



racebridges
for schools

CLASSROOM RESOURCES

BE CIVIL!

How can we explore the human skill of ... Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable? THE SEARCH FOR CIVILITY

BACKGROUND

The volume, intensity, and strident outbreaks of vitriolic tirades in this political season are evident. This same angry argument is found on many levels and on Facebook screens. The urgent need is to lead students to learn how to disagree while remaining civil.

Not only should students learn how to engage in civil debate, but they should also learn the value of listening to points of view and opinions that differ from their own. Being open to different kinds of people and ideas help students maintain open minds and get along in a diverse society.

One of the difficulties teachers face in the classroom is that we as a society are not modeling for young people how to have vigorous conversations, even debates, about significant social and political issues.

In recent decades, we've seen two extreme approaches to hard conversations: privileging agreement over individual opinion on the one hand and a "take no prisoners" approach on the other. When agreement and avoiding conflict is privileged, debate tends to be squelched when someone suggests that all "agree to disagree" or that "everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion." But in some circles, especially politics and media, polarization and "winning" the argument is so valued that there is no room for civil engagement.

In this *RaceBridges* unit, you'll find a classroom activity, some "lesson plan starters" to examine the limits of these two approaches and to practice civil engagement, further resources, and some ideas and thoughts to help inspire you on the journey.

Vigorous debate characterizes a democracy where citizens are entrusted with discussing, disagreeing about, and deciding important issues; it is up to teachers like you to teach the critical skills of analysis and civil discourse if we are to have a vibrant democracy!

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY and PLEDGE

This is a brief lesson that suggests an activity without being overly prescriptive so that you can adapt the activity to your classroom. A pledge or action item is included at the end.

Have students watch or show in class a clip of Representative Joe Wilson shouting “You lie!” during President Barack Obama’s speech on healthcare to a joint session of Congress on Wednesday, September 8, 2009 [make “clip” a link to this address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgce06Yw2ro> or this Clip of Kanye West interrupting Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for “Best Female Video” at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards show [make “clip” a link to this address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z8gCZ7zpsQ>

Place students in groups to discuss what led to Wilson and / or West to “break the rules” of civility. Allow them to brainstorm a list for a few minutes; then have students share all the reasons they can think of with the rest of the class. Reasons should include: frustration, the belief that they are “so right” that they should be allowed to speak, surprise, believing that there can only be one winner and one loser, surrounding themselves with people who agree with them and unable to see other views, selfishness, and lack of impulse control.

After students share, have them come up with ways to avoid breaking the rules of civility. They should identify both “internal” controls such as self-talk that prevents them from being uncivil and “external” responses to trying situations, such as a phrase that will defuse a potential conflict. Once students create this list, have them practice using these controls in small group conversations about controversial or inflammatory topics.

Action: As a class, have students create a list of “Civility Rules.” Put the list on large sheets of paper and post around the classroom. Students could make a separate poster for each rule. Once a week, ask students which rules they’ve followed recently. Publicly congratulate students who choose civility during conflicts and difficult classroom conversations.

LESSON PLAN IDEAS

Some ideas to get started in the classroom.

- Have students watch the nightly news on two different nights, on two different channels, or view two distinct political talk shows. Be sure to pair channels that will offer different “takes” on the news, such as PBS News Hour or MSNBC and Fox News. Have students track the “tone” of both the newscasters and any guests on the news. Are they impartial? Was the reporting fair and balanced? Could you tell the political persuasion of the newscasters, guests, and/or news program?
- Assign students a political blog to read (this could also be a blog attached to a national newspaper). Have them read and print the comments on one or more of the blog entries. Discuss the tone of these comments and why people might be less civil when leaving comments on websites. What causes us to follow the rules of civil society? What gives us permission to be uncivil, rude, or hostile?

A CHECKLIST FOR TEACHERS

Check these out before diving into the topic.

- Create rules for civil discourse in the classroom before engaging in any potentially “charged” discussion.
- Keep a neutral, open attitude towards all sides of an issue.
- Create your own list of civil behavior and responses to rudeness; practice being civil in your own life.
- Look at one or more of the lists / guidelines for civil behavior on the resource list. Use these as a model for creating a guideline for civil discourse in your own classroom.

RESOURCES

Resources to help you plan lessons about this topic.

RaceBridges Studio Site

Related lesson plans on the RaceBridges website(s).

