

Student Micro-Dilemmas: Election Edition

by Sara O'Brien and Meira Levinson

These short dilemmas (“micro-dilemmas”) are designed to help educators lead secondary students in discussions about how they might respond to peers’ comments about the 2024 US election, both in the classroom and in non-curricular spaces. These dilemmas are fictional. When it makes sense, we’ve provided two similar dilemmas, one left-leaning and one right-leaning. This document also includes a [facilitation guide](#) and [participant packet](#) that can be used during discussion, which includes some potential sentence starters students can use in heated conversations about politics. Our team at EdEthics hopes that our users will adapt both the dilemmas and protocol as needed to make them most useful in their contexts.

STUDENT-FACING DILEMMAS

Political Violence [red-leaning]

Blake, a senior, is taking an elective on World War II. The class started by studying the political unrest in Europe during the 1930s. The teacher has just divided the class into trios to dig into primary sources to better understand the coup that precipitated the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Blake is friendly with the other students but doesn’t know any of them that well.

The group stays mostly on task with the first source but starts to lose focus with the second.

“It sucks that the coup set off three years of fighting,” Corey says. “Franco ended up in power anyway in the end.”

“Here’s hoping we don’t have a civil war here in November,” Jordan chuckles. “That would *really* suck.”

“Well, if that’s what it takes to take back the country. We’ve got plenty of patriots ready to step up if Democrats try to steal the election from Trump again,” Corey responds.

There’s an uncomfortable silence at the table. Finally Blake asks, “So, you’re *advocating* for civil war?”

“I’m *advocating* for a stronger America, even if it takes some bloodshed,” confirms Corey.

What should Blake say next?

Political Violence [blue-leaning]

Blake is a junior studying American history. The teacher just assigned a group project on Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act and the events that followed. Blake’s group meets up in the student commons after school to make a plan. The three students in the group don’t hang out together outside of school, but they are friendly and sit next to each other often.

“I knew about Lincoln’s assassination, but I never knew that someone tried to shoot Jackson before that,” Aubrey says.

“Yeah, I guess the Trump shooting in July isn’t as big a deal as he was making it out to be—happens all the time,” Cam jokes.

“Maybe not *all* the time,” Blake chuckles.

“Too bad the shooter failed, though. We’d all be a lot better off if he’d managed to get Trump in the head instead of the ear,” Cam continues.

Blake and Aubrey share an uncomfortable glance, and Blake notices that the two students at the next table over are looking askance at Cam. What should Blake say next?

Political Apathy [*Harris supporter*]

Cam, a sophomore, is at lunch with a group of six or seven friends from the same grade. The conversation turns toward the 2024 election. Nobody at the table is old enough to vote, but many people have opinions. It sounds as though most people at the table support Harris, though a few people are noticeably quiet.

Finally, one of the quiet people, John, speaks up: “I’m sick of hearing about the election. I honestly don’t care who wins. Let’s talk about something else.”

One of the more outspoken people at the table, Naomi, bursts out, “You honestly don’t care? What, you don’t care if Trump bans same-sex marriage or makes it illegal to get an abortion? That just doesn’t matter to you?”

John retorts, “I’m not saying I want those things to happen. But I don’t get a vote. Why would I spend my time obsessing over things I have no say over?”

Naomi fires back, “Well, lucky you. There are a lot of us who don’t get the luxury of not worrying about these things. Do you hear how selfish you sound?”

Everyone else seems to be extra interested in their lunch, eyes down at their trays, but John catches Cam’s eye across the table. “Can you believe this?” he asks. Suddenly, all eyes are on Cam, waiting for the response.

What should Cam say?

Political Apathy [*Trump supporter*]

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Finally, one of the quiet people, Naomi, speaks up: “I’m so sick of hearing about the election. I honestly don’t care who wins. Let’s talk about something else.”

One of the more outspoken people at the table, John, burst out, “You honestly don’t care? What, you don’t care if Harris closes all the mines and bans fracking and spends our tax dollars on forever wars abroad instead of taking care of Americans at home? That just doesn’t matter to you?”

