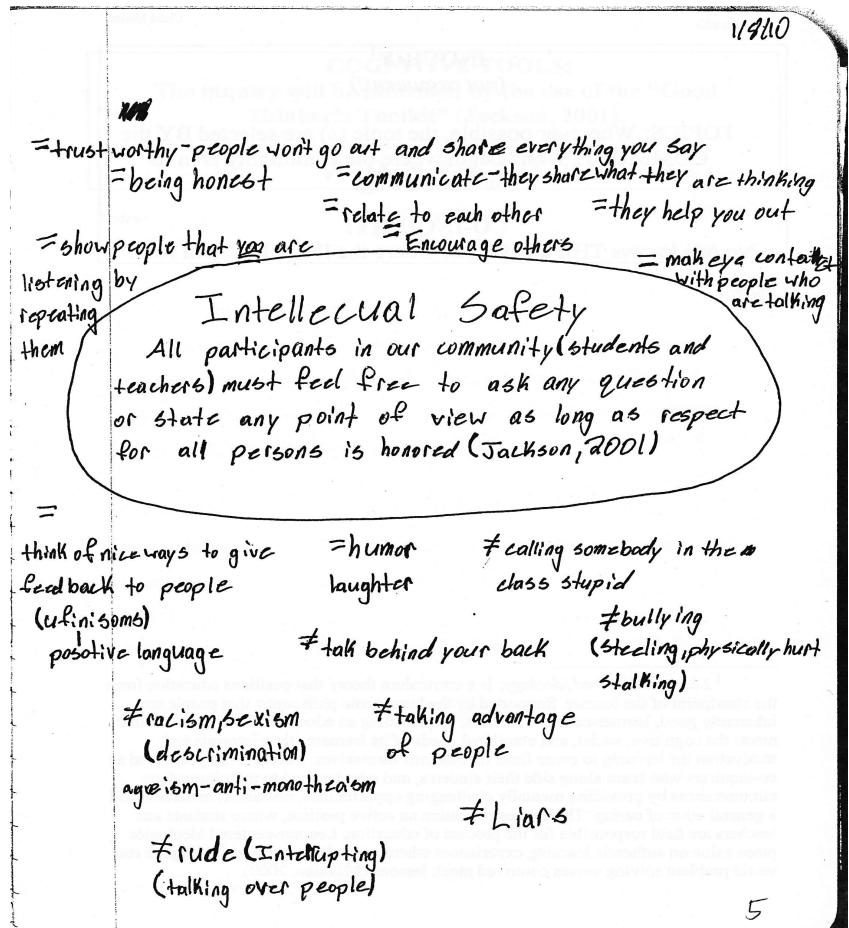
Overview

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (or C3 Framework) (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) is an important resource for social studies teachers who are looking to develop an instructional practice that prepares students for active and meaningful engagement in civic life. With clear learning goals and the organizing structure of an Inquiry Arc, the C3 Framework supports teachers by providing them with an instructional pathway for fostering student-citizens who can both think for themselves and collaborate with others. With a focus on building inquiry skills and key concepts—within a collaborative civic space—the C3 Framework breathes new life into John Dewey’s (1916) assertion that, in order for democracy to function as it should, teachers must provide students with opportunities to *experience* democracy in schools.

So how do C3 social studies teachers cultivate and nurture collaborative civic spaces in their classrooms? In this Brief, I draw on my experiences teaching social studies in the K-12 setting and respond to the question by offering three strategies from the philosophy for children Hawai’i (p4cHI) approach to deliberative pedagogy. p4cHI is part of an international movement that aims to convert traditional classrooms into intellectually safe democratic communities of inquiry by engaging students and teachers in the activity of philosophy. Directly aligned to the core beliefs and practices outlined in the C3 Framework, the p4cHI instructional strategies introduced in this brief give C3 social studies teachers a strong set of tools and methods for engaging their students in the “arts and habits of civic life” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 6). The three strategies profiled here are Intellectual Safety, the Community Ball, and Plain Vanilla.

Intellectual Safety

To cultivate and nurture a collaborative civic space, C3 teachers must be committed to the ongoing process of developing respectful relationships between all members of the classroom community. This is a process that I like to start on the first day of class by introducing students to the concept of “intellectual safety” (Jackson, 2001, p. 460). I write the definition of intellectual safety on the board—“All participants in our community, students and teachers, must feel free to ask any question or state any point of view as long as respect for all persons is honored” (Jackson, 2001, p. 460)—and put a big circle around it. I make myself vulnerable and use examples from my own life to illustrate why I believe classrooms should not only be physically safe, but intellectually safe as well. From there, my students and I work together to think collectively about the type of classroom environment that we want to create. We list examples and counter-examples, from our diverse backgrounds and experiences to help us explain what intellectual safety will look like in the context of our shared classroom space. (An example from a ninth grade ethnic studies class is provided at the right.) When our Intellectual Safety concept map is complete, we make an agreement to put our words into practice. Then we make our community ball.



Community Ball

Used to mediate turn taking during classroom discussion and inquiry, a community ball is an excellent tool for cultivating collaborative civic space in the C3 classroom. The rules of the community ball are: (1) only the person with the community ball speaks, (2) the person with the community ball chooses who speaks next, and (3) you always have the right to pass. These rules distribute power in the classroom, and ensure that all of the classroom participants listen and have the chance to be heard. Put into practice together, intellectual safety and the community ball are instructional strategies that place value on student voice. They help to ensure that the collaborative civic relationships that students and teachers are building together are in a constant state of being developed and nurtured.

