



## **Short Takes/Teaching About Controversial Issues: The Human Continuum Method**

### Overview and Purpose

Teaching about controversial issues provides opportunities for students to practice critical thinking, persuasive speaking, and listening skills. Students will analyze issues, develop their own position statements, listen respectfully to the opinions of others, and evaluate persuasive arguments in support of polar positions.

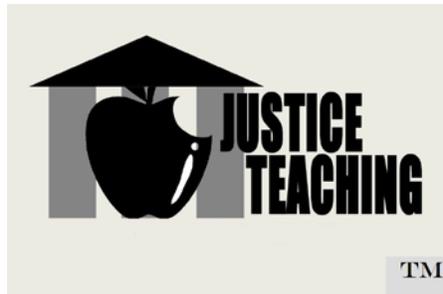
Facilitators should present polar positions in a neutral fashion so that students do not assume there is a 'right answer'. Additionally, facilitators should not identify their own personal views about the issue. In selecting issues to utilize with this activity, ensure the topics have legitimate opposing viewpoints and are grade level/content appropriate for the classroom you are working with. As in all Justice Teaching lessons or activities, the teacher is best equipped to evaluate the appropriateness of this exercise for his/her classroom.

### **Target Grade Levels:**

This activity is designed primarily for middle and high school students. Depending on the content selected and the issue to be presented, upper elementary students may benefit from participating in one of the Human Continuum exercises to explore the process and develop listening skills. Work with your partner teacher to select grade level appropriate content.

### Procedures

1. The statements/questions provided may be utilized to have students answer Yes or No to the question or to allow students to Agree or Disagree with the statement. Develop signs (Yes/No or Agree/Disagree) to place on opposite sides of the room so that students can eventually line up on their corresponding side. The facilitator should pose each question or statement in a neutral tone without providing any emphasis on specific words.



The facilitator should ask students if they agree or disagree with the statement and why. (Alternatively, the statement could be phrased as a question and the students could be asked to answer Yes or No.) See sample statements/questions at conclusion of the procedures.

2. Give the students three to five minutes to think about the question or statement and to determine their position. They should determine if they agree or disagree with the statement and identify two compelling reasons or evidence that supports their decision.
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. Groups should face each other.
4. Provide directions as follows. Let students know that each side (one at a time) will explain their positions/reasoning regarding why they agreed or disagreed with the statement while students on the opposing side listen carefully and determine the single most persuasive argument presented on the opposing side.

Begin with the side that agreed with the statement. After each person has stated their reason for agreeing with the statement, have each person on the opposing side identify the most persuasive arguments they heard one at a time. Repeat exercise for the side that disagreed with the statement.

Important: Instruct students as they announce which opposing argument that they found most persuasive, it does not mean that have to agree with the argument/statement. They just need to identify the one most persuasive argument of all of the arguments presented on the opposing side. When they announce the opposing argument that they found most persuasive, they should not say that did not find any of the arguments persuasive or that they disagreed with all of the arguments. They must select one of the arguments which they found most persuasive of all of the arguments presented.

Sometimes students will change their positions throughout the exercise. This is allowed and students may move to the opposing side throughout the activity. Students should state their reasoning.

**Note:** This can serve as a starter for a discussion or a lesson associated with more comprehensive content on the Bill of Rights or other topics. 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.

#### Sample Polar Position Statements/Questions

1. Should voting be mandatory? Yes or No
2. Everyone should have the right to vote. Agree or Disagree
3. Does treating people equally mean treating them the same? Yes or No
4. I am/am not willing to give up some of my constitutional rights to be safer?
5. Should drug testing be allowed in public schools? Yes or No
6. Should judges be elected? Yes or No
7. Should jury service be mandatory? Yes or No
8. Student speech on campus should have greater limits or restrictions than student speech off campus? Yes or No
9. The government should require everyone who graduates from high school to attend college. Agree or Disagree

#### Alternative Models

There are multiple ways to conduct human continuum discussions. Another method is to provide multiple position options. Instead of just disagree or agree, a continuum could be drawn on the board or signs posted around the room to demonstrate the choices available. The range could include Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, etc. Students should determine where they stand on the issue and line up along a continuum to form a human graph of the students' decisions. If multiple students align at a certain position, they should discuss privately as a small group their reasons and try to come up with the single most persuasive argument to present to the full class. Each group of students standing at each option should present their most persuasive argument. Then after each group has presented, they should decide which opposing position was most persuasive.

To locate variations of this continuum exercise using polar position statements, visit [http://www.streetlaw.org/en/landmark/teaching\\_strategies/continuum](http://www.streetlaw.org/en/landmark/teaching_strategies/continuum).

**Credit:** This activity is a variation of a training exercise/teaching strategy conducted by Street Law.