

Civil Conversations Using Primary Documents

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- *Does the objective declared in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution to “form a more perfect union” have relevance for us today, in the age of blue states and red states? Or does it simply reflect the concerns of the founders at the time of writing the Constitution?*
- *Should the goals stated in the Preamble be reordered to reflect modern priorities?*
- *Why did the framers include “our Posterity” when they talked about the Blessings of Liberty?*



Illinois high school students deliberate “Should the U.S. Constitution be amended to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman?” during a CRFC Youth Summit in Chicago, April 29, 2005.

Photo by Radha Friedman

What do the questions above have in common? All have emerged as issues in discussions with middle and secondary students about the Preamble as they study the Constitution through civil conversations.

Primary source documents can be a key element in conversation and deliberation. They lend authenticity to student consideration of issues facing our democracy and stimulate student interest. In addition, conversation about a primary document leads to a much deeper understanding of that document and can raise authentic questions for further exploration.

In this article, we examine one way of using primary sources to prompt discourse: employing such sources as texts in a discussion model for civil conversation. We begin by looking

at a civil conversation using the Preamble of the Constitution as a text and then consider how teachers might select other documents that would be excellent texts for discussion, analyzing several examples.

A civil conversation is designed to help students gain a deeper understanding of a text or issue by developing and responding to difficult questions over which there is legitimate disagreement. In responding to these questions, new insights are often gained and new questions emerge. The methodology deemphasizes the role of the teacher and redistributes responsibilities to students, thereby helping to prepare students for productive discussions outside of school. The civil



Box A: The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

conversation is not a competitive process. While other forms of discussion, such as debate, may create a situation in which one side wins and one loses, all students should feel successful when a civil conversation concludes.

Civil Conversation on the Preamble

Understanding the Preamble (Box A) is critically important to U.S. citizens because it provides the vision for the government; it explains who is forming the government (“We the People”) and why (“to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity”). Through civil conversation, a text-based discussion model, students can delve into the meaning of this critical primary source. Civil conversation also helps students develop habits of mind that are critical in deliberation: careful reading of sources, listening, and respecting others’ views.

A civil conversation reading guide (see Box B) provides norms for the discussion and helps students prepare. The reading guide asks questions that call for comprehension of the text (questions 1 and 2), elicit student opinions (questions 3 and 4), prompt students to identify questions worthy of discussion (question 5), and stimulate reflection (questions 6 and 7, completed after the conversation). Teachers who have spent time framing questions for discussion know that it is not an easy task—and it is a challenge for students, who often pose comprehension questions or fact-based questions that require additional reading or research to answer. Students need practice and good models to begin framing effective discussion questions.

While students are learning the skill of asking “discussable” questions, the teacher may want to open discussion by posing a question himself or herself. For example, one of the questions teachers have found useful for prompting lively conversation when considering the Preamble is: Who are “We the People”?

Does it affect your reading of the Preamble if you know that you were not included in this phrase in 1787?

As students gain skill in posing questions, conversation can be centered on their own questions. Some teachers use a whip-around strategy, in which they go quickly around the group, asking each student to pose one of the questions they noted on their reading guide. If several students have similar questions or students respond strongly to a particular question raised, this can be the starting point for the group’s conversation.

In the best civil conversations, discussion flows freely from student to student, with the teacher acting as a facilitator, getting the conversation back on track when it strays too far from the topic at hand, reminding discussants to refer to the text, and posing new questions when conversation lags. For the teacher with a very clear outcome in mind (“Students will understand that the Preamble sets forth the purposes of government”), a civil conversation can be frustrating because it often does not take a straight path from start to end. It may involve false starts, productive tangents, circling back to ideas touched upon earlier, or in-depth analysis of a question the teacher never anticipated.

A civil conversation need not last for an extended time—depending on the richness and interest level of the text, anywhere from 10 minutes to an entire class period can be devoted to exploring its meaning. When the conversation is finished, students complete the final two questions on the reading guide as they reflect on what they learned through the conversation.

