

ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION and “PLAIN VANILLA:”

A Strategy for Engaging Students and Teachers in Dialogue, Philosophical Inquiry, and Democratic Deliberation

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What is it? Plain Vanilla (Jackson, 2001, p.462) is an excellent strategy for engaging students and teachers in dialogue, philosophical inquiry, and democratic deliberation about complex topics and issues inherent in an anti-bias, multicultural, and social justice education. Currently used in a wide range of content areas across the P- 20 teaching spectrum, Plain Vanilla is a strategy that supports the work of educators who are looking to facilitate large-group classroom discussions that are learner-centered, culturally responsive, critical and caring, philosophical, and representative of what life could be like in a diverse deliberative democracy. In my own practice as a social studies teacher, I have used the Plain Vanilla strategy to critically engage and co-inquire with my students about issues of identity, diversity, and justice. Additionally, we have challenged ourselves to apply what we learn during our Plain Vanilla deliberative inquires to take informed action in our lives both on and off campus.

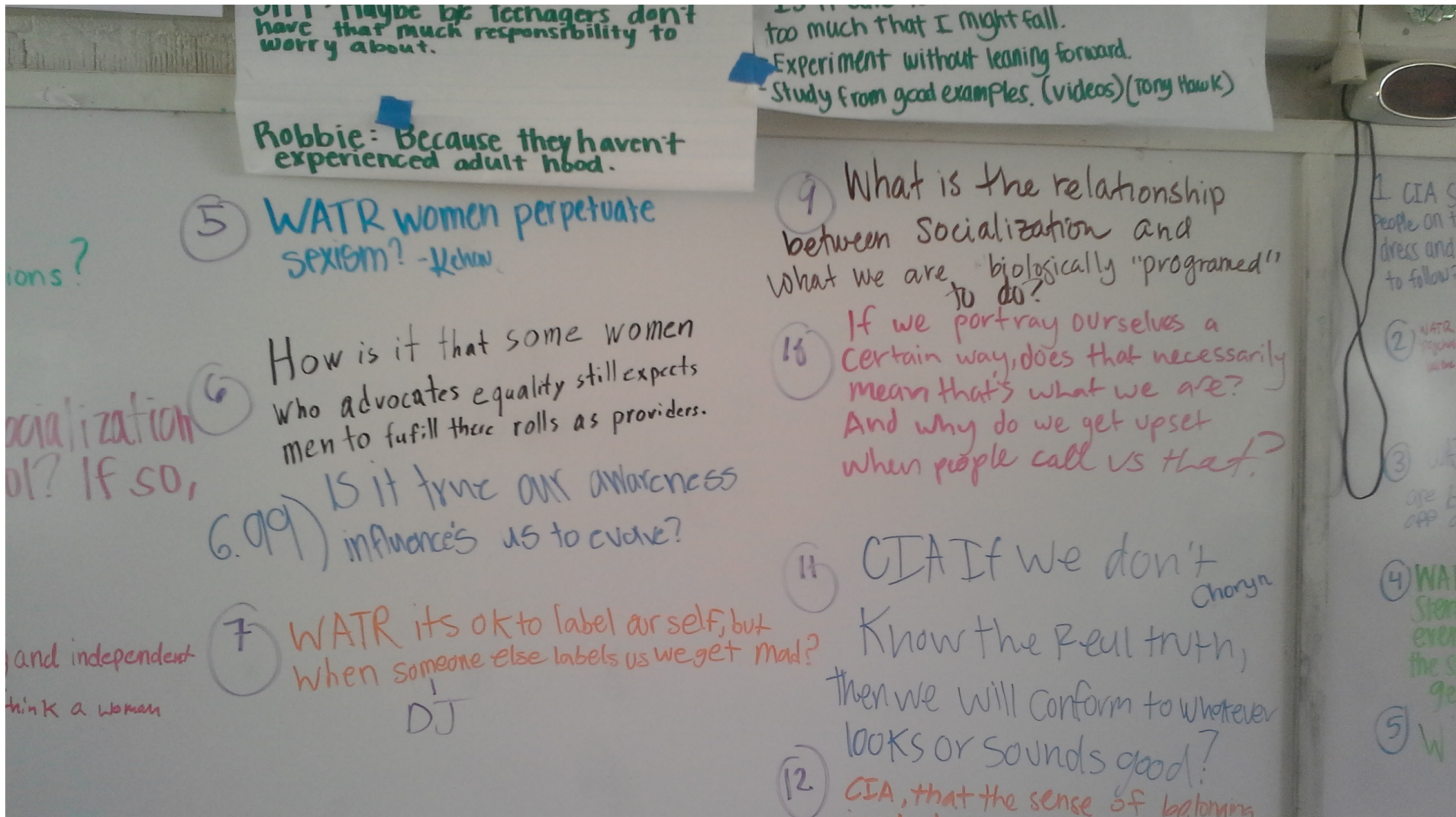
How to do it? Miller (2015) describes the six steps of the Plain Vanilla teaching strategy:

