

**LESSON PLANS**

# Talking Across Divides: 10 Ways to Encourage Civil Classroom Conversation On Difficult Issues

By KATHERINE SCHULTEN SEPT. 29, 2016

Fistfights at campaign rallies. A congressional sit-in. Angry political trolling on the internet. It's not your imagination: America's partisan divide is deeper today than at any point in nearly a quarter-century, according to a new study.

So begins an article from June 2016, which described a problem that has only deepened as the weeks of this unprecedented, vitriolic presidential campaign have gone on.

Months ago, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented the worrying effects of all this angry rhetoric on students and classrooms, and, since then, we've heard those concerns echoed by teachers we asked ourselves. But even after this election is over, a divided nation will remain — and teachers will always be in a uniquely powerful position to help young people learn how to talk to each other across those divides.

Below, we share some ideas we've collected from our readers, The Times and around the web. Use them anytime you and your students are tackling controversial issues, whether in a traditional classroom or online. We welcome your additions to the list.

***Updated: Jan., 2017:***

*In the fall of 2016, as a companion to this lesson, we invited students to participate in what we called our Civil Conversation Challenge.*

*From early October until Nov. 7, teenagers from around the world were encouraged to weigh in on some of the most divisive issues of the 2016 election. The challenge, however, was for them to have the kinds of respectful, productive discussions across ideological divides that, it seemed, many adults were unable to.*

*In December, we wrote about the nearly 3,000 comments we received on the issues of immigration, guns, climate and energy, and race, gender and identity, as well as on many other topics suggested by students themselves in our open forum.*

*Take a look at our Ideas for Productive Discussion: Reflections on Our Civil Conversation Challenge to read our observations about the best of those conversations and what made them work, along with unedited student examples for each.*

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## **1. Create classroom rules and structures that support respectful and generative discussion, online and off.**

How do you handle conversations in your classroom in general? What structures and rules are in place to ensure that they are constructive and civil, yet promote real learning and growth? How do you invite all voices? What happens when someone states an unpopular opinion?

Consider talking about these issues with your students after first asking them to write anonymously about how teachers and schools in general might improve in this area. What problems do they see? What memorable experiences, good and bad, have informed their attitudes toward class discussions? What suggestions for rules, structures or guidelines might they have? How should schools balance the need for open intellectual discussion about issues with the need to protect those who may feel marginalized for some reason?

Then, have a classroom discussion about classroom discussions.

Over the years, we have published many ideas for talking about sensitive issues, and suggested structures including journal-writing, the “one-question interview,” fishbowls and four-corner exercises. You might use any of those methods, or consult this “big list of class discussion strategies” from Cult of Pedagogy. Or, use a protocol called Circle of Viewpoints that focuses on helping students consider diverse perspectives on a topic.

Finally, extend your inquiry from physical classroom conversation to online discussion by borrowing a recent Reader Idea from a teacher named Kate Harris.

She explains how, when teaching a high school World Religions elective, she used the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris as a “teachable moment” to help her students observe and critique online conversations. Ms. Harris writes:

Teachers have to address the political and social issues that divide our nation and dominate our social media feeds. More important, we need to equip students to address those issues on their own, to engage with and respond to conversations and news that may be troubling or challenging, from domestic gun control and police brutality to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and worldwide terrorism. So much of our students’ worlds is online. How can we get them to think critically not only about big media, delivered by giants such as Fox News and The New York Times, but also about “little media,” or the comments and tweets that they write, read and repost?

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## **2. Take the ‘Speak Up for Civility’ pledge from Teaching Tolerance.**

Though it is a pledge intended for teachers and other adults, you might share it with your students as well:

I pledge to discuss this election with civility, to treat people whose opinions differ from mine with respect, and to focus on ideas, policies and values. I will encourage others to do the same. I will speak up when I hear name-calling, stereotypes and slurs. I will do this because children are listening, and it’s important that adults model good citizenship.

The organization's ideas for teaching Election 2016 can also be useful, and those under the heading of "getting along" can be applied far beyond this election season.

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### **3. Read and discuss articles that explore the problem of a divided America.**

Your students might annotate as they read, then use one of the discussion models listed above to talk about their reactions. Here are just a few places in The Times to start:

- The Divided States of America
- Why Calls for a 'National Conversation' Are Futile
- Polarization Is Dividing American Society, Not Just Politics
- Bipartisanship Isn't for Wimps, After All
- Why Facts Don't Unify Us
- The Age of Post-Truth Politics and a response from a teenager — a Student Summer Reading Contest Winner, Michelle Kim — who wrote:

After reading this op-ed piece, I am more aware of my own attitude and more wary of this polarization — the "us" versus "them" mentality that often reduces comments sections into battlegrounds, when passionate ideals are not tempered by a willingness to explore possibilities in order to approach fact.