And what do they learn from participating in a civil conversation about the Preamble? Specific outcomes can vary depending on the direction the conversation takes, but student reflections show that they generally do understand more clearly that the Preamble establishes the purposes of our government and they have a deeper understanding of specific phrases of the Preamble on which the conversation focused. Students also learn that their voices matter, that they can talk about serious issues with people whose ideas differ from their own, that

Civil Conversation

The Rules:

1. Read the text as if it were written by someone you really respected.
2. Encourage everyone in the group to participate in the conversation.
3. Listen carefully to what others are saying.
4. Ask clarifying questions if you do not understand a point raised.
5. Be respectful of what others are saying.
6. Refer to the text to support your ideas.
7. Focus on ideas, not personalities.

Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.

Pay attention to your first impression as to what the reading is about.

Look for the main points and then go back and re-read it. Briefly answer the following.

1. This selection is about
2. The main points are:
3. In the reading, I agree with
4. In the reading, I disagree with
5. What are two questions about this reading that you think need to be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer, ones that can use materials in the text as evidence.)

The next two questions should be answered after you hold your civil conversation.

6. What did you learn from the civil conversation?
7. What common ground did you find with other members of the group?

Source: Constitutional Rights Foundation.



The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago (CRFC) conducts workshops, institutes, or study groups on discussion and deliberation for teachers interested in leading such classroom conversations. Because such conversation, whether about the principles of government or current controversial issues, is so fundamental to citizenship in a democracy, the CRFC has, for the past several years, sought to develop young people's ability to participate in civil and civic deliberation. Through such projects as *Deliberating In a Democracy*, *Equal Justice Under Law*, and several institutes supported by the Teaching American History grants, CRFC has worked with students and teachers to instill the skills and dispositions required to take part in discussion and deliberation. (See www.crfc.org for more information about these programs.)

through careful consideration they can uncover the meaning of challenging texts—and even enjoy doing it.

Selecting Primary Sources for Use as Texts

In a recent Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago institute, middle school teachers developed the following list of criteria for selecting texts for civil conversations:

- The text should be “meaty”—it should provide substance for a meaningful conversation.
- The text should be provocative—it should have a voice or position that stimulates student responses. An article that is an “objective” retelling of facts may not be the best choice.
- The topic of the text should be interesting to students and should be age-appropriate.
- The topic of the text should support the curriculum.

Obviously, a wide array of primary sources could meet these criteria. Let’s consider how several different types of sources could be used in a study of government and the Constitution. For illustration purposes, we will consider two broad topics included in any government course: the legislative branch and the meaning of citizenship.

Legislative Branch. As students learn about the powers of the legislative branch and how the legislature works to create policy, what documents might they discuss? One possibility is to engage students in analyzing founding documents to gain deeper insight into the thinking of the framers. For example, a civil conversation might focus on excerpts from Federalist No. 51, titled “The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments” (available at www.ourdocuments.gov). In this essay, the author speaks of the need for government and discusses methods of controlling the power of the legislative branch, which he believed would be strongest in a republic.

...If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.

...In republican government, the legislative authority necessarily predominates. The remedy for this inconveniency is to divide the legislature into different branches; and to render them, by different modes of

election and different principles of action, as little connected with each other as the nature of their common functions and their common dependence on the society will admit. It may even be necessary to guard against dangerous encroachments by still further precautions. As the weight of the legislative authority requires that it should be thus divided the weakness of the executive may require, on the other hand, that it should be fortified. An absolute negative on the legislature appears, at first view, to be the natural defense with which the executive magistrate should be armed. But perhaps it would be neither altogether safe nor alone sufficient. On ordinary occasions it might not be exerted with the requisite firmness, and on extraordinary occasions it might be perfidiously abused....—Publius

