



Overview

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

Students will be able to:

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

Standards Addressed

Common Core Anchor Standards

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.
3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

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.
4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text,
10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Speaking and Listening Standards

SL.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade level] subjects...

SL.3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

SL.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

Reading in History /Social Studies

RH.1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

RH.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

RH.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).

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. 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.

2. **Large-group conversation** requires that all students sit in a circle or, if the group is too large, form pairs 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. The inner circle holds the conversation.

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 a copy of the **Civil Conversation Reading Guide** for each student.

Procedure

A. Introduction. Briefly overview the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Distribute copies of the Civil Conversation Reading Guide. Review the rules before beginning the activity.

B. Reading Guide. The Civil Conversation can be used with a news article or other reading you select. It works best for readings that present two or more perspectives on a subject. Have students working in pairs complete the reading by following the instructions and responding to the questions in the Reading 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.

Leader's 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 question 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 the 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.



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RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Read the text as if it were written by someone you really respected.
2. Everyone in the conversation 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.
- Next, briefly answer the following questions.

1. This selection is about

2. The main points are:

a)

b)

c)

Continued on back.



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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) _____

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?

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?