

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:
 - Step 2 - A B: Basic understanding of text.
 - Step 2 - C D: Text-based arguments.
 - Step 2 - E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.
 - Step 3 - A: Level of participation (should be “about the same as others”).
 - Step 3 - B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.
 - Step 3 - C D: 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. 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 get the discussion started, 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.

CIVIL CONVERSATION GUIDE

Name: _____

Class: _____

Title of Reading: _____

Step 1: Read.

A. 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.

B. Re-read the selection and annotate (“talk to”) the text:

- Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
- Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
- Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a “?”.
- Draw an ➡ 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.

Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...	B. The MAIN POINTS are:
C. In the reading, I agree with:	D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

Step 3: Discuss and listen.

RULES FOR CIVIL CONVERSATION

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
3. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

You will have _____ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of issues.

At the end of the reading, you will likely find at least one discussion question. Use that question to get your discussion started. If time permits, you can also discuss questions you came up with in Step 2.

If the reading does not provide discussion questions, choose questions to discuss from Section E above.

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in my group, I spoke: ___ less than, ___ about the same as, ___ more than others

B. Some of the ways I added to the discussion:

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the civil conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)