While brief, these excerpts are concept-rich and could thus provide an opportunity for students to examine the need for controls on the power of government, discuss which branch of government is most powerful, and evaluate the effectiveness of checks on the powers of the legislative branch. However, a document does not need to date from the founding period to be worthy of conversation. Students might also conduct a civil conversation on a public opinion poll regarding Congress (see, for example, the announcement of the results of such a poll by the Center on Congress at Indiana University, available at congress.indiana.edu/pdf/COC%20Survey%20Press%20Release%2008_2005.pdf). Documents that reflect the current work of Congress—a piece of legislation, testimony before a congressional committee, or a floor debate (Thomas, a service of the Library of Congress, provides ready access to such documents; see thomas.loc.gov)—could also serve as the text for a civil conversation that would deepen students’ understanding of the process of developing policy.

Citizenship and Participation. Knowledge of our Constitution and government is hollow if students do not know how and feel motivated to participate in that government. A source that teachers may not readily think of using in exploring the meaning of citizenship is the commencement address. Commencement is a time when people talk about the responsibilities of citizenship because those graduating are entering a new phase of life and are thinking about the kind of adult they want to be. Of course, not every graduation speech is a gem, but we have found two that include very interesting ideas about the meaning of citizenship—one by President George W. Bush and the other by Illinois Senator Barack Obama. Both speakers talked about what it means to be American and the need for sacrifice; both told stories intended to convey their notions of the essence of citizenship; and both related their beliefs about the kind of citizens the United States requires. The first is a commencement address by President George W. Bush, given at Ohio State University on June 14, 2002 (www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020614-1.html).

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America needs more than taxpayers, spectators, and occasional voters. America needs full-time citizens. America needs men and women who respond to the call of duty, who stand up for the weak, who speak up for their beliefs, who sacrifice for a greater good. America needs your energy, and your leadership, and your ambition. And through the gathering momentum of millions of acts of kindness and decency, we will change America one soul at a time—and we will build a culture of service.

The following is a commencement address by Senator Barack Obama, given at Knox College on June 4, 2005 (www.knox.edu/x9803.xml):

My hope for all of you is that as you leave here today, you decide to keep these principles alive in your own life and in the life of this country. You will be tested. You won't always succeed. But know that you have it within your power to try. That generations who have come before you faced these same fears and uncertainties in their own time. And that through our collective labor, and through God's providence, and our willingness to shoulder each other's burdens, America will continue on its precious journey towards that distant horizon, and a better day.

Using a page of excerpts from each speech, students could explore such questions as:

- Is sacrifice essential to citizenship?
- What models of citizenship do President Bush and Senator Obama describe? What do their choices demonstrate about their views on citizenship? Who are your models of citizenship?
- What is patriotism? What is its relationship to good citizenship?
- What specific actions do President Bush and Senator Obama believe good citizenship should take? Do you think that a person who takes these actions is a good citizen? Why or why not?

In examining citizenship and participation, the words of ordinary Americans can also fuel conversation. For example,

students might consider oral histories by people who were engaged in the civil rights movement as children. Consider what students might gain from having a deep conversation about oral histories that includes these excerpts:

When I became 21, I ran down to the poll and registered. It was the proudest day of my life. Oh, I was excited. After working so hard on different voter registration drives, literally pulling people off the street to register to vote—hey, I was so proud. —Gladis Williams.

I remember it being warm the morning I marched. The night before at a meeting, they told us we'd be arrested. I went home and told my mother that I wanted to go. She just said, "Okay." I was in third grade. My teacher knew that I was going, and she cried. She thought, I guess, it was admirable that I would go. Teachers had the threat of losing their jobs.—Audrey Faye Hendricks

From *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activities Tell Their Own Stories*, edited by Ellen Levine (New York: Avon, 1993), p. 84.

Visuals, songs, and film clips can also be used as the texts for civil conversations, but many teachers find non-print sources more challenging to use and choose to develop their own facilitation skills and students' discussion skills before they explore texts in other media. Still, as teachers think about the many types of sources that could serve as texts, it becomes clear that the possibilities are endless. We encourage you to pick a document that has meaning for you and will interest your students, and give civil conversation a try. 🌐

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