“Helping Students Navigate Through Difficult and Controversial Contemporary Issues”

A Paper Presented at the Association of Youth Ministry Educators Conference in Charlotte NC, October 18-20, 2024

Tommy Carrington, D.Min.

Taylor University, Professor of Christian Ministries

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, PhD/EDS, candidate

**Abstract**

We are living in a time when there are many controversial contemporary cultural and theological issues that significantly affect the church at large, and which have significant implications for academia as well. In personal conversations, I have found that a number of ministry leaders and professors alike, do not feel adequately prepared to deal with the issues, and often have difficulty addressing them in a cogent manner. A few have communicated with me that they are uncomfortable to address the issues from the pulpit, or in the classroom.

It is incumbent upon us, as educators and practitioners, to help prepare students, who are preparing to become future ministry leaders, to navigate through these controversial areas. In the pluralistic world we live in, these issues can be divisive and even toxic. But there is a way to handle them that can perhaps bring even a “little less” tension in the classroom, or in social conversations.

This paper is designed to provide educators with one approach for dealing with sensitive topics, and to propose a technique for addressing these topics in the classroom. The structure of the paper is as follows: 1) a brief presentation of the problem, 2) a deeper explanation of the complexity of the issues we are facing culturally (and why), 3) a basic outline of the class lecture series I present to students, and 4) a description of the presentation students will conduct in the class, which serves to reinforce the lessons taught in the lecture. The students’ in-class presentation will provide students with an opportunity to “practice” the principles taught.

The Problem

As I mentioned, we are living in a time when there are a number of contemporary cultural issues that significantly affect the church, and Christianity in general. Some of these issues are causing divisions and factions, which are often leading people to leave the church (Childers & Barnett, 2023). In some cases, people are reacting to relevant topics in our culture that Christians have not been prepared to answer. In some cases, the answers we have traditionally provided are not satisfactory to many in our congregations, especially to those in generations Z and the up-and-coming Generation Alpha. Many are finding this to be the case in Christian colleges and seminary spaces as well. Although controversy and divisions are not new, the level of vitriol and harsh rhetoric (and sometimes behavior), combined with the animosity towards one another, has taken on new levels. And the consequences are at a level hardly seen before. Leaving one church for another (and sometimes multiple churches); and even departing from the faith completely appears to be an even newer trend in what is referred to as “deconversion” and “deconstruction of the faith.” Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett (2023) in their book: *The Deconstruction of Christianity,* talk about the implications of people in the church, who have, or are in the process of going through “deconstruction,” and the “hot topics” that have led to many Christians questioning, and eventually leaving their faith.

The class lectures and assignment I will describe in this presentation, were borne out of the concern of seeing more and more people divided over contemporary cultural, political and theological issues, and seeing the level of discord and disregard for one another. In addition to the research itself, this concern led me to the design and adaptation of a class assignment that could be used by professors to provide one perspective on approaching these sensitive topics, and to propose a technique for dealing with these topics in the classroom. The purpose of this research/workshop is twofold: 1) to give educators a tool to help students develop a foundation for navigating through tough issues – now and in the future, and 2) to provide educators with a strategy to address controversial topics delicately and sensitively, with (hopefully) minimal, or decreased hostility and/or opposition from students.

Although conflict and disagreement are inevitable, the goal here is to provide an avenue for students to look into a topic as objectively as possible, with the goal of having civil and respectful conversations with colleagues and classmates, with the view of trying to understand the “other side.” That is, the side the student initially did not agree with.

Complexity of the Cultural Issues we Face

The topics for the issues I am referring to are complex, and they can conjure up deep feelings and emotions. For people in the church, this can sometimes lead to confusion and frustration, to the point of exasperation, and ultimately to a place where one could feel: “I’m done.” In her book: *I Never Thought of it That* Way, Monica Guzmán (2023) refers to the confusion people experience when the complexity of issues becomes overwhelming. “Confusion is such a killjoy,” she says as she describes how people get to the place where they want to give up (Guzmán, audiobook: 2:54:53).

However, giving up is not the answer. Guzmán says this should bring us to a place where we can learn to “embrace complexity.” Complexity is not a curiosity killer she says (Guzmán, 02:54:51 – 02:55:00), and describes how instead of exasperating us, can propel us to strive to understand people even more. I share one of Guzmán’s deepest personal convictions, that “understanding the people who confound us, is always worth it” (Chap. 3 -- 32:15).

Guzmán agrees that the complexities involved in cultural issues are exhausting. “There is no simplifying tough issues,” she says. “(But) you need the friction. It’s not confusion … it’s complexity,” she continues, and advocates for a position of learning and growing as we embrace the complexities.

