



CIVICS CLASSROOM CURRICULUM

CITIZENS CLEAN ELECTIONS COMMISSION ★ YOUTH VOTER EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

**CIVIL DISCOURSE IN
THE CLASSROOM**

Citizens Clean Elections Commission

 AZCleanElections.gov



INTRO

The Citizens Clean Elections Commission (azcleelections.gov) has long fostered civil discourse in the community by providing education and resources to make and share informed decisions. Please explore the website for election and candidate information as well as resources for your classroom.

Discourse, while historically contentious and not always civil in a vigorous democracy, has changed dramatically in the past couple decades, for schools and for the general public. Social media in particular has created an opportunity to voice our opinions to vastly more people in a dramatically shorter period of time. This tends to amplify (as well as entrench) our views as we get more “likes” and followers that reinforce our own beliefs, and the pattern is further magnified by the links that are generated to others with similar views. While this enhanced freedom of speech can be positive, and even democratic in terms of the free exchange of ideas, the perils are apparent in the “echo chamber” of opinions passed off as facts and the incivility of our political discourse. We teachers can make a difference by modeling and teaching listening skills, empathy, and respectful communication in our classrooms. Here are some thoughts about how and why to do so, followed by some specific strategies.

Citizens Clean Elections Commission is Arizona's only non-partisan government organization, created by voters, for voters, to provide voter education.





THOUGHTS AND RATIONALES

- First and foremost, please check with your administration to see if there is an established “controversial issues” policy for lessons and discussions in your school or district. Such guidelines will inform your lesson planning. For instance, many districts have procedures for issuing parent permission slips in advance of the presentation of a controversial topic or for an alternative assignment in the media center for some students who would like to opt out. Furthermore, be sure to examine and discuss with your administration the recent state law in Arizona that limits what teachers can present and penalizes teachers for doing so.
- In the world and in the classroom, political (and other) topics can be controversial. The classroom should be a safe arena to discuss and even debate a wide variety of subjects including elements of our democratic system. Each student should be encouraged to share their beliefs, knowledge, and opinions without threat of negativity or attack. And everyone should be given the opportunity to share while their peers listen with courtesy and respect.
- The teacher, as always, sets the stage and tone, and our job as a facilitators is to moderate discussions in which the students maintain mutual respect. The ability to engage in respectful dialogue involves skills that must be taught, revisited, and reinforced. Your investment in this approach early on will pay dividends for your discussions throughout the year. But there is never a bad time to start!
- Empathy is a “skill” that can be taught, practiced, reinforced, and applied. Allow students to share their life experiences. Encourage their classmates to try to understand, without agreeing or disagreeing, how these experiences might shape one’s views and perceptions. Whether it is an actual skill or not, empathy is a desirable human characteristic to cultivate in the classroom and elsewhere.
- Cultural differences must always be taken into consideration and respected by the teacher and classmates. Our students come from diverse backgrounds and families who interact and converse in myriad ways, resulting in different styles of communication as well as opinions and prejudices. This, of course, often affects our students’ approach and willingness to participate in class discussions. Ethnicity, economic status, and gender are also factors to be addressed, and possibly even discussed in class.
- One of the most important things you can do for your students is to make them feel that their opinions are heard and respected. If not, they will likely not participate. Feeling heard and valued are characteristics that students often mention when asked who their favorite teacher is!
- Advise students to seek to understand without focusing or insisting on being right.

- In all things, foster a classroom of mutual respect. This is not a goal, but an expectation. It is up to you to make that clear in your classroom...that you will accept nothing less. Ask yourself, How can I do this and what am I doing to create a welcoming environment in my classroom? Am I modeling these expectations by encouraging different viewpoints, by listening attentively, and by not speaking disrespectfully to my students?
- Effective discussions are not the freewheeling, unfettered blurting out of opinions. Effective discussions require structure...and rules...and preparation.

STRATEGIES

- Provide students with a structure for your discussions:

Research and utilize a formal debate format (devise a resolution; establish the affirmative team, the opposing team, and the judges; allow time for the teams to do the research; follow the debate format with arguments and rebuttals, etc.

