

Framework for Promoting Peace During Times of Civil Unrest

Purpose:

This framework will guide educators and students in navigating through polarizing and sensitive classroom discussions. The goal is for educators and students to have a working understanding of the following:

- That each person has an opinion but must remain objective, respectful, and demonstrate a willingness to listen to others.
- That the best classroom discussion regarding sensitive or potentially polarizing subjects can only take place when the classroom culture offers a positive environment between educators and students and student to student.
- That potentially sensitive topics will have relevance to the curriculum but must be presented based on timing that involves whole classroom lessons or teachable moments based upon facts and the moment.
- That multiple perspectives must be considered, and until facts are known, conclusions must remain in the abstract.
- That all discussions should include a time of reflection, closure, or further review based upon new information.
- That educators must model for their students the ability to enter into sensitive discussions without interjecting personal views in order for students to exhibit the same traits when engaging in sensitive discussions. Ralph Waldo Emerson stated “What you do speak so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.”

Creating a Positive Classroom Culture that Facilitates Discussions Regarding Polarizing Topics

Establish agreed upon ground rules, which include:

- Active listening
- Understanding the makeup of student demographics
- Understanding that all facts may not be readily available at time of discussion
- Developing activities that encourage students and educators to think more globally at solving the issues at hand

Components of Classroom Strategies

- Objectivity
- Building Relationships
- Modeling
- Curriculum/Pacing
- Perspective
- Synthesizing
- Guiding Questions
- Professionalism

Strategies for Navigating Discussion of Polarizing Topics

Creating Culture of Rapport and Respect

- Establish relationships and a shared vision
- Positive talk
- Safe zone to discuss
- Establish agreed upon ground rules
- Active listeners
- Knowing your classroom and acknowledge the fact that you might not know
- Building relationships activities

1. Objectivity

- What does objectivity look like?
- Display compassion
- When, where, how, why to be objective
- Topics can be open forum
- Active non-judgmental listening and sharing vs. debating

2. Building Relationships

- Allowing students to establish ground rules/boundaries
- Questioning (Socratic method)
- Be open to courageous dialogue or questions from students
- Acknowledging that everyone has an opinion but that it is not right or wrong
- Agree to disagree and move on
- Validates everyone's contributions to discussion
- Criticize ideas not people
- Fairness is not equality
- Know/acknowledge your audiences cultural capital
- Know/acknowledge differences/respect differing views
- Know/acknowledge your community and the value system of people living in RSD

3. Modeling

- "I" statements
- Paraphrasing/reflection
- "What I heard you say was..." vs. "You said..."
- Model how to phrase things that are not judgmental/evaluative
- Asking open-ended questions
- Asking questions that do not insert one's opinion/bias
- Stick to the facts

4. Curriculum and Pacing

- What is the educational outcome?

- Utilize think-write-reflect-pair-share instructional strategy
- Make time for the teachable moment -be aware of time given to topic
- Discussion vs. dialogue
- Providing an opportunity for continued discussion through venues for students to share/discuss
- Develop ways for students to communicate/share their questions/concerns
- Use discussion starters/prompts
- Provide an opportunity for “time out” through journaling/ brainstorming/ reflection before/during/after classroom discussion
- Fitting to the curriculum to ensure that you are adding differing perspectives to a concept (different types of literature, genres relay varying perspectives, ensuring diversity)

5. Perspective

- Situate the event, help students identify there are multiple perspectives, there is no right and wrong, not good vs. bad
- Choose a non-polarizing topic to explore how individuals’ perspectives can be different (Coke vs.Pepsi)
- Fair is not equal
- Challenging one’s own assumptions

6. Synthesizing

- Summarizing what has been discussed to bring closure
- Acknowledge all contributions to discussion
- Reconnect to educational outcome
- Where do we go from here?
- Allow time for reflection

Discussion Starters

Following are suggested discussion starters for classroom discussion. Questions could be grouped into the following categories:

- Media sensationalism
- Fairness and the Judicial System
- Equity and race relations
- Challenges in improving cultural competency in our society
- Social justice

Questions:

- Can you think of a situation in which you felt your experiences and views were not understood by others? How might your feelings in that situation relate to the situation people are experiencing right now in our region?
- What are people angry or frustrated about the Stockley decision? Why are people protesting? Why is this situation so complicated?
- It has been observed that the situation in our region did not develop overnight. In other words, tensions have existed beneath the surface for many years. Where do those tensions come from?
- How many different points of view can the situation in the Stockley case be examined from? What are those points of view? How well do the people holding those different perspectives understand others' views?
- What role do our backgrounds as males, females, members of minority groups or majority groups, members of different socioeconomic classes playing shaping our reaction to what we see on the news from Ferguson?
- What can we do to develop a better understanding of people whose life experiences are different in important respects from our own? What do we have in common with people whose life experiences are different from our own?
- When it comes to how others treat us, what sorts of things do we take for granted based on who we are (e.g., our gender; our ethnic identity; our economic class; etc.) that is, what types of reactions do we come to expect from others? What types of reactions would surprise you? What reactions bother you the most?
- The first amendment in the U.S. constitution guarantees each of us the right to protest, the right to assemble with others in a peaceable manner, the right to "petition the government for a redress of grievances." What are the challenges of protecting those rights in a free society when emotions are running high? Why must those rights be protected even in difficult times? What are the practical

implications for protestors and for law enforcement officials who are trying to maintain order yet who also charged with protecting citizens' first amendment rights? Can we have free expression without things occasionally getting messy?

- Why are many people hesitant to discuss matters related to race or economic class, for that matter? What holds people back from having respectful yet honest conversations about such matters?
- Is it desirable for us to aim for a “color-blind” society? Is such a thing truly possible? How likely are any of us to “just not notice” an individual’s race? Is acknowledging that different groups often have some experiences in common and some experiences that are different a bad thing?
- What can we gain from looking at how race/ethnic identity shapes our own experiences and other people’s experiences?
- What’s the most confusing thing you’ve seen or heard on the news regarding the Stockley verdict situation?
- Why is there national attention to what’s happening in St. Louis? Is it because the events there are rare? Or are there deeper reasons why people are paying attention to this Missouri suburb?
- What will it take for St. Louis to heal? What needs to happen to keep these kinds of events from re-occurring in the St. Louis area.
- What’s the right role for the news media to play in an event such as this? What’s the most responsible thing you’ve seen news reporters/writers do as they’ve covered the different parts of this news story? What’s the most irresponsible thing you’ve seen the news media do? Why is freedom of the press protected by the first amendment?
- We live in an era of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap Chat, etc.). How challenging is it to discuss a complex situation like the Stockley verdict in a responsible, thoughtful way in social media? When you stumble across an online discussion that seems to be spiraling out of control, what’s your reaction?