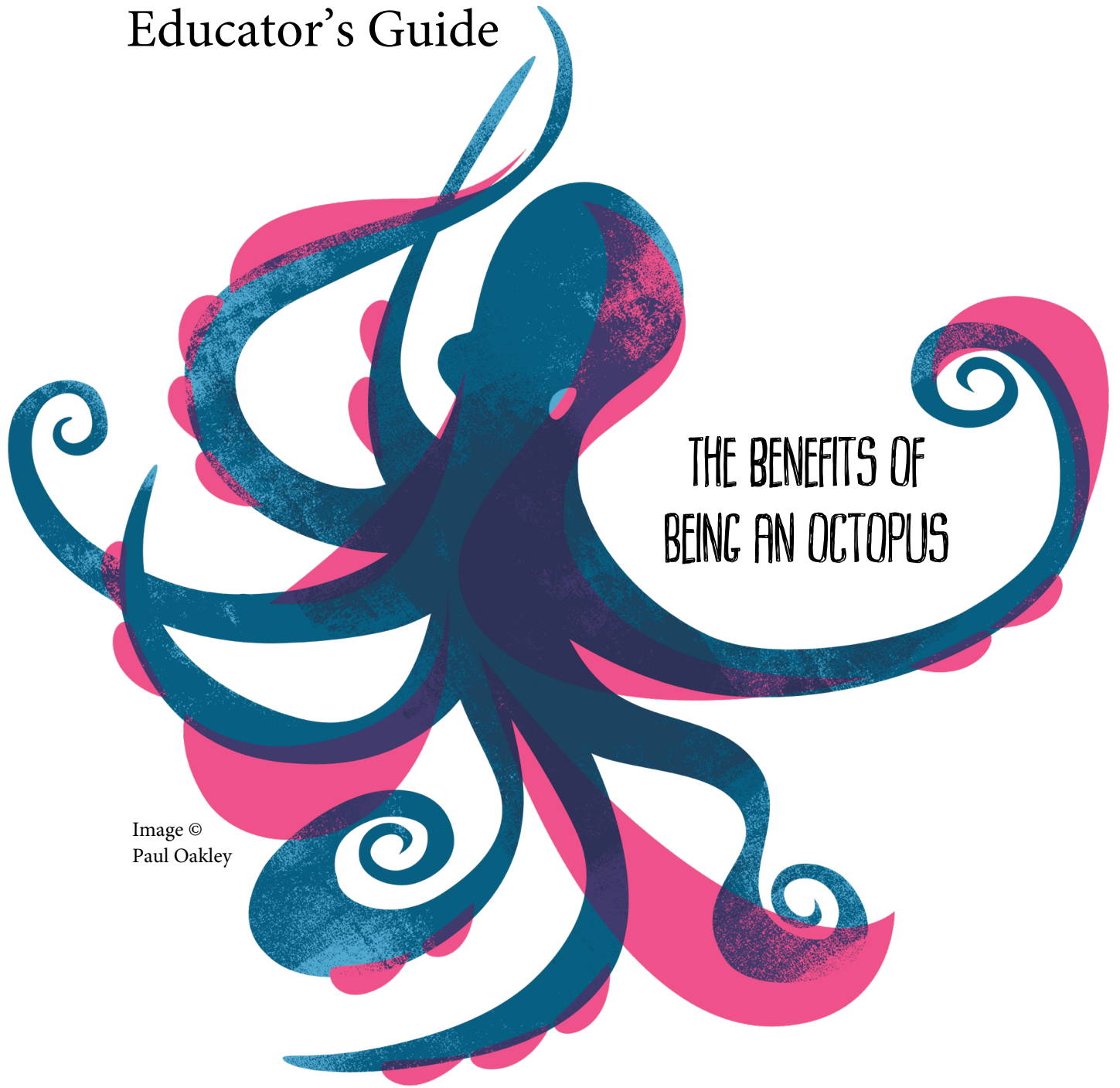


Educator's Guide



THE BENEFITS OF BEING AN OCTOPUS

Image ©
Paul Oakley

A middle grade novel by Ann Braden
(Sky Pony Press) #TeamOctopus

THE BENEFITS OF BEING AN OCTOPUS : AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

THE BENEFITS OF BEING AN OCTOPUS

By Ann Braden

Published by Sky Pony Press

ISBN-13: 9781510737488

Age Range: 8-12 Years

Some people can do their homework. Some people get to have crushes on boys. Some people have other things they've got to do.