In the context of the church, Christian colleges and seminaries, many people are frustrated with how ministry leaders and educators are dealing with these complex cultural issues … or not dealing with them at all. Many perceive the church as “out of touch with culture,” or dismissive to what individuals are going through. But what if *we* – both educators and ministry leaders – deal with the issues head-on with courage, grace, and truth. What if, instead of leading people to want to “deconstruct their faith,” our engagement leads to healthy conversations, and mutual listening and learning? We can’t end all controversy or disagreements, but what if the dialogue itself could serve as a bridge? What if our dialogue could lead them to a place where that tension is healthy? Where they see the body of Christ “grapple” with the issues head-on, without fear or trepidation; but in a spirit of humility, and a posture of learning, where we are all saying: “Teach me … let us learn together.”

Seeing Things Differently

One of the premises of this paper, is that people see things so differently … and that is not always a bad thing. It is a goal of this research and subsequent exercise, to try to see things the way other people see them. If for no other reason, then just for empathy and understanding. But it could also result in growth and healthy change. As Guzmán expresses it, “Trying to see things from a different point of view can take patience, humility, and a good dose of courage, but it works. Research consistently shows us that the more you mingle with people in your ‘other-ized’ outgroups, the less prejudice you will feel against them” (Guzmán – 34:34-34:45).

When one person sees something, and another person says they saw something totally different, it is like the folk tale: “Six blind men who explored an elephant."[[1]](#footnote-1) Each person described the part of their elephant they were feeling with their hands, and describing the elephant as they perceived it. They described the elephant based on their limited experience, and their descriptions of the elephant are different from each other, which did not match the reality of what they were actually touching. So too in life … sometimes we don’t have *all* the information needed to make an accurate judgment on what we are seeing or experiencing. We are like blind people “feeling our way through” understanding a complex world, without *all* the information needed to fully understand all there is to understand. Referring to the illustration of the six blind men and the elephant, Don Davis (2018) points out that:

In one sense, each blind person certainly possessed a piece of data (and were therefore correct in their "piece"), but none of them had the kind of verbal map that would prove sufficient to describe the whole elephant. We do the same when we fail to recognize that our limited, tiny maps may not fit the entire territory of the issue we are discussing. Good dialogue occurs when each person communicating realizes that their particular "slice" of truth may not be everything that can be said and understood on the question at hand (Davis, 2018, p. 21).

We, as humans, are “feeling” our way through some very complex issues and experiences in life (including things we experience with our senses). Some things are very definitive and very objective … and some are not. It is incumbent upon us, to do our best to come to truth and accuracy in our beliefs and teachings, factoring in as much accurate information, and Biblical truth as we can assemble.

Birds of a Feather …

 Research shows that we tend to mostly associate with people who are like ourselves (Myers & Twenge, 2017). Sociologists refer to the “birds-of-a-feather-flock-together” phenomenon as “homophily,” and describe it as 1) the tendency for people to seek out or be attracted to those who are similar to themselves, and 2) the tendency for individuals who are socially connected in some way to display certain affinities, such as similarities in demographic background, attitudes, values, and so on (Guzmán).

Guzmán refers to Ellen Petry Leanse’s book *The Happiness Hack*, where she explains what happens to your brain when you spend a lot of time with folks who reflect your own beliefs back to you. She says:

You stop thinking about those beliefs at all. Your brain likes to stay sufficient, take short cuts, save cognitive power. So, as you become entrenched in your beliefs, your brain moves them to a part of itself that’s good and automatic reactive thinking, and away from the part that reasons things out ... As a result, you react to competing beliefs, the way you would react to anything that seems totally unnatural or raw … with disgust and repulsion. Our life experience is shaped by assumptions, biases and blind spots … We think its reality, yet it is only the conditioned perception we have been taught is truth (Guzmán, 02:01:50-02:02:55).

Guzmán goes on to point out that we often sort into our (own) groups, push off our “others” (those who do not think and believe like us), and settle in too often, and too deeply, into silos that keep us from seeing each other for who we really are. No “us” can see a “them” clearly without opening our eyes wider than we are used to, and building bridges to span divides we fear are too big to cross … The most important thing about a bridge is not that it is crossed … but that it is there.” (Guzmán, 2:11:00 – 2:11:45). Moving *towards* the people who are not like us is the key to a better understanding, and is a more effective solution to conflict, rather than rejecting, and pushing away from them.

Alternative Approaches to Controversy

Empathy

In the current political and cultural climate, it seems as if the sides are so polarized, they don’t even want anything to do with each other. The rhetoric sometimes gets so heated, each side demonizes the other side with harsh words and *ad hominem* attacks. Guzmán refers to the concept of “siloing” oneself, whereby an individual is no longer even open to considering another side. Guzmán says we can go so far, that “the stories we tell about each other are not only wrong, but demeaning. When we spend so much time in spaces that intensify our bassist judgements, that we believe the other side is barely human at all” (Guzmán, 2:01:42). Unfortunately, in the current political and cultural climate, this seems to be the norm.

