Three Ways to Improve Our **Disagreements**

Resolving subjective differences can be challenging, but being able to think deeply about complex issues and communicate why we think a certain way is an important skill for students to develop. **Steven Campbell-Harris** shares some approaches to move beyond intuitive responses to difficult questions.

'New York is the capital of America.' I was on my way to school when I heard a boy arguing up ahead. He turned to the rest of the group and intoned with authority. I edged closer. Most of the others were in agreement, chiming in with 'yes, of course, it's New York.' One boy, however, insisted that they were wrong. 'Washington DC is the capital', he said. I listened for a while before intervening. 'Actually, Washington DC is the capital city of America.' At that moment, the debate was over. An authority figure had settled it. Nothing left to discuss. They walked on momentarily in silence.

This encounter is so unusual because we rarely see heated disagreements settled so easily in the adult world. With purely objective disagreements about matters of fact, we can often resolve the dispute by consulting an authority or looking up the answer on a search engine. By contrast, purely subjective disagreements on questions like 'is broccoli tasty?' or 'is red a nicer colour than blue?' can't be so easily resolved. We recognise that there are no standards to appeal to. It is just a matter of personal preference.

However, many of our disagreements don't fit easily into either category. The question 'Is Theresa May a good Prime

Minister?' seems not to be purely subjective. We can evaluate her policies and decisions and assess whether the impact has been positive or negative. We can give reasons one way or the other beyond just saying 'I like her' or 'I don't'. However, it isn't entirely objective either. Even if we know exactly what the PM has done we still need to make value judgments about whether that impact has been desirable or not. These value judgments differ for different people.

The disagreements in the messy middle tend to generate the most passion but also, unfortunately, the most misunderstanding and confusion. Other examples might be:

Does social media make the world a better place?

Who is the better footballer: Messi or Ronaldo?

Did the UK make the right decision to leave the EU?

The main problem with these disagreements, I believe, is that they lull us into complacency—we think we *know* how to respond and we think we know what we are talking about. Here are three main ways that we can prepare children to deal with them.

Be wary of snap judgements

The American psychologist Jonathan Haidt conducted a number of studies on people making moral judgments. In one case, he asked the participants to read the following:

A family's dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They had heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog's body and cooked it and ate it for dinner. Nobody saw them do this.

After reading this, the participant was asked: did the family do something morally wrong?

In study after study, he found that people made quick judgments about the action's immorality, and only subsequently went in search of reasons. If they were asked to justify their claim, they would often appeal to inconsistent reasons or events outside the story. Some would say: 'someone may have seen them do it, and they would be offended. So they did something wrong.' If the experimenter lightly countered that no one saw them do this, and they made sure no one did, then they would protest: 'they still did something wrong because the dog might have been sick and they might have got ill from it.' If the experimenter said that the family checked that the meat was healthy and no one got sick, the participant would often throw up their hands and say: 'Uhhh…well… Look, I know it's wrong! I just don't know why.'

In the 17th century, the English philosopher John Locke distinguished between 'intuition' and 'demonstration'. When we intuit something, we *see* it clearly and immediately. For example, we intuit that a square cannot be a triangle because a four-sided shape cannot have three sides (by definition). On the other hand, 'demonstration' is required when we need to go through a series of conscious steps to reach a conclusion. Unlike the calculation '5 x 2' (which is intuitive), the calculation 9 divided by 13 will require us to follow a series of steps. We can't immediately 'see' the answer.

Problems arise when we intuit things without feeling the need to demonstrate their validity as well. Some people share a pre-reflective intuition that 'fairness' means 'everyone getting the *same*'. Yet this often breaks down when it is put to the test in different cases, where it comes into conflict with other intuitions, like 'everyone should get what they *deserve*'. When intuitions clash, simply restating the intuitions cannot solve the disagreement. We need to move to a more reflective, deliberate kind of thinking.

In order to encourage students to move from intuitions to deeper thinking we could do the following:

1. Ask a controversial question that provokes several intuitive responses. For examples, 'Should doctors be paid more than footballers?'

2. After the students have had a quick discussion in pairs, gather some responses on the board in a whole class discussion. They may say: 'their work is more valuable so they should be paid more', 'it depends on their motivation' or 'footballers have worked hard to get where they are so they deserve the huge salaries'.