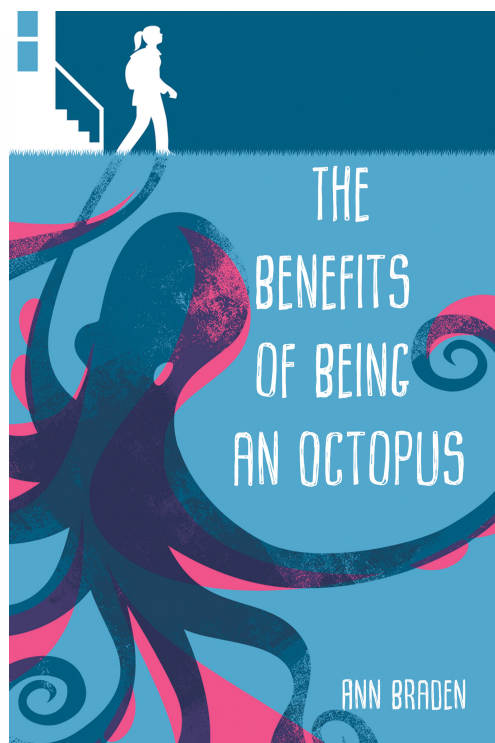
Seventh-grader Zoey has her hands full as she takes care of her much younger siblings after school every day while her mom works her shift at the pizza parlor. Not that her mom seems to appreciate it. At least there's Lenny, her mom's boyfriend—they all get to live in his nice, clean trailer.

At school, Zoey tries to stay under the radar. Her only friend Fuchsia has her own issues, and since they're in an entirely different world than the rich kids, it's best if no one notices them.

Zoey thinks how much easier everything would be if she were an octopus: eight arms to do eight things at once. Incredible camouflage ability and steady, unblinking vision. Powerful protective defenses.

Unfortunately, she's not totally invisible, and one of her teachers forces her to join the debate club. Even though Zoey resists participating, debate ultimately leads her to see things in a new way: her mom's relationship with Lenny, Fuchsia's situation, and her own place in this town of people who think they're better than her. Can Zoey find the courage to speak up, even if it means risking the most stable home she's ever had?

This moving debut novel explores the cultural divides around class and the gun debate through the eyes of one girl, living on the edges of society, trying to find her way forward.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Braden writes books about kids struggling to find their voice amidst the realities of life. She founded GunSenseVT, a grassroots group focused on championing the common ground on the issue of guns in Vermont, which helped pass landmark gun violence prevention legislation. She also founded the Local Love Brigade, which now has chapters all over the country sending love postcards to those who are facing hate. She is a former middle school social studies teacher and now co-hosts a podcast called “Lifelines: Books That Bridge the Divide.” with Saadia Faruqi, a Pakistani American author and interfaith activist. The podcast highlights the children's books that can open minds and the books that can be the lifeline a child needs to remember they're not alone.