To what extent do your students experience these divides? What can their generation do to close them?

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### **4. Consider commenting standards — and test what you learn via the Times Comment-Moderation Quiz.**

In “What Your Online Comments Say About You,” Anna North writes about some questions researchers recently asked:

When we comment on news stories, most of us hope to say something about the topic at hand — even (or maybe especially) if it’s that the author got it all wrong. But what do the comments we leave say about us — about our beliefs, our biases and how we act when the ordinary rules don’t apply? And how do our comments affect the beliefs of others?

Read that article, and, for more context, perhaps the Room for Debate forum “Have Comment Sections on News Media Websites Failed?” Why do we seem to be able to say things online that we wouldn’t say in person? Where do students see especially glaring examples of that?

The Times, including The Learning Network, has commenting standards put in place to maintain civility. You might share them with students, along with a related Times post, “The Top 10 Reasons We Deleted Your Comment.” What do they think of these rules? Could they be useful elsewhere on the internet? Why or why not?

Then, test how well they have absorbed those standards by taking a Times quiz created by our comment-moderation team. If you were a moderator, which responses would you approve and which would you reject? Why?

Finally, have students choose a Times article that interests them and that has many reader comments. Scan the comments, noticing which ones are “reader picks” and which are “Times picks.” What do they notice about the conversation? Is it generally civil? Do they think people are actually talking to each other, or do you think they are more talking *at* each other? In their opinion, can online conversations ever change minds?

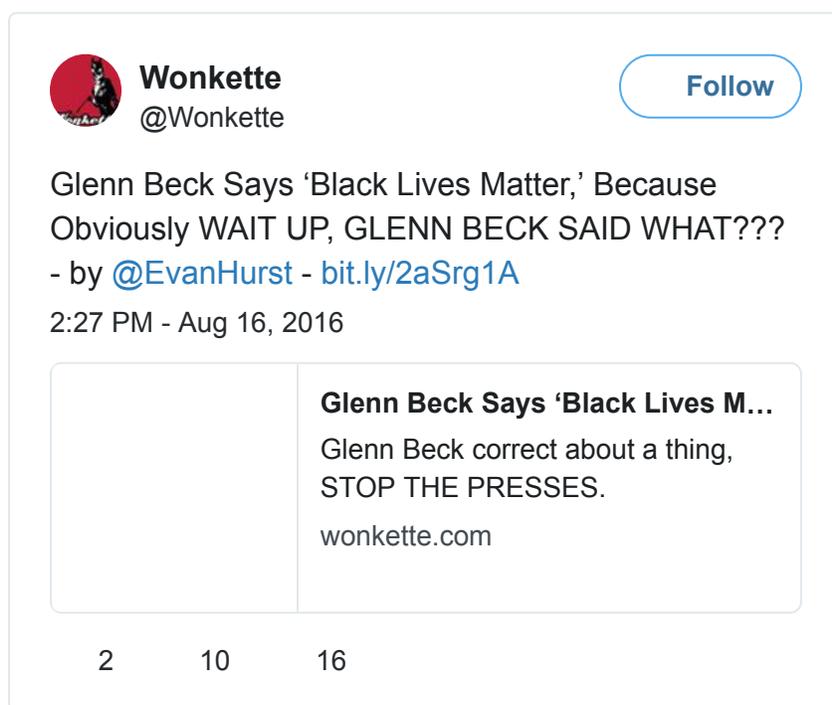
You might start with a recent Op-Ed essay “Will the Left Survive Millennials?” Among the many comments, this one by **Andy B**:

Has anyone noticed that despite our increasing diversity, we are becoming a more isolated society? More prone to stare at a screen than to engage our neighbors in conversation. That same screen provides easy access to surround

oneself with an echo chamber that allows for an ever growing sense of entitlement to impose one's opinion on others above all else. Both sides have moved so far away from one another that honest constructive debate is next to impossible. For the sake of our American experience, let's hope we can eventually find a unifying force. Imagine what could be done as a society if we unplugged and engaged again.

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## 5. Practice empathy.



Do your students know who Glenn Beck is? He is a conservative radio host and media personality who surprised many this summer when he urged his fellow conservatives to understand the **Black Lives Matter** movement. He then published an Op-Ed essay in *The Times* that begins:

In a recent speech to a group of conservatives, I made what I thought was a relatively uncontroversial point about the commonalities between Trump supporters and Black Lives Matter activists. I thought this was a simple idea, but the criticism was immediate and sharp: How dare I try to understand the “other side”?

But as people, wouldn't we all benefit from trying to empathize with people we disagree with?

Have them read what he has to say — and read some of the 919 comments Times readers made in response. What do they think of the argument he makes? What issues about which they feel passionately might they seek to understand from an opposing point of view?

