

(This lesson may be used in a secondary history, civics, and/or English language arts class. It engages students in reading and writing and thinking and speaking and listening and presenting)

***Civil Discourse: Toward a Healthy Democracy***

By James McDermott

**The What** (*What will this lesson teach?*):

The willingness to agree to disagree is a vital ingredient in any decent society. Disagreements can be uncomfortable, but enlightening. The unwillingness to agree to disagree may result in groupthink and falling in with the herd. Democracy believes in the dignity and rights of each individual, championing differences. The herd does not.

Students will grapple with the written speech *The Dying Art of Disagreement* by Bret Stephens to begin to understand the potential harm of not respecting other points of view.

Too often citizens becoming part of the herd do so to feel settled in their beliefs. They don't want to be different. They don't want to feel uncomfortable. The herd, though, may trample over core democratic principles of openness, tolerance, and cooperation.

American thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson warned, "People wish to be settled: only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." Emerson seems to be warning us, that challenging the herd may be risky, but worth the price.

**The Why** (*Why is this important for students to know?*):

Democracy is messy because it invites all voices to share ideas and thoughts and concerns, understanding that no one person or party or belief is omniscient or infallible. Openness to new and different ideas is vital, but sometimes scary. Galileo was punished by the authorities for daring to demonstrate that the earth was not the center of the universe, even though he produced scientific evidence. The loudest voices then were the authorities who desired to remain settled in their belief that human beings were the stewards of the planet at the center of the universe. Galileo's claims unsettled the groupthink of the herd, so they got rid of the thinker who was different, even though he could prove he was in the right. He had the evidence; they had but their feelings.

The United States was founded on an idea that all human beings are created equal with inalienable rights. The very first amendment to the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, even if that speech runs counter to others' feelings, beliefs, politics, philosophy religion, etc. Of course, it makes no sense that one's freedom can diminish that of another. True freedom requires the responsibility to respect the freedom of others. Free people accept the consequences of their choices. Rosa Parks knew her choice to sit in the front of the bus was against the law. She willingly broke the law and accepted her arrest. Students in high school need to understand freedom is different from license.

Today we live in an unsettling world. The fear of being different lately seems to be driving us into opposing herds. In our politics, in our radio and TV rants, in our street protests, in our Congress, in our State houses, and in our Thanksgiving dinners we see a rising intolerance for opposing viewpoints where the loudest voices seem to win, and where civil discourse, the life blood of a healthy democracy, seems absent, even on our college campuses, where opposing views should be championed, not silenced.

Students in this lesson will work together to begin to understand the dangers of polarization by reading a speech by a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and learning the power of sharing thoughts and ideas to understand the writer's argument. Students will become creative and critical thinkers where they will observe closely, listen to opposing views, grapple with ideas, weigh evidence, make some judgments based on their accumulation of facts, offer some solutions, and write a thinking composition.

**The Learning** (*When students finish this lesson, what will they know and be able to do?*):

- Understand that honest, deep thinking can be an uncomfortable experience.
- Read and understand a work of non-fiction written by a Pulitzer Prize winner.
- Understand the danger of polarization to our ideals as Americans.
- Understand how polarization can be an enemy to critical thinking.
- Brainstorm ways to open communication and come to consensus.
- Engage in a group read to uncover complex reading matter.
- Identify, analyze, and apply knowledge of the structure, elements, and meaning of non-fiction and provide evidence from the text to support understanding.
- Use low stakes reading strategies to help comprehend difficult material.
- Use low stakes writing strategies to explore their own thinking.
- Share thoughts and ideas to uncover content in a more meaningful way.
- Practice reporting out and speaking in public.
- Pose questions, listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information and ideas to acquire new knowledge.
- Cite specific evidence to support analysis.
- Determine the central ideas of a primary source.
- Become aware of the danger of identity politics in a democracy.
- Write a guest opinion essay for your local paper responding to a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist's speech.
- Writing is thinking. Good writing is thinking made clear.
- Improve organization, content, paragraph development, level of detail, style, tone, word choice and voice in revising compositions.

**The Assessment** (*How will you and your students know they understand what it is you want them to know and be able to do?*):

- Students will share low stakes writing (writing to learn).
- Teacher will observe students in their low stakes reading groups.

