TEACH DEMOCRACY

Universal Basic Income

Civil Conversation Lesson Plan

Materials

- Handout A1: Middle School Text
- Handout A2: High School Text
- Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide
- Teacher Presentation

Standards and Topics

- CCSS.SL.6-12.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively
- CCSS.R.6-12.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- C3.D2.Civ.13.6-8. Analyze the purposes, implementation, and consequences of public policies in multiple settings.
- C3.D2.Civ.13.9-12. Evaluate public policies in terms of intended and unintended outcomes, and related consequences.

Topics: universal basic income, economics, public policy, government

Overview

In this Civil Conversation, students discuss the benefits and costs of federal Universal Basic Income (UBI). First, they examine a text that offers multiple perspectives on the issue of UBI. Next, they participate in a Civil Conversation on the text. In this structured discussion method, students are encouraged to engage intellectually with challenging materials, gain insight about their own point of view, and strive for a shared understanding of issues.

Objectives

1. Evaluate the potential impacts of public policy on society
2. Participate effectively in a civil discussion by expressing clear and persuasive arguments, while building on others' ideas
3. Consider other perspectives with a sense of empathy

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

A. Tell students to imagine that a law was passed that guaranteed $500 each month to every adult living in the United States. Poll students: How many believe this is a good idea? You may ask students to record their rationales and then share with partners or the whole class.

B. Inform students that an idea, known as universal basic income (UBI), proposes that each adult be guaranteed a basic income. Their task today is to consider the proposal by examining multiple perspectives on the issue.

II. Reading : Universal Basic Income

A. Briefly provide students with an overview of the purpose and rationale of the Civil Conversation activity. Use the overview above to help you.

B. Give each student a copy of Handout A: Universal Basic Income.

C. Distribute a copy of Handout B: Civil Conversation Guide to each student to complete as they read. Each student should fill in their own guide.

III. Civil Conversation

A. Divide the class into groups of 3–4 students. You may want to have each group select a leader who will get the discussion started, ensure the group stays on-task, and finishes on time.

B. Determine how much time the groups have to complete the discussion. (You will know what's best for your students, depending on the length of the reading and how experienced your students are in student-directed discussion.)

- **Time:** Conversations for classroom purposes should have a time limit, generally ranging from 15 to 45 minutes and an additional five minutes to reflect on the effectiveness of the conversations. The reflection time is an opportunity to ask any students who have not spoken to comment on the things they have heard. Ask them who said something that gave them a new insight that they agreed or disagreed with.
- **Small Groups:** This discussion strategy is designed to ensure the participation of every student. Groups of 3-4 students are ideal. If you are scaffolding text for various reading levels, group students who will use the same text together.

C. Review the rules of a Civil Conversation (listed under Step 3 on the Guide) and direct the groups to follow the instructions on the guide to get started.

D. Let groups know you will be circulating to listen in on their conversations and that each person in a group is expected to participate. The goal is for everyone to contribute equally to the conversation.

E. If necessary, remind groups of the time and urge them to move to the next steps.

IV. Assessment / Closure

A. After the groups have completed their discussions, debrief the activity by having the class reflect on the effectiveness of the conversation:

- What did you learn from the Civil Conversation?
- What common ground did you find with other members of the group?
- Ask all participants to suggest ways in which the conversation could be improved. If appropriate, have students add the suggestions to their list of conversation rules.

B. If you want to also debrief the content of the Civil Conversation, you might ask students:

- Was there any surprising information you learned from the reading? What was it?
- What are the problems today with universal basic income?
- What do you think are the most effective reasons for universal basic income?

C. For assessment, look for the following on each student's Civil Conversation Guide:

Step 2 – A, B: Basic understanding of text.

Step 2 – C, D: Text-based arguments.

Step 2 – E: Appropriate and compelling questions about the text.

Step 4 – A: Level of participation (should be "about the same as others").

Step 4 – B: Answer is appropriately related to topic/issue presented in text.

Step 4 – C, D: Specificity/text-based.

D. For additional assessment, you may want to collect the article/text students used to assess the annotations they made in terms of connections to prior knowledge/experience, questions they had while reading, and comments they made.

Poverty, **income** inequality, automation, and a rapidly changing economy have led to the growth of an old idea: providing a guaranteed basic income for all citizens, funded by the federal government. Some prominent people, including Pope Francis, entrepreneur Elon Musk, and former presidential candidate Andrew Yang, have voiced their support for a Universal Basic Income (UBI). Is it a good idea?

What Is a Universal Basic Income?

A Universal Basic Income is a monthly cash payment given to all adult citizens, regardless of their income. It would cover essential needs like food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. However, people who received UBI would still be able to work to cover additional expenses such as housing, transportation, and luxury items. The cost of public services like education and law enforcement would remain the government's responsibility.