See Conducting a Debate:

www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/framefound_sr2/tns/tn-13.pdf

Set up a Socratic Seminar (students pre-read the content, reading for a purpose that the teacher has defined, perhaps along with a worksheet; students come to class prepared to ask clarifying questions and build on the comments and questions of others.

See Socratic Seminar Guidelines:

<https://www.aisd.net/bowie-high-school/wp-content/files/sites/25/2017/05/Socraticseminarguidelines.pdf>

Or devise your own procedures. An example is a modification such as: Establish the topic to be discussed, e.g., national health care. Choose three members for each debate team, pro and con: one student on each side to present an intro, one to rebut the other team's intro, and one to do the conclusion. Provide time for these teams to do the research for their argument. Allow the rest of the class to choose the side they prefer to be on and research that side to prepare for the discussion. On the day of the discussion/debate, follow this procedure:

1. Move desks in the room into two sides and have students move to the pro or con side that they have been assigned (the debaters) or chosen (the class).
2. Start with the pro argument presenter (choose a time limit for each debater based on class time available, say 4 minutes, allowing ample time for class discussion in the middle and debriefing at the end).
3. Rebuttal of the pro argument (by the person chosen on the con side to do so)
4. Con argument presenter (by the person chosen on the con side to do so)
5. Rebuttal of the con argument (by the person chosen on the pro team)

to do so)

6. Open the debate to a whole-class discussion, with the teacher moderating the discussion and encouraging follow-up questions and comments. In this way, the whole class is responsible and involved. The debaters sit this part out.
7. Pro argument conclusion (by the person on the pro team chosen to do so)
8. Con argument conclusion (by the person on the con team chosen to do so)

Teachers debriefs the debate/discussion with the class, emphasizing important points that were made. This format does not require declaring a winner.

- For those more frequent, brief, less formal discussions in the middle of a lesson, be sure to enforce the rules of engagement that have been established for your other more official debates. Try to encourage every student to participate every day. One way to do this is to mark your seating chart when a student contributes to the discussion.
- No matter what format you choose or develop, be sure to establish and communicate clear rules. This will make it easier for you as a facilitator to enforce the rules of engagement and to maintain mutual respect. It is highly recommended that you involve students in the rule making. Self-determination is very motivating and you can expect more student investment in the lesson as a result. A simple brainstorming activity works well: Ask students what the rules of engagement should be, e.g., no side conversations; all should try to track and make eye contact with the speaker; use classroom voices only; no laughter or criticism of others' comments, etc. Discuss and select those of merit. Write them down (create a rubric) and post or hand them out to students. Revise the rules as needed by experience. Reiterate the rules before every debate/discussion.
- Students should be prepared for the discussion, which means they should have read and researched multiple sources on the topic. It is important to ensure that students understand the topic from various viewpoints. Allowing time for students to prepare will ensure that all students will be able to contribute and engage in the discussion. Ways to do this include providing a worksheet on the content to be completed before the discussion; assigning students to find articles and take notes, one page on each of three sources, for instance, to be submitted and graded; assign students to do Cornell notes on the chapter that is the source of your discussion; or devise your own strategy.
- Consider assigning students to research and take a stand on a subject that is the opposite of their beliefs.
- Practice discussion etiquette by starting with easier topics that students are very interested in but are less emotional and polarizing, such as a school-related issue (homework should be banned; school uniforms should be required) or social issue (a



tax on soda; autonomous vehicle regulation). Care about your students and ask what they're interested in. Know your students!

- Before the whole class discussion, have students turn to their elbow partner and briefly share their thoughts on the topic. This allows students to try out their opinions and get feedback before sharing them with the whole class.
- A great strategy to encourage good listening skills and mutual respect is to employ this template for discussion: Tell students that before sharing their thoughts they have to reiterate what the previous person said by stating, "What I hear you saying is..." and then paraphrase the previous person's comment to their satisfaction. Most people think about what they are going to say rather than focusing on what is being said. While the strategy certainly does slow down the discussion, it encourages students to actively listen and process what is being said before speaking. It is a valuable lifetime skill.
- A variation of this listening and participating template is to substitute the following: "I hear what you're saying and I respectfully disagree. I think that..."
- Share and practice listening strategies/skills: Be present. Track the speaker; make eye contact. Defer judgment (think about what the speaker is saying, not what you are going to say); keep an open mind. Make no inappropriate facial expressions. Ask clarifying questions...in an effort to understand, not to challenge. Practice cross cultural thinking: Put yourself in someone else's position (express empathy). Occasionally pause to summarize.
- Democratic viability is threatened if citizen voters are unable to differentiate between fact and opinion. Teaching and practicing the skill is a vital classroom activity at all levels. Check out the following website for definitions, ideas, and activities:

