

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

- 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 “Syrian Refugee Crisis and U.S. Policy” (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.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed

Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

2. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
3. Speaking and Listening: Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas
4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Reading in History/Social Studies: Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text.
4. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Read the text as if it were written by someone you really respected.
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.

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.
- 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: _____

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 material in the text as evidence.)

(a) _____

(b) _____

Discussion Starters

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? _____

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

The Syrian Refugee Crisis and U.S. Policy



Syrian Kurdish refugees crossing into Turkey. (Flickr Commons/EC/ECHO)

The United States has often been a safe haven for the world's refugees. People fleeing from war, famine, or religious and political persecution have sought asylum, or protection, in the U.S. In the last several decades, refugees have fled here from Cuba and Haiti in Latin America, and from Vietnam and Cambodia in Asia. Civil war in Syria in the Middle East has caused a crisis for Syrian refugees and raised a significant debate about whether the U.S. should accept Syrian refugees.

Beginning in 2011, conflict in Syria became increasingly violent until civil war broke out in 2012 between forces supporting President Bashar Al-Assad and various groups seeking to overthrow him. The Assad government's use of chemical weapons and "barrel bombs" against civilians in rebel-held areas, as well as violent and brutal conflicts among competing rebel groups, drove almost 12 million people from their homes. (For reference, please see "[FAQ on the Syrian Civil War](#).")

In the midst of this conflict, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rose to power. ISIS is a radical and well-organized Islamist organization that has conquered territory in Iraq and Syria, further driving many Syrians from their homes. The stated purpose of ISIS is to become the highest authority in the Islamic world and to destroy all it considers the enemies of Islam. The group is infamous for mass murder of civilians, graphic videos of beheadings of captives, and the destruction of irreplaceable archaeological treasures. Thousands of radicalized fighters from around the world, including Europe and the United States, have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join

ISIS, some later returning to their homelands. In 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for downing a Russian airliner over Egypt, killing 234 people, and for a massacre of over 130 people in Paris, France, in November.

Due to the extreme conflict in Syria, an estimated four million refugees have fled the country. Most have settled in camps monitored by the United Nations in Jordan, Turkey, and neighboring Lebanon. They live in often harsh conditions, experiencing unemployment, malnourishment, and disease. They are dependent on aid, like food and medicine, from international relief organizations and the UN.

Over 700,000 of these refugees have taken a risky journey to nations in Europe seeking asylum there. Many have died in the journey, especially in unsafe boats on the open Mediterranean Sea. Germany alone approved well over 55,000 asylum applications from Syrian refugees by November 2015 (but has announced that it would “drastically reduce” the number of refugees it will accept). Sweden accepted 30,000. Others have settled in Bulgaria, Italy, and France.

In an offer of assistance, President Barack Obama proposed a policy in September 2015 to allow 10,000 Syrian refugees per year to gain asylum and settle in the U.S. Since 2011, the U.S. has taken in about 2,500. The current process to resettle refugees in the U.S. is complex, requiring the cooperation of the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services. These departments must coordinate efforts with the UN because U.S. agents interview and screen the asylum-seekers in over 70 locations worldwide, most often in UN refugee camps. The entire asylum application process for refugees takes from 18 months to two years to complete.

Opponents of Obama’s policy argue that allowing thousands of Syrian refugees into the U.S. will increase the chances of terrorism. They point out that incidents like 9/11 and the bloody attacks in Paris were committed by jihadists, or radicalized Muslims who want to make holy war in defense of Islam. They argue that an influx of mostly Syrian Muslim refugees will likely include ISIS-affiliated jihadists hidden among them. They cite the facts that foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria have returned to their homelands, and that one of the Paris attackers reportedly had infiltrated a group of Syrian refugees. Some opponents, including Republican presidential candidates, have proposed allowing Christian Syrians as refugees, and even Yazidis, a small religious minority in Syria, but not Muslims.

Without a strict vetting process to review refugee applications, opponents argue, the risk of even one jihadist terrorist is too great. As Yale professor Walter Russell Mead writes, “The Obama Administration’s extreme caution about engagement in Syria led it to insist on...a thorough process of vetting potential Syrian allies....” Mead continues, “The refugee vetting process won’t be nearly this thorough; it’s almost certain that the President’s program will result in settling people in the United States who could not be certified to fight for the United States in Syria.” Mead also argues that U.S. gun laws will allow “uncertified” refugees to get guns too easily.

Citing national security concerns, over 30 governors of U.S. states (30 Republicans and one Democrat) have declared that they will oppose any resettlement of Syrian refugees in their states. One of them, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, said “American humanitarian compassion could be exploited to expose Americans to...deadly danger.”

The House also passed a bill that would expand background checks on both Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The American SAFE Act would lengthen the time for screening refugees by requiring the FBI to conduct its own background checks. It would also require that three high-ranking officials personally approve each refugee. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) notes, “The

bill imposes no religious test.” Forty-seven Democrats joined 242 Republicans to pass the bill. President Obama has said he will veto the bill if it passes the Senate.

Proponents of President Obama’s policy argue that under the U.S. Constitution and laws, states cannot refuse settlement of refugees within their boundaries. They also argue that the current complex procedures for asylum-seekers are sufficient to screen out jihadists. The Departments of State and Homeland Security conduct repeated interviews and background checks of each refugee seeking asylum. All are fingerprinted. Only about one percent of asylum applicants actually receive asylum. The White House has also argued that the vast majority of potential refugees are women and children or older adults, not men of military age, which is the most common profile of an ISIS fighter.

Proponents also argue that stopping or suspending Syrian refugee immigration contradicts American values. They cite the long U.S. history of accepting refugees, and also U.S. religious diversity. “When I hear political leaders suggesting that there would be a religious test for [who’s admitted] from a war-torn country...” President Obama, “that’s shameful. That’s not American.” Obama has also argued that the American SAFE Act would virtually shut down the process for all Syrian and Iraqi refugees because no official would be willing to risk personally approving each refugee.

With the threat of terrorism by ISIS still a reality, Americans are faced with key questions about how to best handle the Syrian refugee crisis. What should U.S. policy be? Should the screening process for Syrian refugees be stronger, or is it strong enough now? Should there be more or fewer refugees than what the president has proposed? And are American values at stake in this crisis? If so, what are those values, and how can they be protected?