

Take a Stand

Behind every environmental crisis lurks an issue, and the biodiversity crisis is no exception. Here, students begin to think critically about some difficult questions and examine their own values as they “take a stand” on a difficult issue. An exercise in empathetic listening helps them improve their ability to respect others’ viewpoints...

Instructions for the teacher

1. This activity works best when you as a group have discovered an area of controversy in your study, and can easily be done in an outdoor setting.

Tell students:

- *I am about to make a statement that you may find controversial and may not necessarily agree with - and that is okay! I'll repeat the statement once and then will ask you to physically “take a stand” on how you feel about the statement I've made.*
2. Designate areas where students are to stand. This can be done in any one of several ways:
 - *Simply state: “Standing in this part of the room means you strongly agree with the*



statement; standing here means you strongly disagree with the statement; and by standing somewhere between these two points you can show where you stand in the spectrum."

- This can also be done by hanging signs within an room (indoors) or on a tree limbs (outdoors) that say "strongly agree"; "somewhat agree"; "no opinion"; "somewhat disagree"; "strongly agree".
 - *Have students grasp a rope somewhere along its length, where one end represents "strongly agree" and the other end represents "strongly disagree."*
3. Make a deliberately controversial statement that you feel will divide the group - and that ties into your unit of study. Try and use a local example upon which students may have already developed an opinion. Some examples follow:
- *"If a critically endangered species of snail is found to live in (give name of local subdivision) some other homes in the area should be bulldozed and the area restored to provide the snail with habitat."*
 - *"The government should bulldoze all homes and businesses on the outskirts of the town of Banff to provide for more animal habitat."*
 - *"If humans don't have any use for a plant or an animal, then it might as well not exist in the first place."*
 - *"All of the remaining old growth forest habitat of the endangered Spotted Owl should be preserved, even if it means that many loggers and their families end up poor and on welfare."*
4. After students have taken their stand, emphasize that in this matter there are no right or wrong positions, since everyone is entitled to their own opinion. Then play the role of interviewer and ask individuals from different "camps" why they are standing where they are. Allow students to react to statements made by their peers, and then tell them that this "clash" of opinions - resulting from people's different values - is precisely what makes issues and land use decisions so difficult.
5. Decision-making
Ask the students:
- *What would happen if we took a vote on this issue right now?*
Obviously, the majority would win! This would be analogous to a binding plebiscite, in which everyone's vote counts.

Ask the students who lost the vote how they feel, and tell them that you are about to learn a little about another way of decision-making.

6. Have each student pair up with someone who took a different position on the issue. Give them the following instructions:
 - *Find out why your partner stood where they did, and practice “empathetic listening,” in which you try to relate to the person and truly understand, or “empathize,” with their position - even if you don’t agree with it. Listen carefully, because in a few minutes I’ll ask you to tell the group why your partner took the stand they did.*
7. After five minutes, have each student report back to the class. Alternatively, ask each pair to team up with another pair, forming groups of four, and have each student report to the three others in their group. Ask students:
 - *What does everyone in this group have in common on this issue? What is our common ground?*
Students should come to realize that there is a lot of common ground in the group. Tell them that building this common ground is an important part of the consensus process, in which everyone would engage in a negotiation process and search for a compromise that everyone can live with. Ask students which model of decision-making they prefer.

Variation

To add a little spice to this activity, introduce it by “planting” two very opinionated people in the group! Pass the prompt cards (see overleaf) to two group members who you feel are confident and flamboyant enough to successfully play the role of a pro-development and pro-environment person, making the sort of aggressive statement referred to on the next page; and then try to “stake out the middle ground” as these two antagonists make everyone feel decidedly uncomfortable.

Then comes the moment in which you reveal to the whole group that they have been duped or “set-up” by you and your two helpers. In the subsequent discussion, you might touch on the rancor generated when two people move beyond attacking each other’s *positions* to attacking each other on a *personal* level. It is a failure to recognize important *points of process* such as this that can lead to the collapse of many important negotiation processes - including critically important discussions on land use that might lead to the preservation of environmentally important areas.

~ **Prompt card: Pro-development role** ~

Can you keep a secret? Don't let anyone see you read this!

In a few minutes, you'll hear me say the following: "Everybody, I want to tell you something that no-one could possibly disagree with..." I'll then make the following statement: "It's important that we as humans find a way to share this area with the animals that live here."

That is your cue. I want you to pretend that you completely disagree with me! Interrupt me, tell me I'm stupid, tell me that parks are for people and that humans are the most important race on this planet, tell me that recreation is more important than any old animal habitat - be creative and try to get the crowd on your side. ***Be convincing! Be hot-headed! Be prepared to get ANGRY!***

You may find yourself caught in a hot argument with another group member who takes the opposite view. That's OK - its part of the game! Wade into them, too - and don't be afraid to attack them personally as well as their ideas.

Don't worry - after a few minutes of this, I'll cut it off and tell the students that we "set it up". A very interesting discussion will follow!

Be convincing!!! And - thank you!

~ **Prompt card: Pro-environment role** ~

Can you keep a secret? Don't let anyone see you read this!

In a few minutes, you'll hear me say the following: "Everybody, I want to tell you something that no-one could possibly disagree with..." I'll then make the following statement: "It's important that we as humans find a way to share this area with the animals that live here."

That is your cue. I want you to pretend that you completely disagree with me! Interrupt me, tell me that parks are the last homes for animals and that humans must be kept out of the parks, tell me that without biodiversity humans will ultimately perish, tell me that humans are growing like a cancer cell - be creative and try to get the crowd on your side. ***Be convincing! Be hot-headed! Be prepared to get ANGRY!***

You may find yourself caught in a hot argument with another group member who takes the opposite view. That's OK - its part of the game! Wade into them, too - and don't be afraid to attack them personally as well as their ideas.

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Be convincing!!! And - thank you!