

Civi Coalition Bridging Lesson Framework

As the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the founders' vision of an engaged and collaborative society comes into sharper focus. In an era of rising political polarization, the need for high-quality civic education is more urgent than ever. The Civi Coalition is committed to equipping educators with practical, research-informed strategies for promoting civic discourse in classrooms. Our goal is to help students engage meaningfully with complex and challenging issues, developing the skills to bridge divides and collaborate across differences. Drawing on research in civic education, social-emotional learning ([NYS SEL Benchmarks](#)), the [New York State Social Studies Framework](#) and depolarization, we recognize that students benefit most when they have structured opportunities to encounter multiple perspectives, reflect deeply, and practice respectful dialogue.

This framework is not something entirely new—instead, it intentionally weaves together Laura Robb's *Read–Talk–Write* approach (2016), evidence-based SEL practices, political science studies on polarization, a variety of bridging-based dialogue curricula, and the practical strategies from Kent Lenci's *Learning to Depolarize*. By connecting these strands, the Civi Coalition offers educators a loose, adaptable structure they can apply to multiple difficult topics while grounding instruction in disciplinary practices that promote empathy, critical thinking, and intellectual humility.



At the core is the **Read–Talk–Write** sequence:

- **Read** – Students encounter diverse, credible sources to build informed perspectives and challenge assumptions.
- **Talk** – Students engage in structured dialogue to process information, consider alternative viewpoints, and practice listening to understand.
- **Write** – Students synthesize their learning, reflect on shifts in their thinking, and articulate evidence-based conclusions.

By having students sit with information multiple times—reading it, discussing it, and writing about it—this process allows them to interact with ideas in varied ways, consider multiple perspectives, and shape their own well-reasoned viewpoints. Over time, these habits help counteract reactive, identity-driven thinking and prepare young people to contribute to a more respectful and collaborative democracy.

“Hearken not to the unnatural voice which tells you that the people of America, knit together as they are by so many chords of affection, can no longer live together as members of the same family; can no longer continue the mutual guardians of their mutual happiness; can no longer be fellow citizens....”

(Madison, Federalist 14, 1787)

Research Foundations: The Need for Structured Civic Discourse

Toxic polarization has deepened over time and has become personal, with research from [Kalmoe & Mason \(2019\)](#) showing that partisan animosity extends into moral and even violent attitudes. Youth polarization emerges early: [Rachel Hutchins' work \(2024\)](#) finds affective polarization present in grades 5–9, largely due to ingroup favoritism rather than fully developed issue-based knowledge. Below are several methods for combating polarization that we attempt to weave into this framework.

Repeated structured cross-party dialogue reduces polarization:

"Levendusky and Stecula (n.d.) show that having Democrats and Republicans come together and have political discussions substantially reduces affective polarization. The effect, which lasts at least a week, stems from the discussions leading partisans to realize they have more in common with those from the other party, have a better understanding [of] their perspectives, and to have increased feelings of being respected" ([Druckman & Levy, 2021, p. 15](#)). However this can fade without repetition—single interventions help, but durable change requires repeated exposure. Scholars caution against expecting permanent effects from one-off experiences. (Druckman & Levy, 2021) (Finkel et al. 2020)

Thinking about cross-party relationships helps:

"Levendusky (n.d.) goes further to see if contact can be emulated by asking people to think about friends, families, and co-workers they have from the other party – this intervention also reduces affective polarization" ([Druckman & Levy, 2021, p. 15](#))

Understanding moral conflict through perceptions of harm:

Gray ([2025 Outraged](#)) argues that political conflict is often driven less by competing facts and more by competing perceptions of harm. People across ideological differences generally see themselves as protecting vulnerable people, communities, or values from perceived threats. Political disagreement frequently emerges because citizens identify different victims and different sources of harm. Understanding these competing moral concerns can reduce dehumanization and create opportunities for dialogue rooted in curiosity rather than judgment.