To make a community ball, the class must sit in a circle. The teacher begins the activity by wrapping yarn around a hollow cardboard tube while a student next to her feeds her the yarn from a large skein. As she is wrapping, the teacher responds to a question that each person in the classroom will answer in turn. This question can be anything the teacher thinks will stimulate relationship building and inquiry. For example, I started this activity by asking my psychology students, “What do you think is the biggest issue facing your



generation?” In ethnic studies, I asked, “If you had to pick one word to describe your ethnic identity what would you choose?” When the teacher finishes answering the question, s/he passes the cardboard tube to the student besides her, who begins to wrap and speak as the teacher takes over feeding the yarn. This process—one person wrapping and speaking with a neighbor feeding the yarn—continues until all have had the opportunity to speak. Then the teacher inserts a zip-tie into the hollow tube at the center of the wrapped yarn, secures the zip-tie, and forms a bagel shape with the yarn. The final step involves cutting through the yarn at the outer edge, creating a pom-pom ball. Once the community ball is complete, students and teachers use it to facilitate a number of collaborative classroom activities, including Plain Vanilla inquiries.

Plain Vanilla

Plain Vanilla is an excellent strategy for cultivating and nurturing collaborative civic space during the dialogue, philosophical inquiry, and democratic deliberation that occurs while students and teachers are thinking together about the complex topics and issues found in most social studies coursework. It is named Plain Vanilla because it is the most basic format for structuring this type of classroom inquiry. Here is how the strategy works (Miller, 2014):

1. **READ:** Students read or are exposed to some sort of stimulus, such as text, art, music, or video.
2. **QUESTION:** Each student creates a compelling question that was stimulated by the reading and they make their questions public (i.e., they write their questions on a white board and share their questions out loud with their peers and teachers).
3. **VOTE:** Students vote on the question they want to discuss. They do this by passing the community ball around the circle and verbally indicating the question(s) they want to vote for. Each student gets two votes and can place them both on the same question or two different questions. As the class goes through this process, a scribe (student or teacher) records how many votes each question receives.
4. **WRITE:** Once the preferred question is identified, the students write their responses to it. The responses may offer examples, identify assumptions, seek clarification, make inferences, identify counter-examples, and/or ask more questions.
5. **DIALOGUE, INQUIRY & DELIBERATION:** The person whose question received the most votes begins the inquiry. S/he explains what inspired the question (e.g., textual reference, life experience, etc.) and provides the first response. Participants then raise their hands and use the community ball to facilitate turn taking. During this time, participants are able to provide insights, examples, counterexamples, and ask questions in order to inquire deeply into the topic behind the question. Teachers may need to remind students that the purpose of the exercise is to gain a broader understanding by considering and exploring multiple perspectives; it is not an argument or a debate.
6. **REFLECT & EVALUATE:** Closure is created at the end of the deliberative inquiry by having each student write or orally share her or his responses to a set of reflective questions. For example, “What question, thought, or idea are you leaving with today? How does what you learned today connect to your life and the world you live in?” Students and teachers can also use evaluation criteria (e.g., intellectual safety, active listening, effective participation, sustained focus, and use of Jackson’s (2001) Good Thinker’s Tool Kit to assess the

quality of the community's inquiry.¹

The role of the C3 teacher during a Plain Vanilla inquiry is to be a co-inquirer—i.e., one who has her or his eye on supporting students in maintaining a collaborative civic space and digging deeply into the topics being explored. At the end of a Plain Vanilla inquiry, it is important that students and teachers challenge themselves to apply what they learn and take informed action in their lives both on and off campus.

Concluding Thoughts

Intellectual Safety, the Community Ball, and Plain Vanilla are three practices that embody the type of deliberate instructional shifts that C3 teachers can make if they want to help their students become ready for college, career, and civic life. Designed to foster students' active participation in democratic praxis across all four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc, C3 strategies like these help teachers establish deliberative and democratic procedures for making classroom decisions and engaging students in inquiry across the entire school year. Introduced during the first days of instruction, the strategies in this brief should be repeated and practiced over time if students are to internalize the important role that collaboration plays in developing questions, planning inquiries, applying disciplinary concepts and tools, evaluating sources, using evidence, communicating conclusions, and taking informed action. Through the iterative process of reflection and self-correction, C3 students learn how to assess their individual and collective capacities for addressing problems of democracy. They become student-citizens who are "real fixers" (Matthews, 2014, p. xvii), people who make our democracy work as it should. When students are given the opportunity to experience what democracy feels like in school, then they will be more likely to draw from and implement these experiences outside the classroom.

References

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The following reference information should be used in the citation of this document: Makaiau, A.S. (2015). Cultivating and Nurturing Collaborative Civic Spaces. C3 Teachers. Available online: <http://c3teachers.org/c3shifts>

¹ The Good Thinker's Tool Kit consists of seven indicators for critical thinking which are: W-what do you mean by that? R-what are the reasons? A-what is being assumed? Or what can I assume? I-can I infer ___ from ___? Or where are there inferences being made? T-is what is being said true and what does it imply if it is true? E-are there any examples to prove what is being said? C-are there any counter-examples to disprove what is being said (Makaiau & Miller, 2012, p. 15).