

VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY CHALLENGE

Lesson Title:	Unsettling Our Thinking: How will we dive into sensitive topics this year?
Length:	60 minutes
Grades:	9-12
Materials:	Presentation slides, polling software, student worksheets

Lesson Overview

In today's politicized environment, and as we approach a highly contentious election, it has become all too common for all of us – teachers and students – to avoid talking about topics that feel a little too “hot” to touch. One of the reasons for avoidance is a fear that we might say the wrong thing and be harshly judged by others. In this hour-long session, students will explore a method of exploring politically sensitive issues that turns down the heat and focuses instead on deeply understanding the issue from different perspectives. Students will also apply this process to reflect on ways that they can challenge their thinking throughout the year – both as individuals and as a classroom community.

Agenda

<u>Discussion</u>	Why is it so hard to talk about contentious topics?	10 mins
<u>Insight</u>	How settled thinking influences our learning	15 mins
<u>Application</u>	How do political parties reveal their settled thinking?	25 mins
<u>Reflection</u>	How can we challenge our own settled thinking this year?	10 mins

DISCUSSION:

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A PLACE TO START

"I went to college to learn from my professors and peers. I welcomed an environment that champions intellectual diversity and rigorous disagreement. Instead ... students of all political persuasions hold back — in class discussions, in friendly conversations, on social media — from saying what we really think. ... I sometimes feel afraid to fully speak my mind."

- Emma Camp, Student at the University of Virginia, 2022



Script: We're going to start today with a quote from a young journalist named Emma Camp. Emma wrote an opinion piece in the New York Times in March of 2022. Here is some of what she said...

Action: Read slide 2

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Why is it important for us to be able to talk freely about things that matter?



Script: Emma faced some criticism for this article but was also strongly praised. She reasoned that when we hold ourselves back from talking freely about important issues, we all suffer. So let's take a minute to explore that. Why is it important for us to be able to talk freely together, as a class, about things that matter to us?

Teacher Tips:

1. Strong responses include:



- When we hold ourselves back from saying what we really think, we lose the chance to test our thinking against the thinking of others
- If we don't talk freely as a society, we lose our sense of connection with others
- Complex problems require creative thinking, which is less likely in an environment where people are stifling their thinking and therefore their creativity
- Democratic society requires active debate and discussion to successfully make progress on social and political issues

2. If a student claims that being “too” free can be dangerous or harmful, help them make a clear distinction between criticizing an idea (“The Democratic party isn’t speaking to working class voters”) vs. criticizing a person or group (“All Democrats are idiots!”). The first broadens the perspectives of people in the conversation, while the second shuts diverse views down.

Script: Emma said she sometimes felt afraid to speak her mind. Take a minute and reflect on where that might be true for you. What are the issues that make you feel the most nervous to speak? We’re going to respond via an anonymous poll so that we can get a sense of the types of topics we might be interested in, but not exploring as much as we could.

Teacher Tips:

1. You can use whatever real-time polling software you like. We like [Mentimeter.com](https://www.mentimeter.com). We recommend you set the poll up and test it ahead of time.
2. The purpose of this poll is to show students that they are not alone. Many of the same topics will pop up (for example, issues related to race, gender, identity, equality, politics, etc.) This gives students a chance to see how many of them worry about the same things without having to “out” themselves or risk sharing their fear individually.
3. Take one minute to point out the similarities or themes that come up on the screen for each question. If there are topics that you know you will be addressing later in the year, you might point that out. Otherwise, just give students a chance to notice the kinds of topics that arise.



ANONYMOUS POLL 1: What issues do you feel nervous to talk about?

Script: Now that we have a sense of the topics that make us a little nervous. I have another question for you. Why is it so hard for us to talk about these things? Where does the nervousness come from?

[illegible]

Teacher Tips:

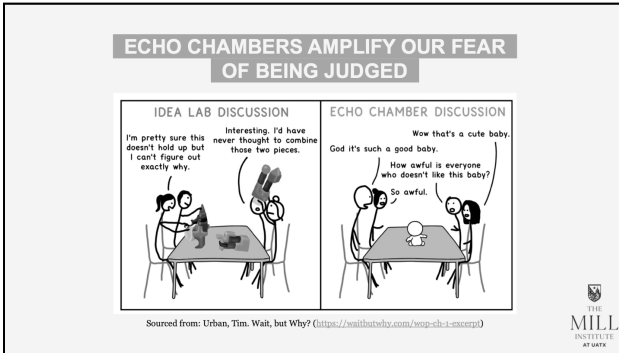
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Cancel Culture	People take it personal or will be hurt because of it	Reputation harm
People attach their opinions to their identity	People are afraid to hurt other people's feeling, or to ostracize themselves by voicing opposing opinions	People are afraid of judgment and saying something that others will frown upon
Aggression towards opposing side	Because some people can be adverse to conflict	People are too opinionated about them

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INSIGHT:

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Script: One of the reasons we might worry about the judgment of others relates to our context. When we are surrounded by others who are seeking out multiple perspectives, we feel freer to offer our own. But when it's more common to see people being criticized or even ostracized for asking a risky question or saying something

different or unpopular, that fear can shut us down. The writer and social commentator Tim Urban drew this cartoon to illustrate that idea.

Urban explains that an Idea lab is a place where people are genuinely interested in figuring things out together. Maybe this is an engineering team or design shop - or just a high functioning classroom. In an Idea Lab, the whole point is to find out new ways of thinking about things. So opposing ideas are highly valuable.

In an Echo Chamber the goal is totally different. The goal of an Echo Chamber is to preserve the status quo and make sure everyone agrees. In an Echo Chamber, opposing ideas or voices are considered dangerous and destabilizing. So they are more likely to be shut down or even removed. When we're operating in an Echo Chamber, it can be really hard to take an intellectual risk.



