

Where Do You Stand?

An activity that encourages open-mindedness and demonstrates the wide range of views on any controversial topic

by **Alanda Greene**

Subject areas: language arts, social studies, environmental studies

Key concepts: Thoughtful decision making requires being open to other points of view and adjusting one's position when new information is acquired

Skills: listening, speaking, evaluating, decision making

Location: large open space

Time: 10-15 minutes per scenario below

Materials: masking tape or string

Most of us grew up with considerable exposure to television and movie screens that repeatedly offered us models of the strong individual who always knew right from wrong, defended the good and punished the bad, and never wavered in knowing which was which. Such models supported a common human tendency to divide the world into opposing camps: believers

and infidels, enlightened and ignorant, righteous and heathen, friend and enemy, worthy and unworthy. There's a sense of security in knowing what's right, and integrity in taking a stand for it. But the black and white world of old westerns and war movies does not offer effective strategies for meeting the challenges of a complex real world. Polarized thinking only exaggerates divisions between people, supporting conflict, exclusion, and hatred. Just consider how those bad guys were treated, and their treatment justified, by the good guy heroes.

Situations in which there is no clear right or wrong are far more common in life than those in which a simple yes or no will serve; yet students have little opportunity to explore this in school. Discussions and debates tend instead to give practice in choosing a position and defending it all the way to victory or defeat. How can this for-or-against attitude encourage students to be flexible and to listen to and respond to the ideas and wisdom of others? The skills of the peacemaker, consensus builder,

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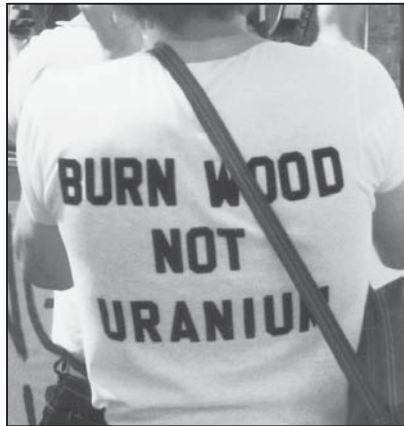
The real world is never this black and white: polarized thinking exaggerates divisions between people.

mediator, and problem solver are the ones most needed in today's world. These skills include the ability to see many possibilities, to be flexible, and to include others. If we value these skills, we must give young people opportunities to learn them.

The activity *Where Do You Stand?* allows students to explore the gray areas that lie between black and white polar opposites of an issue. It asks each person to find a place on the continuum between absolute agreement with a position and absolute disagreement. While everyone must take a position, the activity does not ask participants to defend territory or try to convince others that they are right. Rather, its salient feature is recognition of the knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and values supporting various positions. This emerges as people discuss their current position and the reasons they chose it.

Students whose stands are based on poor information or reasoning are not considered wishy-washy if they change their positions after listening to others; rather, they are encouraged to recognize that this is what responsible, open-minded, thoughtful, learning people do as they acquire more information. Thus, the activity encourages an open mind and a willingness to change as a result of learning and listening. The activity can be used at many levels, from primary to secondary, and requires involvement from everyone in the group. Even though some participants may not express an idea, they must choose a place to stand. Because at any given moment the range of opinions on an issue is visible, students can develop an appreciation for the spectrum of possible views.

Where Do You Stand? shows students that many issues are complex, that there are no easy answers, and that black and white thinking does not reflect the complexities inherent in many of the problems facing us. Learning to be flexible, open, and responsive is what this activity is designed for, and it does not depend on students' having any special expertise on an issue. Used at the beginning of a unit, it may stimulate further research, writing, and discussion. Repeated at the end of a unit, it can assess what the students have learned over a period



Gail Littlejohn

of time and how their views have changed as a result of their learning.

Procedure:

1. In a space large enough to accommodate the group, designate one end as "Totally Agree" and the other as "Totally Disagree." Connect these opposite poles by marking a line on the floor with masking tape or string to represent the continuum of positions that lies between them.
2. Read an issue scenario aloud (see examples below), perhaps twice if needed.
3. Ask students to stand at one end or anywhere along the tape or string to reflect their position or opinion on the issue.
4. Once everyone is in place, ask each student in turn to explain why he/she decided to stand in that place. Encourage students to respond to opinions, reasoning, or ideas expressed by others but do not allow attacking of another student's choice. Explain that they are free to adjust their positions when they hear ideas they had not previously considered.

Sample issue scenarios

These issue scenarios are summaries of actual situations. Once students are familiar with this activity, they can develop their own scenarios based on issues that interest them or on current controversies reported in the media.

Wolves and cattle

Wolves are natural inhabitants of Yellowstone National Park in Montana and Wyoming, but human predation killed off all wolves in the region in the 1900s. After many years of hard work, environmental groups have convinced the government to release a group of wolves into the park to re-establish a wolf population.

Sara, who works for *Wolves in the Wild*, says that wolves must return to these wild areas because they are an important part of the ecosystem and will help to restore the natural population balance of many wildlife species. "We destroyed these animals in what was their natural habitat. It's only right that we return them to it. It isn't the same country without the wolves."

Hank is a rancher who points out that wolves don't know about park boundaries and there's no way to protect his cattle from them. "They're as happy to bring down a heifer as they are to kill a whitetail. I shouldn't have to have my cattle's lives threatened. This is now, not 40 years ago: the wolves are gone; let them stay away. I have to make a living."

Question: Where do you stand on the question of introducing wolves back into the park (Sara's position)?



