



Beyond Bigots and Snowflakes: Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

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Ilana Redstone, a sociologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, created six core videos (total time is less than 40 minutes) titled “Beyond Bigots and Snowflakes” that offer tools and techniques designed to encourage the tough conversations for more open dialogue. She ends the introductory video by stating there is a societal need to have open and honest conversations about sensitive topics to improve communication across ideological divides. But how to have open and honest conversations is a skill that is learned. This guide offers discussion questions and activities to accompany the videos so students can practice this skill.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this discussion and activity guide is to help students better understand their worldview, the importance of viewpoint diversity, and the costs of excessively restricting who can express which beliefs.

After completing the discussion questions and activities, students should be able to:

- Explain the importance and value of viewpoint diversity.
- Describe their worldview and understand how it relates to the opinions they form.
- Distinguish between objective facts and subjective beliefs.

These discussion questions and activities are best suited for high school juniors and seniors and college freshman and sophomores. Still, they can be adapted to fit the needs of younger high school students and older college students. The ideal time to watch and discuss the videos and complete the activities is when students are preparing to engage in classroom discussion of controversial topics. This may be at the start of the semester or school year or it may be after they have taken time to get to know each other—see “Creating Connection to Generate Deep Discussion” for an activity that will help students get to know each other better.

This guide is broken down by video. For each video, there is a brief description of the topic, the video, discussion questions, and activity. The descriptions that follow are included to help you, the teacher, determine when it might be best to show the video and complete the discussion questions and activities. The video “Before We Begin” has no associated questions or activities, but it is a good place to start before diving into the rest of the series. The series ends with a “Summary,” which also does not have associated questions or activities but is a great way to end the series.

Video 1: Building Community through Viewpoint Diversity

After playing this video, have your students engage with the discussion questions and activity to help them better understand what a worldview is and to explore their own worldview.

Discussion Questions:

1. At the start of the video 1, Professor Redstone states, “We each have a worldview. It shapes how we take in information and how we understand and interpret the world. It becomes a lens through which we filter interactions, news, and communication.” What does she mean when she uses the term “worldview”?
2. Professor Redstone describes a research study that explains how one’s worldview shapes their reaction to events in the world. In the study she describes, one group was told they were watching a video of a political demonstration of anti-abortion protestors and the other group was told they were watching a video of protestors that support openly LGBT members in the military. How the groups reacted to the videos depended on their worldview. Four factors were presented to describe the two groups shown the political demonstration. They were attitudes about egalitarianism, hierarchies, individualism, and communitarianism. What does each term mean? If a person prioritizes one or another of these factors, what might that tell us about how they envision society?

Note to teacher:

- a. Egalitarianism is the idea that all humans are equal in fundamental worth and moral status and that people should be accorded exactly equal rights. They should get the same, or be treated the same, or be treated as equals, in some respect, or they should treat one another as equals, should relate as equals, or enjoy an equality of social status of some sort.
 - b. A hierarchy is the ranking of individuals or groups based on status or authority. Those who express egalitarian views likely would not support a hierarchy in which rights were not equally distributed.
 - c. Individualism makes the individual the focus, and individualists promote independence and self-reliance over group identity. They advocate that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the state (country) or a social group.
 - d. Communitarianism is the idea that human identities are largely shaped by different kinds of social relations or group affiliation. Communitarians, unlike individualists, are oriented towards decision-making based on what is best for a group or society over the individual.
3. Professor Redstone posits that discussion and debate over the best movie of the last 5 years or over the best way to hang toilet paper are less controversial topics to discuss and don’t raise people’s defenses, but more controversial topics such as whether schools or employers should use affirmative action do. Why does she think we should discuss controversial topics even if those topics raise your or someone else’s defenses?

Classroom Activity: What is Your Worldview?

Similar to the demonstrators described in the video, your worldview is the lens through which you see the world. Use the reel on this worksheet to describe the different filters you have. Think about your upbringing, interests, and experiences, then choose words or phrases to describe your worldview. Place each word or phrase in a separate box. Your worldview may include things that make up your physical identity (e.g., race or gender), cultural identity (e.g., ethnicity, region of the country you were born/live, ancestry, religion), familial identity (e.g., political orientation of parents, values of your parents), or something else that's important to you.

After you have completed the reel of your worldview, think about a controversial issue you care deeply about. How does your worldview shape your opinion about that issue? Write a one-page essay describing the issue and how your worldview shapes your opinion on that issue.

Video 2: The Problem with Unintentionally Treating Beliefs as Facts

After playing this video, have your students complete the discussion questions and activity to help them better understand the difference between objective facts and subjective beliefs, how facts and beliefs shape their worldview and opinions, and why we need to distinguish between the two.

Discussion Questions:

1. Everyone's worldview is shaped by facts and beliefs. What is the difference between the two? How do you know if someone is expressing a fact or belief?
2. Professor Redstone states, "When beliefs remain unacknowledged, we leave no room for others to have a different set." What is the problem with eliminating the space for different beliefs?
3. What does Professor Redstone mean when she says that to differentiate between facts and beliefs, we need the "humility to challenge what it is we think we know"?

