

The Better Arguments Project
betterarguments.org

The Good Project
thegoodproject.org

September 2020

BETTER ARGUMENTS & GOOD WORK

A WORKBOOK

THE BETTER
ARGUMENTS
PROJECT

THE
GOOD
PROJECT 

BETTER ARGUMENTS FOR GOOD WORK

Approaching complex problems requires room for disagreement. But students need the skills and opportunity to engage in Better Arguments, arguments that are:

- **Emotionally intelligent.**
- **Rooted in history.**
- **Honest about power imbalances.**
- **Rooted in principles of constructive communication.**

We believe that when students can engage each other productively across difference, they are more likely to be able to produce **"Good Work"**: work that is **ethical, excellent, and engaging**.

This resource is designed to help students learn the key concepts of both the Better Arguments Project and The Good Project, and to help them practice applying these concepts in their own educational contexts.

ARGUMENT PROMPT:

EMMA'S DILEMMA

Emma is the student body president of Northwest High School. She is leading a student group who must make a recommendation to the school board about the future of 13 controversial murals within her school building. The murals, painted during the Great Depression as part of the Works Progress Administration, depict the life of George Washington, and some of these murals contain scenes depicting the suffering of enslaved people and Native Americans. Many in the school community have argued that the murals should be taken down because they are offensive and dehumanizing. A plan has been proposed to replace the murals with an alternative art piece celebrating the diversity of the school's students. On the other hand, many others believe that the murals have historic value and that it would be disrespectful to both the artists and George Washington's legacy to remove them, so they must be preserved. Emma can see both sides of the issue, and ultimately the recommendation to the school board is in her hands.

After reading the prompt, take a moment to identify the key tension or tensions involved in this argument.

THE 3ES OF GOOD WORK

REMEMBER, BEING A STUDENT IS A TYPE OF WORK TOO.

EXCELLENCE

Good work includes knowing your area of work well and striving to perform to the best of your ability.

ENGAGEMENT

Good work includes caring about your work and finding it meaningful and involving.

ETHICS

When faced with dilemmas you weigh the alternatives, consider who is impacted by your decisions, consult with knowledgeable others, and try to perform in the most appropriate manner.

Please reflect on the 3Es of Good Work above. Consider, is there anything you would add to these definitions of what it means to do Good Work?

CONTEXT

Underlying context exists within all arguments, and it can be broken into three major categories. Acknowledging and understanding these categories is a prerequisite to any Better Argument.



HISTORY

Arguments are rooted in a historical context. Remember, arguments - being able to reckon with differences and forge joint solutions - are critical to a healthy American civic life. Arguments in daily life can be boiled down to a finite number of never-resolvable, tensions.



EMOTION

A Better Argument is one in which all participants use emotional intelligence. This means that each party must seek to understand why the other party is taking a certain stance, rather than negating that party's opinion.



POWER

A Better Argument requires being honest about power. In many arguments among groups and or individuals, participants do not enter as equals. They enter reckoning with imbalances. These inherited inequalities need to be named before a Better Argument can take place. An important part of the Better Arguments process will be to reckon with these realities.

Using Emma's scenario, examine the underlying context of this argument. Reflect on the following questions:

What circumstances might have led to this argument over time?

**How do you think Emma feels in this situation?
Students who are in favor of keeping the murals?
Students who are not in favor of keeping the murals?**

Does anyone involved in this argument hold advantages or disadvantages? How might these dynamics influence the way that opinions are considered?

PRINCIPLES OF A **BETTER ARGUMENT**

Imagine that you are Emma, who must make a decision about whether to recommend keeping or removing the murals to the school board. In order to determine the best course of action, you want to hear from fellow students who represent different opinions on the matter. Using the five principles of a Better Argument which are listed below, consider the following questions:

- How does each principle apply to this scenario?
What could this principle look like in practice?
- How might this principle help Emma do Good Work?

PRINCIPLE	ACTION	GOOD WORK
<p>TAKE WINNING OFF THE TABLE</p> <p>Conventionally, parties enter an argument with a goal of winning, or at least reaching resolution. Instead, the goal of a Better Argument should be framed as the re-institution of civility to build a common community.</p>		
<p>PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS & LISTEN PASSIONATELY</p> <p>A Better Argument places relationships at the center and requires that all parties are truly listening to one another. Participants should listen to learn, not to win.</p>		

PRINCIPLE	ACTION	GOOD WORK
<p>PAY ATTENTION TO CONTEXT</p> <p>A Better Argument acknowledges culture. Understanding the presence of culture in any debate increases its accessibility. Participants must embrace the range of lived experiences and norms that are present in the workplace and relevant to the argument.</p>		
<p>EMBRACE VULNERABILITY</p> <p>Entering a space of argument means making yourself vulnerable. Vulnerability is necessary and can lead to progress, but it requires trust. A Better Argument builds trust into the process.</p>		
<p>MAKE ROOM TO TRANSFORM</p> <p>A Better Argument is a transformational experience for all involved. Without a goal of winning or reaching resolution, the goal of a Better Argument becomes to change how we engage with one another in order to build a community.</p>		

TAKE ACTION

Put the principles into practice: describe what process Emma should take to reach a decision using the above principles.

Is there a particular decision you think Emma should make in this situation? Why or why not?

What better argument Principles or 3Es might you have prioritized or sacrificed in the decision you chose for Emma? Why?

DEBRIEF

What are long term lessons that Emma might draw upon from this experience?

How would you advise Emma to deal with similar arguments going forward?

What is the relationship between having Better Arguments and achieving Good Work?

TAKE-AWAYS



I came in thinking that good work...



I now think that good work...



So now I will....



The Better Arguments Project is a national civic initiative created to help bridge divides - not by papering over those divides but by helping Americans have Better Arguments. In this sense, arguments don't have to drive us apart. Better Arguments can bring us together. In partnership with communities and advisers around the country, we have synthesized three dimensions and five principles of a Better Argument.

This project is a partnership among the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program, Facing History and Ourselves and The Allstate Corporation. To learn more visit www.betterarguments.org.

If you have any questions or want to share your Better Argument story with us please email: betterarguments@aspeninstitute.org.

The Good Project is one of the research initiatives housed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero. Since 1967, Project Zero has been composed of multiple, independently-sponsored researched projects that have examined the development of learning processes in children, adults, and organizations.

The Good Project promotes work that is excellent, engaged, and ethical, preparing people to become good workers and good citizens who contribute to the overall well-being of society. Through our research-based concepts, frameworks, and resources, we seek to help individuals reflect upon the ethical dilemmas that arise in everyday life and give them the tools to make thoughtful decisions.

To learn more visit thegoodproject.org.

