

Conducting a Civil Conversation in the Classroom

OVERVIEW

Our pluralistic democracy is based on a set of common principles such as justice, equality, liberty. These general principles are often interpreted quite differently in specific situation by individuals. Controversial legal and policy issues, as they are discussed in the public arena, often lead to polarization, not understanding. This civil conversation activity offers an alternative. In this structured discussion method, under the guidance of a facilitator, participants are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

OBJECTIVES

By participating in civil conversation, students:

1. Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
2. Use close reading skills to analyze a text.
3. Present text-based claims.
4. Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.
5. Identify common ground among differing views.

DISCUSSION FORMAT

Time: Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with. Consider the length/difficult of the text(s) students will use and how experienced in student-directed discussion your students are in determining the time.

Small Groups: This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group students who will use the same text.

3. Assessment: Each student should fill in his/her own Civil Conversation Guide. Look for:
 - Q. 1-2: Basic understanding of text.
 - Q. 3-4: Text-based arguments.
 - Q. 5: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
 - Q. 6: Level of participation (should be “about the same as others”).
 - Q. 7: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
 - Q. 8: Specificity/text-based.

In addition, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

PREPARATION

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- Civil Conversation Guide - one per student.
- Article/Text – one per student.

PROCEDURE

A. Introduction.

Briefly overview the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the Overview above to help you.

B. Civil Conversation Guide.

Distribute a copy of the Civil Conversation Guide to each student. The Civil Conversation can be used with a news article or other readings you select. It works best for readings that present two or more perspectives on a subject. In this lesson, you will use “Immigration Enforcement Raids” (below). Each student should fill in his/her own guide.

C. Conducting the Activity.

Divide the class into groups of 3-4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will ensure the group stays on-task and finishes on time.

Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (Depending in the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)

Review the rules of a Civil Conversation and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the Guide to get started.

Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.

If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

D. Closure

After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:

- What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
- What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
- Conclude the debriefing by asking all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.

Civil Conversation Guide

RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Read the text closely.
2. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
3. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
4. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
5. Be respectful of what others are saying.
6. Refer to the text to support your ideas.
7. Focus on ideas, not personalities.

Reading (title): _____

Before the conversation:

- Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section. Pay attention to your first impression as to what the reading is about.
- Re-read the selection and underline the main points.
 - ○ Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
 - ? Write down any questions you have in the margin.
 - ! Draw an exclamation point next to points that surprised you and note what it was that surprised you.
 - ← Draw an arrow in the margin next to text that connects to something else you know outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.
 - ___ Underline or highlight important or interesting claims or supportive statements and label them issues regarding *identity, diversity, justice or action*.
- Next, briefly answer the following questions.

1. This selection is about:

2. The main points are:

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

3. In the reading, I agree with:

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4. In the reading, I disagree with:

5. What are two questions about this reading that you think need to be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence. Below are possible inquiry guides to prompt your scholars to participate in proactive discussion. Choose from these guides or create questions of your own.)

1. How did _____ affect change in the _____?
2. In what ways did _____ raise awareness _____?
3. What are some of the most important reasons why _____?
4. What evidence in the text proves that the author's position on _____ shifted from _____ to _____?
5. Why does the problem of _____ take priority over _____?
6. What would be a creative solution to resolving the _____?
7. What similar historical events connect to how _____ responds to _____?

(a) _____

(b) _____

Communication Guides:

Inquiry Guides	Responding	Sourcing	Clarifying
<p>*How did _____ affect change in _____?</p> <p>*What would be a creative solution to resolving _____?</p> <p>*What similar historical events connect to how _____ responds to _____?</p> <p>*Why does the problem of _____ take priority over _____?</p> <p>*What evidence in the text proves that the author's position shifted from _____ to _____?</p> <p>*What are the most important reasons why _____?</p> <p>*In what ways did _____ raise awareness?</p>	<p><u>Stating an opinion</u></p> <p>*I think/believe that....</p> <p>*In my opinion....</p> <p>*From my perspective...</p> <p>*From my point of view...</p> <p>*My point is...</p>	<p><u>Reasoning</u></p> <p>I think the reason why...</p> <p>The cause is...</p> <p>The rationale is...</p>	<p><u>Asking for clarification...</u></p> <p>*What do you mean by ...?</p> <p>*Will you explain that again?</p> <p>*I have a question about ...</p> <p>*I don't quite understand...</p>
	<p><u>Disagreeing</u></p> <p>*I don't quite agree...</p> <p>*I disagree (somewhat, completely)...</p> <p>*I see it differently...</p> <p>*I have a different point of view...</p>		
	<p><u>Paraphrasing</u></p> <p>*So what you are saying is that..</p> <p>*In others words, you think...</p> <p>*If I understand you correctly, your opinion is that</p>	<p><u>Evidence</u></p> <p>*The text demonstrates...</p> <p>*This text source says...</p> <p>*Page _____ states....</p> <p>*This evidence shows...</p> <p>*This passage displays...</p> <p>*According to....</p>	<p><u>Asking for a response</u></p> <p>*What do you think?</p> <p>*We haven't heard from you yet?</p> <p>*Do you agree</p> <p>*What are your thoughts?</p>
	<p><u>Agreeing</u></p> <p>*I agree with (person's name) that...</p> <p>*I share your point of view...</p> <p>*My perspective is similar to (person's name)...</p> <p>*My idea builds upon (person's name)</p>		

If your group needs help getting started:

- Everyone share something they agree with from the article, then something they disagree with.
- Choose someone's question to discuss from #5 above.

The next three questions should be answered *after* you hold your civil conversation.

6. Compared to others in my group, I spoke:

___less than others ___about the same amount as others ___more than others

7. Some of the ways I added to the discussion:

8. What did you learn about the topic from the civil conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)

9. What common ground did you find with other members of the group?

Discussion Web - Exit Ticket

