

Conducting a Civil Conversation in the Classroom

OVERVIEW

Our pluralistic democracy is based on common principles—such as justice, equality, and liberty—that often are interpreted quite differently in specific situations by individuals. When controversial legal and policy issues are discussed in the public arena, they often lead to polarization, not understanding. This discussion model offers an alternative. Under the guidance of a facilitator, participants are encouraged to think carefully about a challenging text, gain insight about their own points of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

DURATION AND FORMAT

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. A large-group conversation requires that all students sit in a circle; 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. 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.

PROCEDURE

Introduction. Briefly review the purpose and rationale of the activity. Distribute a copy of Handout 1E, “Civil Conversation Worksheet,” to every participant. Review the “Rules for Civil Conversation” with the class.

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. Ask 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.

Conducting the Activity

Step 1. Select a format and time frame and participants 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. Use these instructions for facilitators:

- § Begin the conversation by asking every member of the group to respond to questions 3 and 4 of the Civil Conversation Worksheet. 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. Ask students to return to the Reading Guide and answer questions 6 and 7. Then begin by asking students who were not active in the conversation to comment:

- § Who said something that gave you a new insight? What did you hear that you agreed with? disagreed with?
- § What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
- § What common ground did you find with other members of the group?

Step 4. Conclude the debrief by asking all participants to suggest any ways they might improve the conversation. If appropriate, add these suggestions to the conversation rules.