

Resources to Respond to Tragedy and Violence

Excerpt from the [Illinois Civics Course Implementation Blog](#)

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by Mary Ellen Daneels, Civics Instructional Specialist

All educators are civics teachers. Teachers send messages to students about power, justice, and representation by the content we select, the way we engage student voice, the norms we employ, and the stories included in our classroom. We have a responsibility to prioritize our students' lived experiences, putting *Maslow before Bloom*, to inform the essential questions we address in our curriculum. When violence or tragedy occurs, classrooms provide a safe venue for students to process, ask questions and be given context to understand current events as they happen.

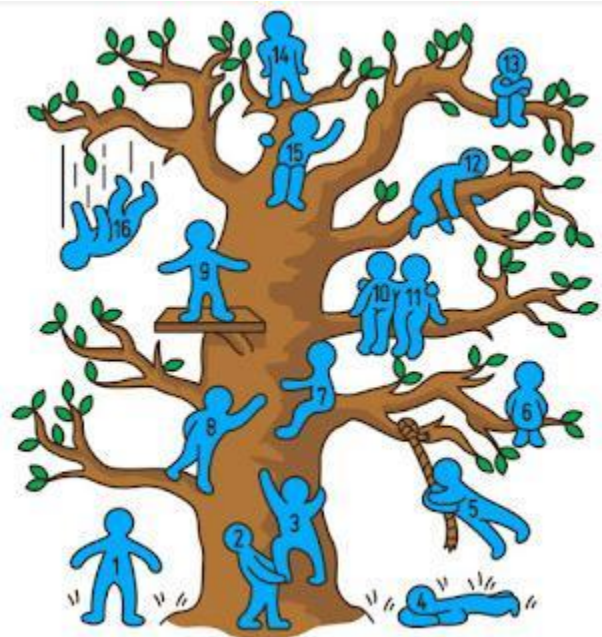
While current events unfold, it is *not* the time to debate policy. Educators will not have all of the answers to the questions students pose. Teachers can create a classroom space where we can be present, listen, and create a safe environment for our students to do the same.

Start with Reflection

Your students may be wrestling with a range of emotions. We cannot assume what students are feeling or their perceptions of unfolding events. The tools below can be used to check in and see where students are. After using the tool that works for you, collect student responses, and display them in a chart or word cloud. Discuss the patterns, trends, and outliers to build empathy and awareness of self and others in the class. Engage students in a proactive conversation about what can be done to address past issues and the question: *Where do we go from here?*

Have students individually complete the following sentence, "When I think about (insert event here), I feel____ because_____." Use some of the Visible Thinking Routines from Project Zero:

- [Compass Point Reflection](#) has students identify something that is worrisome, exciting, a "need to know," and a suggestion for moving forward.
- [Color, Symbol, Image](#) asks students to share and discuss a color, a symbol, and an image that represents how they are feeling.
- [3-2-1 Bridge](#) can be used to have students identify 3 thoughts they have about the current event, 2 questions they have, and 1 idea they have for moving forward.
- [Claim, Support, Question](#) prompts students make a claim about the event, support it with evidence, and a question they still have.
- Have students identify where they are on this Blob Tree, explain their placement, and the questions they have from their position on the tree. This tool is especially user-friendly for younger students.



Revisit Norms for Discussion

One of the essential questions tackled in any classroom is, “How should we live together?” Revisit your classroom norms for discussion. What does productive dialogue look like, feel like, and sound like? Here are a few tools to help to recalibrate or establish these norms.

- [Class Contracting](#) from Facing History and Ourselves helps students discuss expectations and norms of how class members will treat one another face to face or online.
- This one-page explainer of [Dialogue vs. Debate](#) from the U.S. Institute of Peace provides students a vision of productive dialogue.

Have a Structure for Your Conversation

Great classroom discussions, like great lesson plans, rarely “happen.” They take time and intention. Here are strategies to consider employing to help students share their reflections and address the essential question, “Where do we go from here?”

- Socratic Seminar is a protocol designed to help students dive into a common text or process a common experience to promote understanding of multiple perspectives, deepen inquiry, and create understanding of the lived experiences of others. Support the seminar with an article you have curated about the election or with ideas students created in one of the reflection activities above. This [guide from Facing History and Ourselves](#) provides an overview of the strategy in traditional classrooms and there is also a [remote learning edition](#) from the IllinoisCivics.org [Remote Learning Toolkit](#).
- Big Paper Talk allows students to reflect on a common text or experience and silently share their thoughts before engaging in a larger conversation. There is both a [face to face](#) and [remote learning edition](#) from Facing History and Ourselves.
- Hexagonal Thinking is a tool that can be used in the traditional or remote classroom. Students use hexagons (physical or digital) to personally reflect on a prompt and then bring the hexagons to the larger group to make a hexagonal map, illustrating connections between participants’ ideas. Students work together to connect all of

the ideas, deliberate how the hexagons should be shifted, question to understand, and create new hexagons if needed to make connections. You can find out more about this strategy from the [Cult of Pedagogy blog](#) or [Vision in Practice](#).

- Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn from [Facing History and Ourselves](#) has students journal, share, and listen, then discuss ideas in small groups before moving to whole class group sharing and discussion. This protocol concludes with a reflective journal entry. Students focus on listening to understand rather than to respond.

Words Matter

Classrooms often work to simulate the “real world” for students. However, much of the debate around current events happening outside of the classroom can be hyperbolic, misinformed, and often hurtful. Explicitly teaching and modeling “how we should live together” in the classroom is an important step to building “a more perfect union” outside of the classroom.

- When speaking of the people involved, use formal language. Use terms like President Trump and President Biden rather than terms like “Trump” and “Uncle Joe.” Avoid the language of *othering*. As [iCivics](#) Chief Education Officer Emma Humphries explained in an opinion piece for [The Hechinger Report](#), “Vocabulary can be divisive, so give some thought to class norms for talking about the parties and candidates. For example, say *the Republican Party and the Democratic Party*, not *the Republicans or the Democrats*.”
- Give students tools like these [sentence starters](#) from Teach Thought and these [transition statements](#) from [Illinois Civics Instructional Coach](#) Candace Fikis to support civil discussion. This is especially useful for ELL students.
- Do not allow dehumanizing language. To quote activist and writer James Baldwin, “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”

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