



LESSON

Evaluating Political Arguments with Community-Based Evidence

OVERVIEW

Providing students with the skills to evaluate and analyze political speech is a natural way to merge the goals of civics education with CCSS ELA and NCSS C3 standards. This lesson does just that by providing students with an opportunity to conduct an in-depth examination of a political position and then evaluate it using real-life circumstances on the ground.

Using clips from *The Overnights*, students will evaluate whether private charity can replace government welfare programs and would, ultimately, do a better job accomplishing the policy goal of alleviating poverty and suffering. To focus the exercise on analysis rather than partisanship, students will be required to research and craft both pro and con arguments.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Analyze the logic of the political proposal that government welfare programs should be replaced by private charity.
- Evaluate evidence supporting and undermining the proposal, including evidence from a real-life situation involving people in need.
- Evaluate a counterargument.
- Write well-documented pro and con statements about the proposal.
- Develop a basic understanding of the social problems that arise from the economic boom times that fracking has brought to North Dakota's Bakken shale region.

GRADE LEVELS: 10-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Civics/Government
Critical Thinking
Social Studies
Writing

MATERIALS

- Computers with Internet access
- Film clips from *The Overnights* and equipment on which to show them

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

60 minutes divided over two class periods, with homework assigned in between.

FILM CLIPS

Video clips provided with this lesson are from *The Overnights*.

Clip 1: Sleeping at the Church (3:05 min.)

The clip begins at 1:30 with pastor Jay Reinke waking up men who have been sleeping in the church. It ends at 4:35 with the pastor saying, “We have people literally walking up to our door from all over the world saying, ‘Can you help me?’”

Clip 2: Life at Church (1:23 min.)

The clip begins at 6:17 with a graphic reading, “Many new arrivals have nowhere to sleep.” It ends at 7:40 with the pastor admitting that the congregation never really planned to house the overnights and saying, “That’s probably one of the chief criticisms I have to bear.”

The segment includes overnights attending church services but not really participating, and the pastor explaining the Christian ethic to care for one’s neighbor and acknowledging that both the overnights and those who oppose their presence in the church are his neighbors (hence the dilemma).

Clip 3: The Problem (3:30 min.)

The clip begins at 9:31 with pictures of traffic congestion. It ends at 13:01 with the pastor acknowledging that neighbors fear one of the men could “hurt their child.”

The segment includes footage from a town council meeting where commissioners are considering a ban on RV parking. It also includes a news story about a local woman who was kidnapped and killed, presumably by two men who, like the overnights, came to Williston, North Dakota, looking for oil jobs. The pastor notes that the church is supposed to welcome sinners, but that this can lead to people in the neighborhood being afraid.

Clip 4: Church Members Object (2:00 min.)

The clip begins at 15:43 with the pastor sweeping up broken glass from the parking lot. It ends at 17:43 with church member Shelly Schultz saying, “This is not my home anymore, you know? And it’s ... it’s very difficult.”

In the segment, Schultz explains that it is upsetting to come to church and find it dirty, or to be in services and have overnights act in ways that she considers disrespectful.

ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to identify Paul Ryan. If they don’t know who he is, have them practice online search skills to find out. They should be able to ascertain that he is a Congressional Representative from Wisconsin, that in 2012 he ran for vice president on the Republican ticket and that the Ryan budget plan has been a centerpiece of the conservative Republican Party platform for the last several years. He has been a major voice in his political party.

Tell students that they are going to examine one facet of the Ryan budgetary approach: the position that the nation can cut funds currently supporting many welfare programs, because aid

can and should be provided by private charity. If time allows, you can have students fully research Ryan's position, or you can have them read his comments at:

www.ontheissues.org/2012/Paul_Ryan_Welfare_+_Poverty.htm.

One of the comments included on that page summarizes the essence of Ryan's argument. In a 2012 speech at Georgetown University:

Ryan argued that government welfare "dissolves the common good of society, and it dishonors the dignity of the human person." He would restore human dignity by removing anti-poverty programs. The moderator asked the chairman about "the moral dimension" of a budget that gives tax cuts to the wealthy and cuts spending for the poor...Spending on programs such as food stamps and college Pell Grants is "unsustainable," he said. If government does too much for the poor, "you make it harder" for churches and charities to do that work.

