Lesson 8: Teacher Resource Sheet - Civil Discourse Application

---

Lesson Overview and Goals

Purpose

This lesson serves as the culminating application of all civil discourse skills learned in Lessons 6-7. Students will demonstrate their ability to:

- Apply steel-manning and star-manning techniques
- Avoid logical fallacies in real-time discussion
- Use perspective-shifting skills
- Engage respectfully with assigned positions they may not personally hold

Formative Assessment Opportunity

- Observe skill application before unit wrap-up discussion
- Identify students who need additional support
- Document progress on civil discourse learning objectives
- Prepare for final unit synthesis

Topic Selection Guidelines

Recommended Topics

Choose issues that are:

- **Relevant to student experience** but not deeply personal
- **Complex enough** to require genuine consideration of multiple viewpoints
- **Low-stakes** in terms of real-world consequences for students
- **Balanced** with legitimate arguments on multiple sides

Youth Curfew Discussion Framework

Position A - Support Youth Curfews:

- Public safety benefits for both youth and community
- Parental peace of mind and support for family rules
- Reduced opportunity for youth to get into trouble
- Successful implementation in other communities

Position B - Oppose Youth Curfews:

- Individual freedom and civil liberties concerns
- Potential for discriminatory enforcement
- Better to address root causes of problems
- May harm youth who have legitimate reasons to be out

Social Media Civility Discussion Framework

Position A - Platforms Should Regulate More Heavily:

- Responsibility to protect users from harm
- Current systems allow abuse and misinformation
- Private companies have right to set community standards
- Successful moderation models exist

Position B - Platforms Should Regulate Less:

- Free speech principles and concerns about censorship
- Difficulty of fair and consistent moderation at scale
- Users can make their own choices about engagement
- Innovation and creativity flourish with fewer restrictions

Position Assignment Strategy

Why Assign Positions

- **Skill focus over opinion**: Emphasizes civil discourse techniques rather than personal beliefs
- **Perspective-taking**: Forces students to understand different viewpoints deeply
- **Reduces defensiveness**: Students can't retreat into "but this is what I really believe"
- **Fairness**: Everyone practices the challenging skill of arguing for assigned positions

Implementation Tips

- **Random assignment**: Use clearly fair method (draw from hat, count off, etc.)
- **Acknowledge discomfort**: "It may feel strange to argue for something you don't believe - that's normal and part of the learning"
- **Emphasize skill**: "We're practicing civil discourse skills, not determining your actual beliefs"
- **Professional development**: "Lawyers, diplomats, and debaters regularly argue positions they don't personally hold"

Structured Discussion Format

Preparation Phase (20 minutes)

Same-position small groups develop:

- **Core arguments** with supporting evidence
- **Anticipated counterarguments** and responses
- **Steel-man version** of opposing position
- **Star-man acknowledgment** of opposing values
- **Fallacy check** of their own arguments

Teacher circulation should focus on:

- Helping groups find strongest arguments
- Preventing fallacious reasoning
- Encouraging steel-manning of opposition
- Suggesting evidence or examples
- Managing time and keeping groups on task

Discussion Structure (15-20 minutes)

Round 1 - Position Statements (2 minutes each side):

- Clear, fallacy-free presentation of main arguments
- Evidence and reasoning support
- Professional, respectful tone

Round 2 - Clarifying Questions (3 minutes):

- Questions for understanding only, not rebuttals
- "Help me understand..." or "Could you clarify..."
- No arguing or challenging at this stage

Round 3 - Responses (3 minutes each side):

- Address questions and concerns raised
- Steel-man opposing arguments before responding
- Star-man acknowledgment of opposing values
- Avoid fallacies in responses

Round 4 - Finding Common Ground (4 minutes):

- Both sides identify areas of agreement
- Shared values or concerns
- Potential compromise positions
- Acknowledge complexity of the issue

Round 5 - Closing Thoughts (2 minutes each side):

- Final reflections on the discussion
- What they learned from the other side
- Refined understanding of their assigned position

Teacher Facilitation During Discussion

Active Monitoring For

Positive examples to highlight:

- Effective steel-manning or star-manning
- Questions that show genuine curiosity
- Respectful disagreement focused on ideas
- Acknowledgment of good points from other side
- Avoiding logical fallacies successfully

Gentle corrections needed for:

- Ad hominem attacks or personal references
- Straw-manning of opposing positions
- Logical fallacies in arguments
- Interrupting or talking over others
- Getting emotionally reactive

Intervention Strategies

For fallacies: "Let's pause and think about how we could reframe that argument"

For personal attacks: "Remember, we're focusing on ideas and policies, not individuals"
For straw-manning: "Can you steel-man their position before responding to it?"
For emotional escalation: "Take a breath and remember our civil discourse goals"

Encouraging Participation

- **For quiet students**: "What questions do you have about the other side's position?"
- **For dominant speakers**: "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet"
- **For nervous students**: "You can start by building on what [classmate] just said"

Common Challenges and Solutions

Students Reverting to Debate Mode

Signs: Trying to "win" rather than understand, attacking weak points instead of engaging strongest arguments

Response:

- Pause and remind about dialogue vs. debate distinction
- "Remember, we're exploring ideas together, not trying to defeat each other"
- Redirect to steel-manning: "Can you present their strongest argument first?"