Many countries and some U.S. cities have experimented with a UBI. For example, the city of Stockton, California, in 2019 and 2020, paid $500 per month ($6,000 per year) to adults in 125 low-income working households. Most **recipients** spent the money on basic necessities like food, clothing, and electrical bills.

The UBI Debate

The proposal for a UBI has sparked a debate over several key questions.

Can We Afford a UBI?

Critics argue that the cost of implementing a UBI, estimated to be at least $2.8 trillion annually, would lead to an increase in the federal budget and national **deficit**. Such a huge cost would need to be covered by borrowing and higher taxes.

Supporters acknowledge that taxes would need to be raised to fund a UBI, with the wealthy and businesses likely facing higher tax burdens. Microsoft's Bill Gates, a supporter of UBI, suggested taxing the use of robots that are expected to replace human workers could help the loss of taxes from human workers' incomes.

Ending some federal welfare benefits, as Andrew Yang would do, could mean more money for a UBI. To do this, Congress would need to repeal certain tax deductions and almost all federal welfare programs, including food stamps, Medicaid, Social Security, and Medicare.

Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs speaks at an event in San Francisco, California (New America / Creative Commons)

"We need a social safety net that goes beyond conditional benefits tied to employment, works for everyone and begins to address the call for racial and economic justice through a guaranteed income."

- Michael Tubbs

income money that you receive from working or investments

recipients people that receive something

deficit spending more money than you bring in

Would People Quit Working?

Opponents fear that a UBI could discourage people from working. Some economists suggest alternative solutions, such as **tax credits** for people experiencing poverty or a federal jobs guarantee, to encourage employment.

UBI advocates point out that a basic income is barely enough to live on, especially if traditional **welfare** benefits are unavailable. It is more likely that people might quit their jobs not for a life of leisure but to look for a more rewarding job, become caregivers for their children and sick family members, seek education and new skills, or take the opportunity to start a business.

Should Low-Income Families Give Up Welfare Benefits?

A UBI might replace existing welfare programs, forcing low-income families to rely solely on the basic income. Supporters argue that this change could eliminate the poverty trap and **incentivize** people to work and improve their overall income. Critics, however, believe that would deprive vulnerable individuals of essential benefits.

Why Give Money to the Rich?

One point of contention is whether a UBI should apply universally, including to wealthy individuals who do not require financial assistance. Critics ask why rich people would receive UBI payments when they do not need them. Advocates argue that a universal approach ensures broader support, as the rich would be less likely to oppose the UBI if they also receive the benefit.

What do Americans Think about UBI?

According to a 2020 Pew Research Center survey, more Americans opposed the idea of a $1,000 monthly UBI (54 percent) than supported it (45 percent).

tax credits money subtracted from the tax amount someone owes

welfare government assistance programs for those in need

incentivize to motivate someone to do something

Poverty, stalled wages, **income** inequality, loss of jobs to other countries, automation, and a dynamic economy have hurt many, reviving an old idea: a guaranteed basic income for all provided by the federal government. Many notable figures, including Pope Francis, entrepreneur Elon Musk, and former presidential candidate Andrew Yang all support a universal basic income (UBI). Is it a good idea?

What Is a Basic Income for All?

Today, the most debated basic income for all is unconditional. This means that the government makes a monthly cash payment to all adults at every income level with no conditions attached. Payments would go to those who work and to those who do not. Basic income recipients would not include children, non-citizens, and people who are incarcerated. This idea is called a universal basic income or UBI.

The UBI monthly cash payment is meant to cover essentials, such as a person's costs of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Individuals would not be prohibited from working to pay for most of their other costs, such as more expensive housing, cars, and luxury goods. A UBI remains the same no matter a person's income. The cost of public services like K-12 public schools, police, and fire protection would continue to be the government's responsibility.

Many countries and some localities in the United States have experimented with a UBI. By the end of 2020, former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey donated $15 million to fund local programs in some U.S. cities that guarantee people a basic income. For example, the city of Stockton, California, in 2019 and 2020, paid $500 per month ($6,000 per year) to adults in 125 low-income working households. Most **recipients** spent the money on basic necessities like food, clothing, and electrical bills.

The UBI Debate

The growing popularity of UBI ideas has sparked debate over several questions.

Can We Afford a UBI?

The biggest criticism of a basic income for all is its cost. Proposed UBI payments per person per year range from about $10,000 to $15,000, which could add up to at least $2.8 trillion annually. Critics say this would explode the annual federal budget and the national **deficit**. Such a huge expense would have to be financed through a combination of borrowing and higher taxes.

UBI supporters agree that taxes would have to be increased to pay for a UBI, and

Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs speaks at an event in San Francisco, California (New America / Creative Commons)

"We need a social safety net that goes beyond conditional benefits tied to employment, works for everyone and begins to address the call for racial and economic justice through a guaranteed income."

- Michael Tubbs

income money that you receive from working or investments

recipients people that receive something

deficit spending more money than you bring in

some people, especially the wealthy, would see their taxes go up. Businesses would also have to share the tax burden. Microsoft's Bill Gates, a supporter of UBI, has suggested taxing the use of robots that are expected to replace human workers to ameliorate the loss of tax revenue from human workers' incomes.

The value-added tax (VAT), commonly used in Europe, is a national sales tax. The government collects the VAT multiple times on goods and services from production through distribution and final sale. The tax burden is then mainly placed on consumers. Because they tax consumers equally regardless of income, VATs are criticized as regressive taxes. But even a small VAT could raise an enormous amount of **revenue** to pay for the UBI.

Ending some federal welfare benefits, as Andrew Yang would do, could mean more money for a UBI. In 2020, the conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI) recommended a plan to pay adults $15,845 and children $7,923 per year with no net cost to the federal government. To do this, the AEI advised repealing certain tax deductions and almost all federal welfare programs, including food stamps, Medicaid, Social Security, and Medicare.

Would People Quit Working?

A powerful objection to UBI is that many would quit working and become "free riders" on society, supported by those who work and pay taxes. Critics say that a UBI would kill the **incentive** to work.

According to some economists, a better alternative is for the government to encourage people to work. Conservative critics of UBI tend to prefer tax credits that incentivize the poorest people to earn more. Left-leaning critics tend to prefer a federal jobs guarantee or raising the minimum wage instead.

UBI advocates point out that a basic income is barely enough to live on, especially if traditional welfare benefits are unavailable. It is more likely that people might quit their jobs not for a life of leisure but to look for a more rewarding job, become caregivers for their children and sick family members, seek education and new skills, or take the opportunity to start a business.

Should Low-income Families Have to Give Up Welfare Benefits?

The federal government currently funds dozens of welfare programs, many targeted to deal with the specific needs of children, older adults, and people with disabilities living in poverty. Some or all welfare benefits would disappear in most UBI plans. People would have to pay for private services, which could cost more than their UBI basic income. If the federal government did not eliminate all welfare benefits, it would have to find additional revenue sources, such as higher taxes.

Some supporters of UBI argue that eliminating the welfare system would reduce the poverty trap since people would no longer lose federal benefits when they earn more work income. They argue that a basic income could encourage people to work and improve their total income.

Critics call the loss of federal welfare benefits a form of economic austerity. They warn that depriving people of basic benefits would merely coerce them into ever

revenue money that a government earns

incentive something that motivates someone to do something

longer hours of work just to survive without any improvement in their quality of life.

Why Give Money to the Rich?

A universal basic income is universal: the same amount for everybody. Critics ask why rich people would receive UBI payments when they do not need them. Supporters of UBI argue that when the rich get the same payment as everyone else, they are less likely to politically oppose the UBI, even though it may increase their taxes. It is a fundamental fairness argument: The benefit to most people would greatly outweigh the burden on the relatively few rich people.

What Do Americans Think About UBI?

In 2020, during the Coronavirus Pandemic, the Pew Research Center asked Americans their opinion of a $1,000 monthly Universal Basic Income. More opposed the idea (54 percent) than supported it (45 percent).

Name: _____

Universal Basic Income

Civil Conversation Guide

Step 1: Read.

A. Read through the entire selection without stopping to think about any particular section.

B. Re-read the selection and annotate ("talk to") the text:

- Underline the main/most important points. You can comment on these points in the margins.
- Circle words or phrases that are unknown or confusing to you.
- Write down any questions you have in the margin labeling them with a "?".
- Draw an ➡ in the margin next to text that connects to something you know from outside the text. Note what the connection is, such as a news item or personal experience.

Step 2: Think about the reading to prepare for the discussion.

A. This reading is about...

B. The MAIN POINTS are:

Should the Federal Government Guarantee a Basic Income for All?

C. In the reading, I agree with:

D. In the reading, I disagree with:

E. What are two questions about this reading that you think could be discussed? (The best questions for discussion are ones that have no simple answer and that can use the text as evidence.)

1.

2.

Step 3: Discuss and Listen.

You will have _____ minutes to discuss. Your goal is to engage with each other and the text to gain insight about your own point of view while finding a shared understanding of the issue.

Start by taking turns sharing your answers to the questions in Step 2, sections A-D. Then, you will likely find at least one discussion question at the end of the reading. If time permits, you can discuss questions you came up with in Section E above.

Rules for a Civil Conversation

1. Everyone in your group should participate in the conversation.
2. Listen carefully to what others are saying
3. Ask clarifying questions if your do not understand a point raised
4. Be respectful of what others are saying.
5. Refer to the text to support your ideas.

Step 4: After your conversation...

A. Compared to others in your group, did you speak? ___ Less than, ___ About the same as, ___ More than others.

B. Note some of the ways you added to the discussion.

C. What evidence did you use from the text to add to the discussion? Why was this evidence helpful?

D. What did you learn about the topic from the Civil Conversation? (Be sure to reference the text!)