3. As you gather different responses, identify conditions that the students have given for being paid well. For example, 'how much you get paid should depend on how *valuable* the work is' or 'your *motivation* for doing the work' (e.g. fame, self-interest, compassion) or 'how *hard* you work' etc.

4. Once you have gathered these principles, you can then ask them: which of these conditions are the most important and which aren't that important? For example, should 'the value of the work' more important than 'how hard you work' in determining your pay? To make this question more tangible, you could write out the values on whiteboards/A4 sheets and move them up in a scale from 'most' to 'least' important in the middle of the room. This encourages students to move beyond the force of the intuition itself to reasons why a particular value should trump others.

Move from the concrete to the abstract and back again

A few years ago, a film came out that won rave reviews, had a decent showing at the Box Office, and was even presented with the Best Picture Oscar before they realised that they made a mistake: La La Land. Suppose two people are discussing the question:
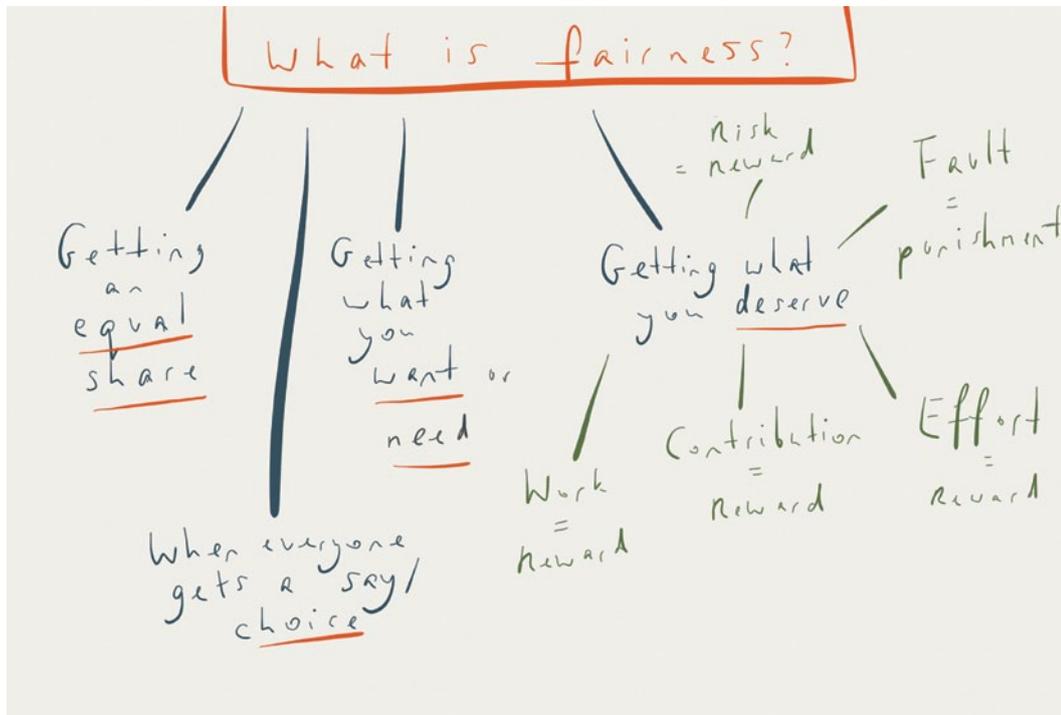
Is La La Land a masterpiece?

If they disagree, there is a big temptation to restrict their discussion to a heartfelt defence or criticism of the film itself. Doing so will lead them to fall into a trap: the tyranny of apparent transparency. The concept of a 'masterpiece' may evoke something different to these two people. One might view a 'masterpiece' as a film that wins almost universal critical acclaim, while the other may think that a masterpiece must be innovative in some way, changing film history or inventing a new style. In this instance, the disagreement at the level of the concrete case is just a proxy war for a more abstract disagreement:

What makes a film a masterpiece?

