

Conducting a Civil Conversation in the Classroom

OVERVIEW

Our pluralistic democracy is based on common principles—such as justice, equality, and liberty—that often are interpreted quite differently in specific situations by individuals. When controversial legal and policy issues are discussed in the public arena, they often lead to polarization, not understanding. This discussion model offers an alternative. Under the guidance of a facilitator, participants are encouraged to think carefully about a challenging text, gain insight about their own points of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

DURATION AND FORMAT

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. A large-group conversation requires that all students sit in a circle; if the group is too large, pair the students so that there is an inner and outer circle with students able to move back and forth into the inner circle if they have something to add. Small-group conversation can be structured either with a small group discussing in the middle of the class “fish bowl” style or simultaneously with different leaders in each group.

PROCEDURE

Introduction. Briefly review the purpose and rationale of the activity. Distribute a copy of Handout 1E, “Civil Conversation Worksheet,” to every participant. Review the “Rules for Civil Conversation” with the class.

Reading Guide. Disseminate the selected text. The reading should not be long—shorter is better—and it sometimes is helpful if it is a complete reading [such as the Preamble to the Constitution or the Pledge of Allegiance], although self-contained selections work, too. Ask the students to work in pairs and to complete the reading by following the instructions and responding to questions 1 through 5 in the guide.

Conducting the Activity

Step 1. Select a format and time frame and participants accordingly.

Step 2. If selecting the large-group format, the teacher leads the discussion using the procedures from below. If using a small-group format, write the following procedures on the board and review them with the class. Then select co-conversation leaders for each group. Use these instructions for facilitators:

- § Begin the conversation by asking every member of the group to respond to questions 3 and 4 of the Civil Conversation Worksheet. Members should not just repeat what others say.
- § Then ask the entire group to respond to question 5 and jot down the issues raised.
- § Continue the conversation by discussing the questions raised.

Step 3. Debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation. Ask students to return to the Reading Guide and answer questions 6 and 7. Then begin by asking students who were not active in the conversation to comment:

- § Who said something that gave you a new insight? What did you hear that you agreed with? disagreed with?
- § What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
- § What common ground did you find with other members of the group?

Step 4. Conclude the debrief by asking all participants to suggest any ways they might improve the conversation. If appropriate, add these suggestions to the conversation rules.

Civil Conversations

Rules for Civil Conversations

- § Read the text as if it were written by someone you really respected.
- § Everyone in the conversation group should participate in the conversation.
- § Listen carefully to what others are saying.
- § Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
- § Be respectful of what others are saying.
- § Refer to the text to support your ideas.
- § Focus on ideas, not personalities.

Civil Conversation Reading Guide

Reading: _____

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. Look for the main points, and then go back and re-read it. 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) I disagree with _____

- 5) What are two questions about this reading that you think need to be discussed? (The best questions are ones that have no simple answers and ones that can use materials in the text as evidence.)

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

- 6) What did you learn from the civil conversation? _____

- 7) What common ground did you find with other members of the group? _____

Amendment XIV to the Constitution of the United States

1 Section. 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United
2 States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of
3 the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No
4 State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the
5 privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor
6 shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property,
7 without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its
8 jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

The Fourteenth Amendment was ratified July 9, 1868.