Naomi retorts, “I’m not saying I want those things to happen. But I don’t get a vote. And I don’t spend my time obsessing over things I have no say over.”

John fires back, “Well, lucky you. I don’t know what it’s like where you live, but there are a lot of us who don’t get the luxury of not worrying about these things. Do you hear how selfish you sound?”

Everyone else seems to be extra interested in their lunch, eyes down at their trays, but Naomi catches Cam's eye across the table. "Can you believe this?" she asks. Suddenly, all eyes are on Cam, waiting for the response.

What should Cam say?

Policy Disagreements vs. Existential Debates

Ali is taking A.P. Government with three friends. Each Friday, the class does a short "Policy Debate" as their warm-up activity; their teacher Mr. Garcia generally pulls from news headlines when choosing the topics. Ali's group of friends has started trying to guess the week's topic ahead of time; whoever has the most right at the end of the semester gets Sour Patch Kids from the vending machine.

"Searching for current events this week, I read a long article about transgender kids in sports. Half the states have a ban now. That's my guess for the week," Jude says.

"No way," Ash objects. "Mr. Garcia isn't going to let us debate something that's just morally wrong. Trans kids' rights are getting trampled by those laws."

"Actually, it's girls' Title IX rights that are being trampled by trans athletes competing on girls' teams," Quinn argues. "We should be debating whether a trans kid should be able to take a team spot or a championship trophy away from someone who was, you know, *born* as a girl."

"Trans kids are *born* as one gender or the other as well," Ash challenges. "It just doesn't necessarily align with their sex. That's hard enough without other people debating whether trans kids deserve to belong to a group they already know they're a part of!"

"The girl in the article I read really seemed like she deserved to be on the team," Jude murmured.

"I don't know anything about her," Quinn retorts. "I'm just saying that whether or not kids like her get to join girls' sports teams should be up for debate."

"And I think that debate is dehumanizing for trans kids. This is a human rights issue, not a policy one," Ash insists.

Jude shoots Ali an imploring look, a clear request for help. What should Ali say?

Political Meme

Cam is a freshman. It's only a couple of months into the school year, and everyone is still getting to know each other. Cam wanders into the student commons after school one day to find a group of classmates huddled together. At the center is Quinn, whom Cam has seen around but never really met. Everyone is staring at Quinn's phone. Most are laughing, though it seems to Cam that some of the kids on the periphery might be uncomfortable. Cam doesn't have any close friends there, but it's a pretty diverse group, so it seems like a good chance to get to know some people.

"What's so funny?" Cam asks.

"Oh my god, you have to see this," Quinn laughs, turning the phone so Cam can see.

It's a meme of Donald Trump holding two kittens protectively and running from two shirtless Black men. The caption reads "Make Kittens Safe Again."

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Cam's cousins actually live in Springfield, Ohio; their school had to be evacuated because of bomb threats called in after Trump claimed that Haitian immigrants were eating pets there. Moreover, the student standing next to Cam is Haitian on her mother's side, something Cam learned during the first week of social studies.

What should Cam say?

Responding to Peer Comments About the 2024 Election: Participant Packet

Norms for Today's Conversation

- 1. Respect Yourself and Others**
Actively listen. Maintain confidentiality. Challenge ideas, not people.
- 2. Acknowledge the Different Backgrounds and Experiences of Others**
Consider the role of your identities and power dynamics.
- 3. Accept Challenge and Anticipate Discomfort**
Push your thinking. Hold yourself and others accountable. Contribute to the conversation.
- 4. Keep an Open Mind**
Allow for growth. Listen before responding. Stay engaged.
- 5. Embrace Uncertainty and Non-Closure**

Norms are adapted from "[Leveraging Norms for Challenging Conversations](#)," Developed by Whitney Polk in collaboration with Dr. Aaliyah El-Amin. Harvard Graduate School of Education. 2016.

Personal Reflection: Identity, Beliefs, and Values

Which parts of your identity (gender, race, sexuality, nationality, etc.), and/or the beliefs and values that you hold, feel most important to you as you think about talking with peers about the election?

