

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING
IN LANGUAGE ARTS

THE GREAT DEBATES

A Problem about How Television Changed
the Landscape of the 1960 Presidential Election

Teacher Manual

Dana L. Plowden

Sara E. Townsend

with contributions from Shelagh A. Gallagher

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Problem Narrative:

The Storyline for *The Great Debates*

Ideally, the direction of a Problem-Based Learning unit is decided through the questions students ask. To some extent, this is made manageable by the structure of the opening scenario presented during Problem Engagement. The opening scenario is carefully designed to point students in the direction of some predictable questions. For example, it would be hard to avoid asking why television was forcing campaign strategies to evolve or why a candidate's image was so important. The narrative below and the lesson plans in this unit respond to these more predictable questions and address other desirable learning outcomes. They also provide a helpful guide for teachers new to PBL.

Experienced PBL teachers are encouraged to use this unit as a framework, selecting and sequencing lessons that fit the students' questions (and, as above, many should fit) and adding new lessons to address other questions.

Problem Engagement

The students are in the stakeholder role of media consultants to Vice President Richard Nixon's *ad hoc* advertising group, Campaign Associates, for the 1960 presidential election. Nixon is running against John F. Kennedy from Massachusetts. This election is considered the first of its kind because the candidates have participated in the first-ever televised debates. Students enter the story after the fourth debate has taken place. Nixon's poll numbers have dropped, and his campaign team is in the final push before Election Day. Students are tasked with devising a strategy to help reshape Nixon's image in the media so that he will gain votes and triumph over Kennedy for the presidency.

Questions Students Should Ask

- Who are we, and what is our role?
- What do media consultants do?
- What is a media image, and why is it important?
- What is Nixon's current image in the media?
- What is Kennedy's current image in the media?
- Why are Nixon's poll numbers dropping?
- How have the televised debates impacted Nixon's poll numbers?
- What can we infer from this information?

Inquiry and Investigation

Students work together to analyze campaign materials from both camps. They break into groups to look at campaign materials for both Nixon and Kennedy, watch television commercials, and view the televised presidential debates. They use this information to compare and contrast Nixon's and Kennedy's campaign messaging in order to get a better understanding of what they are up against as they work to reshape the Vice President's public image.

Questions Students Should Ask

- What are the differences between the two candidates' strategies and messages in the media?
- What are the differences between Nixon's and Kennedy's debate performances on television?
- Has Nixon successfully embraced the use of television to convey his message?
- What seem to be the important issues of the day?
- What can we learn from these resources as we look toward reshaping Nixon's public image?
- Based on our analysis, what has Nixon done well? What could we help him do better?

The students receive a memo reminding them that foreign policy is the Vice President's forte. The memo asserts that convincing voters that Nixon is the best choice to combat communism may be the key to saving the election, and it directs them to take a hard look at the Quemoy-Matsu issue. Students view video clips of speeches made by Kennedy that criticize Nixon's foreign policy, take notes of Kennedy's speech delivery style, and develop a list of researchable questions about the Chinese islands of Quemoy and Matsu.

Questions Students Should Ask

- What is the Quemoy-Matsu issue?
- What is the Vice President's foreign policy stance regarding Quemoy-Matsu?
- What is Kennedy's foreign policy stance on the issue? How can we use it to make him look weak?
- What is Kennedy saying about Nixon's position?
- What is the difference between the two candidates' foreign policy experience?
- What lessons can we learn from Kennedy's delivery of his speeches?

Students use the questions they have generated to research the Quemoy-Matsu issue in order to gain a deeper understanding of the foreign policy issue.

Once the students have enough background knowledge, they participate in a lesson about messaging. They watch one of the first negative commercials ever used in a presidential campaign, which was released by the Kennedy camp. They read research on the effectiveness of negative messaging and participate in a four-corners discussion to begin deciding whether the message that they will recommend to reshape Nixon's image should be positive or negative.

Questions Students Should Ask

- What can we infer about political campaigns of the day based on the memo from Mr. Newton?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of negative messaging?
- How can we determine which type of messaging is most effective when trying to gain votes?
- What kinds of words can we use for positive messaging? What about negative messaging?

Problem Definition

Before the students begin crafting their recommendations, they take some time to synthesize everything they know in order to create a problem definition. They receive some additional information explaining that not only must they create a messaging strategy for improving Nixon's image, but now they must also create a persuasive presentation for the Vice President to convince him that the direction they have chosen will turn the campaign around.

