
CHAPTER 7

SOCIETAL DILEMMAS: FINDING A BALANCE

By Fredricka L. Stoller

This chapter explores one of the complexities of civil societies, specifically the tensions that exist between the values, needs, and interests of individuals, on one hand, and the values, needs, and interests of society at large, on the other. Civil societies are constantly struggling to find a balance between these two powerful forces (i.e., individuals and society). Both forces play an important role in shaping communities and nations, and both have the potential to strengthen or weaken communities and nations.

In the following lesson, students consider several societal dilemmas that exemplify the tensions that can exist between individuals and society. While exploring these dilemmas, students learn a new set of concepts, become familiar with associated vocabulary, and have multiple opportunities to improve their language skills. Because the topic is so broad, it has the potential for being explored from multiple perspectives and in different ways. Teachers have the option of using the proposed lesson for a single, stand-alone class, or they can expand upon the proposed lesson to create a series of connected lessons that explore the topic in greater detail. They can also develop a thematic unit that examines the topic from a variety of perspectives over a longer period of time. The lesson plan ideas presented here are meant to serve as a starting point for teachers interested in introducing the topic of "Societal dilemmas: Finding a balance" to their students.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Societies are complex; their complexity is partially due to the fact that they comprise two separate, but overlapping, components:

1. individuals with their own values, desires, and needs
2. groups of individuals with common interests, religion, values, educational backgrounds, socioeconomic status, political orientations, and other factors

When merged together, these two components--individuals and groups of individuals--form a society. Interestingly, societies, as free-standing entities, have their own sets of needs and priorities, distinct from those of individuals and groups of individuals.

The presence of two other separate, but overlapping, entities, the government and its citizens, adds to the complexity of societies. In a civil society, the government and its citizens have two major responsibilities: The promotion of the common good (that is, the well being of society) and the protection of individual rights. This dual responsibility often results in tensions, conflicts, and contradictions. In civil societies, it is not uncommon to witness tensions between

- personal responsibilities and civic responsibilities
- individual needs and societal needs
- individual interests and societal interests
- individual priorities and societal priorities
- individual values and societal values

For a civil society to function, the government and its citizens must strive to find a balance between these competing perspectives. To maintain a civil society, personal desires and interests often have to be subordinated to the public good. This means that the well being of society must take precedence over the needs of individuals or small groups of individuals. This "balancing act" often leads to situations in which the government and its citizens must choose between two alternative positions, one which caters more to the individual and the other which caters to the society. The need to choose between two alternative possibilities results in a wide range of societal dilemmas.

A sampling of societal dilemmas is listed below. These dilemmas share at least one common feature - the fact that there are always at least two sides to every issue, at least two alternatives from which to choose, or at least two different solutions to a given problem. This duality of possibilities creates the dilemmas faced by many civil societies.

Consider these examples:

Societal dilemma #1: Individual beliefs versus majority rule

Societal dilemma #2: The need to obey the law versus the right to dissent

Societal dilemma #3: The appreciation for cultural variety versus the need for cultural unity

Societal dilemma #4: Individual rights versus the concern for public safety

Societal dilemma #5: The need for national security versus the right for individuals to have access to information

Societal dilemma #6: The desirability for free enterprise versus the need for public planning

Societal dilemma #7: Global business versus national interests

Societal dilemma #8: Local control versus national control

Societal dilemma #9: Power of the people versus power of the government

Societal dilemma #10: Right to privacy versus the right of the public to know

These dilemmas represent just a few of the tensions that can exist in civil societies. In countries that have experienced similar dilemmas, one major challenge, faced by governments and citizens centers on finding a balance which meets the needs of individuals and society.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

The following 50-minute lesson highlights select issues related to societal dilemmas: Finding a balance. Teachers are encouraged to adapt this lesson to the language and content learning needs of their students. Adjustments can easily be made so that the lesson matches the needs of lower or higher proficiency English language learners.

Preliminary Lesson Planning

Materials:

Create two handouts. Handout #1 should list at least ten dilemmas, such as those listed in [Appendix A](#). (Information for Handout #1 can be written on an overhead transparency or on the blackboard before class.) Handout #2 should list at least five scenarios illustrating tensions that can arise when two different perspectives exist about a common issue. To create Handout #2, either select a subset of the scenarios provided in [Appendix B](#) or create scenarios that are more suitable to the society in which your students live. In Handout #2, make sure to create a space to the left of each scenario (as modeled in [Appendix B](#)), where students can note the number of matching dilemmas (from Handout #1).