INTRODUCTION FROM AUTHOR

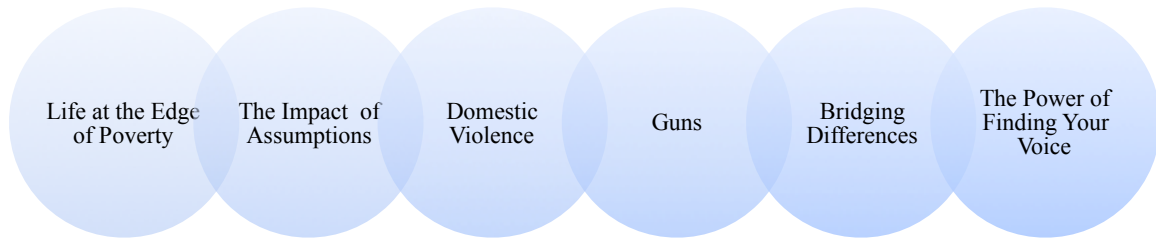
When I was a middle school teacher I loved finding thought-provoking resources that would connect deeply to the students’ lives, prompt rich discussions, and ultimately help students recognize their ability to shape the world around them. My goal with this educator’s guide is do just that. I believe the best way we can help students grow is to give them the space they need to ask questions, to draw conclusions, and to build their own broader understanding of the world.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- When we make assumptions about other people, what do we base them on? How do those assumptions shape our interactions?
- How are people’s lives affected when they have to struggle to make ends meet?
- When it comes to controversial issues, what role does debate play? How does it help? How does it hurt? What alternatives exist?
- What cultural divides exist in communities? How might it be possible to bridge those divides?
- What happens when a person who has felt misunderstood and alone finally feels seen and valued?

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THEMES



COMMON CORE STANDARDS

READING: LITERATURE: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5-7.1, RL.5-7-.3,
LANGUAGE: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.5-7.1, L.5-7.3, W.5-7.1, W.5-7.1.A, W.
5-7.1.B, W.5-7.1.C, W.5-7.1.D, W.5-7.1.E, W.5-7.2
SPEAKING AND LISTENING: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.5-7.1, SL.5-7.1.A, SL.
5-7.1.B, SL.5-7.1.C, SL.5-7.1.D, SL.5-7.3, SL.5-7.4, SL.5-7.6,
WRITING: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY W.5-7.2.A, W.5-7.2.B, W.5-7.2.C, W.5-7.2.D, W.
5-7.2.E, W.5-7.2.F, W.5-7.4, W.5-7.5, W.5-7.6

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

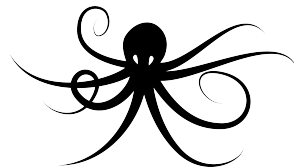
Pre-Reading:

- 1) Examine the cover of *The Benefits of Being an Octopus*. What predictions can you make about the main character in the story?
- 2) What do you think some of the benefits of being an octopus could be?

Extension Activity:

If you had eight arms, what would you do with them?

Worksheet: "The Benefits of Eight Arms"



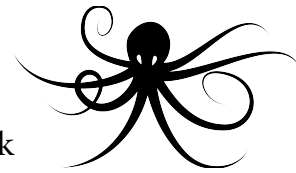
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Chapter 1-3 (page 1-29):

- 1) Describe Zoey's home life. What's your take on it? What's her take on it? If the two perspectives are different, why do you think that is?
- 2) What characteristics of an octopus does Zoey see as important? Why do you think that is?
- 3) How does imagining she's like an octopus affect the decisions Zoey makes? Use an example from the text to support your answer.
- 4) How might Silas's superpower of going for entire school days without talking help him? How might it hurt him?
- 5) Brainstorm other reasons why someone might choose to not talk during school.

Extension Activity:

On page 16, Zoey explains that, "Telling stories means I get to spend time in a world where the person in charge of what happens is me." If she were going to tell a story about her family and got to make it all up, which characters do you think would make the cut the way they are? Who would show up as improved versions of themselves? Who might not show up at all? Would Zoey's real dad be there?



Write a good night story that Zoey might tell Bryce and Aurora based on this made-up version of their family.

Chapter 4-6 (page 30-52):

- 1) Why is Zoey so surprised when Matt responds to her comment about the Patriots?
- 2) How does Zoey change as she watches the other student present their topics for the animal debate? What causes this change? Support your answer with examples from the text.
- 3) What role does hope play in Zoey's life? Explain.