www.hmhco.com/blog/teaching-fact-versus-opinion

Create assignments to distinguish fact from opinion. Generate (or copy and paste) a list of grade-level appropriate sentences that students must identify as F (fact) or O (opinion). For example:

1. It is important to cut taxes because doing so stimulates economic growth.
2. Cutting taxes affects businesses and individuals differently.

Similarly, prepare and assess with students various newspaper articles and editorials that illustrate the differences between fact and opinion. Discuss how to make the distinctions and the importance of knowing the difference as you read. Do the same for online resources by examining various pre-selected websites or social media entries.

- At election time, find and assess numerous statements made by political candidates or political ads as fact or opinion, and evaluate them for accuracy as well. Distinguishing fact versus fiction is an important skill to teach in addition to fact versus opinion. The Clean Elections website has resources and information on voting, elected officials and candidates. For instance, have students read



and evaluate ballot issues, write a letter to the editor, or perhaps engage in a civil dialogue with an elected official by writing a letter (or sending an email).

The impact and efficacy of social movements like Black Lives Matter/All Lives Matter, School Strike for Climate (Greta Thunberg), or organized labor are topics that are ripe for debate. Why do people organize? How do the two sides see things differently? Civil discourse often implies civic action.

- Reinforce all of these strategies and activities by asking students to share subsequent real-life examples of their applying of listening skills, distinguishing fact versus opinion or falsehood, stories of family discussions, examples of their exposure to social movements, respectful discussion of issues with peers or in other classes, and other applications. Encourage students to seek opportunities for involvement.

After all, the whole point is to inspire students to be active participants in our democratic processes, develop positive relationships, and engage in Civil Discourse!



ARIZONA CIVICS STATE STANDARDS

The civics standards promote the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for informed, responsible participation in public life. Productive civic engagement requires knowledge of the history, principles, and foundations of our Constitutional Republic and that each person has both human and civil rights. People demonstrate civic engagement when they address public problems individually and collaboratively and when they maintain, strengthen, and improve their communities and society. Civics also requires an understanding of local, state, national, and international institutions. Civics encompasses practices such as voting, volunteering, jury service, contributing to public processes, and the public discourse.

6.C4.2 Describe and apply civic virtues including deliberative processes that contribute to the common good and democratic principles in school, community, and government.

- Key concepts include but are not limited to civility, respect for the rights of others, individual responsibility, respect for law, open mindedness, critical examination of issues, negotiation and compromise, civic mindedness, compassion, patriotism, conciliation, and consensus building

7.C4.3 Analyze the purpose, process, implementation, and consequences of decision making and public policies in multiple settings.

7.C4.4 Explain challenges people face and opportunities they create in addressing local, regional, and global problems at various times and places. Apply a range of deliberative and democratic procedures to make decisions and act in local, regional, and global communities.

8.C1.3 Analyze the influence of personal interests and perspectives when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

8.C1.4 Engage in projects to help or inform others such as community service and service-learning projects

HS.C1.1 Explain the significance of civic virtues to a well-functioning constitutional republic.

HS.C1.3 Explain and use deliberative processes implemented in various civic and political institutions

HS.C2.1 Explain the importance of individual participation in civic and political institutions

HS.C2.6 Evaluate the contributions of individuals and groups, including Arizonans, who have played a role in promoting civic and democratic principles. An understanding of civic and political institutions



HS.C4.4 Analyze the purpose, process, implementation, and consequences of decision making and public policies in multiple settings and at various levels

HS.C4.6 Assess options for action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self- reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.