One of the paradoxical facts about disagreements is that you often get closer to the truth the more you abstract from the individual case. Disagreements are clarified when we move from the individual case to the abstract and then back again. The co-founder of the Philosophy Foundation, Pete Worley, has called this the 'Hokey Kokey method' because you go in to the concrete case, out to the abstract, and in and out again. In this case, you would start with the question 'Is *La La Land* a masterpiece?' and generate responses. Then you would move to the more abstract question 'What makes a film a masterpiece?' Finally you would return to the original question to see if some of those responses help us to answer it.

In addition to the Hokey Kokey method, you can encourage students to *be precise about vagueness* or *clear about what is unclear*. We can distinguish between a word whose meaning is 'transparent' and one that is 'opaque'. The meaning of a 'pineapple' is transparent. We are all clear about what it refers to. 'Is this a pineapple?' is unlikely to kick start a debate. The meaning of words like 'art' or 'fairness' is more opaque.
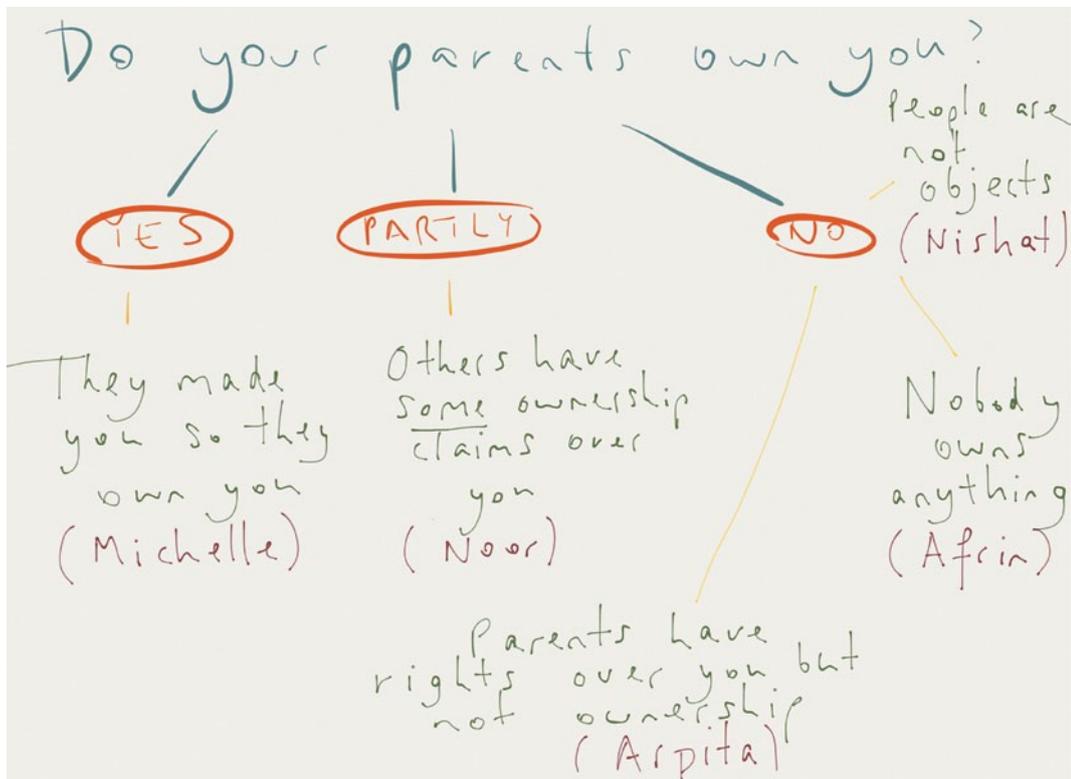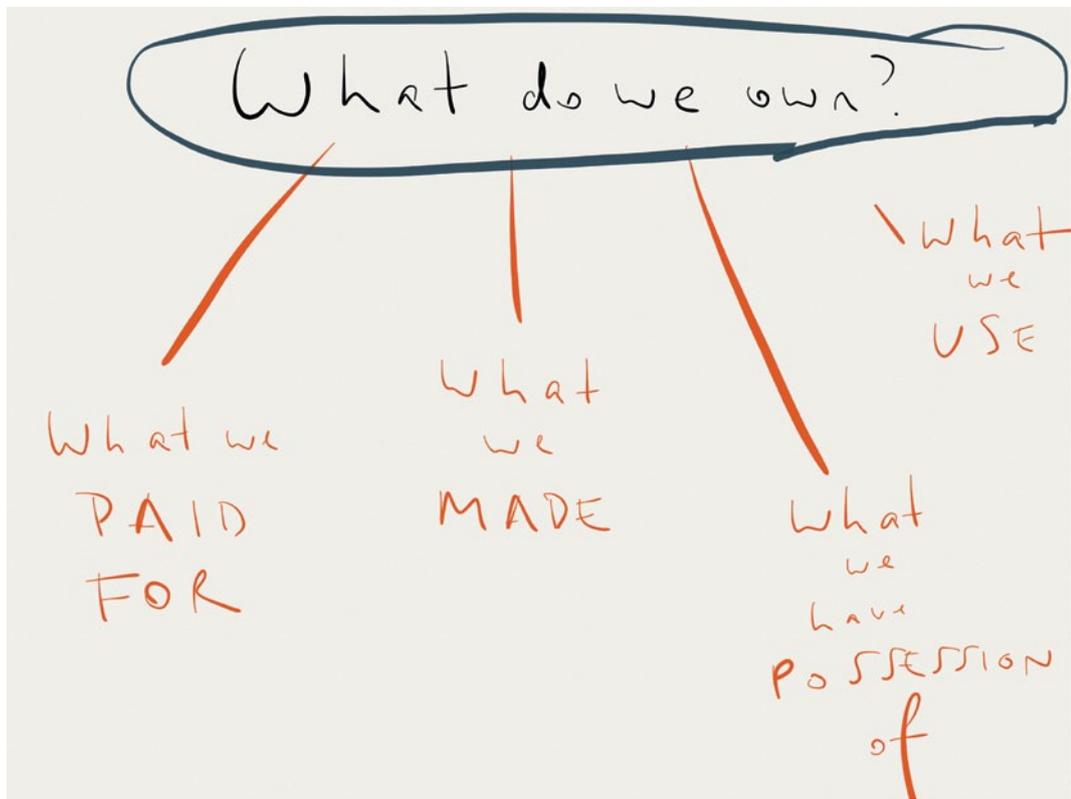
We cannot be sure that everyone interprets the meaning in the same way. 'Is this art?' is a question that can provoke controversy.