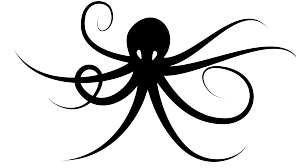
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- 4) What conclusion does Zoey make based on the incident with the bus? Do you agree?

Extension Activity:

Decide on which animal YOU think is the best. Support your answer with details. Do you think Zoey would value those characteristics, too? Why or why not?

Present to the rest of the class your animal, your supporting details, and your ideas about whether Zoey would agree.



Chapter 7-9 (page 53-74):

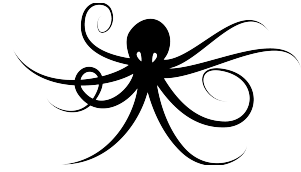
- 1) On page 57, after the interaction with the toaster why is Zoey so adamant that she is not the same as her mom?
- 2) On page 58, Bryce denies that he's been crying. Do you agree with Zoey that when Bryce stops himself from crying, he's more likely to have a nightmare? Why or why not?
- 3) On page 62, why do you think Holly Macnamore changes her mind and says that owls are better than giraffes? Can you think of examples in your own life of when someone has started out thinking one thing, and ended up saying the opposite? Why do you think it happens? In what situations might this be a good thing? When might this be problematic?
- 4) On page 68, Zoey realizes: "This isn't some crush on a boy. This is me wanting to feel the way he does. Strong. Confident. Like no one would even think about messing with me. Too bad that's even more impossible." Why do you think that feels so impossible to Zoey?
- 5) Analyze the location of the laundromats and available mass transit in your community. Based on where you live, calculate approximately how much time it would take to do laundry if you had no functioning washing machine or access to a car.

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Extension Activity:

On pages 54 and 55, Ms. Rochambeau tells Zoey: “I needed to learn how to get people to take me seriously.” Zoey thinks instead about how she’s learned that: “People will treat me how they treat me, and I don’t have a shred of say in it.”

Do you agree with Zoey? If not, why do you think there’s a difference? If you agree with Ms. Rochambeau that it’s possible to make people take you more seriously, describe some of the ways you can.



Pair up with someone who has a different opinion on this, discuss, and then present the other person’s point of view to the rest of the class.

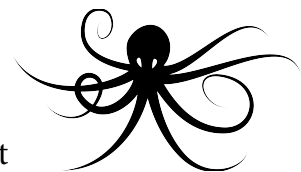
Chapter 10-12 (page 75-102):

- 1) On page 90, Ms. Rochambeau asks Zoey what kind of person she wants to be. How would YOU answer that question?
- 2) What’s your reaction to Ms. Rochambeau’s advice for Zoey at the end of Chapter 11 (page 95)?
- 3) Explain what you think led to Zoey’s mom getting that “old mom kind of spark” in her eye?
- 4) Compare how Connor was feeling when trekking around Peru with how Zoey is feeling now. What is the same? What is different?
- 5) Explain why this interpretation of the chakana was so meaningful to Connor. Which other characters might also be impacted by learning about it?

Extension Activity:

Connor describes finding out about the chakana as a “moment where everything is suddenly clear” (p. 102)

Think about a similar ah-ha moment in your life. If it was positive, design a tattoo that could help remind you about that moment. If it was negative, design a tattoo that could help you grow beyond that moment.



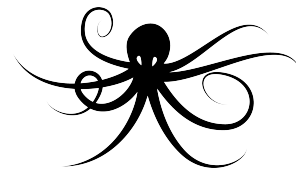
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Chapter 13-15 (page 103-134):

- 1) Describe Lenny's relationship with Zoey's mom. How does he treat her? In what ways does he manipulate her? How do you think she thinks he treats her? Use examples from the text to support your answers.
- 2) What does Zoey mean when she says, "I know where my old mom went"? Explain how Lenny's words and actions have impacted Zoey's mom.
- 3) What ultimately convinces Zoey to try the after school debate club? What role does her octopus tattoo play in that?
- 4) Unpack Frank's response to the mention of a gun on pages 133 and 134. Discuss why he might feel this way.