Cultivating intellectual humility:

Encouraging openness to revising views and recognizing limits of one's knowledge correlates with political tolerance. (Krumrei-Mancuso & Newman, 2021; Fernbach et al., 2013) [in Druckman & Levy](#)

Correcting misperceptions:

Showing people that their beliefs about the extremism or negativity of the other party are exaggerated reduces hostility. An excellent [lesson plan](#) regarding this depolarizing concept comes from [More Like US](#) our Coalition highly recommends it. (Lees & Cikara, 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2021) [in Druckman & Levy](#)

Developing civic identity through structured engagement:

[Westheimer and Kahne](#) (2004) found that civic identity is shaped by the kinds of opportunities and programs students have to participate in community life. Programs that center inquiry, collaboration, and real-world problem-solving (especially those encouraging root cause analysis) to solve societal challenges, can potentially equip students to engage effectively across differences and work toward the common good.

Respect, Fair Process, and Feeling Heard:

Feeling respected in the process reduces affective polarization even when disagreement remains. Reductions in polarization are mediated by perceived respect and fairness, not persuasion. (Better Arguments Project)

Reducing Identity Threat:

Depolarization efforts work best when identity threat is minimized. Affective polarization is driven primarily by outgroup animosity, not disagreement over issues. Threatening identity activates motivated reasoning and hostility. (Mason, 2018) (Iyengar et al. 2019)

Bridging as Civic SEL

Bridging is defined by the [Listen First Project](#) as intentionally bringing together divided perspectives to foster understanding, curiosity, trust, empathy, respect, and productive disagreement—without requiring an altering of one’s viewpoints. We utilize many of [CASEL’s SEL Strategies from their playbook](#) which is also reflected in the [NYS SEL Benchmarks](#).

Bridging shifts focus from “winning” debates to dialogue, building common ground, and enabling collaboration on shared problems.

Research in moral psychology suggests that people are more willing to engage constructively when they feel their concerns are understood and respected. Many political disagreements stem from different perceptions of who is vulnerable and what needs protection (Gray, 2025).

In an effort to demonstrate the overlap between Social Emotional Learning and bridging practices we created a “crosswalk document” demonstrating the similarities between SEL CASEL strategies and the NYS SEL Benchmarks. [See NYS SEL & Bridging Crosswalk Document](#) (last page of this document)

Why Read–Talk–Write Works

Based on Laura Robb’s framework (2016), this sequence scaffolds writing through informed reading, collaborative meaning-making, and reflective synthesis.

Reading exposes students to complex, diverse texts that challenge assumptions.

Talking promotes comprehension, listening to understand, exposure to new perspectives, and divergent thinking.

Writing consolidates understanding, builds evidence-based reasoning, and reduces reactive identity thinking.

Supports findings from Johnston’s *Choice Words* (2004) that teacher language and questioning styles shape collaborative, respectful learning spaces.

Unit Flow Overview

Phase	Civic Value	Depolarizing Function	Example Activity
Read	Informed Perspective	Challenges assumptions through exposure to diverse, credible sources	Multi-source packet with guided questions
Talk	Civic Dialogue	Builds empathy, develops habits of respectful disagreement	Four Corners + Narrative Sharing protocol
Write	Reflection + Agency	Encourages evidence-based reasoning, reduces reactive identity thinking	Reflective synthesis essay
Extend	Civic Action & Transfer	Moves from understanding to collaboration	Student-led forum

Systematic Lesson Sequence for Challenging Topics

Stage 1 – Prepare the Environment

Purpose: Establish the trust, norms, and safety needed for honest discourse.

- Norm-setting session using “call in” vs. “call out” strategies.
- Introduce listening to understand protocols (e.g., “Have you considered...” / “That’s interesting, maybe...”).
- Practice low-risk discussion prompts to build comfort.

