

A banner with a blue and green circular pattern background. The text "DIVERSITY MEMO" is in large white capital letters, and "for teachers" is in smaller white lowercase letters below it.

# DIVERSITY MEMO

for teachers

## **DIVERSITY MEMO: Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable** **The Search for Civility**

**Dear Teacher (and Leader),**

Given the increasing volatility of political discourse in the United States, from vitriolic editorializing presented as news to recent Tea Party protests, there is a need for 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 to 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 Diversity Memo*, you'll find a classroom activity, some "lesson plan ideas" 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 civil discourse if we are to have a vibrant democracy!

# Classroom Activities :: Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable

This brief lesson-starter suggests activities 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 and / or a clip of Kanye West interrupting Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for “Best Female Video” at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards show.

## Video Links on YouTube

- Joe Wilson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ICVSzPBOIw>
- Kanye West: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lz8gCZ7zpsQ>

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. Or have students take the official civility pledge at [www.civilityproject.org](http://www.civilityproject.org).

# Lesson Plan Ideas :: Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable

Some ideas to get started in the classroom.

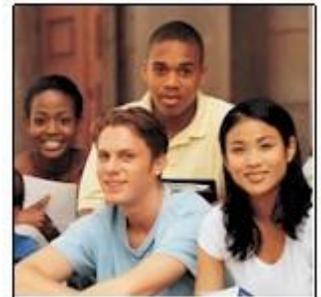
- Have students watch the nightly news on two different nights, on two different channels, or view two distinct political talk shows. Be sure to pair channels that will offer different “takes” on the news, such as PBS News Hour and Fox News. Have students track the “tone” of both the newscasters and 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 :: Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable

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 :: Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable

Resources to help you plan lessons about the topic.

## RaceBridges Studio Content – <http://RaceBridgesStudio.com>

- Sticking Together: Sharing our Stories, Our Differences, Our Similarities
- Claim It! Differences and Similarities: Creating a Climate of Inclusion
- Keep the Peace! Preparing for Conflict, Dealing with Anger, and Creating Communities of Harmony
- Including Everyone: Small Changes to Create a Welcoming Classroom



## Other Resources

### Dr. Forni's Civility Web Site:

<http://krieger.jhu.edu/civility>

This is the site of Dr. J. M. Forni, a professor who co-founded the John Hopkins Civility Project that aims “at assessing the significance of civility, manners and politeness in contemporary society.” Forni authored two books on civility: *Choosing Civility: Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* and *The Civility Solution: What To Do When People Are Rude*.

### “From Enmity to Comity: Restoring Civility and Pride to American Life,” by Robert Fuller.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-fuller/from-enmity-to-comity-res\\_b\\_327308.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-fuller/from-enmity-to-comity-res_b_327308.html)

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.

### “Obama Calls for Civility at Prayer Breakfast,” by Jeff Zeleny.

[http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/04/obama-calls-for-civility-at-prayer-breakfast/?\\_r=1](http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/04/obama-calls-for-civility-at-prayer-breakfast/?_r=1)

This article covers President Obama's address to the National Prayer Breakfast when he called on people to engage with their political rivals without attacking one another's character.

### Choose Civility:

<http://choosecivility.org/>

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.

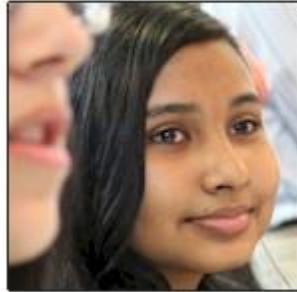
### The Civility Project:

<http://www.civilityproject.org/>

This website seeks to encourage civility in the political arena. Contains a bibliography of books on civility and examples of civility and incivility in contemporary culture.

# Words to Remember :: Disagreeing Without Being Disagreeable

Use these quotations at the beginning of the lesson or unit to spark student interest; try having students respond to them in writing or discuss them in small groups.



**Be the change you wish to  
see in the world.**  
(Gandhi, Indian spiritual and political leader)

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

(Cyril Connolly)

***Do not mistreat the alien or oppress him,  
for you were aliens in Egypt. Do not oppress an alien;  
you yourselves know what it feels like  
to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.***

(Exodus 23:9)

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

(Barack Obama, U. S. President)

**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 kind.**

(Henry James, novelist)

**“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 :: Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

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.

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## 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.*

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