Extension Activity:

In a journal: discuss how people can sometimes try to manipulate others into doing certain things. What kinds of manipulation tactics are used? Which are most effective?



Brainstorm possible ways to remove some of the power from these manipulations tactics. Discuss how the situation would be different if the person manipulating you was your best (and only) friend?

Choose one answer to each question and write each set of questions and answers on a notecard so that it's anonymous. After the notecards are collected and reshuffled, they are handed back to different students to be read out loud. Discuss the responses as a class.

Chapter 16-19 (page 135-171):

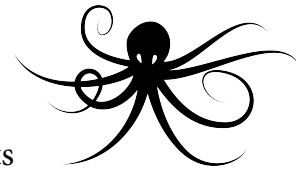
- 1) Explain the power of Lenny's words "Little Miss Clueless" on page 152. Why does he use them? What affect do they have?
- 2) Why do you think Zoey walks out of debate club on page 158? Was that the right thing to do? Discuss.
- 3) On page 159, Zoey mentions Lenny's alphabetized DVD collection. How have her thoughts about it changed over the course of the story?

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- 4) Describe Zoey's mom's reaction to the form Zoey hands her in the Pizza Pit bathroom on page 164. Discuss why she might have reacted that way.
- 5) Discuss Zoey's line on page 171: "When you're living in a pond of algae, you turn green. It doesn't matter how often someone tells you to stop." What does she mean by that? Where else might you see or experience something similar to this, where words are no match for the forces already acting? What are some of the different forces in life that color the water we're swimming in?

Extension Activity:

Choose an issue that divides your community. Using the Worksheet: "Bridging the Divide," fill in the two bridge pillars with the main points from each of the sides in the debate. At the top of each pillar, list the phrases and arguments that are heard most often. At the bottom of each pillar, list the deeper beliefs and emotions that are at the core of those arguments. Compare the beliefs and emotions on each side. How are they similar? How are they different? See *Worksheet: Bridge the Divide*



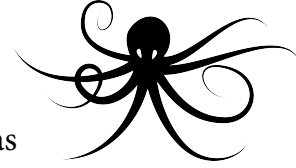
Chapter 20-23 (page 172-205):

- 1) Why do you think Zoey didn't take Fuchsia's complaints seriously before?
- 2) What has changed for Zoey that makes her run after Silas at the beginning of Chapter 21 (page 179)? How is this morning different from the previous morning?
- 3) Analyze the statements that Zoey made in her telling-off of the debate club on pages 191 and 192. How do you predict Matt and Lydia might respond to them? How do you think Frank might respond to them?
- 4) On pages 178 and 181 Zoey talks about she's armed with "a measly Q-tip." What powerful tool does she discover she has in her arsenal at the end of Chapter 22 (page 193)? What impact does this have?
- 5) Compare Zoey's confrontation of her mom in Chapter 23 with the confrontation in Chapter 19. What has changed? What are the effects of those changes?

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Extension Activity:

Discuss the ways that Zoey's statements to the debate club and her perspective could be a bridge that spans the divide in the gun debate. Using your completed pillars from the worksheet "Bridge the Divide", team up with a partner who has a different perspective to write out statements that have the potential to serve as common ground on the issue you chose. Cut out the pillars and use the common ground statements form a bridge that connects them.



