

The Civil Discourse Project

An informative, small group presentation in a panel discussion format, designed to present both sides of a controversial topic in an informed, balanced, and respectful manner.

Recommended Courses

Any course in which controversial topics are studied, discussed, or implemented

Goals and Objectives

At the conclusion of this project, students should have experienced or explored:

- the definition, purpose and practice of civil discourse
- the potential strengths and weaknesses of group work
- both sides of a controversial topic
- conversation with someone in the community who holds an opposing opinion, as insight into a valuable avenue of research
- bringing multifaceted information and perspectives into a cohesive whole
- development of a panel discussion presentation

Rationale

Vital to the success of the individual student and our communities is the ability to meet the challenges of diversity, not through force or manipulation, but through insight, empathy and effective communication. A working knowledge of civil discourse can help students learn valuable lessons from one another while learning to share ideas and solve problems in a respectful manner. Discussion leads to insight; insight leads to understanding; understanding leads to respect. This assignment instructs and encourages students to consider and present a controversial topic from multi-faceted perspectives. Discussing ideas in a climate of civil discourse allows the free flow of ideas and deeper understanding.

Conducting the Activity

Overview

The activity is conducted in six steps with students divided into groups of 4-5. Each group chooses a controversial topic to research and present, then creates a Google Doc for ease of collaboration outside the classroom and to create a record of participation.

Step 1

- Introduce key concepts of civil discourse and explain the details of the Civil Discourse Project
- Divide class into groups of 4-5 (random selection; e.g., using playing cards)
- Ask students to share contact information and create a Google Doc brainstorming page for the group

Step 2

- Groups brainstorm possible topics
- Groups clear topic with the instructor, reserving it for their use
- Groups create purpose statements
- Groups discuss whom they will interview, then divide the assignment into manageable tasks
- Groups contact potential interviewees by email in a respectful and professional manner. Each message should include a professional greeting, a brief explanation of the Civil Discourse Project, a request for a face-to-face interview, and a warm and professional closing
- Create and document non-combative interview questions, to be included as an addendum to the outline
- During the interview:
 - Engage in conversation
 - Learn about interviewee's perspective
 - Ask non-combative, open-ended interview questions
 - Incorporate question linking into your conversation
 - Express gratitude for time spent and insights gained
- Send thank-you note or email

Step 3

- Groups develop their presentations by using the purpose statement as a guide to gathering material, interviewing, organizing, and creating moderator questions, all of which are done collaboratively, whether in person or digitally
- Groups create an outline for their presentations

Step 4

- Practice aloud to achieve a smooth flow of ideas and to time the presentation

Step 5

- Deliver panel discussion presentation

Step 6

- Write reflective paper

Debriefing

Post-project analysis is based on insights from reflective papers, in which students are asked to consider and record **knowledge, skills, and abilities** gained or demonstrated through the Civil Discourse Project and how these might be used in the future; **integration**, or how this project relates to or affects other experiences or knowledge gained in other classes, activities, or conversations; and **importance**, asking what makes civil discourse a key skill to success, what students learned about themselves and others through this project, and what the “takeaway” is from this learning experience.

Limitations

As with any group project, there are some who work with diligence and timeliness, while others attempt to get by without contributing much. The Turkey Clause and Google Docs help keep the playing field fair.

Turkey Clause

(Courtesy of Robert Smith, Purdue University)

Occasionally a group member will choose, for whatever reason, not to contribute to the group's efforts by not doing research, missing most out-of-class planning time, or withdrawing during the work sessions. Each group should attempt to draw the member back into the process and sometimes legitimate adjustments need to be made.

However, despite good-faith efforts, if a member does not contribute, the group as a whole may enact the “turkey clause” – in effect, firing the person from the group. If this is necessary, the group must contact the instructor and document the need for this action. If the instructor approves, the non-contributing student will receive an F for the assignment.

Civil Discourse

- engagement in discourse (conversation) intended to enhance understanding.
- “the exercise of patience, integrity, humility and mutual respect in civil conversation, even [or especially] with those with whom we disagree.” James Calvin Davis, *In Defense of Civility*

Essentials of Civil Discourse

Verified information

Thoughtful listening

Mutual respect

Disagreement does not equal hate

Everyone has a right to his or her opinion

It is vital to respect another's right to an opinion

Disagreeing is a key component of civil discourse

Disagreeing is different from being disagreeable

Critiquing or challenging ideas, not individuals

The goal is understanding

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