

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.
- 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 you know from 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 the issue.

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

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

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? ___ Less than, ___ About the same as, ___ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you 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!)



Guns and School Safety: What is the Best Way Forward?

On February 14, 2018, a shooter went to his former high school in Parkland, Florida, and shot and killed 17 people. The community was **traumatized**. Within days, student-survivors of the shooting helped organize a rally. Speeches by students went viral. Student actions gave the national debate on gun safety a lot of attention. The shooting and survivors' responses also sparked debates about what schools should do to keep campuses safe.

News outlets described the Parkland shooting as the 18th school shooting of 2018, less than two months into the year. Not all school shootings are mass public shootings (or "**mass shootings**"). Certainly, all shootings are concerning for Americans. Between 2006 and 2013, two out of seven mass shootings at schools involved more than 10 deaths. Over the years, lawmakers have responded to these traumatic events, and the public has experienced disagreement about what should be done.

SUMMARIZE: In 1-2 sentences, note the main idea of these paragraphs.

What is the Current Law?

There are federal laws about gun safety at schools, and there are state laws. The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that an individual has the right to own firearms, but the Supreme Court has said the government *can* impose reasonable regulations on gun ownership.

Federal Law (Laws that apply to all people living in the U.S.)

Given the individual right to own guns, what has Congress done over the years about school safety? In 1990, Congress passed the Gun Free School Zones Act (GFSZA). This law prohibits any person from knowingly possessing a firearm in a place that person knows, or reasonably should know, is a "school zone." A school zone includes the grounds of public and private schools, as well as public property within 1,000 feet from the grounds of those schools.

The GFSZA's prohibition has exceptions. For example, police officers are allowed to possess firearms, as are local residents on private property. In 1994, Congress passed a law specifically about students and guns called the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA). This law requires any school receiving federal funds (public schools) to expel students for at least one year if they possess a gun at school. After the Sandy Hook shooting, President Barack Obama issued executive orders to improve training for law enforcement and school officials on "active shooter" situations. The Department of Justice also gave grants to school districts to hire more school resource officers (SROs).

Glossary

active shooter: a person who is actively trying to shoot other people, usually in a confined and populated area.

concealed: kept secret; hidden.

lobbying: seek to influence (a politician or public official) on an issue.

lockdown: a situation in which a school's doors and gates are locked, and students and staff stay away from windows and wait for law enforcement.

manufacturers: a person or company that makes goods for sale.

mass shooting: an incident involving multiple victims of firearms-related violence.

prohibit: forbid something by law, rule, or other authority.

traumatized: subject to lasting shock as a result of an emotionally disturbing experience of physical injury.

unconstitutional: not in agreements with a political law for the U.S.

State Law (Laws that apply to people in each state)

State laws vary from state to state. Almost all states, however, **prohibit** guns in K-12 schools. Many states do allow people to get licenses to carry a **concealed** weapon. In general, “plain-clothes police” can get these permits, and in some states, so can people who show “good cause” (e.g., documented threats from another). Eight states either allow concealed firearms at K-12 schools or just do not have a law to prohibit them.

SHOW WHAT YOU KNOW: Give an example of a Federal law and a California law.

Proposed Policies

<p><i>Increasing the Use of School Resource Officers (SROs)</i></p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- A survey showed that 90% of resource officers stop between 1-25 violent acts in schools each year.- Violence has gone down nationwide at schools since the mid-1990s when more SROs were put in schools.- SROs often work as informal counselors at their schools. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Some argue that school officers treat misbehaving juveniles harshly.- Many disciplinary problems handled by SROs would be better handled by the principal’s office.- SROs are not effective; they were present at the Parkland shooting and at Columbine High School (where 13 people were killed).	<p><i>Active Shooter Drills</i></p> <p>Many school districts practice for an active shooter to prepare students for this situation.</p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) supports the use of traditional lockdowns as part of any active shooter drill.- Active shooter drills are like fire drills. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Some parents oppose active shooter drills because they can leave some children traumatized.- NASP warns that an active shooter drill is only as good as the training of school staff beforehand.
<p><i>Gun Control</i></p> <p>Gun control means a law or laws that restrict either the type of guns that can be sold; the ability of certain people to buy or own guns; or both.</p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Waiting periods after gun sales would delay a person’s ability to have a gun immediately.- Background checks would restrict people with violent criminal records from owning guns.- Minimum age to buy a handgun should be raised to 21. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- National Rifle Association (NRA), a lobbying organization for gun owners and manufacturers, argues that gun control laws are unconstitutional.- NRA argues that improving mental health treatment will stop people from illegally using guns.- NRA supports increased punishments for illegal gun use.	<p><i>Arming Teachers and School Staff</i></p> <p><u>Supporters:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- President Trump and the NRA propose that teachers should be trained to use firearms and should have them in the classroom.- Texas and Utah already allow teachers to carry concealed handguns. Ohio teachers can already have firearms locked away only to be used in emergencies.- Knowing people in a school are armed would discourage a shooter from trying to attack the school. <p><u>Critics:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- National Education Association President argues arming teachers does not prevent gun violence in the first place.- Teachers already have enough on their plates.- Arming teachers is a bad lesson for students and society.

Writing & Discussion

1. In your opinion, which set of laws, federal or state, seem to address the problems of gun violence more effectively? Use evidence from the article in your answer.
2. Of the proposed policies to address gun violence at schools, which seem most effective? Why?
3. What is your opinion of gun control? Adam Lankford, a professor of criminology at the University of Alabama, has found that countries with higher rates of gun ownership experience more mass shootings. In the United States, there are 88.8 guns per 100 people in the country. Does this statistic affect your opinion of gun control? Why or why not?