See Worksheet: Bridge the Divide

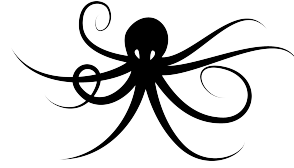
Chapter 24-28 (page 206-254 aka The End):

- 1) On pages 210 & 211 when Zoey's mom is explaining what changed for her, Zoey thinks: "How is it so different when you're the one who's being bullied?" What's your take on this? Discuss as a class.
- 2) On page 218, Zoey says, "It might be messy...but the only way we're going to have a chance is if we stick together." What's your reaction to this? Discuss the ways it's possible to see this play out in your life. Discuss where you think this should be happening but isn't.
- 3) Analyze the role Lenny played in the fight that Zoey's mom and Crystal had. What impact did that have? What would Zoey's situation be like now like if Zoey's mom didn't have any friends other than Lenny?
- 4) What does Zoey assume Fuchsia is thinking when she comes into the bedroom as Zoey is about to start telling Bryce and Aurora a story on page 252? With a partner make a list of other assumptions that have been made by characters throughout the book. What impacts have they had?
- 5) How does the ending make you feel? Is it a happy ending? Why or why not?
- 6) How did Zoey change over the course of the book? In your opinion what was the most important turning point that brought about this change. Discuss as a class.
- 7) Have you (like Zoey) shifted over the course of the book? How has the book impacted you?

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Extension Activity:

Research the resources in your community available to someone who needs to leave an abusive relationship. What services does the local domestic violence shelter provide? If a person didn't have enough money for a security deposit, what housing options would be open to them?



POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Budgeting Activity:

Using the Worksheet: "Budgeting on a Minimum Wage Income" analyze Zoey's mom's budget constraints, examine what it would take to save money for a washing machine, and discuss the consequences.

See Worksheet: Budgeting on a Minimum Wage Income

Journaling: From a Different Perspective:

Choose one of the secondary characters and write a journal entry from their point of view that following spring. What has shifted for them? How do they see things differently?

Class Discussion: Analyzing the Divides and Exploring Possible Bridges

As a class, make a list of the cultural divides that exist in this book. What assumptions are fueling these divides? In what parts of the story do you see the potential for bridges to be formed across these divides? What tentative steps are taken? What would the next steps look like?

What sort of divides do you see in your own community? What role do assumptions play in fueling your community's divides? What potential bridges could be built? What would the first tentative steps in that direction look like?

With a Partner: 2 Sides → 1 Goal: An Alternative to the Traditional Debate:

Find a person who disagrees with you on an issue. Use the worksheet "2 Sides → 1 Goal" to work together with the goal of finding common ground on the issue.

See Worksheet: 2 Sides → 1 Goal

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Writing With a Purpose: Using Your Voice

Choose either the issue you selected for the Bridge the Divide worksheet or another issue that divides people. Lay out the common ground that can be the foundation for a path forward by writing a letter to the editor and/or preparing and giving testimony to either a local board (school board, select board, planning board, etc.) or to the relevant legislative committee at the Statehouse.

See Worksheet: Bridge the Divide

INCLUDED WORKSHEETS

- The Benefits of Eight Arms
- *2 Sides → 1 Goal*
- Bridge the Divide
- Budgeting on a Minimum Wage Income

THE BENEFITS OF EIGHT ARMS

What would you do with eight arms? Fill in the blanks with your ideas.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

8.

6.

7.

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Paul Oakley

TWO SIDES → ONE GOAL

An Alternative to Traditional Debate That Relies on Listening, Questioning for Understanding, & Finding Common Ground

Often two opposing sides are pitted against in each other in debates, but that can lead to further polarization and make it harder to find solutions. For this exercise find a partner who you disagree with, and focus on an issue that divides you.

1) Listen

Listen to the other person's viewpoint for at least five minutes. Take notes below on what's most important to them. (No interrupting!) Then, when they're done, switch roles and explain your perspective on the issue.

TWO SIDES → ONE GOAL

2) Question for Understanding

Take turns asking each other questions to help you both better understand the other person's perspective. Ask questions to clarify things or dig deeper into their reasoning. (Don't ask questions that are designed to trip the other person up -- that won't help.) You can jot down questions you don't want to forget to ask here.

TWO SIDES → ONE GOAL

3) Find Common Ground

Together brainstorm a list of statements around this issue that you both might agree on. Circle 2 or 3 of these shared values that together you see as the most important.