Student grouping:

Group students for Activities 1 and 2 since students will remain in the same groups for both activities. It is recommended that each group have no more than five participants.

Vocabulary considerations:

Decide the vocabulary that students need to know to complete the lesson successfully. Determine which vocabulary items the students already know and which items they will need to be introduced to. Some important terms, and their definitions, are included in a glossary in [Appendix C](#).

Warm Up Activity (approximately 5 minutes)

Purpose:

- To stimulate student interest in the topic of the lesson
- To introduce vocabulary and concepts that will be used in this lesson

Procedures:

1. Write "societal dilemmas" on the blackboard.
2. Point to the word **dilemmas** and ask students what it means. Write a definition or key words on the board to assist those students who are unfamiliar with the word.
3. Ask students the following question: Can you think of any dilemmas that you are currently facing or that you have faced in the past? For each dilemma introduced, ask students to identify at least two sides of the issue and/or the two (or more) choices that they are considering. Be prepared to share a personal dilemma of your own to clarify the meaning of the word.
4. Point to the word **societal** and ask students what it means. Write a definition or key words on the board to assist those students who are unfamiliar with the word.
5. Ask students the following question: What societal dilemmas is our community (or nation) currently facing? For each dilemma introduced, ask students to identify at least two sides of the issue and/or the two alternatives that are in conflict. List responses on the blackboard. You may want to introduce a dilemma and ask students to help you identify the two sides of the issue.

Transition from Warm Up to Activity #1

Tell students that the class session will be devoted to exploring a variety of situations in which society has to decide between two or more possibilities or positions. The challenge is "finding a balance" to meet the needs of the individual and the society. Write "finding a balance" on the blackboard next to "Societal dilemmas." (Do not erase the board. You may want to return to it at the end of the lesson as a way of providing meaningful closure to the lesson.)

Activity #1 (approximately 20-25 minutes)

Purpose:

- To provide students with opportunities to use English in a meaningful way
- To allow students to use key vocabulary and concepts associated with the topic of the lesson
- To introduce students to a set of societal dilemmas that reinforces the lesson
- To encourage students to engage in critical thinking and problem solving

Procedures:

1. Distribute a copy of Handout #1 to all students or display an overhead transparency of the same material. Ask students to look over each pair of contrasting possibilities and each pair reflecting a dilemma and to explain what the societal dilemma is. Clarify new vocabulary at this time.
2. Read a sample scenario to the class. Ask students to identify one or more of the societal dilemma(s), listed on Handout #1.

Sample scenario: In a recent election, voters passed a law requiring drivers of automobiles to wear safety belts. Some citizens do not want to wear safety belts and are protesting the law.

(Possible societal dilemmas resulting from this situation: individual beliefs versus majority rule, need to obey laws versus right to protest unfair laws, individual rights versus public safety)

3. Discuss students' interpretations of the scenario, focusing on the dilemma(s) being faced.
4. Assign students to groups. (Students should take their copies of Handout #1 with them, if handouts rather than an overhead transparency were used earlier.)
5. Give each student a copy of Handout #2; orient students to the handout. Then ask students to number off, 1-2-3-4-5, in each group. Tell students that they are individually responsible for reporting group deliberations on one of the scenarios on Handout #2. For example, student #1 will report on scenario #1; student #2 will report on scenario #2, and so forth. (If there are more than five students in a group, multiple students can be assigned to each scenario and share the responsibility for reporting group deliberations.)
6. Ask students to read over the scenarios and discuss them in their groups. Students should match the most appropriate societal dilemmas, from Handout #1, with each scenario on Handout #2.
7. While students are working in groups, circulate to clarify new vocabulary, answer questions, and keep students on task.
8. Discuss each scenario. Ask for a student volunteer to report on his/her group's interpretation of scenario #1. Encourage students from groups with different views to add to the class discussion. Continue with scenarios 2-5. Possible interpretations are listed in Appendix D. (Keep in mind that students in different parts of the world may interpret scenarios differently.)

Activity #2 (approximately 15 minutes)

Purpose:

- To provide students with opportunities to use English in a meaningful way
- To reinforce key vocabulary and concepts associated with the theme of the lesson
- To contextualize the lesson in a meaningful way
- To engage in problem solving

Procedures:

1. Ask student groups to follow these steps:
 - a. Identify three dilemmas facing our community/nation.
 - b. Rank order the dilemmas from most to least serious (1 = most serious; 3 = least serious).
 - c. Consider the most serious dilemma. What are the different perspectives that people have on this issue?
 - d. What can be done to find a balance between people's different views? Be prepared to report your answer to the class.
2. Ask students to report group deliberations about the most serious dilemma on their list. What can be done to solve the dilemma?