Students are introduced to the idea that real-world problem solving consists of two components: the issue and the constraints. The issue is the problem they are trying to solve, and the constraints are the limitations or restrictions that they have to work within as they create a solution. The students work together to discuss the issue they are facing and brainstorm the constraints that are associated with it. In this case, they should realize that the issue they are facing is the best way to turn Nixon's image around using the foreign policy platform to gain voter support. The constraints associated with the problem include limited time and Nixon's insistence on approving the recommendations.

Questions Students Should Ask

- What are the issues we are facing?
- What are the constraints that we need to take into consideration?
- How will we decide which constraints are most important to consider?

Students then work together to create a problem definition. The final definition should take the form:

How can we (issue) in a way that takes into account (constraints)?

Examples:

How can we capitalize on Nixon's foreign policy experience to convince voters that he is the best choice to keep America safe in a way that takes into account the things Kennedy is saying, our limited time, and knowing that we need to convince the Vice President to agree to our plan?

How can we create a foreign policy message that will convince voters that Nixon is the best candidate to combat communism in a way that takes into account the message that Kennedy is sending, our limited time, and the fact that we have to get the Vice President to agree to our plan?

Problem Resolution

Now that the students have defined the problem, they work together to decide what recommendations to make to Nixon for a television spot that will help him reshape his image and win the election. As part of this process, they must come to consensus on whether or not they think that the message should be positive or negative. Once they have decided on a specific set of recommendations, they work on a persuasive presentation to Nixon. At the end of this lesson, the students present their final products to the Vice President and his team.

Questions Students Should Ask

- What are the most important points to consider as we decide on our recommendations?
- Do we want to use positive or negative messaging?
- What emotions do we want to evoke from voters?
- What words, sounds, and visuals do we want to use to evoke those emotions?
- What language will we recommend using to convey our message in a convincing way?
- Who should star in the television spot? Nixon or someone else? No one?
- As we prepare our presentation, what can we say or do to convince Nixon to embrace our ideas?

Problem Debriefing

The students reflect on the evolution of campaigning since the introduction of television. They participate in a Socratic seminar to discuss a quote from Richard Nixon’s memoir as he reflected back on the 1960 election. During the course of the discussion, they debate a variety of questions related to the changing emphasis on image versus content in light of the more widespread use of television to engage voters. They also consider how important it is for a candidate to have charisma versus experience in modern-day campaigns. They then compare the impact of the “new medium” of television on the election of 1960 with the widespread use of social media in today’s elections.

Problem Engagement




Who Are We?

Goals:

- Introduce students to the problem.
- Help students identify important questions.
- Develop issues on the Learning Issues Board.
- Prioritize learning issues.

Grouping: Pairs for initial activity; whole group for discussion

Generalization: Change is necessary for growth.

 Materials	 Problem Log	 Teacher Reference
<p>Included in Unit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Memo #1 from Leonard Newton• Learning Issues Board• Reflective Moment <p>Additional Materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Optional: Kennedy commercial• Optional: Projector for a computer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning Issues Board• Reflective Moment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sample Learning Issues Board

Summary:

Students receive a memo that introduces them to the problem and to their role as stakeholders in it. In pairs, they analyze the information provided in the memo and discuss the questions they have about it. Together as a whole class, they identify the questions to answer first and create a plan of action for the next day.

Things to Do Before Class:

1. Prepare the classroom to look like a conference room in Nixon's campaign headquarters as much as possible.
2. Read through the information in Part II of this book, including the Content Background and the Problem Narrative, as well as the memo for this lesson. Consider what questions will be necessary to ask to get students thinking about the issue at hand.
3. Download, print, and make copies of the memo from Mr. Newton.

4. Prepare a blank Learning Issues Board for the class using a whiteboard or smartboard for whole-class discussion.
5. Optional: Prepare the “jingle” television commercial that Kennedy’s campaign put out so that the students can watch it as a class. The commercial is available at www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1960/jingle (1 min.)

Things to Do During Class:

1. The first step is to introduce the students to the problem, preferably by introducing the opening scenario immediately as one of the stakeholders. Begin class with a statement such as, “Okay, folks, I hope you all had a restful weekend because we have our work cut out for us. The latest polling numbers are out, and they’re not good. Mr. Newton sent over a correspondence this morning. Take a look at it, and get to work. We’re down to the wire here.” Then hand out the memo.