One of the goals of the lecture and assignment I propose, is to help individuals become more empathic towards others who might not agree with them (on whatever topic). Empathy can be defined as “the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view, and imagine yourself in their place. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else’s position and feeling what they are feeling” (Cherry, 2024). As Alfred Adler put it: “Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another” (as quoted by Inazu, 2024, p. 1), and is an important component of this approach to the complex issues we intend to deal with in the class.

 Attorney and law professor John Inazu (2024) points to this in his book *Learning to Disagree,* as he tactfully demonstrates the power of empathy in trying to navigate through complex political and cultural issues. He shows that by having a deeper understanding of what someone else is saying (or going through), by truly listening and “walking in their shoes,” might just cause us to pause … slow down, in our judgement of people. Inazu says, “Rather than launching into an immediate critique of how someone else has handled an unfamiliar or impossible situation, we might pause to imagine the distance that divides our experiences. We may find after a little reflection that we aren’t as sure as we initially thought. Sometimes a drop of empathy can restrain a flood of needless words and thoughtless commentary” (Inazu, p. 10).

 As Inazu points out, you don’t have to have training as a lawyer, or be “wired” like a lawyer to be able to learn the skills of empathy. Anyone can learn and practice these skills, and my premise is that you can become a better person because of it. The goal of the lesson I deliver to students, and the subsequent presentation I have them do, is to help them have a more empathic and, dare I say it: “balanced perspective.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Inazu says that the better you understand the other side of the argument, the better you can critique it and the more strongly you can defend your own position. But he advocates for doing it with an attitude of empathy, saying:

If all you do is reflexively dismiss the other side (‘Those idiots – how could anyone think that way? What a stupid idea!’), you will never really understand the argument someone is making or why they are making it. Attributing bad arguments to people you think are dumb is easy, but it usually misleads you. Empathy lets you see that smart and well-intentioned people can also make bad arguments (Inazu, P. 10-11).

In class we are intentional about being empathic to the causes, philosophies, and mission of “the other side,” in a genuine attempt to understand. I teach students to “lean in” to what the other side is saying. Whether it leads to lasting change on either side is a possible bi-product. But civil discourse and empathy **are** mandates.

Proposed Learning Experience / Assignment

 The proposed approach to address the problem of the extremes, and the polarization they can lead to, is to help students think critically about both sides of an issue. In many of our classes as professors, we might have students write a research paper on a particular issue. In some cases, we will have students present their papers to the entire class. We might even instruct our students that good papers will usually have a section on the “limitations of this study,” or “for further study …” where we suggest ways students can look at another side of the issue. But this is usually brief, and we might implicitly be saying: “we don’t really think the other side is substantial, but …” (and go on to propose the side we already subscribe to).

 In a forensics course, debate class, or law school, they teach you that to prepare for your position well, you should have a good idea in advance of what the other side might say in their rebuttal of your view, or the refutation (Inazu). Good preparation will lead the student in those classes to have a good grasp of “the other side.”

 What is unique for this assignment in a “regular” Christian Ministry course or “Contemporary Cultural Issues” course, is that I have the students prepare and give a presentation where they are going to present *both sides* of a particular topic … *as if they believed each side.* The goal here, is to understand “the other side” so well, they are (almost) convinced of it … and in some cases, it can cause them to actually *change* sides from the one they started out with. But at a minimum, it could possibly do 2 things: 1) make them more empathetic to the other side (since they have researched it so well, they can convince someone of it), and/or 2) bring them to a more balanced perspective of the issue, that they did not start out with. This is a technique employed by professors of forensics/debate, and law school professors, to teach the skills often needed in persuasion and negotiation (Inazu).

 I teach students that as they become more familiar with “the other side,” in a genuine attempt to understand it (not just try to “prove them wrong”), the more balanced they *are likely* to become regarding the issue being examined. As Inazu describes it, “I suggest to the students in front of me that the right approach lies at the intersection of civic responsibility and civic grace: don’t be afraid to express your honest opinions but treat others kindly” (Inazu, p. 13).

 I think students can learn how complex some of the contemporary issues in our culture are, when they understand how inextricably woven into the issues are concepts such as confirmation bias, paradox, nuance, anomalies, etc.[[3]](#footnote-3) You then begin to see that people with a different viewpoint are not necessarily the “idiot” you might think they are. Inazu says “you start by assuming the best of someone – or at least not assuming the worst – to open the door to deeper understanding and an opportunity to learn from those who see the world differently” (Inazu, p. 18).

Research has shown that you are much more likely to accept something as evidence (truth) if it confirms something you already *think* you know, and much more likely to discount information if it contradicts your views. This is known as *confirmation bias*, and it plays heavily into when we “dig our heals” into the thing we already believe (Myers & Twenge 2017). This is especially true for things that are emotionally charged, or where our views are deeply held. It usually happens at an unconscious level. Put another way: you are likely to stick with the thing you have decided to believe, and it is very difficult to change that belief (Myers & Twenge). One of the more startling things I have seen in my own life, and that is supported by the research, is that people will continue to stick to the thing they already believe, even to the extent that even when it is **proven** wrong … they will still hold to it. This is referred to as “belief perseverance,” and numerous sociological studies have shown consistent evidence of this (Myers & Twenge, p. 79).