Civi Coalition Seven Bridging Tips:

1. Prepare as the facilitator

- Reflect: call in vs. call out ([UNM HSC Learning Environment & Ross](#))
- Do the research prior to the discussion
- Model what you expect of the students

2. Establish firm set of norms and practices

- Focus on the “how” vs. the “what”
- Begin with low risk topics

3. Safe environment: getting to know each other

- Think elephants not riders (see Haidt’s Righteous Mind, 2011)
- Narrative sharing with protocols (Lenci, 2023)
- Seek to understand what people are trying to protect rather than what position they hold (Gray, 2025)

4. Take winning off the table ([Better Arguments Project](#))

- Dialogue rather than debate-explicitly define the two and their unique purposes
- Explicit listening to understand not to respond
- Gray (2025) argues that productive conversations begin when participants shift from trying to prove others wrong to understanding the fears, experiences, and moral concerns driving their views.

5. Identify areas of common ground

- ([Perception Gap](#), [More Like US](#))

6. Question everything (media literacy)

- [Media Education Lab](#)
- [AllSides](#)
- [See Redmond, 2022 select chapters](#) 5-7

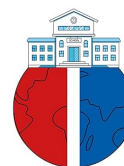
7. Embrace vulnerability & humility

- ([Better Arguments Project](#))

Kent Lenci’s work is essential for anyone seeking to engage in depolarization within the classroom. As a leader in the field, he offers practical and actionable solutions to the challenges educators face in bridging divides. Educators can also explore his work further and even collaborate with him at [Middle Ground Schools](#).

LEARNING TO DEPOLARIZE

Helping Students and Teachers Reach
Across Lines of Disagreement



KENT LENCI

An Eye On Education Book

Stage 2 – Read (Informed Perspectives)

Purpose: Ground discussion in shared evidence, not hearsay or assumptions.

- Select multi-perspective, complex sources relevant to the challenging topic (news articles, historical documents, opinion pieces, data visualizations).
- Share polarization research with students for them to see the divides we currently face-ask them ***is this to our benefit as a nation and people?***
 - [Druckman & Levy 2021](#)
 - [Polarization Research Lab](#)
 - [Pew Research Polarization Page](#)
 - [Pew Research 2022](#)
 - [NY Times 2019 No Hate Left Behind](#) (Kalmoe Study Specifically)
 - [Middle Ground School's Resources](#)
- Include guided reading questions that probe author perspective, evidence quality, and underlying values.
- Also consider utilizing a reading protocol like [“First Turn Last Turn”](#) from [Thinking Collaborative](#)
- Students annotate texts for:
 - Points of agreement
 - Points of curiosity
 - Points of respectful disagreement

Stage 3 – Talk (Civic Dialogue)

Purpose: Engage in structured discussion to build empathy and broaden perspectives.

- Use protocols like:
 - Four Corners for values-based positioning before discussion. ([see other CASEL strategies as well](#))
 - Structured Narrative Sharing to humanize perspectives.
 - Ask students to reflect on how they arrived at their current viewpoint, and share when ready.
 - Structured partner rounds (listen–switch–cross-talk + appreciation) to model respectful exchange. **Sample below:**
 - Student discusses an issue with a fellow student they might agree with first for one minute (or more)-open cross talk no structure.
 - Student finds another student who has a different viewpoint-structured talk
 - **Student A** discusses their thoughts and how they arrived at their conclusion (one minute or more) while **Student B** listens to understand intently without speaking.
 - **Student B** then takes their turn for the same amount of time.
 - In the third round Student **A** and **B** engage in a cross-talk about each other's views while modeling norms, **but end with one appreciation for the other's viewpoint in the discussion.**
- **Moral Understanding or Curiosity Questions (Gray, 2025):** The practice of seeking to understand what another person is trying to protect, preserve, or prevent from being harmed before evaluating or responding to their position.
 - What do you think this person or group is trying to protect?
 - What harm are they most concerned about?
 - What experiences may have led them to this conclusion?
 - What values might both sides share?