Reflection on a Micro-Dilemma

Values, Interests, and Concerns

As you read the scenario, consider: *What are the key values, interests, and concerns for this student?*

(Possible Values: community, inclusion, integrity, safety, dialogue, truth, freedom of speech...)

“Missing Pieces”

What information is missing that might impact how the student responds? (*i.e., identity markers, demographics, school or community context, relationships, etc.*) How would the answer change your thinking about the possible responses?

Micro-Dilemmas - What to Say?

Possible Action ¹	Possible Sentence Stems
Interrupt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hang on...” • “Stop.”
Use curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Can you explain that a bit more?” • “What would you say to someone who believed [the opposite]?”
Name a different perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think something different.” • “I’ve heard [a different perspective].”
Give people the opportunity to correct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think I heard you say _____. Is that what you meant?” • “I think your point was _____. Is that right?”
Use confusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I don’t think I’m following you. Can you say more?”
Pause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hold on, I need a minute.” • “Time out.”
Leverage the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What do you all think?” • [Wait and see what others say.]
Ask for evidence or explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How do you know?” • “What makes you think that?”
Share feelings with “I” statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I feel really uncomfortable hearing that.” • “I don’t like [that word, that joke, that idea].”
Correct misinformation and disinformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “That actually isn’t true. Here’s the truth: _____.” • “A lot of people think that, but it’s not really true. This is: _____.”
Call people in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How might someone else see things differently?” • “How might someone misinterpret what you said?”
Call people out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Oh, that’s not [our culture, our values, how we do things here].” • “I don’t think that’s funny.”
Give the benefit of the doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You may not realize how this sounded...” • “I hear that you’re trying to make a joke, and yet...”
Explain the potential impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I could imagine that some people might feel _____ if they heard that.”
Support others who are speaking out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I didn’t think that was funny, either.” • “Thanks for saying something.” • “I agree with _____.”

¹ The following suggestions have been pulled from: [Facilitating Hot Moments in Classroom Discussion](#), by Dr. Aaliyah El-Amin and Kimberly Osagie; [Speak Up At School](#), by Learning for Justice; [Calling In and Calling Out Guide](#), by Harvard DIB Team; [Making the Most of Hot Moments in the Classroom](#), by University of Michigan CRLT

What *might* the student say?

(Remember, we're just brainstorming here!)

What *should* the student say?

*Which response do you believe the student **should** use? Why is that the best response to you? What values, interests, and concerns does it prioritize?*

Reflection Questions:

- What language did you hear that you could imagine using with your peers?
- Which parts of this exercise might you use to make values-based choices in challenging conversations with peers moving forward?
- Which of the “missing pieces” that we talked about today will you want to seek out or keep in mind when you’re responding to peers?

Responding to Student Comments About the 2024 Election: Facilitation Guide

Norms for Today’s Conversation
<p>1. Respect Yourself and Others Actively listen. Maintain confidentiality. Challenge ideas, not people.</p>
<p>2. Acknowledge the Different Backgrounds and Experiences of Others Consider the role of your identities and power dynamics.</p>
<p>3. Accept Challenge and Anticipate Discomfort Push your thinking. Hold yourself and others accountable. Contribute to the conversation.</p>
<p>4. Keep an Open Mind Allow for growth. Listen before responding. Stay engaged.</p>
<p>5. Embrace Uncertainty and Non-Closure</p>

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Time	Activity	Facilitation Tips
5-10 min.	<p><u>Welcome, Introductions, Framing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome the group. • Go around the group and ask students to introduce themselves if they don’t know each other well. • Provide some framing for the session. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We’re here to think about how we might respond to heated conversations about the 2024 election. • Our goal isn’t to determine “the right thing to say” in any of these dilemmas, but rather to explore a process for thinking about some good responses. Different people may have different views about “the right thing to say,” depending on the context, and their identities, relationships, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the group doesn’t know each other well, or you anticipate discussion might be slow going, consider adding an icebreaker to the introductions. • If you have time, you might also consider having students share what they hope to learn or what concerns they have about classroom conversations about the election.

