



CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

Civil Discourse Lesson Plan

LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

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Grade Level 9,10,11,12

Subjects:

- Social Studies: Activism, Government
- Language Arts: Speaking, Listening, Writing, Reading, Argumentation

Description: This lesson provides an overview of how to understand and implement civil discourse in a classroom setting. Students will learn the importance of civil discourse and the guidelines for participating in civil discourse effectively. Students will also participate in a classroom lead activity that puts them through the process of having a civil debate and asks them to challenge their understanding on controversial issues.

Goals:

Social Studies:
English

Objectives:

- Understand importance and relevance of increasing civil discourse
- Identify and suggest guidelines for participating in civil discourse
- Learn steps to craft an effective argument
- Participate in classroom lead discussion on controversial issues
- Improve listening skills in argument to gain new perspectives

Introduction:

Civil discourse occurs when people participate in a discussion on political, social, or economic issues with a goal of increasing awareness and challenging their viewpoints. In order for a discussion to be considered civil, it must avoid hostility, preconceived judgement, and personal or moral attacks on the other person. Numerous issues can cause incivility in debate, but two of the main issues are confirmation bias and political polarization.

When people discuss topics that make them passionate, confirmation bias often gets in the way. Confirmation bias results in people only listening to viewpoints that confirm their views and not having an open mind to learn from disagreement. In addition, there is a notion that the loudest argument is the only one that matters, regardless of whether it is accurate. Many people have an especially hard time getting their voices heard without a platform on the media to reach a wide audience.

Political polarization describes the growing ideological gap between ideological extremes. In other words, liberals and conservatives are less likely to be open to understanding or respecting the other side's viewpoint.

While Americans are very divided among their stances on controversial issues, most people agree that our society has a problem with civility. After the 2016 presidential election, one

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survey found that 75% of Americans believed incivility had risen to crisis levels (Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate with KRC Research). This lesson will outline what we as individuals can do to revive civility.

Questions for Discussion:

- What are some specific examples of hostility you have witnessed that impeded on civil discourse?
- What are some steps we can take to have more effective and civil discussion?
- What would be your list of 'rules' for civil discourse?

Lecture:

While being polite and good mannered is very important to show respect, civility and politeness do not mean the exact same thing. Some arguments may not be considered "polite," but if they work towards opening society's mind to a new and beneficial perspective, they are civil. It is extremely important to learn how to communicate your ideas so that they can provide a beneficial perspective. In order to effectively participate in civil discourse, this lecture contains guidelines that center around both speaking and listening within a discussion or debate. Know that not every discussion will fit perfectly within these guidelines, but understand that the principles provided in this lecture are important to build a background on what a civil discussion should be like.

Before the discussion begins, there are a few steps to take to ensure that the discussion will be effective civil discourse. First, make sure that the information you form your stances and opinions off of comes from non-biased and credible news sources. This is important to make sure the information is accurate and you have been exposed to both sides of the problem through stories told in a neutral manner. Only looking at news sources that lean either right or left wing can prevent you from having an open mind and being presented with all the important information.

Another way to plan before a discussion is to make sure the participants have a wide range of ideologies and backgrounds. This way, viewpoints will contradict and everyone has a possibility to come away with a challenged and revised perspective. Engaging in discussions with people who have the exact same opinions as you do can fuel confirmation bias.

The way one states something can be as important as what is being said, therefore, it's important to clearly and respectfully get the point across and stay engaged in the discussion. Here are some tips for effectively communicating and listening: (refer to Lecture Handout, in Appendix)

Questions for Discussion:

- How has your perspective on civil discourse changed?
- What information from the above guidelines is something you haven't thought about before?

Lecture (continued):

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In addition to participating in an open and respectful conversation, another element to effective civil debate is crafting an effective argument and counter argument. Here is one way to think about creating an argument based on the necessary components.

Parts of an effective argument:

- Assertion - stating your side of the argument in simple terms
- Reasoning - explain why assertion is correct, use a word such as “because”
- Evidence - supports reasoning by providing a quotation from a reliable source or a direct example. This part makes sure your argument is based on facts instead of emotion.

In a discussion between two or more people, an effective initial argument is usually only half of the process. The person or people you are discussing with will also have an argument, so it is necessary to be able to form a counter argument to respectfully show why you stand for your position over the opposing position.

Steps for Refutation

- Restate - restate the opposing side’s position to acknowledge that you have listened to them and understand their argument
- Refute - say “but” or “however” and provide your side of the argument (similar to the assertion step above)
- Support - provide reasoning and evidence for why your rebuttal is stronger than the opposition’s argument
 - Try to make this evidence directly oppose the opposition’s evidence
 - In some cases, you can use the evidence that the opposition provided and evaluate it in a different way to show how it supports your argument
- Conclude - after providing evidence, restate why your argument is more logical than the opposition’s argument. Use a comparison or contrast to resolve the two opposing arguments

Before forming a counter argument, remember that listening to and attempting to understand the opposition is a vital first step. If the opposing argument makes more sense to you and changes your viewpoint, then a counter argument may not be necessary. Instead, talk about how your original ideas have been challenged. Understand that the goal of civil discourse is not the same as a formal debate. The goal is not to win, but instead to walk away with a challenged viewpoint or increased understanding a perspective on the subject.

