

QED52U Character and Citizenship Education in the Singapore Context Final Essay

Essay Prompt:

Responding to the then Member of Parliament Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar in Parliament on 4 March 2020, the then Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung commented that:

Dr Intan said that values are more often caught than taught. I think both are needed. Families play a big part in instilling them in the young at home. But schools can then work with parents and make a big difference too.

- *How would you try to ensure that your students learn and demonstrate the CCE core values and social-emotional competencies?*
- *What major challenges might you face as you try do so?*
- *What possible strategies might you try in order to respond to these challenges?*

Your final essay (with appropriate references) should be between 1450 and 1550 words in length (excluding references).

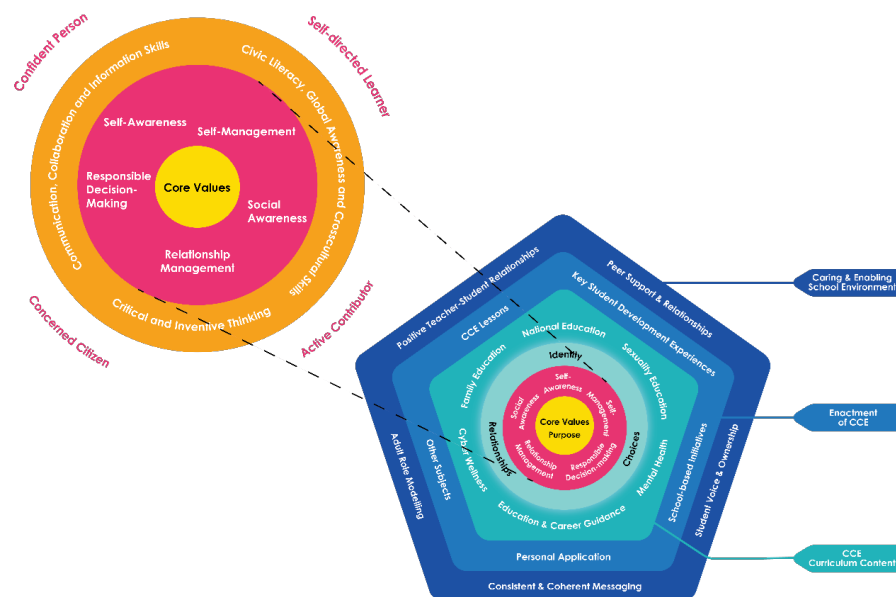
Introduction

The CCE syllabus 2021 focuses on the deep learning of character and citizenship that students require to thrive as members of society. The syllabus accommodates both explicit instruction (being “taught” values) and the intentional creation of participatory, interactive learning opportunities (Elias et al., 2007) for values to be “caught”. Hence, schools aim to “provide rich learning platforms and opportunities” for students to come to an “understand[ing of] who they are and who they can become” (SDCD, 2020a, p. 4). This contrasts approaches that focus heavily on explicit instruction on the morality of particular actions (Hinman, 2003) and those overtly devoted to nation-building (Sim, 2012). Instead, CCE now adopts a “values-driven” perspective in line with the fourth phase of Singapore’s education system, where values “are at the core of one’s character”, with shared values including “respect, responsibility, resilience, integrity, care, and harmony” (SDCD, 2020a, p. 9).

I would ensure that my students learn and demonstrate the CCE key competencies by engaging them using real-world, authentic conflicts. This approach entails the key challenge of ambiguity, which I frame on two levels: the first is the ambiguity that arises from putting one's ideal values into action. Second, ambiguity arises from Singapore's societal conflicts and tensions – some of which remain intractable. I would address these challenges through the CCE pedagogical approaches of values clarification and consideration. These facilitate student learning of key CCE Social and Emotional Learning Competencies and 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Relationship between 21CC Framework and CCE 2021 (SDCD, 2020a, p. 6)



Key strategy: authentic scenarios and needs

My overarching approach to CCE lessons is to incorporate authentic scenarios and material. Matthew Davidson emphasises the challenge of both *knowing* and *doing* good, a recurrent debate within character education (Nucci, 2017; Lickona and

Davidson, 2005). Hence, Davidson argues that “character might best be defined as “values in action”” (2005, p. 224). In order to *do* good, educators must create “authentic learning opportunities” (SDCD, 2020a, p. 16) for students to exercise moral action. As then-Minister for Education Ong Ye Kung stated, MOE endeavours to “engage secondary school students more actively on contemporary issues ... using more authentic scenarios, immersive modalities, ... giving students' more voice and agency” (2020). While part of such engagement is found in the intentional design of Key Student Development Experiences, such as “CCAs, camps, learning journeys, and Values-in-Action [Programmes]” (Ong, 2020), authentic sources should also form the basis for CCE lesson materials. Nonetheless, this commitment to authenticity and relevance presents several challenges and opportunities for CCE educators.

Challenges

The first challenge is the ambiguity that arises from conflicting values within the authentic, complex and everyday tensions of social life. Here, I note that character volatility is a challenge widely noted in the literature (Davidson, 2005; SDCD, 2020a). Nonetheless, beyond character volatility, the values we hold can and often do come into conflict with one another. For instance, under the CCE theme of “Building Connections”, students are taught to “empathise and relate with others who are different from themselves” within “broader social, cultural, national and global” contexts (SDCD, 2020b, p. 10). Yet, one recent global development which pressures this ideal of empathy and relationality would be the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The disturbing photographs of Afghan people desperately clinging onto departing planes would certainly inspire an affective response from students. Yet, it would be

remiss for educators to ignore Singapore's stance of rejecting refugee seekers (Osada, 2015). This highlights a tension between "Serving others" and "National Identity": two learning outcomes under the theme of "Building Connections" (SDCD, 2020b, p. 54). While few would argue that Singapore should indefinitely support refugees, this scenario reminds us that values are often in competition within Singapore's realities. Hence, teachers must endeavour to respect their students' complexity, rather than seek to simplify their actions and intentions. Teachers also need to guide students to slow down and actively reflect on their experiences and other "teachable moments".