- Encourage “**intellectual humility**” moves:
 - Acknowledging uncertainty
 - Asking clarifying questions
 - Summarizing the other’s point before responding
 - Educator demonstrates their own humility when appropriate
 - “Citizens who abide by the tribal theory of democracy rarely ask questions because they routinely believe that they have all the answers.” Tim Redmond - Political Tribalism in America ([Redmond, 2022](#))

Stage 4 – Write (Reflection + Agency)

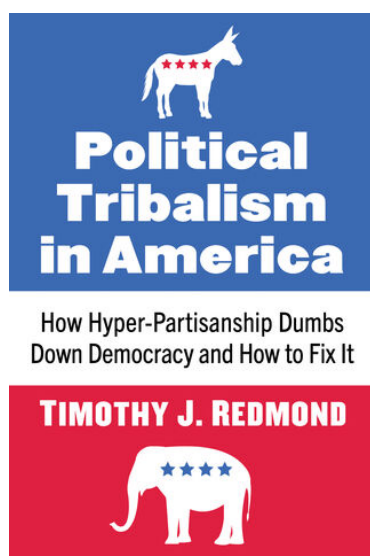
Purpose: Deepen understanding and develop actionable insights.

- Students write:
 - A reflective synthesis combining personal viewpoint with insights gained.
 - An evidence-based claim supported by sources and peer discussion.
- Include a metacognitive prompt:
 - “How has your thinking changed, expanded, or been challenged?”
- Optionally, have students propose a collaborative action related to the topic.

Stage 5 – Extend & Transfer

Purpose: Apply discourse skills beyond the classroom.

- Debrief as a class: Identify common ground and enduring differences.
- Connect to civic engagement:
 - Mock school board hearing
 - Student-led informational campaign
 - Dialogue with a local policymaker
- Reflect on ***how the process—not just the content—prepares them*** to bridge divides in other contexts.



Dr. Tim Redmond is another major resource to highlight in your work. As an active political scientist and classroom educator, Dr. Redmond provides in-depth analysis on political polarization in America. His scholarship, along with that of [Dr. James Druckman](#) from the University of Rochester, has significantly influenced the academic research foundation of our Coalition.

Bridging Concepts & SEL Crosswalk

Bridging Element	General Bridging Definition	CASEL Competency	Direct NYS SEL Benchmark Language	Application Example
Establishing Norms & Safety	Set clear expectations for respectful, inclusive dialogue	Self-Awareness & Self-Management	Recognizes emotions and biases; manages emotions to achieve goals	Use norm-setting activities (“call in” vs. “call out”) and low-risk discussion prompts to build trust before tackling difficult topics.
Dialogue over Debate	Shift from persuading to understanding	Relationship Skills & Social Awareness	Listens actively; engages in respectful disagreement; values diverse perspectives	Use protocols like Four Corners to surface values before discussion, followed by structured appreciation statements.
Perspective-Taking & Empathy	Understand experiences different from one’s own	Social Awareness	Demonstrates empathy and perspective-taking; respects diversity	Use narrative-sharing prompts where participants explain “how I arrived at my view.”
Managing Tension & Emotion	Remain calm and constructive in moments of disagreement	Self-Management	Uses strategies to regulate emotions in challenging situations	Teach pause–reflect–respond moves and model self-regulation in live discussions.
Identifying Common Ground	Recognize shared values and mutual interests	Relationship Skills & Responsible Decision-Making	Works collaboratively; makes constructive choices considering impact on others	Summarize shared points at the end of dialogue and explore possible joint actions.
Questioning Assumptions	Approach information critically but respectfully	Responsible Decision-Making	Evaluates accuracy and reliability of information	Annotate diverse sources for points of agreement, curiosity, and respectful disagreement.
Extending Skills to Civic Action	Apply dialogue and collaboration skills to public life	Responsible Decision-Making	Applies skills to new contexts; engages in ethical civic participation	Plan student-led forums, mock hearings, or dialogue sessions with policymakers.

