



## **Where Do You Stand?**

### **Overview and Purpose**

Teaching about current issues provides opportunities for students to practice critical thinking, persuasive speaking, evidence-based reasoning, and listening skills. Students analyze issues, develop their own position statements, listen respectfully to the opinions of others, and evaluate persuasive arguments in support of positions. This activity is known as a human continuum exercise and can serve as a starter for a discussion or a lesson associated with comprehensive content on the Bill of Rights or current events. This type of activity strengthens critical thinking, reasoning, persuasive speaking, and listening skills.

Facilitators should present issues in an impartial, inclusive fashion so that students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. 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. See the list of questions provided in this document. 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 issues presented, upper elementary students may benefit from participating in one or more of the exercises to explore the process and develop listening skills. Work with your Justice Teaching partner teacher to select grade level appropriate content. Review all of the issues presented in this overview to determine the best fit.

### **Procedures**

1. The questions provided below allow students to answer Yes or No initially. Develop signs (Yes and No) to place on opposite sides of the room so that students can eventually line up on their corresponding viewpoint. The facilitator should select one question and ask in a neutral tone without providing any emphasis on specific words. See sample statements/questions at conclusion of the procedures.
2. Students should remain seated while reflecting on the question. Give the students a few minutes to think individually about the question and write down their positions. Each student should write down their individual viewpoint (Yes or No) and identify two or three compelling reasons that support their decision. Students should write down their responses.



3. Next, ask students that answered “Yes” to the question to line up on one side of the room and the students that answered “No” should line up on the opposite side of the room. Students should bring their response papers. Let students in each of the two groups talk quietly about their positions and reasoning. Remind the groups to discuss their responses quietly so the opposing group will not hear their responses. The two groups should determine their top six or eight reasons for answering “Yes” or “No” and be prepared to present their responses.

4. After students in each of the two groups have met to discuss their reasoning, provide additional directions as follows. Let students know that each side (Yes or No) will explain their positions/reasoning to the opposing side while students on the opposing side listen carefully and identify the most persuasive argument presented on the opposing side. Individual students should be allowed to respond.

Begin with the side that answered “Yes” to the question. This group should provide the best six or more reasons they selected to support their position. Multiple students on that side should speak and provide their reasoning. Let the “No” side know that their job is to LISTEN to all of the reasons presented and be prepared to identify the one most persuasive argument they hear on the opposing side. After the “Yes” side has presented its reasoning, have students on the “No” side identify the single most persuasive argument they heard from the opposing side. Several students may identify the most persuasive position. Repeat exercise for the side that answered “No” to the question.

**Important:** The opposing side is not permitted to speak or ask questions when the other side is presenting. They are to listen and determine the most persuasive argument or position. It does not mean they have to agree with the argument/statement. They just need to identify the one most persuasive argument of all of the reasons presented on the opposing side. **When the “No” side announces the most persuasive reasons they heard from the “Yes” side, 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 reasons/positions they found most persuasive/compelling. (You may permit students to huddle together to discuss the one most persuasive argument as a group or just allow several students to provide their perspective of the most persuasive argument.)

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. This is an inclusive activity with the emphasis on practicing **listening skills**. Teachers and resource persons will need to maintain this focus throughout the exercise.

**As a follow up or homework assignment, students may research the topic and draft an evidence-based, persuasive essay supporting their position.**



**Note:** This activity is known as a human continuum exercise and can serve as a starter for a discussion or a lesson associated with comprehensive content on the Bill of Rights or current events. This type of activity strengthens critical thinking, reasoning, persuasive speaking, and listening skills. Students learn the importance of providing reasoning and evidence in support of their positions rather than just stating their opinions. There are multiple ways to utilize this type of human continuum activity. For this version, it serves as an opener or starter to a lesson or comprehensive discussion. It can provide a visual representation of student perspectives prior to or following a lesson.

*Sample Polar Position Questions (Select one or create your own.)*

1. Should voting be mandatory/required? Yes or No
2. Should everyone have the right to vote? Yes or No
3. Does treating people equally mean treating them the same? Yes or No
4. Are you willing to give up some of your constitutional rights to be safer? Yes or No
5. Should jury duty be voluntary? Yes or No
6. Should student speech at school have greater restrictions or limits than student speech off campus? Yes or No
7. Should the government require everyone who votes to be a high school graduate? Yes or No
9. Should community service be required? Yes or No

#### Alternative Models

There are multiple ways to conduct human continuum discussions. Another method is to provide multiple position options. Instead of just yes or no signs, you could have students align with Yes, No, Undecided, etc. Students should determine where they stand on the issue and line up along a continuum to form a human graph of their positions. If multiple students align at a certain position, they should discuss their positions as a small group and try to come up with the most persuasive arguments to present to the full class. Each group of students standing at each option should present their most persuasive arguments. Then after each group has presented, they should decide which opposing position was most persuasive.

Credit: This activity is a variation of traditional law-related education teaching strategies.