

TAKING SIDES



LEVEL: high school
SUBJECT: social studies
TIME: one to two class periods

FOUR STEPS TOWARD COMMON GROUND

Common ground is built on democratic discussion. Think about the four disputants on the Auburn Dam issue who took a raft trip down the American River. They found a patch of common ground by discussing the very issues that divided them. Discussing controversial issues is part of democracy. This exercise gives students a chance to talk about open-ended issues and take risks.

Begin by preparing students. Talk about what makes a good discussion of issues. Do participants ask for others' opinions? Listen? Reflect on new ideas? Allow others a chance to speak? What behavior should be expected of each student? Try the first round in this exercise. When students prove that they are ready, move on to the next and more complex round.

ROUND ONE

Read my lips or "Don't beat around the bush"
(five minutes)

1. Assign a topic. (Suggested topics are listed at the end of this exercise.)
2. Break students into groups of four.
3. Have each group pick a timekeeper.
4. One after the other, have each student express his or her ideas as succinctly as possible. (Time limit: 20 seconds per student.)
5. After each student has spoken, all students have two minutes to record all of the ideas in their journals.

ROUND TWO

Hearing aids
(five minutes)

1. Continue the same discussion. Have the group choose a new timekeeper.
2. The first to speak must explain and support his or her ideas.

3. The speakers who follow must restate the prior speaker's reasoning, add a supporting statement, and then proceed to explain and support his or her own idea. Group members are encouraged to help each other in this task. (Time limit for each speaker: 30 seconds.)
4. After all the students have spoken, give them two minutes to record the support provided for all the ideas in their journals.

ROUND THREE

Waiting your turn

1. Continue the same discussion. Have the group choose a new timekeeper.
2. Start with the first idea; each speaker has 30 seconds to comment on its accuracy and/or relevance.
3. No one may speak a second time until everyone has spoken once.
4. The group records controversies or opposing arguments in their journals next to the original idea.

Note: Round three may be repeated for each idea.

ROUND FOUR

Drawing conclusions

1. Continue the same discussion. Have the group choose a new timekeeper.
2. Each speaker has 30 seconds to support the idea of his or her choice.
3. The group must decide which idea(s) they favor.
4. The group has two minutes to record the reasons for their choice in their journals.

SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

- There is far more racial prejudice in America than ever before.
- The best way to solve the problem of illegal immigration is to place severe restrictions on all immigration.
- Our economy suffers because there are too many environmental regulations.
- The best way to handle criminals is to put them in jail. Without informed and educated citizens, democracy will fail.

TAKING SIDES



LEVELS: middle school and high school
SUBJECTS: government and U.S. history
TIME: one class period

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TIME: one class period

SHARED SYMBOLS AND VALUES

Ask students to discuss their heritage with their families. Have each student interview older members of his or her family about family traits, characteristics, and values.

One or two days later, introduce the Iroquois Confederacy, which was a community of six Indian nations. To preserve order among six distinct and warlike peoples, the Iroquois created symbols and ceremonies to provide common ground (as well as laws and a constitution to guide their unity).

- **Great Tree of Peace:** Seen from a distance, this was believed to provide protection under its boughs.
- **Bundle of arrows:** Show how easy it is to break one arrow and how difficult it is to break six arrows.
- **Eagle:** Far seeing, considered an early warning system.

In groups, have students discuss the symbols that may reflect their cultures. (Depending on ethnic variety, students could discuss their common values in homogenous groups.)

Ask each group to identify and list common characteristics among their values and symbols. Ask students if they can name people who best represents their symbols.

Conclude the exercise by asking students to compare their symbols to those of the Iroquois. Do students believe that it's possible to find a common identity in a diverse society? Did the students' distinct traditions unite or divide them?

Douglas E. Miller
Fremont High School
Sunnyvale, Calif.

WHO ARE YOU?

Divide the class into small groups and ask them to brainstorm and list the ways in which they create their own identities in school. Lists should include three to four categories. For example:

- **Studies:** the classes they take, their clubs, notebooks
- **Looks:** choices in clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, hats, backpacks
- **Social language:** slang, locker decorations, music, extracurricular activities
- **Political:** student government

Bring the class together and compare lists. Discuss the similarities and differences. Ask students how their choices reflect an image or attitude. Debate the positive and negative effects of these "identity-makers." Does sharing certain traits serve to exclude as well as include? Do these traits help build interest groups? Create gangs? Compartmentalize? What other factors influence students and promote or hinder a sense of community in their school?

Merrill Thompsen
Wilson High School
Yakima, Wash.