

*Thank you*

FOR YOUR  
INTEREST IN  
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Civil Discourse.

[LEARN MORE](#) about this title!

# Introduction

## *Civil Discourse Strengthens Communities*

*There is no power for change greater than a  
community discovering what it cares about.*

Margaret Wheatley

We are at a crossroads as individual nations and as a global community. Political polarization is on the rise and every decision seems to become a flashpoint of anger and resentment (Dimok & Wike, 2020; Lutz Fernandez, 2021). But it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, many studies find that people agree more on local politics than national politics, where organized forces such as political parties telling us what to believe have less influence on our opinions (Jensen et al., 2021). And successful conflict-resolution programs have shown dramatic results in fostering discourse even after violent conflict (North, 2003; Steele, 2021).

The two of us—Joe Schmidt and Nichelle Pinkney—are social studies educators who see civil discourse as the key component to building community. We wrote this book to help educators leverage opportunities to examine our differences in a way to strengthen all of us. As American writer Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” This book is a first step for educators who recognize the value of discussing contentious topics. We develop an

understanding of each other through engaging in civil discourse, which allows for the accepting and celebrating of our inevitable differences.

With experience as a classroom teacher in both high school and college as well as roles in district and state-level leadership, Joe has a combination of classroom experience as well as big-picture thinking done in support of educators in both rural and urban districts. He has also served in a variety of positions with social studies–related organizations across the United States, which have provided insight into how to make connections between resources available for educators and how to best implement those resources in the classroom with students. Joe’s professional network allows him to collaborate with educators who represent the diverse perspectives and issues that we see in schools today. He sees student conversations as one of the most important and engaging parts of a student’s education and always encourages his students to have an opinion, even if that opinion may be subject to change as students continue to learn more about the topic.

Nichelle Pinkney’s life experiences as a woman of color teaching and leading social studies education in the southern United States has given her insight into the importance of navigating contentious topics with careful planning and clear communication. She regularly writes lesson plans and assessments for all courses and grade levels from kindergarten through high school and conducts professional development to help teachers improve their craft. She seeks to empower teachers to move past the fear that has become a common part of their jobs by giving them tools to prepare students for democratic participation in a diverse, pluralistic society.

Even though we both have backgrounds in social studies, the need for civil discourse transcends the lines of content areas. Throughout this book, you will see examples related to non-social studies classes as well as ideas, suggestions, and frameworks that are applicable in almost every classroom. By the

end, we hope that districts use this book to create curriculum and policy that supports all students and all educators in all content areas, because we are all a part of something bigger than a single subject area and classroom.

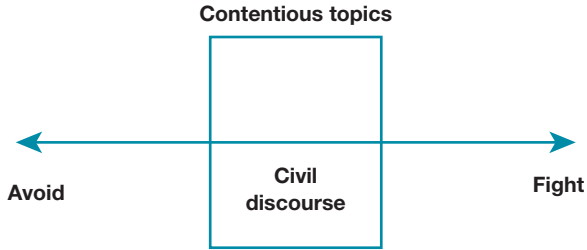
Every person on Earth belongs to distinct communities, and individuals depend on these communities for survival and for living meaningful lives. A community is simply a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. We are a part of several communities in our lifetimes that help to establish and formulate who we are and who we are destined to become. Infants have both an innate need and desire to belong to a community. In the school system, we establish the importance of belonging to a community as early as kindergarten. We teach the characteristics of a strong community and how to maintain them in the walls of the school, with the hope that this will eventually permeate the cities and countries we live in.

When people come together in communities, disagreement is inevitable. We all disagree with our friends and family on simple things like where to go for dinner or who is responsible for cleaning the kitchen. Part of maturity and strong self-development requires us to listen, empathize, seek understanding, and even compromise. The trouble is, with contentious topics, we often resort to one of two poor choices: avoidance or fighting.

But there is a better way. Civil discourse is an alternative to either avoidance or fighting, as shown in Figure 0.1. The building blocks of civil discourse are courage, understanding, belonging, and empathy. This book helps educators build these foundations so that students learn the skills necessary to navigate thorny issues with maturity and respect for those who hold differing opinions.

Through our communities, we learn how to come together even when it is uncomfortable. As history has shown,

**FIGURE 0.1** The Spectrum of Contentious Topics



sometimes we get this right and sometimes we do not. Imagine if the following topics were avoided rather than brought out for formal discussion. When the need arises, we have to be courageous in discussing contentious topics for the betterment of our communities.