Guiding Principles for Navigating Through Complex Issues

 Apart from Scripture, and empirical facts, I have often been guided by 2 quotes I heard as a young college student. I refer to the lesson I learned as: “The pendulum swing of extremes.”

The Pendulum Swing of Extremes

 The first quote is one that stuck with me as an undergraduate student reading through John Dewey’s work on *Experience & Education* (1938)*.* According toDewey: “Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of either/ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. When forced to recognize that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise” (p. 17).

 Even as a young college student, I remember being impacted by the statement, and beginning to observe how often this happens in life … even in general conversations. I am referring to the tendency we have to gravitate to a particular idea, philosophy or belief, and take it to an extreme, even when not logical or warranted … or true (by objective means).

 The other quote that has impacted my thinking regarding the “two extremes” we tend to gravitate towards, is from a sermon I heard as a teenager while attending a church on Key Biscayne (Miami), Florida. The pastor at the time was Rev. Steve Brown. During his sermon, he made a statement, that though profound, kind of came across as “matter-of-factly.” Rev. Brown stated: “Heresy, is truth, promulgated to the exclusion of all other truth” (Rev. Steve Brown, Key Biscayne Presbyterian Church, 1980). He repeated it again, as I frantically wrote down what he had said. Rev. Brown went on to explain how there are so many truths that people gravitate towards (and around), but that those “truths” are nuanced and impacted by other truths … that we might omit, neglect, or downright ignore.[[4]](#footnote-4)

 Here is how it often plays itself out: You learn something new, you become convinced it is true, and before you know it, you have taken it to such an extreme, you forget (or dismiss) all other truths. But then, you might somehow become convinced that that is no longer true, and you grab on to a “different truth.”[[5]](#footnote-5) And before you know it … you are all the way on “the extreme other side” of the issue. Scot McKnight (2008) describes a similar process when relating how “traditions are formed.” As Dan White, Jr. expressed it in a tweet: "People choose extremes in reaction to other people's extremes, choose to live in the tensions” (<https://x.com/danwhitejr/status/1818257113749021012>) - retrieved July 30, 2024).

It is my firm belief that we miss out on a lot of good information, and even truth, when we “dig our heels in,” and “hunker down” holding to seeing things the way we do because “that’s what I have always believed.” And we do that at the possible expense of either missing the truth entirely, or missing an *element* of truth. Monica Guzmán proposes: “If there is one question you should always be asking, it is: ‘what am I missing?’ It is the doorstop to put down in the hallways of your mind … to keep open possibilities from slamming into harmful assumptions” (Guzmán, Chap. 3 – 00-00:30). Guzmán is tapping into this concept, that too often we *miss* the truth, because we are not looking in enough places, asking all the possible questions, getting input from enough credible sources … not digging in deep enough.

The Role of Balance

 Both aforementioned quotes, as well as the advice provided by Guzmán, point to the need for us to be open-minded, humble, and balanced in our approach to discovering and articulating truth. It is not that there is not absolute truth, or that it is *always* found somewhere in the middle; but, as we will see later on, it is that sometimes the thing we held onto so strongly, might be nuanced, or skewed one way or the other. The admonition is to approach issues with a healthy skepticism and humility; to at least listen to, and seriously consider the other side being expressed by someone else. And in *some* cases, the answer might very well be … in the middle of two extremes. I teach students that as they become more familiar with “the other side,” in a genuine attempt to understand it – not just try to “prove them wrong” – the more balanced they *are likely* to become regarding the issue being examined.

To illustrate the “illusive nature of balance,” I like to use the quote I heard from my friend, Dr. Kara Powell at Fuller Theological Seminary (Fuller Youth Institute), who said: “Balance, is the place you get to … on your way to the other side.” I believe that was a tongue-in-cheek way to illustrate the tendency we have of hardly ever staying in balance. But, as we will see later, the research supports that viewpoint.

Dialectic Learning Pedagogy

The process I describe in class to introduce students to the technique I suggest, involves a pedagogical approach referred to as “dialectic learning pedagogy.” Dialectics, in its simplest form, is “(a) any systematic reasoning, exposition or argument that juxtaposes opposed or contradictory ideas and usually seeks to resolve their conflict: a method of examining and discussing opposing ideas in order to find the truth; and (b) an intellectual exchange of ideas” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>. Accessed: 10/1/2024).