Optional: Depending on how comfortable you are in the role of metacognitive coach, you may want to play up this part. One idea is to storm into the classroom and say, for example, “Okay, this is what we’re up against. No wonder his numbers are up.” Then show the “jingle” commercial that Kennedy’s camp released. After the students have watched the commercial, pass out the memo.

2. Once the students have read the memo, have them choose a partner with whom to conduct a think-pair-share activity. Direct them to the Learning Issues Board in their Problem Logs to record questions or hunches that come to mind as they discuss what they know and what questions they have from the memo.
3. Bring the students back together, and have them share what they know and what they want to know more about after reading the memo. Help them sort out and record information and questions into the three categories on the class copy of the Learning Issues Board: What We Know, Learning Issues, and Plan of Action. As the students generate questions, ask them to discuss their hunches or the assumptions that they are trying to follow with those questions. Record their hunches on the top section of the Learning Issues Board.

Key Questions:

- *Who are we, and what is our role?*
- *What do media consultants do?*
- *What is a media image, and why is it important?*
- *What is Nixon’s current image in the media?*
- *What is Kennedy’s current image in the media?*
- *Why are Nixon’s poll numbers dropping?*
- *How have the televised debates impacted Nixon’s poll numbers?*
- *What can we infer from this information?*

4. After the students have finished listing their Learning Issues, ask them to identify the two or three questions that they need to answer first in order to make progress on the problem. As a class,

discuss the students' question rankings, and expand the list to four or five questions to help the students learn the skill of prioritization.

Key Questions:

- *Which of these questions do we need to answer first?*
- *How can we find answers? Who could we ask? What should we look at?*

5. Help the students develop a plan of action to find the answers to their prioritized questions.
6. Have the students complete the Reflective Moment in their Problem Logs at the end of class or as homework.

October 24, 1960

MEMORANDUM TO: Communications Team

FROM: Leonard Newton, Assistant Communications Director

SUBJECT: Vice President's Image

The latest numbers are in, and they show that we're down in the polls. So far, our strategy has been to focus on Vice President Nixon's vast experience in office and his insistence on campaigning in all 50 states. Clearly we need to reevaluate this approach.

We've also underestimated Senator Kennedy's camp. His message of change and his slogan "We Can Do Better" have resonated with more voters than we anticipated, and his image—especially on television—has captivated the masses.

As we move toward the final push in this election, we need a new message that will reignite voters' confidence in the Vice President as their next leader. We all know that we've taken a lot of hits lately. Nixon's performance in the September 26th televised debate didn't do us any favors. His sweaty, sickly appearance was no match for Senator Kennedy's youthful, glowing image. And I don't need to remind you of the unintentional damage that the President did to the Vice President's credibility.

It has become increasingly clear that, with the widespread use of television, image may be more important to voters than experience. As Nixon's media consultants, this is something to keep in mind as you think about the best way to bolster Nixon's numbers. With less than three weeks before Election Day, we're in the most critical phase of the campaign. There's no time to waste.

LEARNING ISSUES BOARD

Hunches:

What We Know	Learning Issues	Plan of Action

Reflective Moment: Thinking about Image

Write a brief response to one of the quotes below. Place an x by the quote you chose.

“Nobody counts the number of ads you run; they just remember the impression you make.”
– Bill Bernbach, advertising pioneer

“Individuals make impressions and judgments about people very quickly, very easily, and with very minimal information. And once those judgments are made, they tend to be very hard to undo. They’re quite sticky.”
– Dr. Vivian Zayas

A quality response: (1) addresses the quote, (2) stays on topic, (3) is plausible or reasonable, and (4) gives enough detail to make your ideas clear.

SAMPLE LEARNING ISSUES BOARD

Hunches: Nixon must not seem very likable on television.

What We Know	Learning Issues	Plan of Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are members of Vice President Nixon’s presidential campaign team as he runs against Senator Kennedy for president. • The campaign has been pushing Nixon’s experience in office as the reason to vote for him. • Kennedy’s message of change and his motto “We Can Do Better” are gaining voters’ attention, and we need to turn things around. • What we’ve been doing hasn’t been working, and we’re down in the polls. • We’re in the final push of the election, and we need a change. • We have to come up with a strategy to use the media to improve Nixon’s image, especially on television. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are our poll numbers down? • What happened in the September 26th debate? • How did the President damage Nixon’s credibility? • How do you turn someone’s image around in the media? • What strategies have we been using to get our message across? • What strategies has Kennedy been using? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the internet and print resources to conduct research into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The job of media consultant - The September 26th debate - Ways to create a public image - Kennedy’s strategy versus Nixon’s strategy to win over voters