- Sticking Together: Sharing our Stories, Our Differences, Our Similarities
<http://racebridgesstudio.com/sticking-together-sharing-our-stories-our-differences-and-our-similarities/>
- Claim It! Differences and Similarities: Creating a Climate of Inclusion
<http://racebridgesstudio.com/claim-it-differences-similarities-creating-a-climate-of-inclusion/>
- Keep the Peace! Preparing for Conflict, Dealing with Anger, and Creating Communities of Harmony
<http://racebridgesstudio.com/keep-the-peace-2>
- Including Everyone: Small Changes to Create a Welcoming Classroom
<http://racebridgesstudio.com/including-everyone-small-changes-to-create-a-welcoming-classroom/>

OTHER RESOURCES

[“From Enmity to Comity: Restoring Civility and Pride to American Life.”](#) by Robert Fuller. This article addresses the root cause of incivility—fear—and argues for ways to return to civil political discourse where we don’t have to disagree but where all are respected.

[Choose Civility](#): This website was created in response to the book *Choosing Civility: Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*. There are a variety of resources there, including in-depth [book lists](#) for children, teens, and adults.

Teaching Children Civility Begins at Home

<http://www.familyresource.com/parenting/character-development/teaching-children-civility-begins-at-home>

Teaching Civility in an F-Word Society

Marilyn Price-Mitchell Ph.D.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-moment-youth/201206/teaching-civility-in-f-word-society>

FURTHER IDEAS ON CIVILITY**What Are The Ways That Civility Might Thrive?**

- Teaching children to care about others because it brings them meaning rather than expecting anything in return.
- Involving children in public service at a children's hospital.
- Teaching children to respect senior citizens by volunteering at independent living facilities.
- Teaching common courtesies, such as introducing oneself, shaking hands with others, and thanking people for doing kind gestures for them.
- Teaching children to share and play cooperatively with others.
- Teaching children to respect and assist those who are disabled or have learning limitations.
- Parents can demonstrate through word and action what civility means.

15 Ways Children Learn Civility From Adults:

- Lead by example.
- Think about the impact of our words and actions on others first.
- Treat children and adults with the respect that we expect them to treat others.
- Apologize when we are wrong.
- Disagree with intelligence, humor, and civil discourse.
- Don't let anger and emotion get in the way of listening to others.
- Teach character strengths, like respect and empathy, at home and in classrooms.
- Demand civility of our politicians and public servants.
- Set ground rules for civil behavior at home and in classrooms.
- Challenge people's views but don't attack the person.
- Be tolerant of people who are different from us.
- Praise others for their civil behavior, regardless of their viewpoints.
- Empower children to take a stand against bullying.
- Remind students often why we should be civil.
- Teach children how to become engaged citizens.

WORDS TO REMEMBER

**Be the change you wish
to see in the world.**

Gandhi, Indian spiritual
and political leader

**Three things in human life
are important: the first is
to be kind; the second
is to be kind; and the
third is to be king.**

Henry James, novelist

**Hate is the consequence
of fear. We fear something
before we hate it.**

Cyril Connolly

**Civility is not a sign
of weakness.**

Barack Obama, U. S. President

**"Hello, babies. Welcome
to Earth. It's hot in the
summer and cold in the
winter. It's round and wet
and crowded. At the outside,
babies, you've got about a
hundred years here. There's
only one rule that I know of,
babies—God damn it, you've
got to be kind."**

an imagined speech at
baptism in *God Bless You,*
Mr. Rosewater by Kurt Vonnegut

REFLECTIONS

Use these questions to inspire your own thinking and teaching about the topic.

- Examine your own feelings about conflict: do you seek to avoid conflict at any cost? Do you avoid discussing controversial topics? Do you pursue your own point in an argument, no matter what? Do you seriously consider others' point of views?
- Remember the best "difficult" conversation you've had in your classroom: what went well? What did you do to facilitate the conversation? What is your strongest skill as a conversation facilitator?
- When students disagree in your class, how do you normally respond? How might you better help students share their honest, heartfelt opinions, listen authentically to one another, and engage in civil discussion, even disagreement?

Post this on your bulletin board or photocopy it and pass it out to students to use as a bookmark.

BE CIVIL!**I'm Right . . . You're Wrong! Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable**

"Civility is not something that automatically happens. Civil societies come about because people want them to." (Jimmy Bise, Jr.)

Many claim that civil society is breaking down as political rallies turn ugly, people text and take cell phone calls during concerts and speakers, and it feels that everyone is only looking out for number one.

It's easy to look at the behavior of others, but it is essential that we examine our own actions. Are we being kind? Are we taking time to listen to one another? Do we apologize when we have hurt another? Do we treat others as we want to be treated?

As the quotation says above, civility doesn't just happen. We have to commit to behaving civilly ourselves.

There are many lesson plans, stories and videos on our RaceBridges sites for teachers. We invite you to explore some of these units. Many of them have a connection to themes about civility and dealing with differences.

www.RaceBridgesStudio.com