- As reported by Dana Milbank of *The Washington Post* in "Paul Ryan's Faith-Based Lesson" on April 27, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/paul-ryans-faith-based-lesson/2012/04/27/gIQA76TIT_story.html

Alternatively, if time allows, you may want to have students watch the Ryan speech in its entirety and listen specifically for his comments about welfare policy:

- The speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4tjo4N8sOM>
- Follow-up questions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ysu4wuHpJms>

For this first round of analysis, students' focus should be on comprehension and logic: Do they understand what Ryan is saying and does it make sense? A short class discussion about reactions to his position should reveal whether students have accomplished these goals.

2. As homework, or in class if time allows, assign students to read this counterargument by former journalist and current religion professor Daniel Silliman:

<http://danielsilliman.blogspot.com/2013/01/could-charity-replace-welfare.html>.

This reading should be done individually with a focus on comprehending the counterargument and checking Silliman's sources. As a check-in, have each student write a brief summary about whether they think Silliman's sources are used fairly and whether or not they adequately back up his position.

3. Segue into the film clips by inviting a few students to share reactions to the reading assignment. Then note that sometimes public policy proposals sound good in theory, but things change when you start to apply them to real situations. Tell the students that they are going to watch clips from a documentary called ***The Overnights***, which examines challenges faced by one boom town in North Dakota's Bakken shale region, a place that has been a magnet for workers and job seekers drawn by the thriving oil fracking industry. Explain that the focus of the film is on a church, as a private charity, trying to cope with the needs of those who can't afford or can't find housing.

Show all four clips. Students should take notes about how the content they see relates to Ryan's proposal that private charity replace welfare.

After showing the clips, let students know that the town eventually shut down the overnights program, citing building code violations (e.g., no sprinkler system, no showers—the church

wasn't built to be a dorm) and also zoning problems (the church is in an otherwise quiet neighborhood of single-family homes).

4. As an assessment, assign students to write summaries of both the pro and con positions on the proposal to replace government welfare with private charity. The summaries must provide supporting evidence, properly cited, including evidence from the video clips.

To provide a guide for this assignment, you may want to have students look at one of the issue pages on ProCon.org and use that website's format as a guide.

5. (Optional) Create a class wiki where students can post their pro and con arguments and defend the sides they choose. Let the online discussion continue for several days, so students have time to research their responses to one another's arguments and engage in serious dialogue.

EXTENSIONS

1. As a follow-up to reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, watch the entire film and compare the experiences of the pastor and the overnights with the experiences of the main characters in Steinbeck's novel.

2. Use the town's and/or church's conflicts to have students practice mediation skills. Use your school's conflict resolution program as a guide. Invite a counselor or the staff member in charge of peer mediation to coach and/or evaluate student performance.

3. Compare the shifts that are happening today in small towns across North Dakota with previous U.S. migrations driven by the search for work (e.g., silver mining boom towns in Colorado, the mass migration of blacks from the South to urban centers in the North, the Gold Rush, Irish immigrants fleeing the Irish Potato Famine).

RESOURCES

The Overnights

You can find links to additional resources at the film's websites: www.theovernights.com and www.pbs.org/pov/theovernights/discussion-guide.php – The **POV** site includes a general discussion guide with additional activity ideas.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php>

This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

On The Issues

www.ontheissues.org – Without supplying commentary, this site aggregates public statements from nationally important political candidates on current "hot topics"; this site is searchable by issue, candidate and year.

ProCon.org

www.procon.org – This site provides detailed, nonpartisan presentations of contentious issues, outlining the arguments made on all sides.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

[SL.11-12.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

[SL.11-12.3](#) Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

[W.9-10.1](#), [11-12.1](#) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

[W.9-10.2d](#) Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

[W.11-12.2d](#) Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

[W.9-10.4](#), [11-12.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Content Knowledge: (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

NCSS C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

D1.2.9-12. Explain points of agreement and disagreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question.

Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools: Civics

D2.Civ.13.9-12. Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good and protecting rights.

Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

D3.3.9-12. Identify evidence that draws information directly and substantively from multiple sources to detect inconsistencies in evidence in order to revise or strengthen claims.

D3.4.9-12. Refine claims and counterclaims attending to precision, significance and knowledge conveyed through the claim while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both.

Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

D4.1.9-12. Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

D4.2.9-12. Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose (e.g., cause and effect, chronological, procedural, technical).

D4.4.9-12. Critique the use of claims and evidence in arguments for credibility.

D4.5.9-12. Critique the use of the reasoning, sequencing and supporting details of explanations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin, 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 250 independent films.