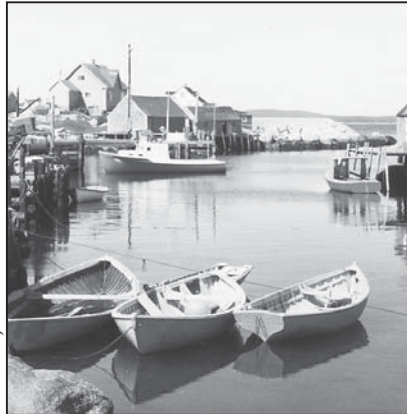
Logging the frontier forests

A major international study recently revealed that only about one-fifth of the world's wild forests, called frontier forests, remain on the planet. The study determined that all the frontier forests have been eliminated in Africa and the Middle East, and nearly all are gone from Europe. In the temperate climate zone, which includes Canada and the continental United States, about three percent of the frontier forests remain.

Carla, who works with an environmental group in the Pacific Northwest, wants all logging in these forests to stop. The group says that these wild natural forests need protection because they are home to many species of plants and animals that can live only in these environments. Carla maintains, "So many forests have been destroyed. We want to keep what remains, not remove it. Too much has already gone."

Ali works for a logging company that plans to clear-cut some areas of a frontier forest in the coming months. She claims that the best timber is located in these forests and that loggers have a right to take some of it. "Our company is just as entitled to use these forests as are other people and animals. We should be able to take a share of this timber. We need to make a living."

Question: Where do you stand on stopping the logging of this frontier forest (Carla's view)?



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Whales and jobs

In the coastal waters of Mexico there is a small bay, isolated and protected. For as long as anyone remembers, gray whales have gone there when it is time to give

birth. The warm, sheltered bay is an ideal place for young calves and their mothers to rest until they are strong enough to return to the open waters of the Pacific Ocean. Without such a place of safety, many of the newborn calves would likely die in the first weeks of life.

A large company has plans to build a factory in the bay that will extract salt from ocean water. This will drive the whales away. A group of people has organized to protest the building of the factory, saying that the whales have a right to this bay where they can safely have their calves. Others want the factory to be built because it will provide jobs and bring money to the region. The area is quite poor and many families from the nearby village would find employment in the factory.

Question: Where do you stand on building a salt factory in this bay?

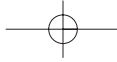
Fish now or later?

Allan has made a living for himself and his family for the last 20 years by salmon fishing on the west coast. Anticipating greater expenses as his three children enter high school, he recently purchased a larger fishing boat. The payments on the boat are high, but with it Allan can bring in more salmon.

Allan's neighbor Doug is a government marine scientist who has been studying salmon populations for the past ten years. He supports a large reduction in the number of salmon allowed to be caught each year. He says, "Salmon stocks once had huge populations, but every year fewer and fewer are returning to spawn in rivers. Already, 142 salmon stocks are extinct and 624 salmon stocks are in danger of extinction. It is urgent that fishing be cut back."

"I can't cut back," replies Allan. "I have to make payments on my boat and I have a family to support. Keep the rivers in better shape so the salmon that return and spawn will have a higher number of offspring that survive. Don't make me and my family suffer."

Doug replies by saying, "If we don't act now, there won't be any fish left in a few years, and no one will have a job in the salmon industry. Look what happened to the cod stocks on the east coast."



“There are still lots of fish out there,” answers Allan, “and I expect to be able to catch my fair share. How else can I pay for this boat and earn a living?”

Question: Where do you stand on not cutting back on salmon fishing (Allan’s position)?

Alanda Greene is the author of Rights to Responsibility: Multiple Approaches to Developing Character and Community (Zephyr Press, 1997). Now retired from teaching, she lives in Crawford Bay, British Columbia.



Superheroes: From Fiction to Reality

Children's natural fascination with heroes can be channeled toward values and actions needed to solve global problems

by Ron Ballentine, Al Finlayson, and Sharon Laivenieks

Subject areas: language arts, visual arts, drama, social studies, science and technology

Key concepts: adaptation, biodiversity, compromise, conflict resolution, environmental protection, global perspective, heroes, interdependence

Skills: problem solving, goal setting, decision making, inquiry/research, communication skills

Location: indoors

Time: 4-6 weeks, or up to 1 year

Materials: markers, tempera paints (to color models), tissue paper (for stuffing), materials for papier-mâché (or drawing paper)

Many teachers are familiar with the phenomenon of students who resist reading in school but are nevertheless fascinated by comic books. What is it about the comics that appeals to these kids? The stories present a wide variety of conflicts, characters, and creatures — but one feature appears common to all: in replaying the age-old battle between good and evil, comic books serve up an abundance of larger-than-life heroes. From Superman to Batman, from Spiderman to the X-Men (three of whom are women), these modern superheroes are usually athletic, good-looking, and — most important — in possession of special powers to defend values that would better our world. As educators we hope that our students,

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too, will come to hold values that lead them to take action to improve the world. Education for a global perspective is one means of encouraging this.

In its simplest terms, global education seeks to help students to see the big picture, to look beyond national interests to the global community. It encourages them to regard themselves and others as “crew members,” dependent on one another and on the limited resources of “Space Station Earth.” This unit on superheroes may be one way that we can link this perspective with students’ ready admiration of comic book superheroes. It places current issues at the heart of learning by asking students to develop a team of superheroes for a story about non-violent resolution of a major global problem. In considering how heroism is defined, students are exposed to positive role models and come to realize what ordinary individuals and small groups can do to improve the world. It has the potential to strengthen students’ development as responsible, action-oriented global citizens who care enough and know enough to be able to do at least one thing to improve the planet. Perhaps, years from now, you might even recognize the name of a new global hero.

Preparation:

One of the aims of this unit is to motivate students to improve their reading and writing, their creative thinking, and their ability to work collaboratively with others. Before starting, some teachers may find it helpful to lay a foundation for creative thinking and problem solving using exercises that promote divergent thinking in a wide variety of situations.