TWO SIDES → ONE GOAL

4) Work Toward Solutions

Brainstorm ways to support these shared values: community projects, laws that need to be passed, changes to how things are done at school, etc.

TWO SIDES → ONE GOAL

5) Don't Keep Your Good Ideas To Yourself!

As a team, make a plan to present your ideas to others and explain the thinking behind it. Together you can even zero in on one of your ideas and put it into practice!

The next time you face an issues that's dividing people, try turning the traditional debate on its head. It's amazing what can develop.

BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

- 1) Choose an issue that divides your community.
- 2) Find a partner (preferably on the other end of the debate) and each take on one of these sheets to record the statements, beliefs, and emotions of the other.
- 3) Listen carefully to what your partner has to say about the issue.
- 4) Compare the beliefs and emotions on each side.

ISSUE:

SIDE:

STATEMENTS HEARD MOST:

BELIEFS & EMOTIONS:

BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

- 5) On a separate paper, work with your partner to write statements that represent the common ground on the issue.
- 6) Cut out your pillar and use your statements to physically build a bridge between the two sides.
- 7) Share your results online with hashtag: #TeamOctopus.

BUDGETING ON A MINIMUM WAGE INCOME

Analyze the numbers in Zoey's mom's general budget, and answer the questions below.

Zoey's Mom's Income	Each Month (an approximate amount)
30 hours/week at minimum wage \$10.50 (Vermont's minimum wage is one of the higher ones in the country)	\$1332
Zoey's Mom's Expenses	Each Month (an approximate amount)
Taxes	\$100
Housing*	500** If splitting 2 bedroom trailer with Lenny. An average two-bedroom apartment in the area rents for about \$1000.
Food	\$550** It would be \$900, but they've applied to get food stamps (an EBT card), which provides \$250 in assistance, and they
Transportation (uses mass transit b/c no car)	50
Health Care	50** This would be at least \$500, but Zoey's mom qualifies for Medicaid in Vermont, and all of the kids are covered by the state's Dr. Dynasaur program.
Cell Phone	40** The base cost of the cell phone is \$35, plus an additional \$5 for past late fees and interest.
Electricity	30** It would be \$40 but they have applied for the low-income credit.
Utilities (Heat, water, sewer, etc.)	0** Covered by Lenny.
Childcare	0 **It would be at least \$1,300, but Bryce and Aurora are able to use Headstart pre-school which is free, and Zoey's mom works the afterschool shifts so she won't need childcare for Hector during the day.
Internet	0

BUDGETING ON A MINIMUM WAGE INCOME

Cable (DirecTV, Dish, etc.)/ Entertainment (Hulu/Netflix)	0
Coin Laundry	16
Other (Clothing, grooming, gifts, etc.)	5
TOTAL EXPENSES:	
How much is left over for savings?	

How much do her expenses total up to?

How much is left over for savings?

Which items in the budget don't have enough to cover basic needs?

What is missing from this budget?

If it's possible to get a functioning washing machine on Craigslist for \$50, how long will it take her to save for that washing machine at this rate? What other areas of the budget could she cut money from?

What needs to change for this budget to work?

Why do you think Zoey's mom can't easily get a better paying job?

Extension Activity: Bring this home and discuss how this compares with your family's budget with your parents and guardians.



BUDGETING ON A MINIMUM WAGE INCOME

SOURCES:

“Basic Needs Budgets and the Livable Wage” Prepared by the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office.

http://www.leg.state.vt.us/jfo/reports/2017%20BNB%20Report%20Revision_Feb_1.pdf

“Medicaid and Dr. Dynasaur.” Vermont Health Connect.

<http://info.healthconnect.vermont.gov/Medicaid>

“Vermont Paycheck Calculator.” Smart Asset.

<https://smartasset.com/taxes/vermont-paycheck-calculator#SZIMI1GMSG>

“Benefit Programs.” Agency of Human Services: Department of Children and Families.

<http://dcf.vermont.gov/benefits>