- Teacher will observe students working on double entry journals.
- Teacher will observe, listen, question, probe suggest, and encourage students working on their presentation based on the double entry journals.
- Teacher will observe group presentations and be able to encourage, clarify points, and correct misunderstandings.
- Teacher will read drafts and final copies of compositions written by students, making comments, questioning thoughts, and providing guidance – all leading students on the path to better understanding of an important and complex piece of non-fiction.
- Teacher is encouraged to set up a writing workshop to help student writers move from the first crappy draft to a polished piece of their composition. The first draft is low stakes or writing to learn. The polished draft is writing to show learning, high stakes where the messy thinking of the first draft is made clear.

**The Activities** (*What Will You and Your Students Actually Do in Class?*):

*Part I - Writing into The Day*

1. Students enter to desks arranged in groups of 3.
2. The following quote is displayed on the board or overhead: “People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson.
3. Teacher directs students to read the quote and to think about what the quote seems to be saying.
4. Teacher says, “You have only 3 minutes to write down whatever this quote makes you think about. Write quickly and try to write for the entire 3 minutes.” (This is low-stakes writing or writing-to-learn intended to get students thinking).
5. After 3 minutes, teacher says, “Stop writing. In your groups, share with one another all or parts of what you wrote.” Teacher visits each group, observing and listening, and asking for one spokesperson to share some of the group discussion with the rest of the class.
6. One spokesperson from each group shares the thinking of the group prompted by the Emerson quote with the rest of the class. Teacher facilitates.

*Part II – Low Stakes Reading Activity*

1. Students, still in groups of 3, have before them a speech by American Pulitzer Prize winning editor and columnist, Bret Stephens, delivered 9/23/17 in Australia. The [piece in full as it appeared in the New York Times](#).
2. Reading is thinking. Three heads are better than one. Students will work in groups of three to work toward comprehending the lecture by Bret Stephens. Here is how it will work:
  - a. One student in each group begins reading the lecture aloud to the other two.

- b. The two not reading will underline a sentence or a line, not more than two underlinings, for each page read. Try to underline something that may be important or interesting or confusing or eye-catching.
  - c. The reader chooses to stop reading aloud any time. The person to his or her left, then takes over reading aloud. The two not reading continue the underlining.
  - d. The second reader chooses when to stop reading. The reader to his or her left takes over reading aloud. The two not reading continue the underlining.
  - e. The reading and underlining continue until the reading is completed.
3. With the reading completed, students in each group do the following:
    - a. Share what they underlined in the speech with one another.
    - b. Together work to come to a consensus on the top 3 underlinings of the essay. They may choose them for many reasons - most interesting, confusing, important, disturbing, eye-catching. They then come to a consensus on what they as a group consider the 3 most interesting or important or confusing or eye-catching.
    - c. Offer a brief reason for each choice.
    - d. Try to make a connection to the Emerson quote that prompted the writing-into-the-day of the opening of class.
  4. Teacher facilitates whole class sharing by asking each group to choose one of their 3 selected quotes to share with the class. One spokesperson from each group:
    - a. Shares one quote;
    - b. Explains the group reason for selecting that quote;
    - c. Points out a connection to the Emerson's quote if there is one.  
(Groups have 3 quotes or phrases or passages so they should choose one not already selected by another group).

### *Part III – Group Presentations*

You have 20 minutes to prepare a presentation in front of the class. Each of you must take part. You will be given one of the following tasks: (If there are more than 4 groups, then double up the tasks).

1. Using crayons and/or magic markers draw pictures and symbols (no words) on big print paper to try to capture the essence of the lecture by Bret Stephens. When done with your low-stakes artwork, you will tape your masterpiece on the wall or board for all to see. The three of you will explain in your presentation what you drew and why.
2. Select one part of the speech – about half a page – and work together to deliver it in such a way that it comes alive for the class. You may deliver it together, split it up, do a combination of both. Be creative, tap into your acting brain, use your thespian voices. After you deliver and entertain us, explain why you decided to pick this part of the lecture to present.
3. Double-entry journal. Select 5 phrases or lines from the lecture by Bret Stephens.

- a. On a sheet of big print paper, draw a line down the middle of the big print paper.
  - b. On the top of the left column write, 'Quote'.
  - c. On the top of the right column write, 'Reason'.
  - d. Write the quotes you select in the left column. You need not write out the entire quote. Use the ellipsis mark (3 dots) to indicate you have deleted words from an otherwise word-for-word quotation.
  - e. On the right explain briefly the reason for your selection.
  - f. Tape the big print paper up on the wall for all to see.
  - g. Each person will present by reading an entire quote and then explaining why it was selected by the group.
4. Stephens mentions some people who, he claims, have been victimized because of their different thinking. Select 4 of them. You may have to go to the web to figure out who some of them are. Divide a sheet of big print paper into quadrants. Write the names of each person in a separate quadrant. In that same quadrant write out as much info as you can identifying that person with an explanation as to why you think their presence as a speaker might unsettle some people.