The second challenge is the ambiguity that arises within Singapore's larger social context, where our shared values are constantly being clarified. There is an increasing call to relook our values-in-action in Singapore today (Han, 2021), with recent debates about equality, privilege, race, class and gender inviting us to consider how our values are actualised within Singapore. For instance, contemporary discussions on sexuality in Singaporean society may pressure the CCE shared value of harmony. On one hand, the CCE syllabus retains and reflects mainstream heterosexual conceptions of the nuclear family unit: where students must learn to "develop healthy and rewarding relationships including those with members of the opposite sex." (SDCD, 2020a, p. 12) Yet, there is a growing body of literature about the discrimination that individuals with non-normative genders and sexualities face in everyday life (Gan, 2019). These conversations will necessarily be uncomfortable and divisive for students and teachers (Ang, 2021), since such negotiations go against the grain of prevailing social sentiment.

I illustrate this dilemma with a real-life example from my contract teaching experience at a Catholic school. During a book sharing segment of an English class,

a student shared Young Adult books that highlighted the growing up experiences of LGBTQ individuals. As a teacher, I guided students to identify the competing values at stake: the values of MOE and the Catholic institution vis-à-vis the social movements that advocate for LGBTQ recognition. This student was admirably demonstrating “Appreciating Diversity” and demonstrating “Civic Consciousness” and “Empathy” (SDCD, 2020b, p. 53). Yet, her choice of topic necessarily challenged the prevailing moral sentiment, which would be seen by some educators as disruptive to our “core value” of “harmony”.

Strategies

As a CCE educator, my first strategy is to actively build respectful discussion opportunities. This enables students to rationalise the positions they adopt. I would use facilitation techniques to build a sustained interchange of views. As Larry Nucci notes, moral “[d]ecision-making in such multifaceted contexts may draw on concepts from more than one domain requiring cross-domain coordination” (2017, p. 7). Hence, students require space and time within the classroom to articulate and justify their complex views. Teachers must “[a]void short-circuiting the process by zooming in on the “correct answer”” (SDCD, 2020b, p. 32) and should deliberately invite perspectives that differ from their own to stimulate discussion. In line with the CCE pedagogical approach of values clarification, educators should enable their students to rationalise and learn values for themselves. I would use facilitation strategies such as *Circle of Viewpoints*, *Deciding Line*, *Debate* and *Role-Play* to facilitate respectful discussion and disagreement, to work through “moral differences [which] cannot simply be left unresolved” (Hinman, 2003, p. 32).

My second strategy is to actively encourage students to encounter the Other (Bernasconi, 2005), which fosters dialogue and avoids stereotyping, by consciously introducing marginalised perspectives and asking students to (reasonably) question dominant narratives. As Hinman argues, “[d]isagreement and difference are standard features of the moral landscape and can be sources of moral strength” (2003, p. 54). Ambiguity indeed presents an opportunity for students to clarify their own values, and it is vital for teachers to guide students in working through multiple perspectives and to find common ground across those perspectives.

In this vein, a key CCE pedagogical approach in grappling with broader societal shifts is the consideration approach (SDCD, 2020a, p. 24). It guides students to “adopt the perspectives of others, understand their thoughts and feelings, and develop a balanced view” (SDCD, 2020a, p. 24). Such an empathetic response requires both the affective hospitality of being open to the other as well as the cognitive aspect (Gibbs, 2013). With respect to the latter, teachers can socialise students by guiding them to engage in perspective taking (Gibbs, 2013), considering why particular people adopt specific perspectives. I would endeavour to guide students towards an advanced stage of cognitive empathy where they can appreciate “the authentic inner experience, subtler goals, and complex life situations of another individual or group” (Gibbs, 2013, p. 109).

For example, students could engage with the topic of how racial “privilege” and Critical Race Theory can be useful in Singapore’s context (Low, 2021). I personally encountered such critical pedagogy during my university studies in the United Kingdom. There, discussions on racial privilege were commonplace, with White students calling for the decolonisation of the Literature syllabus (Kennedy, 2017),

which I came to understand as a means of cultural reparation for the legacies of British colonialism. However, students should also understand how the notion of privilege seems accusatory in Singapore (Lee, 2021). I would employ facilitation strategies such as *True for Who*, *Hot Seating* and *Role Playing* to develop students' ability to appreciate perspectives that are sometimes vastly different from their own.

Conclusion

Ultimately, students need to develop what Nucci calls a “system that enables the person to engage the social world as a moral agent [and function] coactively within the social context” (2017, p. 12). My training as a Literature educator also invites me to borrow the words of John Donne in recognising that no man is an island. By developing students' ability to “justify their actions to others, on grounds that they could not reasonably reject” (Scanlon, 1998, p. 154), they can then make coherent decisions across a wide range of scenarios, and contribute to collective progress on society's intractable conflicts.

(1538 words)

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