Cool Down Activity (approximately 5 minutes)

Purpose:

- To conclude lesson
- To allow students to discuss the relevance of this lesson

Procedures:

1. Pointing to the blackboard, ask students why "finding a balance" is important when facing societal dilemmas.
2. Ask students the following question: What happens when societies do not or cannot find a balance?

Possible Extensions to Lesson

1. Ask students any of these questions to extend the lesson:
 - a. Under what circumstances should individual freedoms be limited to protect other members of society?
 - b. Should "hate speech" be allowed in societies that value freedom of speech? Why or why not?
 - c. How much privacy should citizens and governmental leaders have?
 - d. How can a society balance the public's right to know what the government is doing and the need for national security?
 - e. Should citizens who own property be able to do whatever they want on their properties?
 - f. Should landowners be able to destroy the environment on their properties?
2. Ask student to evaluate the statement that "all rights have limits."
3. Ask students to write an action plan to solve one of society's most pressing dilemmas.
4. Refer to the web sites listed in the next section of this chapter for more information and lesson planning ideas.

[Back to the top of Chapter 7](#)

Appendix A

Suggested Dilemmas for Handout #1

1. Individual rights versus Public safety
2. Individual beliefs versus **Majority rule**
3. Freedom of the press versus Right to privacy
4. Need to obey laws versus Right to protest unfair laws
5. National security versus Public health
6. **Cultural pluralism** versus **Cultural unity**
7. Use of **Natural resources** versus **Preservation** of resources
8. Local control versus National control
9. **Free enterprise** versus Public planning
10. **Global** business versus National interest

(back to [Classroom Applications](#))

Appendix B

Possible Scenarios for Handout #2

____Scenario #1: A teenage boy in a crowded movie theater shouts "Fire." His actions cause major chaos in the theater. The boy defends his actions by referring to **freedom of speech** laws. The owner of the movie theater claims that there are limits to free speech and that the boy was wrong.

____Scenario #2: A popular newspaper recently published a detailed story about the private life of an important politician. The newspaper defends its actions by saying that it is protected by **freedom of the press** and that the public has a right to know about the private life of an important leader. The politician strongly objects to the story because of his right to **privacy**.

____Scenario #3: A small community has just passed a law that requires all bike riders to wear **helmets**. Those **in favor of** the law claim that the law protects its citizens from possible **injury**. Those **opposed to** the law claim that they have the right to decide whether they want to wear a helmet or not.

____Scenario #4: A **navy official** reported the dumping of **toxic wastes** in the ocean. The official is being accused of **treason** because he has revealed top secret information. He claims that as a concerned citizen, he had the obligation to report this illegal and dangerous act.

____Scenario #5: A community has decided to honor its different cultural groups with a special celebration each month of the year. Opponents claim that such celebrations will destroy unity in the community.

____Scenario #6: A group of citizens living in a mountain community wants to cut down the nearby forest to build 100 new houses. Opponents of the plan want to protect the forest for future generations.

____Scenario #7: Parents want local control of school curricula and textbook selection. The national government does not want to give up the control it currently has over school curricula and textbook selection in the country.

____Scenario #8: A new company, which has its home office in another country, wants to open in town. The new company will compete with local businesses in a number of ways: It will take workers away from local businesses, and it will take customers away from local businesses. An active community group is holding a protest because it does not want the foreign company to come to town. It wants to protect local businesses.

____Scenario #9: A local business, a **lumber mill**, employs 1,000 people. It has cut down most of the trees in the area. The wood from the lumber mill is used to build houses and furniture. An active community group wants the lumber mill to close down to protect remaining forests.

(back to [Classroom Applications](#))

Appendix D

Possible Interpretations of Activity #1
Scenario 1: Individual rights versus public safety
Scenario 2: Freedom of the press versus right to privacy
Scenario 3: Need to obey laws versus right to protest unfair laws; Individual rights versus public safety; Individual beliefs versus majority rule
Scenario 4: National security versus public health
Scenario 5: Cultural pluralism versus cultural unity
Scenario 6: Free enterprise versus public planning; Use of natural resources versus preservation of resources
Scenario 7: Local control versus national control
Scenario 8: Global business versus national interests
Scenario 9: Use of natural resources versus preservation of resources; free enterprise versus public planning