

Conducting a Civil Conversation in the Classroom¹

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 situations 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

1. Gain a deeper understanding of a controversial issue.
2. Identify common ground among differing views.
3. Develop speaking, listening, and analytical skills.

FORMAT OPTIONS

1. 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. If all students have not participated, the reflection time is an opportunity to ask those who have not spoken to comment on the things they heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight, that they agreed with, or disagreed with.
2. A large-group conversation requires that all students sit in a circle or, 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.
3. 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.

PREPARATION

You will need one copy of the handout “Civil Conversations” for each student.

¹* From: *The Challenge of Violence: Teacher’s Guide*. 1997: Constitutional Rights Foundation.

PROCEDURE

- A. Introduction:** Briefly overview the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Distribute the handout, “**Civil Conversation.**” Review the “Rules for Civil Conversation” with the class.
- B. 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. As 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.
- C. Conducting the Activity**

Step 1. Select one of the formats and time frames from above and arrange the class 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.

LEADERS' INSTRUCTIONS

- Begin the conversation, by asking every member of the group to respond to questions 3 and 4 of the Reading Guide. 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. Begin by asking students to return to the Reading Guide and answer questions 6 and 7. Then ask:

- What did you learn from Civil Conversation?
- What common ground did you find with other members of the group?

Then ask students who were not active in the conversation to comment on the things they learned or observed. 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.