The proposed assignment uses this approach which emphasizes the importance of students learning from one another through dialogue and interaction (Yu Wu, et al., 2016)). The context and environment within which this takes place is significant, and the facilitator (professor) creates a safe environment that welcomes civil discourse (Fosnot, 1996; Harris & Graham, 1994). Dialectical thinking further refers to the ability to view issues from multiple perspectives and to arrive at the most economical and reasonable reconciliation of seemingly contradictory information and postures. It is a way of using paradox and cognitive dissonance to enhance learning and deepen one's understanding of complex issues (Yu Wu, et al.).

 Dialectical constructivism considers that the source of knowledge comes from constant and complex interactions between the evolving individual and the developing environment. Dialectical constructivism informs dialectical learning pedagogy, where students constantly interact with each other in developing and refining arguments over an issue from multiple perspectives (Yu Wu, et al.).

Beginning the Lecture Series

To prepare the students for the class assignment, I begin by establishing some “class guidelines” and “ground rules.” In light of the fact that we will be discussing many controversial topics, I let the students know that these ground rules are essential for the success of the class discussions and ultimately for the class presentations. Those guidelines are outlined as follows:

Class Protocol

Introduction

1. We don’t have to all agree on everything, but when you **do** disagree …
	* Lean into what the research says (on all sides)
	* Do not rely on social media, online sources, personal preferences, or things “you’ve always just known.”
2. In light of the above, I establish the following “ground rules” for the class, leading up to the discussion on the controversial topics. Those ground rules are:
3. Be respectful – If someone has a different point of view, be respectful of the individual. Please refrain from using derogatory language, or ad hominem attacks.
4. Avoid "putting people in a box."
	1. Life is complicated. Issues are often nuanced
	2. Social issues are complicated … and fluid (constantly changing)
	3. Things are changing all the time
	4. Issues are changing all the time
	5. People change their minds (we need to allow for that)
5. Learn to listen very carefully to the “other side.” That is, the side you don’t necessarily agree with.
	1. It will make you a better person
	2. It will help you be more empathetic to others
	3. The goal is compassion and patience as a human being
6. Be diligent in your readings – Read and Reflect!
7. Strive for balance (where warranted). Note: sometimes balance is warranted … sometimes not (I go more into this when I describe the assignment in detail)
8. Be open – All issues are not clear-cut. Recognize that in this life we have people with different worldviews, different perspectives, and different approaches (philosophies) towards life.

Terms and Definitions

 I then proceed to explain and define significant terms that will be very important to in learning how to navigate through the complex issues we will discuss, and essential in understanding the assignment. I define the following terms:

* Overconfidence Phenomenon – The tendency to be more confident than correct – to overestimate the accuracy of one’s beliefs (Myers & Twenge)
* Confirmation Bias – “A tendency to search for information that confirms one’s preconceptions” (Myers & Twenge)
* Belief Perseverance – Persistence of one’s initial conceptions, such as when the basis for one’s belief is discredited but an explanation of why the belief might be true survives. Research conducted by Lee Ross and Craig Anderson (et al), revealed that “it is surprisingly difficult to demolish a falsehood after the person conjures up a rationale for it” (Myers & Twenge, p. 79)
* Paradoxes -- “A statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality, expresses a possible truth”; “An opinion that conflicts with common belief” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary)
* Anomalies – A deviation from the common rule, type, arrangement or form; an odd, peculiar, or strange condition (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary)
* Nuance – “a subtle difference in or shade of meaning, expression, or sound” (Webster’s). I explain that sometimes there is just a bit of a difference in what the other person meant, and is taken (or interpreted) differently
* Facts vs. Opinion – Especially in our culture today, there are things that are presented as fact, that are mere opinions, and conversely, sometimes someone will correctly state something as a fact, and someone will say: “well, that’s just your opinion,” when it is not just an opinion. (I like to use the old saying from a U.S. Senator, that “You are entitled to your own opinion, you are not entitled to your own facts” – Senator Patrick Moynihan, New York)
* Facts are defined as: “statements that can be shown to be true or can be proved, or something that really happened."
* In contrast, “an opinion expresses someone's belief, feeling, view, idea, or judgment about something or someone” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary).

Full Assignment Explanation & Topics

 After going over the terms and definitions, I then remind the students about the requirements of the assignment as written in the course syllabus (provided in Appendix I), and then I walk through the actual assignment as detailed in a supplement handout I provide called: “full assignment explanation” (provided in Appendix II). I then provide a list of potential topics students can choose from (Appendix III). This is not an exhaustive list, and students are welcome to choose a topic of their choice, as long as it meets the criteria provided.