The examples above align directly with the Civi Coalition Read–Talk–Write framework and Seven Bridging Tips, but they are also adaptable to a variety of bridging contexts in schools, community groups, and civic organizations

Appendix Activity: Questions We've Stopped Asking

Interrupting the Tribal Theory of Democracy

Developed independently by Nick D'Amuro (2025). Included in the Genesee Valley BOCES Read–Talk–Write Framework with permission. Conceptual foundation drawn from Tim Redmond, *Political Tribalism in America* (2022).

This activity grounded in the work of Dr. Tim Redmond, particularly his critique of what he calls the *tribal theory of democracy*. Redmond argues that when democratic participation becomes organized around partisan identity rather than shared inquiry, citizens come to believe they already possess the “right” answers and therefore stop asking genuine questions. This activity translates Redmond’s theoretical insight into an inquiry-based civic practice by shifting the focus away from positions and toward the kinds of questions that disappear under conditions of tribal certainty. In doing so, it treats question-asking not as a prelude to debate, but as a core democratic skill; one that can interrupt identity-driven thinking, surface hidden assumptions, and reopen space for curiosity, humility, and more productive public disagreement.

Anchoring quote (given to students):

“Citizens who abide by the tribal theory of democracy rarely ask questions because they routinely believe that they have all the answers.”

(Redmond, 2022, p. 184)

- **Purpose:** To help students surface how certainty, identity, and partisan loyalty can *crowd out inquiry*—and to practice rebuilding question-asking as a civic skill.
- **Grade Level:** High school or college (adaptable to middle school with scaffolding)
- **Time:** 40–60 minutes
- **Structure & Pedagogical Roots:** Faithful to inquiry-based civics; accountable talk; Read–Talk–Write sequencing.
- **Original synthesis:** using questions (not positions) as the object of civic analysis.

Key ideas for this lesson:

- It disrupts tribal certainty without naming or shaming tribes.
- It frames *question-asking* as a democratic responsibility, not a weakness.
- It avoids persuasion and instead builds intellectual humility

Step 1: Silent Read & Reflect (5 minutes)

Students read the Redmond quote. Then respond **privately** in writing:

- What does Redmond mean by “tribal theory of democracy” **in your own words**?
- Where do you see this dynamic **in society, school, media, or yourself**?

Teacher move: Emphasize there is **no expectation of political self-disclosure**. Students do not have to share their own political identities; rather we focus on civic thinking.

Step 2: Question Audit (10 minutes)

On the board or shared document, post two columns:

Column A: Questions We Ask All the Time

Column B: Questions We Rarely Ask (or Avoid)

Students contribute questions, not opinions. Examples:

- “Which side is right?”
- “Who’s to blame?”
- “What would people who disagree say they’re protecting?”
- “What tradeoffs are involved here?”
- “Why should this particular bill pass?”
- “Is this legislation necessary? Why or why not?”

Key norm: No debating the questions yet. Try to keep it to dialogue.

Step 3: Small-Group Analysis (10–15 minutes)

In groups of 3–4, students choose two questions from Column B and discuss:

- Why might these questions be uncomfortable or threatening?
- Who benefits when these questions are not asked?
- How might asking them change the quality of public debate?

Use accountable sentence stems to keep inquiry central:

- “I’m wondering why...”
- “A question this raises for me is...”
- “One assumption behind this question might be...”

Step 4: Whole-Group Debrief (10 minutes)

Facilitate with *overarching inquiry questions*:

- What happens to democracy when questions disappear?
- Is certainty always a problem—or only some kinds of certainty?
- How might schools unintentionally reward “having answers” over asking questions?

Step 5: Reflective Write (Exit Ticket)

Prompt:

- What is one civic question you want to practice asking more often—and why?