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	students, and values.	
5-10 min.	<p><u>Discussion Norms</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let participants know that we have some discussion norms to guide the conversation. • Ask participants to review the discussion norms in the participant packet. • Ask whether any students would like to talk more about the meaning of any norms on the list or would like to add a norm that's currently missing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have enough time, you might ask students to write a sentence about a norm they are particularly focused on for this conversation and ask a few volunteers to share. (This will likely work best with groups that have already built up some trust.)
5-10 min.	<p><u>Personal Reflection</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct students to the personal reflection section of their participant packet and ask them to spend time thinking and/or writing about the questions there. • Ask students to keep these reflections in mind as they consider how they might respond to the scenario. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you have time and have a group that trusts one another, you might ask people to share some thoughts with a partner. Or you might use a word cloud or some other anonymous digital activity that would make students thinking visible in a safe way.
5 min.	<p><u>Micro-Dilemma</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribute the micro-dilemma to the group. • Read the micro-dilemma aloud while students read along and make notes. • Give students a few minutes to make notes in their packet about the values, interest, and concerns, as well as the missing information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participant packet includes a list of potential values at play in the scenario, but consider providing students with a further list if discussion about values is new to them.
10-15 min.	<p><u>Values, Interests, and Concerns</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead the group through a discussion about the key values, interests, and concerns at play in the dilemma. • Possible Follow-Up Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why does that [value, interest, concern] seem important here?</i> • <i>What value(s) do you think are behind that concern? Is the teacher thinking about inclusion, for example?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes people struggle to name values. If you hear students talking around a value, feel free to name it for them. (“It sounds like friendship might be an important value for this student. Does that seem right?”) • If there’s a value, interest, or concern that feels important to you but isn’t being mentioned, you can bring it into the conversation. • You might use pair-shares

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		here to get more voices into the conversation.
10 min.	<p><u>Missing Information</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead the group through a discussion about what information is missing from the scenario (i.e., identity markers, demographics, school or community context, work role, etc.). • Possible Follow-Up Questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Was there any missing demographic information? Or anything you needed to know about the context or the relationships between the characters, for example?</i> • <i>Why is that missing information important here? How would you use it to help you decide how to respond?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The timing in this session is flexible, and the conversation may go back and forth between values, interests, and concerns and the missing information that would be helpful. • You may want to use pair-shares to get more voices into the conversation.
5-10 min.	<p><u>What Might the Student Say?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct the group to the page in their packet that lists possible strategies and language teachers might use in facilitating “hot moments.” • If students can’t imagine using the language in the suggested list, help them brainstorm more authentic language for the strategies that they could imagine using.. • Help the group generate a list of possible responses the student in the scenario might use. It’s just a brainstorm! Remind students that there’s no “right answer” here. • Record those responses so that students can see them (on chart paper, a white or chalk board, digital projection, etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there’s a response that you think might be a good one, but you’re not hearing anything like it from the group, you might suggest it yourself. (Just be careful that it doesn’t become “the right answer” because a teacher said it.) • You may need to redirect if students are trying to move into what should be said. That part will come next!
5-10 min.	<p><u>What Should the Student Say?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead students through a discussion of what the students in the case should say. Make sure to ask why the students think a certain response is a good one: what values, interests, or concerns does it uphold? • You might want to indicate on your written brainstorm which responses are being chosen as good ones (by starring them, adding +1, etc.) and what values those responses uphold. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be prepared to redirect if students do start debating the “best” response. Different responses are the “best” one depending on which values and concerns you want to uplift, and that will depend on the circumstances and the person. The goal isn’t to come to consensus as a group but to explore a range of “good” responses.

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5-10 min.	<p><u>Reflection</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Direct students to the reflection questions in their packets. (You can also supplement these with questions specific to your context and goals.)• Students may think or write about these questions, or may talk through them with a partner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflection is a key part of this activity and worth fitting in even if you only have two minutes for participants to write down a takeaway.• You might ask students to share their reflections (anonymously or not) through a digital platform to make their learning visible to all.
5 min.	<p><u>Closing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Let students know where they can find further resources or supports in the school if they encounter challenging conversations about the 2024 election.	

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