Moving from *Knowledge* to *Understanding*

 Following the full assignment explanation**,** I then provide some ideas and approaches for researching the two sides of their topics. I have used principles I developed over time, but that are similar to those described in Ian Shaw’s (2015) *Handbook for Supervisors of Doctoral Students in Evangelical Theological Institutions.* Shaw talks about the importance of developing critical thinking skills. He expresses the concept of critical thinking as “probing inquisitiveness, a keenness of mind, a zealous dedication to reason, and a hunger or eagerness for reliable information” (Shaw, quoting from Facione, p. 29). Shaw says that the key (movement/progression) needs to go from *knowledge* about something, to the *understanding* of something. To enhance understanding, the student/researcher:

* Makes links to other areas of knowledge
* Finds ways to restructure materials
* Synthesizes ideas and arguments
* Likes to get the “whole picture”
* Searches for underlying structure and meaning
* Is intuitive as to solutions and outcomes (Shaw, 29).

Referring to *The Delphi Report* (written by Peter Facione), Shaw points out that the ideal critical thinker is “habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and circumstances of inquiry permit” (from The Delphi Report). Shaw goes on to say that “educating good critical thinkers assists wider society in ‘working toward this ideal” (Shaw, 33).

I propose that it is healthy and wise to take a balanced approach to *many,* if not *most* issues in life. I am convinced that many of our problems exist, because people are trying to solve them with a view from the extreme. Not to sound cliché, or intellectually naïve, but I believe we could solve so many problems if we just humble ourselves, listen closely to the other side, and find some balance – usually somewhere close to the middle. The goal is not agreement on everything … that’s not likely to happen. The goal is to have civil conversations that are filled with grace, empathy and patience knowing both sides of an issue makes you a well-rounded person, and open-minded to consider points of view that are different than your own. We grow from sharing ideas from each other.

The “Slippery Slope of Relativity”

One thing that must be addressed regarding this paper and proposed class presentation, is the issue that is raised by many about “the slippery slope of relativity.” Some might think of this pedagogical approach as “wishy washy”; or that you don’t have strong convictions; or that you are on that “slippery slope of moral relativism.” But this is not so at all. The key to this, is to have strong convictions on those things we are categorically convinced there ***is*** ***not*** another side, and to hold a balanced view on those things where there ***is*** a possible “other side.”

Shaw addresses the concerns that this type of critical thinking could produce Christians who question everything, and doubt everything. To that, Shaw’s answer is a categorical “no.” Shaw refers to Peter Facione’s Executive Summary of “The Delphi Report,” where he points out that “Christians are seekers after truth, not doubt. There is ‘truth,’ which resides in God and needs to be explored, and that is what we are seeking. Indeed, this is enormously profound. In searching for ‘truth’ on a particular issue, we are exploring aspects of the mind and workings of God. The evangelical Christian who is a critical thinker will:

1. Recognize that a problem exists and discuss that in their research proposal/thesis statement
2. Recognize that there is evidence, ‘sources,’ that need to be considered, including the Bible and key primary texts
3. Recognize that God has given us minds with which to tackle and propose answers to problems.

As Facione himself puts it: “Critical thinking is therefore about being ‘open minded without being wishy-washy.’ It is analytical without being nitpicky. Critical thinkers can be decisive without being stubborn, evaluative without being judgmental, and forceful without being opinionated.’” (Facione, 1990, p. 25).

Conclusion

A question that often comes up when I conclude the presentation and assignment description to the class is: Are there topics that are off-limits? I explain to the students that the things we would agree that are the “non-negotiables of the Christian faith,” would not qualify as topics for the “both sides” assignment. I suggest to students that they do not choose those topics. In addition, issues that have overwhelming Biblical or scientific, empirical evidence should also be avoided (though there are some exceptions there as well). I tell students that virtually “everything else is fair game.”[[6]](#footnote-6) If they are in doubt, they could go to their church’s or school’s statement of faith for clarification on their institution’s non-negotiables. And “when in doubt …” I tell students, “… you can ask me” (or their pastor, supervisor, etc.).

Although there have been rare occasions when the assignment has gone “awry,” the vast majority of times I have had students do this assignment we have experienced overwhelming success. I have been asked if I have done a clinical analysis to investigate if the assignment has had lasting effects on students’ ability to apply this to their lives and change how they approach contemporary, controversial cultural issues. To date, I have not, and although I am considering it … I know it changed mine, some 40 years ago.

Bibliography

Childers, Alisa, and Barnett, Tim. *The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale,

2023.

Cherry, Kendra. “What is Empathy? How it Helps Strengthen our Relationships.” Article in: *Very Well Mind (*[*https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-empathy-2795562#:~:text=Empathy%20is%20the%20ability%20to,feeling%20what%20they%20are%20feeling*](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-empathy-2795562#:~:text=Empathy%20is%20the%20ability%20to,feeling%20what%20they%20are%20feeling)*).* Retrieved: 10/1/202).

Davis, Don. *Building Bridges, Scaling Walls: Learning the Art of Edifying Dialogue*. Wichita, KS: TUMI Press, 2018.

Dewey, John. *Experience & Education*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1938.

Facione, Peter A. “Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction.” *The Delphi Report, Executive Summary:* The California Academic Press, 1990.