Teacher Tip: For an extension exercise on Echo Chambers vs. Idea Labs, [click here](#).

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ECHO CHAMBERS THRIVE ON CERTAINTY



Settled Thinking

When we treat open questions as though the answers are known and that the path forward is obvious and has no downside.

E.g. "Giving schools more money would obviously make education better for everyone."

Source: Redstone, Ilana. *Breaking Out of the Certainty Trap*

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Script: Echo Chambers are really good at nurturing certainty. They encourage people to feel pretty sure that they are right about what they think - because everyone around them thinks the same thing! Ilana Redstone, a sociology professor at the University of Illinois, has coined this problem the "Settled Question Fallacy" in her book *The Certainty Trap*. She

writes that settled thinking is when we treat open, complex or messy questions as though they have obvious, clear answers.

When our thinking is settled, we stop asking questions, we stop feeling curious, and we dismiss or even demonize people who disagree with us.

In order to create the conditions for an Idea Lab environment to thrive, rather than creating an echo chamber, it's helpful to put some ground rules in place. These ground rules or conversational "norms" support everyone's learning and discourage group-think.

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GROUND RULES

1. **Seek out multiple or conflicting perspectives, even if you do not personally agree with them.** The goal is clarity, not consensus.
2. **No ideas are off the table, ignored, or untouchable.** No idea is exempt from criticism or questioning.
3. **Treat others as individuals.** Remember that no individual speaks for any identity group, and no identity accounts for all of an individual.
4. **Choose the most generous interpretation of what others say.** We rarely know why people hold the views they hold. Stay curious, ask them questions, and let them tell you.
5. **Everyone gets a do-over.** We all get the chance to clarify our statements or questions.

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Script: Here are five ground rules to start with (although we might add more in the future).

Action: Read slide 8 aloud or have select students read each point aloud.

APPLICATION:

<slides 9 and 10>

LET'S PRACTICE UN-SETTLING SOME THINKING 1. What facts, narratives, or conclusions are people on each side of this issues treating as "settled" or obviously true? 2. Describe the values each side is working to protect or promote. 3. Is there anything that both (or all) sides agree on? Where do these different arguments seem to converge? BONUS: Can you think of anything that both sides seem to be missing? 	LET'S PRACTICE UN-SETTLING SOME THINKING <i>If you were to give one piece of advice to each side in this debate to help them better understand one another, what would it be?</i> 
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Script: So let's do an exercise focused on UNsettling thinking. At the front of the room there are different news stories. Each story reports on a different issue that can, at times, become contentious. Each story also offers a summary of responses from people arguing different sides of the issue. . In groups, you are going to read the story and then work together to see if you can identify the settled thinking from each side that is represented in the article.

Activity:

1. Get into groups of 4 or 5.
2. Designate someone to come up and get a copy of one news story you'd like to read.
3. In your group, read through the news story. You'll notice that each story has the same format. It summarizes the issue and then offers a summary of responses from people on different sides of the issue.
4. Once you've read through the story, you're going to work together to answer the questions on the screen.

Teacher Tips:

1. You have some freedom here about how to lead this activity. You can ask groups to look at one question at a time and then share some responses with the rest of the class. Or, you can give students as long as possible to dig in and get as far as they can through the questions. It is up to you whether or not to ask student groups to share with other groups what they found interesting. There are a lot of possible conversations to be had about themes that might arise within values or assumptions that political parties are

making, even across different topics. Use the time in the way that best serves the needs of your students and what you are trying to accomplish.

2. Circulate while student groups are discussing and encourage them to think critically about whether or not they are layering their own assumptions onto their analysis. For example, do students assume that those representing a position they agree with are well-intentioned while those who disagree are self-serving or ill-informed? If so, remind them of the importance of open minded questioning and exploration.



Optional discussion questions, if there is time:

- What kinds of assumptions or conclusions did you notice people making in the story you read?
- Did searching for settled thinking shift your perspective about the story? If so, how?
- What advice would you offer to the different sides to help them better understand each other
- What do we lose when we assume there are only two sides to a complex argument?
- If we wanted to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the issue, where might we start to look for good information or additional perspectives?

REFLECTION:

Script: It can be useful to do a quick activity that helps us better understand other people's settled thinking. But what about our own? For the last 10 minutes of class, I want you to focus on the areas where we all close ourselves off to new ideas. When do you shut down? Or dismiss views different from your own?

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HOW CAN WE CHALLENGE OUR OWN SETTLED THINKING?

Partner Exercise

1. One personal action I want to take to challenge my own settled thinking throughout the year is _____
2. One action we could agree to as a class to challenge our settled thinking as a group is _____



Script: In pairs, you are going to reflect on two questions and write down your responses on this worksheet. You are going to individually reflect and then share with your partner one action you want to take individually to challenge your own settled thinking this year. This is a real goal you are setting for yourself, so think about it carefully.

Then, you are going to write down one action you think the class as a whole could take to tackle our settled thinking as a group. What can we do to function more like an idea lab and less like an echo chamber? Try to keep your suggestions practical. For example, "Respect each other's ideas" isn't as clear or practical as something like, "Assign someone during each class to offer a counterpoint when we all start to agree with each other."

Ask students to submit their worksheets as exit tickets on their way out of the classroom.

Teacher Tips:

1. Compile student answers for discussion or reflection at the beginning of next class. You may also use student suggestions to add to the five ground rules to create a more comprehensive list of classroom conversation norms.
2. Anonymize and then share the different commitments students offered on their exit tickets and hang them around the room for future discussion.



Teacher Notes:

