



LAES has developed a series of immigrant issue instructional modules entitled "Tierra de Oportunidad" for orientation to our complex society.

Analyzing and Debating Issues

It is important to participate in the community affairs, specially when they affect the way we live. To become active you need to take the time to study the facts, to listen carefully to the different opinions of other people and weigh the consequences of a decision. Here are some ideas to follow.

1. **It is all right to have an opinion, to differ with others, and to advocate for one's point of view.** Very little of the communication we have with each other is neutral exchange of facts. In fact, when people talk to each other, most of the time is spent either directly or indirectly expressing their opinion or viewpoint than in communicating factual information. The guideline which people should follow to is to clearly distinguish between expressing an opinion, a belief, and a fact. Practically, if individuals and groups do not speak out about their opinion on community or social issues, their concerns are seldom considered.
2. **It is allowable to differ about how important a social issue is.** In contemporary society we face many complex issues. The range of issues important to people in the U.S. is very broad. People usually differ about the importance of any issue. As in other areas, being respectful of differences is wise, but attempting to bring others around to one's own opinion is also legitimate.
3. **It is okay to change your opinion.** Not only is it all right, it is inevitable. One's opinion should change when one learns more about an issue or when it turns out that what one believed to be a fact is not actually the case. When one does change an opinion, it is valuable to reflect on why and how the change process went. This prepares a person to better analyze their own way of thinking as part of getting more skilled in analyzing issues. It also can provide the foundation for better communication in the future.
4. **Staying calm and remaining polite is essential for communicating clearly.** No matter how extreme are the differences of opinion, staying calm is essential to communicating clearly, and for persuading others to re-examine their facts or opinions, and to seriously examine your facts or opinions. In almost all public and private forums, a person who speaks rudely or who loses emotional control is less effective than a person who remains calm. Feeling strongly is appropriate and strength of emotion is still part of advocating for one's point of view, but it is most effective when a person is calm and polite.
5. **Everyone's viewpoint matters.** Everyone's perspective matters, not simply the experts' viewpoint. Many people with little schooling feel that others know more than they do so they should remain silent and let those who know talk and decide. We all should listen to what experts have to say. We also should remember that our own experiences shape our opinions, and these opinions are important and make a difference. Also, people can become experts -- sometimes very rapidly.
6. **Clarify the issue or a speaker's perspective.** Active listening, that is, trying to organize what a speaker is saying in one's own mind, and asking relevant questions to clarify points which are not clear are the first steps. As a listener, one must remember to ask appropriate questions or to give either positive feedback (e.g. praise, thanks) or negative feedback (criticism, requests for sources of disputed facts). Whether a person thinks they agree or disagree with a viewpoint, it is a good idea to try to verify that they correctly understand

what a speaker said. As a speaker, one of the best ways to make one's own perspective clear to others is to anticipate the questions you would expect the audience to have.

7. **Find out more about the opinion or issue.** Check the facts. Consider what else might be relevant. Are there any questions that need to be answered to know with some confidence whether a viewpoint on a controversial issue is justified? Are there any aspects of the issue about which everyone agrees? How much information is there? How many different perspectives? Who might know more about the issue?
8. **Remember to consider the source or sources of an opinion or exposition of an issue.** Whose information is reliable or more reliable? Even informed discussions of issues may not be neutral. In fact, one of the points of discussing and debating an issue is to get different perspectives about it. Particularly important, both informally and formally in the political process, are the viewpoints of groups affected by a proposed policy, program, or government action. These affected groups or individuals are often referred to as "stakeholders". There may be several different stakeholders. For example, for a city zoning ordinance about where restaurants can be located, stakeholders might include businesses in the area, the city planning department which would implement the zoning, residents living in the area, and customers of affected businesses. Do you think that they will all have the same opinions?
9. **On political proposals, determine who benefits and who loses.** Almost all contemporary social policy benefits some groups at the expense of some other groups. Commonly debated questions are the degree to which different groups benefit and the degree to which other groups are hurt by a proposition. Quite often, the political process may obscure the identity of the group which is proposing a new course of action to keep the public from recognizing that an apparently neutral proposal actually benefits the group proposing it.
10. **Determine how the opinion or proposal relates to your own views, interests, and objectives.** Part of analyzing an opinion or a proposed policy is to understand how it relates to other issues of importance to you personally. People who might not be interested in taxes on gas or oil might be interested if it affected the kind of education their children get.
11. **Determine what you think is the best point of view, or best proposal, and why.** In many decisions on community issues, there is not one right or one wrong solution. Instead there are usually a number of different possible solutions. Often the final solution involves negotiations among different individuals or groups, each of whom thinks one proposal is (from their point of view) the best one. While we often refer to compromises in a negative way, they are an indispensable part of the process of agreeing on a common course of action to deal with community problems. Knowing why one believes in a particular solution to a problem is excellent preparation to argue in favor of one's point of view and, when necessary, consider what kinds of compromises make sense.
12. **Consider who might agree or disagree.** In analyzing community issues it is very important to consider who might agree or disagree with you. Democracy eventually involves numbers of people holding one opinion or another and in general the majority prevails. Discovering one's allies and opponents is an eventual step toward being involved in addressing community problems. Allies or opponents can be family members, friends, neighbors, civic groups, newspaper or television reporters, staff of a public agency, elected officials, or local businesses.
13. **Discuss the issue or proposal both with those with whom you agree and those with whom you disagree.** A basic concept in politics is the concept of the "swing vote", that is, representatives who will change their vote or persons who will change their point of view. Being effective in addressing community issues inevitably involves persuading people who do

not initially agree with you. At the same time, sharing information, ideas, and concerns with friends, neighbors and allies can both help you analyze the issues better, express them clearly, and help others gain more insight.

14. **Do not burn bridges. Treat both allies and opponents properly.** There is seldom a good reason for insulting those with whom you disagree. At the very least, angry exchanges mean that people stop listening to each other. At the worst, conflict escalates, sometimes into violence. People's opinions change. In community life, old alliances break up. New alliances are formed. Dialogue instead of confrontation, debate instead of insult, are necessary because, in most communities, people need to keep on living with each other and whenever one set of problems is resolved, a new set will appear.

Authors: Ed Kissam and Holda Dorsey

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