Fosnot, C. T. *Constructivism: A Psychological Theory of Learning.* In C. T. Fosnot (Ed.), *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.

Guzmán, Mónica. *I Never Thought of it That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*, BenBella Books, Audible, 2022.

Harris, K. R., & Graham, S. “Constructivism: Principles, paradigms, and integration.” *The Journal of Special Education,* 28(3), 1994, pp. 233-247.

Inazu, John. *Learning to Disagree*: The Surprising Path to Navigating Differences with Empathy

and Respect. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary online. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Myers, David G. & Twenge, Jean M. *Social Psychology*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017.

McKnight, Scot. *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How you Read the Bible.* Grand Rapids, MI:

Zondervan, 2008.

Shaw, Ian with Lawson, Kevin E. *Handbook for Supervisors of Doctoral Students in Evangelical Theological Institutions*. Langham Global Library, 2015.

Yu Wu, Shih, Patrick C., & Carroll, John M. “Design for Supporting Dialectical Constructivist Learning Activitie*s.” Educational Technology Research and Development,* vol. 64, 2016, pp. 137-156.

**Appendix I**

**“Taking Both Sides” Class Presentation**

**Syllabus Assignment Description**

There are many topics related to culture that are controversial, misunderstood, and misconstrued. As we will discuss in class, many of these issues have 2 distinct, and extreme sides. Each student will do independent research on an issue that clearly has 2 sides, and you will present the topic to the class. In your presentation, the student will present **both sides** of the issue, and present their findings on each side as if they support each side. The goal of the assignment is to examine two sides of a particular issue, pointing out how difficult it can be to draw a definitive conclusion regarding certain complicated and/or paradoxical topics.

Grading will be based on the thoroughness of your preparation, the depth of your analysis, your ability to present both sides, the clarity of your arguments, and the professionalism of your communication. The purpose of this assignment is to help you to learn how to think critically about issues. The student may close the presentation with a drawn conclusion, **or** may conclude that you are not sure, based on the research. **All you need to turn in is your notes you used to put together your presentation, and the actual PowerPoint presentation,** **including** **references (and/or links) for the sources you used.** **Presentations will be 15-20 minutes long, with an opportunity for questions.** A separate handout will be provided to explain this assignment in detail, with suggestions on topics.

**Your Paper and slides will be due on the day you present.**

**Appendix II**

**“Taking Both Sides” Class Presentation (**200 points)

**Full Assignment Explanation**

Each student will do independent research on an issue that clearly has 2 sides, and you will present the topic to the class. In your presentation, the student will present **both sides** of the issue, and present their findings on each side as if they support each side. The goal of the assignment is to examine two sides of a particular issue, pointing out how difficult it can be to draw a definitive conclusion regarding certain complicated and/or paradoxical topics. Sample topics are listed below. For this assignment you can “start” with a basic search, but make sure the information/articles you use are from reputable sources.

Students should bring documentation of their research on both sides to class. Websites are acceptable, as long as they are credible sources. (Avoid the “wacky, fringe” views). I know this is subjective, but do your best to “vet” the credibility of the sources you use (especially if you use websites). **Presentations should be 15- 20 minutes long, with a time for questions.**

Grading will be based on the **t*horoughness of your preparation, the depth of your******analysis, the clarity of your arguments, professionalism of your communication, and integration of Scripture (A Christian worldview).* Remember the purpose of this presentation is to help you to think critically.**

After presenting both sides, you can indicate the side you lean towards, **or** indicate where you might be on the continuum. It is legitimate to say: “I have no idea,” or “even after my research, I am still not sure” in your conclusion.

**All you need to turn in is your notes you used to put together your presentation, and the actual PowerPoint presentation,** **including** **references (and/or links) for the sources you used.**

**Your Paper and slides will be due on the day you present.**

**Note: Your presence on days you are not presenting are equally as important as the day you are presenting.**

Below are some potential topics you can choose from, but you are not limited to these. In some instances, I have given some explanations (expanded versions) of the title to clarify the two. But you can develop the topic the way you see fit. Note that some of these are “paradoxes,” so both sides can be true, and some are 2 extremes of a particular issue.