1. **READ:** Students read (or are exposed to some sort of stimulus, such as art, music, or video).
2. **QUESTION:** Each student creates a philosophical question in response to the reading. Philosophical questions: 1) Use the Good Thinker’s Toolkit. 2) Move beyond the “text” or use the text to question a larger issue. 3) Capture something that we truly want to think about with others. Once they are created the students make their questions public (i.e. they write their questions on a white board) and share their questions out loud.
3. **VOTE:** Students vote democratically on the question they want to discuss. Each student gets two votes and can place them both on the same question or two different questions. Typically, the students take turns in a circle and let each person cast their vote.
4. **WRITE:** Once the question is selected, the students write a response to it. The response should have some examples, identify assumptions, seek clarification, make inferences, identify counter-examples, and ask more questions...
5. **DIALOGUE, INQUIRY & DELIBERATION:** The person whose question got the most votes begins the inquiry. They explain where the question came from (e.g. textual reference, life experience, etc.) and provide the first response. Participants then raise their hands and use the community ball to facilitate turn taking. This is when the participants are able to provide insights, examples, counterexamples, and ask questions in order to inquire deep into the question or topic. Remember, it is an inquiry 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 their responses to a handful 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 also use evaluation criteria (e.g. about listening, intellectual safety, participation, use of the Good Thinker’s Tool Kit, focus, etc.) to assess the community of inquiry.

Why do it? Plain Vanilla is a concrete practice for anti-bias educators who want to critically engage their students with classroom materials, differentiate instruction, foster cooperative and collaborative learning, assist students in making real world connections, and implement values based assessment and evaluation.

What are some examples of how it can be used to practice anti-bias education in the K-12 setting? One example of how the Plain Vanilla strategy is currently being used to carry out the goals of anti-bias education is found in a brand new Philosophical Inquiry course that is being piloted in the Hawai’i State Department of Education. In each unit of this new course students use the Plain Vanilla strategy to think together about the complex topics that they are learning about. For example, in the fifth unit of the course, *Gender and Society*, students learn to “recognize that power and privilege influence relationships on interpersonal, intergroup and institutional levels and consider how they have been affected by those dynamics” (Justice 14). They start this process by annotating texts such as bell hooks’ *Feminism is for Everyone*, Lupe Fiasco’s song lyrics in *Bitch Bad*, gender statistics from Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*, and the philosophies of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Next, they use their annotations to generate a philosophical question that they want to think about with their peers during our Plain Vanilla deliberative inquiry (see below). After voting on the question that they want to talk about the students engage in dialogue, inquiry, and deliberation in an effort to scratch beneath the surface of the question and find

possible answers. As a part of this process they are asked to record "inquiry memos" or notes that describe both their own thoughts and the multiple perspectives of their peers. At the end of the Plain Vanilla deliberative inquiry the students reflect on and evaluate what they learned by writing a philosophical insight paper. Here is a quote from one student's paper – 'In the bell hooks article it states, 'mostly they think feminism is a bunch of angry women who want to be like men' (p.7). As a class, we all read the article and shared our own understandings of sexist acts. This helped us understand different point of view because we were all able to share what we think 'feminism' means. Kate said that 'feminism is the movement to stop sexism,' which changed my perspective because I thought feminism was similar to what bell hooks said - a bunch of people wanting to be someone there not. Now not do I only understand feminism, but I also understand that women are being mistreated, and I can play my part by making sure I am a feminist" (Senior, 2014).



References:

1. Jackson, T. (2001). The art and craft of gently socratic inquiry. In A. L. Costa (Ed.) *Developing minds: A resource for teaching thinking* (459 – 465). Alexandria, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
2. Miller, C. (2015, May 19). The Plain Vanilla Process. Retrieved from <http://theteacherphilosopher.blogspot.com/2015/05/the-plain-vanilla-philosophical-inquiry.html>.