After teaching this distinction, during a class discussion you might do the following:

1. Ask the class if the meanings of key words in the discussion are transparent or opaque.

2. If they agree that the meaning is transparent, we can quickly move on.

3. If they agree that the meaning is opaque, you can then use the Hokey Kokey method to go back and forth between the concrete case (e.g. Is this art/fair?) and the abstract question 'What is X?' (E.g. what is art/fairness?)

4. If they disagree about whether they are transparent or opaque, this can itself become a subject of debate. You can ask: what reasons do you think it is one or the other? What makes the meaning of a word clear or unclear?

What do we own?

What we PAID FOR

What we MADE

What we have POSSESSION of

What we USE

Do your parents own you?

YES

PARTLY

NO

People are not objects (Nishat)

They made you so they own you (Michelle)

Others have some ownership claims over you (Noor)

Nobody owns anything (Afrin)

Parents have rights over you but not ownership (Arpita)

Divide up disagreements

At the moment the future of nuclear weapons is in the news because of recent aggression from North Korea. A question that often gets discussed in nuclear-armed nations is:

Should we keep our nuclear weapons?

This issue provokes heated responses. As a result, two different kinds of disagreement are often hastily elided. They can be separated as follows:
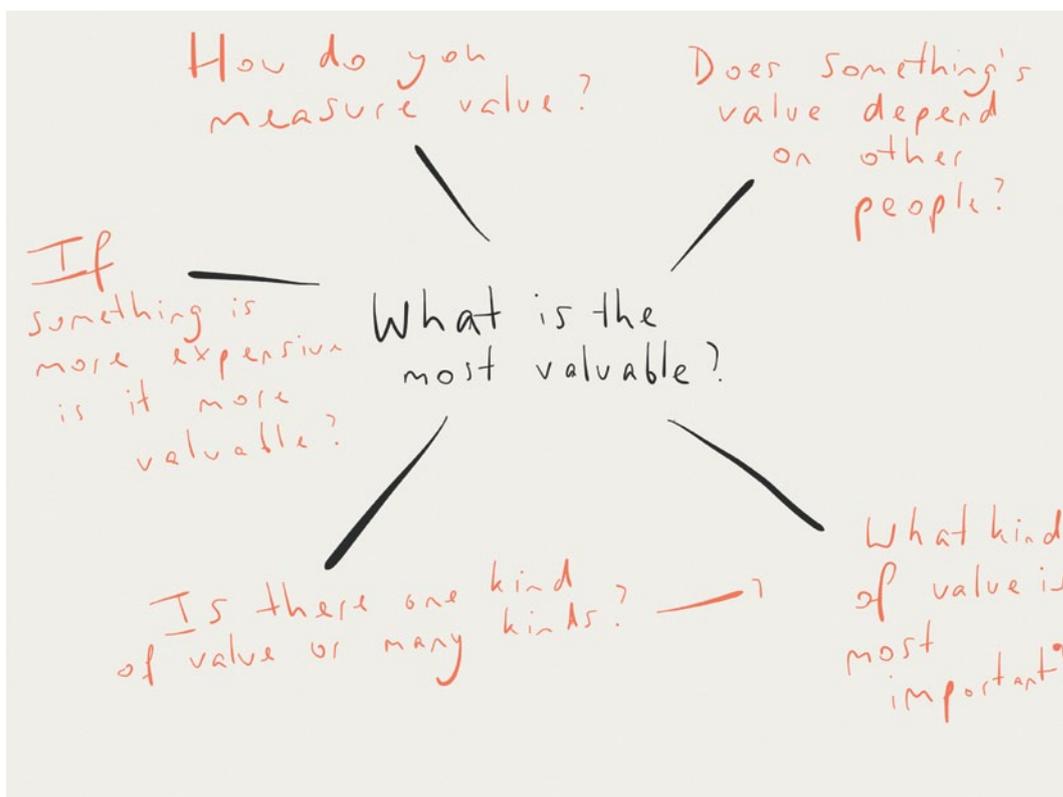
We have a question of value: *what kind of world do we want?*

We also have a question about how the world works: *will keeping nuclear weapons help us achieve the world we want, or not?*

We might also add a further question about justification that underlies these two: *what can we know/justifiably believe about the likely consequences of keeping nuclear weapons?*

If we don't separate these different kinds of disagreement, we may disagree but not be so clear on what we are disagreeing about. We might think that our opponent is committed to different values, or a different view of how the world works, when there may be hidden consensus on one of these questions. Unfortunately, the absence of clarity will lead to many conversational cul-de-sacs. Better instead to divide up disagreements so we can see *where* and *why* we disagree. This leads to greater understanding on both sides and generates more productive questions for inquiry.

How do you measure value?

Does something's value depend on other people?

If something is more expensive is it more valuable?

What is the most valuable?

Is there one kind of value or many kinds?

What kind of value is most important?

The following exercise can help with this process.

1. Pick a controversial question for debate in the class. For example, 'What rights, if any, do animals have?'

2. After an initial few minutes discussing this question, ask the group 'Are there any other questions we should ask that would help us answer this question?' Collect any questions on the board in a spider diagram with the central question in the middle.

3. After collecting questions, ask the group to divide the questions up into different kinds. For example, questions about how the world is (reality), what people should do (value), what we can reasonably believe/know (justification), and what words mean (meaning). Here are some examples of questions of these kinds: 'Do 'rights' exist?' (Reality), 'Are rights needed to treat animals fairly, or are they unnecessary?' (Value), 'Is there any evidence that animals have conscious experiences like us?' (Justification), 'What do we mean by 'animals' and does it include humans?' (Meaning).

4. While labelling these questions, invite them to try and answer some of them alongside the central question. Some will be more controversial than others and so will serve as a focus for further debate.

5. If a disagreement ensues in the discussion, you can ask them if they think their disagreement is primarily about reality, value, justification or meaning. In many cases, there will be more than one aspect, but focusing on these different elements can help students to see where the key points of contention are and where there may be room for consensus.

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