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## **6. Back up statements with evidence and sources.**

"These days it seems like politics and propaganda take precedence over rational discussion, especially when the conversation goes online," writes Chris Sloan in an essay at KQED Education on "Teaching the Art of Civil Dialogue. He suggests "teaching argument the way it's been conceived since Aristotle's time."

It seems that everyone agrees that in order to be "college and career ready" our students need to know how to write argument and back it up with evidence. In reality, this approach falls short when our own assumptions are challenged; however, research shows that learning gains are greatest in these moments of "cognitive dissonance."

The winners of our annual Student Editorial Contest, in which we invite students to "write about an issue that matters to you" but back it up with evidence both from The Times and elsewhere, can provide models for how to do this. You might invite students to scroll through the essays and find a few that interest them to see how the evidence is woven in.

And this related lesson plan can help with tips and ideas. In it, we quote Andrew Rosenthal, former Times editorial page editor, who made a video for our contest and reminds students to do their research. He says:

Everyone is entitled to their opinion, you're not entitled to your own facts. Go online, make calls if you can, check your information, double-check it. There's

nothing that will undermine your argument faster than a fact you got wrong, that you did not have to get wrong.

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### **7. Listen better, and ask genuine questions that seek to help you understand rather than judge.**

Hearing is easy, writes Seth S. Horowitz in the Sunday Review. But “listening is a skill that we’re in danger of losing in a world of digital distraction and information overload.”

Many teachers are familiar with the concept of “active listening” and, via activities like “think/pair/share,” have incorporated regular practice in the skill. But listening can be much more, as this famous essay from the 1930s, “Tell Me More,” describes. In it, the writer Brenda Ueland says listening is a “creative force,” and explains:

When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. You know how if a person laughs at your jokes you become funnier and funnier, and if he does not, every tiny little joke in you weakens up and dies. Well, that is the principle of it.

One recent example of listening in action: a new book by the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild that seeks to understand “Why Do People Who Need Help From the Government Hate It So Much?” The Times reviewer writes, “A distinguished Berkeley sociologist, Hochschild is a woman of the left, but her mission is empathy, not polemics.” Have students read the review to understand the role open-minded questioning and listening played in this “respectful” work, then think about how they might practice listening to those with whom they disagree.

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### **8. Expand your ‘filter bubble.’**

In a Student Opinion question, “Is Your Online World Just a ‘Filter Bubble’ of People With the Same Opinions?,” we challenge teenagers to look at their social and news feeds and work to broaden them to include new perspectives and opinions.

Read our questions and invite your students to think about where and how they get their news. How diverse are their social media and news feeds in terms of the ages, races, religions, geographical locations, interests and political affiliations of the people they follow — and why does it matter?

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### **9. Consider why ‘us and them’ is so ingrained in who we are.**

Our friends at Facing History and Ourselves frequently look at questions like these:

- Why are notions of “us and them” such a consistent feature of human societies?
- When and why does an “us and them” view of the world become especially appealing or attractive? When does this worldview develop into verbal and physical violence?
- How can individuals respond to expressions of hatred, anger and fear? What happens if we choose to remain silent?

In “How Teachers Can Help Students Make Sense of Today’s Political and Social Tensions,” Laura Tavares and Jocelyn Stanton list a number of resources to help teachers and students go deeper.

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### **10. Learn about and try to counter ‘confirmation bias.’**

Confirmation bias is the tendency to look for information that supports the way we feel about something. Carl Richards wrote about it for The Times in a 2013 piece, “Challenge What You Think You Know”:

We do this all the time. In fact, academics even have a name for it: **confirmation bias**. It's when we form an opinion, and then we systematically look for evidence to support that opinion while discarding anything that contradicts it.

The first place we go for feedback about what we believe is other people. And who do we ask first? That's right, people we know who are already inclined to think the same way as we do. And friends don't always tell one another the truth, even if they disagree. The result is a dangerous feedback loop that actually confirms our bias. It's incredibly hard to avoid.

The Upshot also wrote about this phenomenon, saying:

...confirmation bias may be the reason that our political debates remain intractable. After all, as you accumulate more evidence confirming your views, you're less likely to question them, and less likely to change your mind. As members of competing political tribes collect more evidence in favor of their favored views, their opinions harden, and each tribe becomes more convinced of its correctness.

So what's the solution? As Mr. Richards writes, "The only solution that I see is to purposely expose yourself to views that don't match yours." In an echo of many of the other ideas in this post, he suggests purposely seeking out views from "the other side," whether via websites, books, radio or television, or conversations with people across the aisle. And, he says, it's not enough just to seek them out:

Try, just try, to listen, to understand. See if you can get to the point where you can honestly say, "I understand the argument and can see why they feel that way."

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How do you foster civil conversation in your classroom? Tell us in the comments.