Activity: In class discussion

Randomly sort students into groups of 4-6 people. Have students start by brainstorming a list of topics they find controversial that are currently impacting our nation or our world. After brainstorming, provide the following as a list of potential topics: climate change, homelessness/poverty, health care, immigration (DACA, wall-building , refugees, travel ban), LGBTQ issues (marriage, gender neutral bathrooms, transgendered students in high school sports), abortion, gun violence, foreign policy (globalization vs isolationism, trade war vs free market), taxes, campaign finance reform, euthanasia, economic policy (capitalism vs socialism), budget deficit, free college, religious freedom, racial inequality, socioeconomic inequality.

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Have the groups each pick 3 topics to discuss during the class period. These topics may come from the list above, but they do not have to. The process of picking topics itself may cause some disagreements, so tell the students to attempt to solve this first step through civil discourse as well. There may be a period of discussion within each group on which topics are most relevant or important.

After the students have selected topics, tell them to each individually find at least one source for each topic. Remind them that the source(s) should explore all sides of the topic. Ask them to pick an initial viewpoint for each topic. This does not have to be a clear-cut yes or no, but it should be in the form of an argumentative statement with evidence to support it.

After forming initial arguments, have the small groups discuss each issue. Each person should present an argument initially, then the discussion can be opened up to students challenging each other's viewpoints. The teacher should divide the discussion period in 3 and keep students on track for when to move between topics.

Have students fill out the discussion activity chart (see Appendix) to organize and reflect upon ideas.

At end of activity, have each small group choose one student to share something interesting about the group discussion, how group members' opinions changed, one thing the group did well to make the discussion civil, and one thing the group could have done better to practice more effective civil discourse.

Additional Activity (optional):

As a teacher, you could start a club outside of the school day where students can come together once a week for 30 minutes to an hour and discuss current issues. Remind them that discussions can be ongoing because one class period is not enough time to fully discuss every issue that students care about. Use the above activity as an outline for the club meetings. Because you will proctor the activity, make sure to remind students of the guidelines in this lesson if the conversation does not display proper civil discourse. At end of conversation, ask students to write down what they learned that they felt impacted or challenged their viewpoint the most.

APPENDIX

Discussion Activity Organizer

Issue	Source(s) Used	Initial Argument	What peers said during discussion	Updated viewpoint on subject

LECTURE HANDOUT

Tips for Effectively Communicating and Listening

- Don't attack someone personally, instead challenge ideas you disagree with. Calling someone names or refusing to talk to them doesn't help solve the dispute, and neither of you will learn.
- Facial expressions and body language should not give off the idea that you are not engaged. Maintain eye contact and avoid acting distracted or disinterested. Don't be on your cell phone, having side conversations, or doing anything to show dissatisfaction with the current speaker such as rolling your eyes or laughing when you think no one will notice.
- Respectfully ask questions as a form of both clarification and challenging others' views.
- Don't begin talking until the person before you has finished.
- It can be helpful to have a formal set-up where a proctor such as your teacher can call on students to speak and keep track of the time. This way, the discussion is organized in a way that allows everyone an equal opportunity to voice opinions.
- When responding back to another person, repeat some of what was said to show that you acknowledge the information presented and to make sure you respond to each part of the argument.
- Don't only be thinking about your response as if you were in a debate. The goal should be to understand and learn, not just to get your point across. Make sure you are actively listening in between speaking.
- Have all discussions in person. Email, text, and social media makes it difficult for people to understand intent because tone and body language are not apparent. If you do not finish discussing within the time you have provided to meet, then plan to meet again in person.
- If someone says something that makes you heated, take a moment before you reply. Your instinct reply is most likely not the most civil if negative emotions are involved.
- Don't be afraid to change your viewpoint during or after the conversation if you recognize that the opposing argument is more logical.
- Reflect on the discussion at the end. Even if your overall stance on an issue has not changed, you should be able to name contributions in the discussion that expanded your viewpoint on the issue.

In addition to the above guidelines that should apply for any civil discussion, here are some more ways to think about creating a more unique and inclusive conversation.

- Get to know the other people on a personal and friendly level first to allow for more natural and open conversation. Remember that having opposing viewpoints should not lead to any personal hostility.
- If having a political discussion, ask both what divides our country and what you are thankful for to bring both challenges and positivity into the conversation.
- As long as it is done in a light hearted and respectful manner, jokes and laughter can be used to lighten the mood of a conversation. However, be careful that this is not done in a way that is seemingly making fun of the person you are discussing with.