Classroom Activity: Facts versus Beliefs

Revisit the issue you wrote about in the activity after the first video, "What is Your Worldview?" Write five facts related to the issue and five beliefs that you have about the issue. Pair up and share your issue with a partner, including the facts and your beliefs associated with the issue. Once you and your partner have both shared, ask questions of each other, and share how your belief about your partner's issue differ. During this activity, practice humility by staying open to new ideas, staying curious about your partner's beliefs, and asking questions without judgment.

Video 3: The Problem of Excessive Social Penalties

After playing this video, have your students complete the discussion questions to help them better understand the problem with using offense to determine whether speech should be penalized.

Discussion Questions:

1. Professor Redstone differentiates between what a person intends by what they say and how another person responds to what is said. What is the difference between intent and offense (i.e., how the person responds)? How do people generally draw conclusions about someone's intent?
2. What is the problem with too broadly defining demeaning or offensive speech? What is the problem with penalizing speech when what is considered demeaning or offensive speech is too broadly defined? And who should decide what "too broadly" means?
3. What does Professor Redstone mean by "social costs"? Give an example of a high social cost. Professor Redstone asserts that we should take offense seriously, but what is the problem with using offense to determine whether someone deserves a social penalty?
4. Professor Redstone uses the example of affirmative action to describe a scenario in which a person who advocates against this sort of policy could be driven by hate or could have principled reasons for not supporting the policy, such as "it's not the right way to help minority groups." How does assuming bad intent (e.g., that the person is racist), rather than assuming a well-intentioned desire to find another way to help minority groups, affect open communication and problem-solving?

Video 4: The Problem of Telling People To Stay in Their Lane

After playing this video, have your students complete the discussion questions and activity to help them better understand the phrase “stay in your lane” and why it’s important to allow people to stray from their lane to speak about issues they have not personally experienced.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Professor Redstone mean by “stay in your lane”?
2. Professor Redstone asserts that some questions should be asked of a broader audience, not just of people who have personally experienced the issue. What types of questions should be asked of a broader audience, not just those who have had personal experiences?
3. What are the criteria for determining whether someone can stray from their lane to speak about an issue (three were listed and three were spoken)? Do you agree with those criteria? Should any be added or omitted?
4. Why might it be beneficial for individuals to stray from their lane to discuss issues?

Classroom Activity: Don’t Stay in Your Lane

Think of an issue about which you have strong opinions but have not personally experienced. Then pair with a partner to share why you think you (and others without personal experience of the issue) should be able to express an opinion about that issue.

After you and your partner have finished sharing, revisit the list of criteria for determining whether someone can stray from their lane. Based on your discussion, do you and/or your partner have anything to add to the list, or do you think any of the criteria should be removed?

Video 5: The Problem of Relying on Science to Bridge Divides

After playing this video, have your students complete the discussion questions to help them better understand why invoking science, or empirical evidence, might not work to bridge our ideological divides or differences in opinions.

Discussion Questions:

1. Professor Redstone claims that data and science won't bridge our divides. Why won't data and empirical evidence bridge our ideological divides?
2. What often informs how we view and understand evidence?
3. Professor Redstone ends this video by stating: "even in a world in which everyone had perfect and identical information, we would still have very different opinions about how society should be structured, and that's a good thing." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Video 6: Putting the Lessons into Practice

After playing this video, have your students complete the discussion questions and activity to close out the video series. The questions below touch on key issues discussed throughout the video series and drive home the importance of viewpoint diversity. The activity allows students to negotiate diverse viewpoints to develop a goal related to tolerating different viewpoints for their school or classroom.

Discussion Questions:

1. In this video, Professor Redstone discusses restricting social norms and social penalties. What are the costs to restricting or penalizing diversity of thought? What are the benefits of removing social penalties restricting diversity of thought?
2. Professor Redstone asserts that both intentions and feelings matter. How does she propose negotiating the two? How should the offended and offender respond to each other? What does it mean to give someone the benefit of the doubt?

Classroom Activity: Develop a Value Statement for Our School

Professor Redstone ends the video by stating: “The key, when the priority is maintaining tolerance for different viewpoints and welcoming dissenting voices, and when repeated interactions are likely, is to have a clear and explicit goal of the kind of environment an institution or organization wants to create.” Schools are diverse because they enroll students from a variety of backgrounds with a variety of worldviews. Does [name of your school] have a clear and explicit goal related to tolerating different viewpoints and welcoming dissent? Do you think an explicitly stated goal of this type would be helpful for our school environment? What should that goal be?

Teachers: Assign students to groups. To the extent that you know the views of your students, place them into groups that are politically, religiously, culturally, etc., diverse—in other words, groups that will hold a range of viewpoints. Instruct each group to develop a goal or value statement for the school to adopt. In addition, after they have created their statements, have each group develop a slogan and image that encapsulates the statement.

After each group has developed a statement, slogan, and accompanying image, have them present their final product to the school's administration (if this is possible and welcomed). The administration can vote on the winner and adopt the statement, slogan, and image as an official stance of the school if they are so inclined. If conducting this sort of contest is not possible at the school level, do so at the classroom level and invite parents and other community members to be the judges.