



Short Takes/ Teaching About Controversial Issues: The Continuum Method

OVERVIEW:

Teaching about controversial issues provides opportunities for students to practice listening to other opinions; consider polar positions on controversial topics and their impact; and to practice the skill of stating and analyzing a position.

Facilitators should present polar positions in a neutral fashion so that students do not automatically assume there is a ‘right answer’ in choosing issues for this activity, ensure the issues have legitimate opposing viewpoints.

PROCEDURES:

1. The facilitator should ask students to write down the following statement and if they agree or disagree with the statement and why. The statement should be read in a neutral tone with no specific emphasis on particular words. The statement is “I am willing to give up some of my constitutional rights in order to be safer/more secure.”
2. Give the students five minutes to write down the statement and to determine their position. They should write down if they agree or disagree with the statement and two compelling reasons that support their decisions.
3. Ask students that agreed with the statement to line up on one side of the room and the students that disagreed to line up on the opposite side of the room. Bring their papers with them. Groups should face each other.
4. Provide directions to the students at this stage. Let students know that as one side explains their position, students on the opposing side must listen and each student must select the single most persuasive argument presented on that side. This ensures that students are really listening to the opposing viewpoints.
5. Begin with the side that agreed with the statement. After each person has stated their position for agreeing with the statement, have each person on the opposing side identify the most persuasive arguments presented one at a time. Repeat exercise for the side that disagreed with the statement.



6. Important: Instruct students as they announce which argument that they found most persuasive, it does not mean that it was necessarily an argument that they agreed with. They just need to identify the most persuasive argument. When they announce their selection, however they should not say that none of the arguments were persuasive or that they disagreed with all of the arguments. They must select the one most persuasive argument.
7. Note: This can serve as a starter for a discussion or a lesson on the Bill of Rights. Often used in conjunction with the Invaders lesson. This type of polar positions activity can also be used to thoroughly discuss a topic and take a position on the topic. There are multiple ways to utilize this type of polar positions continuum activity. For this version, it is used as an opener or starter.
8. To locate variations of this continuum exercise using polar position statements, visit www.landmarkcases.org/continuum.html or www.landmarkcases.org and look under Continuum.

Credit: This activity is a variation of a training exercise conducted by Street Law.