Consider these examples:

- In the 1840s, at a time when strong customs and beliefs held that women should be subservient to men in all aspects of life, a community of both women and men came together to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women. Through shared discourse about many contentious aspects of the topic, this community of people wrote the Declaration of Sentiments and their efforts would eventually lead to the passage of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote in the United States.
- During the extreme discrimination, oppression, and violence against African Americans in the 1950s, tensions ran high even among those who sought to change these circumstances. Disagreements among activists threatened to derail their mission. But disciplined discourse led to specific messaging for different groups, a result of practicing empathy, and bolstered the organization and tactics of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

- At the end of the Cold War, thousands of nuclear weapons were in danger of theft and deployment by nefarious groups. The Cooperative Threat Reduction program, which was responsible for the safe destruction of thousands of nuclear weapons, was the result of years of careful discourse and negotiations (Shonk, 2019).
- In the 1990s, members of the law enforcement community teamed up with the broadcasting community to formally discuss ways to save children from abduction. The conclusion of that discourse is now known as the AMBER Alert, which broadcasts a serious—and uncomfortable—topic across television and radio stations when a child is reported missing. The program has now expanded to cell phone users and to date, over 600 children across the United States have been saved as a result.

In all of these monumental historical examples, there are four common themes that arise: courage, shared understanding, belonging, and empathy. This book is organized by these themes, with each chapter providing resources for educators to teach the skills of discourse to their students. We cannot simply walk into a classroom and ask students to discuss abortion or gun control, for instance, without adequate planning and preparation. We have to gradually lead up to this type of discourse. Chapter 5 is where we offer distinct strategies, but recognize that the first four building blocks must be laid before we get there.

Chapter 1 focuses on the **courage** to embrace our discomfort and come together as a group because it is the first step toward establishing strong communities. As psychologist Susan David (2017) says, “Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.” Many of us prefer to avoid difficult or sticky conversations, choosing to ignore them and hoping they will go away, but that is the exact opposite of what strong communities need. When we avoid tough conversations, we

weaken our civil societies and make ourselves vulnerable to the power hungry.

The next building block is shared **understanding**, especially around key terms, which we focus on in Chapter 2. We have to be sure that the words we use have the same meaning to all members of the discourse community. And when we shift the focus toward understanding rather than “winning,” we can help our young people have productive conversations that are sorely needed in today’s divided society.

Although communities are essential for human survival, we want to do more than survive. We want to thrive, and a strong sense of **belonging** is the next piece of the puzzle for strong communities, which is the focus of Chapter 3. Healthy communities acknowledge that each member belongs in their community, even when those members have differing thoughts, views, cultures, and abilities. Educators can set up their classroom communities to foster this sense of belonging that is so essential to living meaningful lives.

Finally, strong communities practice **empathy**, recognizing that each member has a unique and valid perspective, which is the focus of Chapter 4. By viewing the world through other people’s perspective, we can better understand each other and live together in harmony. Strong communities thrive on the concepts of embracing and acknowledging courage, common good, belonging, and empathy of their members. This book seeks to build these values back into our school communities.

With that foundation in place, we can have **discourse** around contentious topics, which is the focus of Chapter 5. To help busy educators remember these building blocks, we can use the acronym **CUBED**. This book sets the foundation for discourse through fostering courage, understanding, belonging, and empathy that leads to productive discourse for stronger communities. Each chapter provides a checklist at the end

to ensure teachers are prepared to foster civil discourse with their students. See Figure 0.2 for our visual of the building blocks of discourse.

Schools play an essential role in our communities. As we type this, there are hurricanes, wildfires, and floods gripping the United States and many other parts of the world. We face a climate crisis, a physical and mental health crisis, a global refugee and migration crisis, and the backsliding of democracies across the globe. While it is certainly not the job of students or teachers to solve these challenges, we can build an important foundation by equipping young people with strong skills in discourse around contentious topics. If we get this right, we have the chance to emerge stronger than ever. Thank you for joining us.

**FIGURE 0.2** Building Blocks of Discourse





# THE C.U.B.E.D APPROACH

## Supporting Each Other in Civil Discourse

**C**ourage: to embrace our discomfort and come together as a group

**U**nderstanding: of key terms, ideas, and goals

**B**elonging: for all including differing thoughts, views, culture and abilities

**E**mpathy: to recognize that each member has a unique and valid perspective

**D**iscourse: with students about contentious topics with appropriate supports and structures

---

*Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* by Joe Schmidt and Nichelle Pinkney. Copyright © 2022 by Joe Schmidt and Nichelle Pinkney. All rights reserved.