Difficulty with Assigned Positions

Signs: Students explicitly saying "But I don't actually believe this" or giving half-hearted arguments

Response:

- Acknowledge the challenge: "It's hard to argue for something you don't believe - that's exactly why it's good practice"
- Reframe as skill-building: "Think of this like acting - you're playing a role to develop your abilities"
- Focus on understanding: "Your job isn't to become convinced, but to help us all understand this perspective"

Unproductive Group Dynamics

Signs: One person dominating, others checking out, side conversations

Response:

- Structured turn-taking: "Let's hear from each person for 30 seconds"
- Role assignments: "You be the questioner, you be the summarizer"
- Redirect energy: "Channel that enthusiasm toward steel-manning their position"

Emotional Investment Despite Assigned Positions

Signs: Students getting upset even when arguing assigned positions

Response:

- Normalize the reaction: "These topics do matter to people - that's why civil discourse skills are important"
- Refocus on skills: "This is exactly when these techniques become most valuable"
- Provide cooling-off moment: "Let's take 30 seconds to reset and remember our goals"

Reflection Component

Individual Reflection Prompts

During final 5 minutes of discussion:

- Which civil discourse technique was most helpful today?
- What was most challenging about arguing for your assigned position?
- What did you learn about the other side's perspective?
- How might you apply these skills outside of school?

Homework Reflection Template

Civil Dialogue Template should include:

- Summary of assigned position and main arguments used
- Examples of steel-manning or star-manning attempted
- Logical fallacies observed (in self or others) and how addressed
- Moments of finding common ground or shared values
- Personal reflection on skill development and challenges

Assessment Rubric Elements

Skill Application (Observable During Discussion)

Steel-manning:

- Proficient: Accurately represents opposing arguments in strongest form
- Developing: Attempts to represent opposing views fairly
- Beginning: Focuses mainly on weak points of opposition

Star-manning:

- Proficient: Genuinely acknowledges good intentions or values behind opposing position
- Developing: Shows some recognition of opposing motivations
- Beginning: Focuses only on disagreement without acknowledgment

Fallacy Avoidance:

- Proficient: Arguments are logically sound and address real issues
- Developing: Occasional fallacies but catches and corrects them
- Beginning: Frequent use of fallacies without recognition

Respectful Engagement:

- Proficient: Maintains respect for persons while challenging ideas
- Developing: Generally respectful with occasional lapses
- Beginning: Focuses on attacking people rather than addressing arguments

Participation Quality

Question Asking:

- Seeks genuine understanding rather than setting up attacks
- Shows curiosity about different perspectives
- Helps clarify positions and reasoning

Response to Others:

- Builds on others' contributions constructively
- Acknowledges good points made by others
- Maintains professional tone even in disagreement

Preparation for Unit Wrap-Up

Skills Transfer

- **Document observed skills** for unit wrap-up planning
- **Identify students** who need additional support
- **Note successful strategies** that can be reinforced in final discussion
- **Plan groupings** for unit wrap-up based on skill development

Content Connection

- This lesson bridges civil discourse skills with substantive identity/pluralism content
- Students will apply these same skills to unit synthesis topics
- Experience with assigned positions prepares them for complex identity discussions

Confidence Building

- **Celebrate successes**: Point out effective examples during discussions
- **Normalize challenges**: "These skills take practice - you're doing the hard work of learning"
- **Build momentum**: "You're ready to apply these skills to even more complex topics"

Extension and Differentiation

For Advanced Students

- **Additional roles**: Assign some students to be discussion moderators or observers
- **Meta-analysis**: Have them identify which techniques are most effective in real-time
- **Coaching role**: Help support students who are struggling with assigned positions

For Struggling Students

- **Simplified focus**: Choose one technique to focus on rather than trying all at once
- **Partner support**: Pair with stronger students during preparation phase
- **Sentence stems**: Provide frames like "What I hear you saying is..." or "I appreciate that you..."

For Different Learning Styles

- **Visual learners**: Provide graphic organizers for argument structure
- **Kinesthetic learners**: Allow standing discussions or movement between groups
- **Auditory learners**: Include think-pair-share components throughout