**Appendix III**

**Possible Topics**

**Topics related to church/ministry, and theological/doctrinal issues:**

* 1. Traditional vs. Contemporary means of ministry
	2. Women in ministry
	3. Preservation of the saints -- You can/cannot lose your salvation
	4. Predestination
	5. Baptism/infant baptism
	6. Expositional preaching vs. topical preaching as a standard for the church

**The following fall in the category of contemporary social issues, related to the fields of Christian ministry, sociology, psychology, etc.**

* 1. **The Church should be involved in social justice issues as an integral part of what they do, vs. Church should not be involved in social justice causes – it is distraction to the gospel.** Many people are increasingly more concerned about social justice issues, but there are those who believe it is not the concern of the church, or related to the gospel. Those issues would include: poverty, welfare, sex trafficking, immigration, environmentalism, etc. You could take any of those issues, and state the pros and cons of each side. You are answering the question: should the church be involved?
	2. **Nature vs. Nurture** – are we who we are more based on nature (genetics/DNA), or from nurture (our environment, peers, socialization and parental influences)? Assuming it is both, prepare your arguments on how and why they are both significant factors in who we are.
	3. **Autism and Vaccinations** – Is there a correlation/causation?
	4. **Work Mandates vs. Welfare –** One side says the government shouldrequire people to work, and not have a welfare program where people can collect a paycheck without pursuing employment. The other side says it is the responsibility of government to provide a financial “safety net” for people who cannot work (for a variety of reasons).
	5. **Systemic Racism.** There is systemic racism in America vs. there are individual racists in America, but the system is not set up to favor one group of people over another.
	6. **Pro war (or Just War Theory) vs. Pacifism** – True “pacifists” believe we should not go to war for anything, and some believe war is necessary at times.
	7. **Holistic/alternative medicine vs. Conventional medicine** – some people believe that doctors (in general) are just “pedaling pills,” and they just want to prescribe drugs for everything. We should just eat right and exercise, and we would not need conventional medicine. Others see that the medical profession is what is keeping us alive longer.
	8. **Diagnosis of psychological disorders --** Clinical depression, anxiety and ADHD are psychological disorders made popular in our culture and people are heavily medicated vs. these disorders are not seen in other countries, and are “made up” by the establishment.
	9. **Freedom of speech vs. limiting the use speech** (e.g. offensive speech). Include the use of Social Media.
	10. **Immigration** – Develop at least 2 sides of the argument (there are multiple sides). Example: Should America have a “merit-based” immigration policy vs. “chain migration,” referred to as: “family reunification/sponsorship.”
	11. **The right to be secure** … against unreasonable searches and seizures vs. the need to safe-guard people and infringe on their privacy in light of 9/11. Should we be so committed to the First Amendment that we give up our rights, or should we be willing to give up some of those rights in order to be safe from potential terrorists? What about when the government goes too far? Can we trust them? Or does safety come first, and freedom come second?
	12. **Gun control vs. gun rights** (the right to bear arms). Should the government have more regulation over guns, or does that infringe on the 2nd Amendment?
	13. **Natural remedies vs. conventional medicine** for illnesses
	14. **Global warming** (climate change) – Be sure to include the use of those terms
		1. Global warming is real vs. it is not real – what we are experiencing is cyclical
		2. Global Warming is man-made Vs. It not made-made – what we are experiencing is real, it’s just not “caused” by human beings (humans have a minimal role)
	15. **Human population growth** – is the earth “overpopulated,” or do we actually “need” more people to sustain life?
	16. **“Malpractice Award Caps”** – Is America too “litigious” of a society, or do people deserve to be compensated for their suffering (no matter the limit)?
	17. **Mandatory health insurance** – If you don’t have people paying into the system, the system cannot support itself vs. you cannot force people to pay for a service they do not use (like young people)
	18. **Physician assisted suicide** – Should terminally ill people in incredible pain, be allowed to have a doctor end their life?
	19. **Drug testing in animals/ animal rights**
	20. **Taxing junk food** -- to encourage people to eat healthier, because people are dying, vs. you can’t limit peoples’ freedoms, especially when it comes to food and drink.
	21. **Environment and Cancer** – Environmental regulations are necessary because humans are producing too many chemicals that are causing cancer, vs. the impact on the environment and cancer is minimal. Regulations are oppressive and causes taxes to go up. Let the free market work.
	22. **Addiction as a mental illness**. Addiction is a mental disorder and should be treated that way, not as people are responsible for their choices, leave them alone).
	23. **The Research and/or usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI)**
	24. **Stem Cell Research / Therapy**
	25. **Genetic Testing of Embryos** (is that destroying a potential life)?
	26. **In Vitro Fertilization (IVF).** Should Christians be for/against it?

1. If you are not familiar with the folk tale about the six blind men and an elephant, you can read the story here: <https://www.peacecorps.gov/educators-and-students/educators/resources/blind-men-and-elephant/story-blind-men-and-elephant/> (retrieved 10//11/2024) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This idea of a “balanced perspective” and why I was apprehensive to call it that, is explained later on pages 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We will look closer at each of these later. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interesting to note, that I emailed Rev. Steve Brown some 40 years later, to let him know how much that sermon (and quote) impacted and shaped my own thinking, and how I have used it in class for decades. His reply to me was of profound gratitude and appreciation. What a blessing! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These are in parentheses because of my belief that there is no such a thing as “an alternative *truth*,” or a “different *truth.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I know this can be subjective, but I do tell the students that when in doubt, ask me, rather than risking taking on a subject that I did not see as having a clear “other side.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)