

PUBLIC AGENDA

*Independent, Thought-Provoking,
Always in the Public Interest*



Teaching Methods

A PUBLIC AGENDA CITIZEN CHOICEWORK GUIDE

***FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS,
CLASSROOMS, STUDY GROUPS AND
INDIVIDUALS***

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A Note on Public Agenda's Choicework Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

Customizing to fit your situation

Note that the Choicework Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways--they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints necessarily mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation. For instance, for a guide on an education topic, a few well-chosen facts about local schools might be a useful adjunct to the guide if you are using it in a group setting.

Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model

Public Agenda often uses these guides (and, when available, their video counterparts) as discussion starters for community conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda's approach to community conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, "beyond the usual suspects"
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda's approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website www.publicagenda.org and click on "Public Engagement."

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Traditional vs. Innovative Teaching Methods

Introduction

- Are the “tried and true” teaching methods that we grew up with the best way to help today’s kids learn, or are there new, innovative approaches that work better?
- Do today’s students need new approaches because of television and video games, or are more traditional approaches to learning more important than ever because of television and video games?
- Or perhaps the schools should use more traditional approaches in the early grades and more innovative ones later on?
- Do today’s jobs require more teamwork, creativity and ongoing learning than in the past, and does this require us to change the way we teach?

The following scenario describes two school districts that use different teaching methods in their schools. Which would you want in your local school district, and why?



Choicework

School District A relies on **traditional** teaching methods. Classes are conducted in a traditional teaching style, with an emphasis on lectures and note-taking. Lessons are organized around traditional subjects, so that Columbus would be studied during history, astronomy during science, and so on.

Because a foundation of basic knowledge is emphasized, history lessons stress facts, English lessons concentrate on spelling and grammar, and students do math by hand before using calculators. Students are placed in class according to academic ability. Students get regular exams and traditional report cards with letter grades.

Those who like this approach often say:

- The traditional methods are tried and true, and while they may not be the most exciting way to learn, they worked well enough in the past.
- It's easier for parents to help their kids with schoolwork if they understand the way things are being taught.
- Traditional grades give parents clearer indications about whether their kids are making progress or not.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the downsides to this approach?*
- *Doesn't today's workplace emphasize flexible, adaptable learners? Shouldn't schools emphasize these traits, rather than have students memorize facts?*
- *Is "tried and true" really just code for boring?*
- *Can too much emphasis on grammar and spelling early on stifle children's creativity?*
- *We live in a high-tech age. Why shouldn't kids use tools like calculators that help them solve problems more efficiently?*
- *Don't some kids do good work in class but test poorly – and vice versa? What's wrong with finding new ways to measure kids' progress?*



School District B relies on **innovative** teaching methods. Classes emphasize discussion more than lecture, and students are encouraged to participate. Several subjects are taught together by organizing lessons around themes rather than dividing them into traditional subjects. In addition to history, a lesson about Columbus might cover economics, the environment and astronomy. Because creativity and the use of tools to find and manage information is emphasized, English is taught by stressing creative writing first, and correct spelling and grammar are added later, and students are encouraged to use calculators and computers from the beginning.

Kids of different abilities are grouped together, sometimes working in teams and graded on group, not individual, accomplishments. Student progress is assessed through teacher observations, yearlong collections of students' work (portfolios) and demonstration projects, rather than through traditional tests, letter grades and report cards.

Those who like this approach often say:

- Drills and rote learning are so boring they make kids hate school.
- It's more important to learn how to learn than to stuff kids full of a lot of facts.
- Traditional grading can be misleading – some kids can do great work in school even if they don't test well.

Questions to consider about this approach:

- *What are the downsides to this approach?*
- *Aren't facts important? Doesn't every kid need a basic foundation of factual knowledge?*
- *Lectures and learning drills might not be the most exciting way to learn but aren't they effective? Besides, learning can't always be fun, can it?*
- *If schools stress looking at different ways you can interpret historical events, won't kids just wind up confused and unsure what to think about anything?*
- *Is it fair for a student to be dragged down, or raised up, by his or her group's performance? Isn't individual achievement what really counts?*
- *What do you think about this district's approach to evaluating students? Would parents and kids really get a better idea of how they're doing, or would they be more confused?*



Using the guide in a community conversation, discussion group or classroom setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a choicework dialogue, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging from Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from deliberation and dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today's conversation?
3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today's conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?