#### Part IV – Presenting

Group 1 presents. When they finish, teacher leads applause. Group 2 has the task of beginning class response to Group 1's presentation. A great way to begin the response is to use the following: "What struck me most ..." Others, including teacher, are invited to join in.

Group 2 presents. When they finish, teacher leads applause. Group 3 now has the task of beginning the response to Group 2's presentation with "What struck me most..." Others, including teacher, are invited to respond.

Group 4 begins the response to Group 3, and so on. Group 1 has the task of beginning the response to the final group presenters.

#### *Part V – What Do You Think? The Opinion Essay*

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Freedom, he knew, depends on self-government. Self-government depends on self-governing citizens. And education contributes to both the knowledge and virtues that form a self-governing citizen.

Thomas Jefferson believed in an enlightened citizenship to ensure a healthy democracy. Bret Stephens in his speech, *The Dying Art of Disagreement*, believes the

same, but fears that the rise of partisanship has darkened rather than enlightened minds and hearts, even on our college campuses. What do you think?

Hanna Holborn Gray, former president of the University of Chicago, on the purpose of education, wrote: “Education should not be intended to make people comfortable; it is meant to make them think.” Some of you may think Gray’s quote is very similar to the Emerson quote we used to warm up our thinking to this lesson.

On the other hand, in 2017, 58% of college students said it is, “important to be a part of a campus community where I am not exposed to intolerant ideas.” Some of you may think these students believe differently about the purpose of education.

What do you think is the purpose of education in a democratic society? Is a ‘safe zone’ freedom from thinking or freedom for thinking?

### ***Your job – Write an opinion column.***

Check one out in your local newspaper. In your opinion column make sure you expound on your thinking. Begin by tapping into the speech by Bret Stevens. Use thoughts and ideas discussed in class. Use quotes from Stevens. Use Emerson, Jefferson, Gray, etc. Use what makes your thinking clear.

Your working title: Toward a Healthy Democracy. You may change your title later.

Hint: Newspapers have a standard policy for guest columnists. Below is an example (**Pay special attention to bold print**):

*As part of our mission to help discuss important local issues, we welcome your letters and guest columns. We appreciate your willingness to share your perspective. **Your voice matters.***

*Sadly, we can’t publish every letter or column that we receive, but we read and appreciate every submission. Sometimes, your letters make our editorial board and staff aware of an issue we hadn’t known about. Always, **they help us understand what people are thinking about and saying in the community.***

*For publication, we especially look for letters and columns that share **a unique perspective – that make us think.** We look for writers who have spent time and attention **developing their own opinions**, rather than simply repeating other people’s arguments. **Write in your own voice.** We’re much more interested in **why you feel the way you do** than in what you think is wrong with people who disagree with you.*

*We work hard to select a diversity of voices, perspectives and views.*

We expect writers to be **civil and straightforward**. Satire is a difficult skill to master, sarcasm rarely is persuasive and, as your mother no doubt has told you, **name-calling is just plain rude**.

**Use logic and reasoning** to support your opinions. Facts and figures are great but give them context and include sources with your submission.

When we select a piece for publication, we edit it for accuracy, length, redundancy, clarity and civility. If we have substantive changes, we'll get your approval before we publish the edited version. Our intent in editing never is to change your opinion, but to ensure your views are clear and easy to understand.

**Here is a submission checklist. Did I:**

- Write it myself and stay within the maximum word limit (450-600 words for a guest column).
- Include my full name, address and daytime phone number for verification?
- Write about an issue of local importance?
- Offer solutions to the problems I am addressing, when possible?
- Use plain language, spelling out acronyms and explaining any specialized jargon?
- Focus on my own thoughts and opinions, without making false and damaging statements about another person?
- Include sources of facts that I used in support of my argument?

Double hint: You have just finished reading and working to comprehend a speech. The ammunition for your writing lies in the text, the discussions, the presentations, the big print sheets of paper draping the room, and the thinking you and your classmates shared. You are thinking beings. Show your mind thinking in your writing. Have the courage to demonstrate where you stand. Good luck.