

unique and united

FROM CONFLICT TO UNDERSTANDING:
A TRANSFORMATION TOOLKIT



OVERVIEW

This toolkit directly supports **Students Rebuild: Unique and United** by inviting students to reflect on what makes them different, what they share with others, and how communities grow stronger when individuals feel seen and valued. The final performance or visual submission serves as a collective statement: while we may experience conflict and difference, we are capable of choosing empathy, care, and connection.

By documenting and submitting student work, whether through recorded performances, process photos, or reflections, educators help students see their creative voices as part of a larger, global conversation about belonging and unity. In doing so, students are not only learning social-emotional skills; they are contributing to a movement that affirms that our differences matter, and so does our ability to come together.

While these lessons are intended to be completed as a set, if you only have time to do one, film the acting or improvisation section and submit it to Students Rebuild as a piece of creative expression. Remember, each youth engaged or creative expression submitted sparks a \$5 donation to organizations empowering youth and building bridges worldwide.

This toolkit was created in collaboration with the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding.

About Tanenbaum

Tanenbaum promotes justice and builds respect for religious difference by transforming individuals and institutions to reduce prejudice, hatred, and violence.

As a secular and non-sectarian non-profit, Tanenbaum works to promote religious peacebuilders who help counter extremism and violence in armed conflicts, and to reduce religious bullying of students, harassment in workplaces, and disparate health treatment for people based on their beliefs.

Tanenbaum's Education program works to teach students skills of respectful curiosity and positive communication, setting them up for lifelong success. We develop curricular and professional development resources and work with educational institutions to build environments where students of all religious and non-religious backgrounds feel safe, heard, and respected.

LESSON 1: HOW DOES CONFLICT HAPPEN?

Time: 45–60 Minutes

In this lesson, students examine how conflict often emerges from differences in expectations, communication styles, cultural norms, and assumptions, even when no one intends harm. Through an improvisational role-play called The Cultural Gathering, students experience how the same situation can feel completely different, depending on perspective. The lesson builds empathy, improvisation skills, and analytical thinking while laying the groundwork for conflict transformation work.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze how norms, identity, and expectations shape social interactions
- Identify how misunderstanding can escalate into conflict
- Practice improvisation using intentional vocal and physical choices
- Reflect on how perspective influences interpretation

Materials Needed

- Open classroom space
- Cultural Role Cards (provided at the end of this lesson PDF)
- Timer
- Board or chart paper
- Markers



activity

1

PHYSICAL & VOCAL AWARENESS WARM-UP

Tell students that they are about to explore the concept of mood through physical movement. Instruct them to move freely around the room while listening to your prompts. Students should alter their body movements to reflect each of the following prompts:

- Walk like you are authoritative.
- Use your body to show that you are reserved.
- Use your face and body to show that you are defensive.
- Walk toward someone in a welcoming way.
- Show what the movements of someone who is distracted would look like.
- How would you show someone that you are confident?

Students adjust posture, pace, and spatial awareness accordingly.

Now shift the focus of the activity to voice. Instruct your students to say the phrase “Nice to meet you” in a natural tone.

Next, instruct them to repeat the phrase, but shift their vocal tone to reflect the following moods:

- genuine
- forced
- sarcastic
- guarded
- enthusiastic

Have a brief reflection by asking them:

- What changed physically when the prompts shifted?
- How did bodily movements and vocal tone affect meaning?
- What assumptions might someone make based on posture or voice alone?
- How can that lead to confusion?

2

FRAMING THE SCENARIO

Explain to the students that they are about to engage in a role-playing activity and provide the following scenario:

You are about to participate in a social gathering. It could be a formal networking event, a cultural celebration, a community forum, or a leadership summit. You will be divided into groups. Each group will represent a different set of social norms and expectations.

Provide definitions:

- **Culture:** Shared values, behaviors, and communication patterns within a group
- **Social norm:** an unwritten and often unspoken rule, belief, and shared expectations that define appropriate behavior within a group or culture
- **Improvisation:** Making intentional choices in the moment without a script
- **Conflict:** A clash of needs, values, identities, or expectations

Invite students to consider:

- What are some social norms in your community?
- How do unspoken rules shape social spaces?
- What happens when those rules collide?

3

PREPARATION

Divide students into four groups. Each group receives a **Role Card** outlining specific social norms that they need to act out in this role-playing activity.

To prepare, groups need to privately discuss how they will portray their characters by considering questions such as these:

- How does our group communicate?
- How do we show respect?
- How do we handle disagreement?

Students plan how these norms will appear through body language, tone, pacing, and interaction style.

4

IMPROVISATION

As this is a social event, students will circulate and interact in character. It is imperative that they socialize with members from other groups and that they stay in character. To facilitate conversation, you may need to provide conversation topics such as:

- Current events
- School policies
- Team projects
- Community issues

To ensure students continue circulating as if at a real social event, signal them to shift to a new person every 3–5 minutes.

5

REFLECT & name CONFLICT

Bring students together and facilitate discussion about the activity by asking these questions:

- Where did tension arise?
- Did any of the behaviors or language used by other students confuse you?
- Did conflict appear without direct argument?
- How did assumptions influence interpretation?
- What changed once you understood other groups' norms?
- Were any norms judged as “better” or “worse”? Why?

6

CLOSING REFLECTION | 5 minutes

Ask students to return to their groups to complete this statement:

A conflict emerged when one group expected _____, and another group expected _____.

Students may share aloud or submit as exit tickets.

7

CLOSING THOUGHT

Understanding differences does not require agreement. We can maintain distinct identities while choosing to engage with curiosity rather than assumptions. Theatre helps us examine the invisible rules shaping our interactions and practice responding more intentionally.

Teachers are encouraged to record this role-playing exercise and submit the photos or videos to [Students Rebuild: Unique & United](#). These short scenes highlight students' creativity and their ability to show how differences can be handled with empathy and respect. Sharing their work allows student voices to contribute to a larger, positive impact beyond the classroom.

LESSON 2: TRANSFORMING CONFLICT: FROM ESCALATION TO PEACEBUILDING

Time: 60 Minutes

Students explore how conflict escalates or transforms depending on language, tone, body positioning, and listening. They create and perform two contrasting versions of the same conflict scenario, analyzing how small communication choices dramatically shift outcomes. The lesson connects performance skills to real-world peacebuilding and civic engagement.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Evaluate how communication choices escalate or de-escalate tension
- Apply “I” statements and active listening strategies
- Perform contrasting dramatic scenes demonstrating conflict transformation
- Connect theatrical tools to real-world interpersonal and community conflict

Materials Needed

- Open space
- Board/chart paper
- Markers
- Sample Conflict Options handout (provided at the end of this lesson PDF)
- Optional: Rehearsal Checklist (provided at the end of this lesson PDF)



activity

1

WHAT ESCALATES CONFLICT?

On the board, create two columns that show how some language choices escalate conflict, while others de-escalate it.

Escalates Conflict	De-escalates Conflict
Blame language	“I” statements
Absolute statements	Specific observations
Interrupting	Pausing
Volume increase	Calm tone
Closed or aggressive posture	Open body language
	Reflective listening

To help students better understand this concept, model examples of language from both columns.

Blame language that escalates conflict:

“You never show up prepared.”

Reframe with an “I” statement that expresses how a person feels rather than placing blame:

“I feel frustrated when we’re unprepared because it affects the group’s success. I’d like us to agree on clearer expectations.”

Ask the class to carefully listen to both examples and identify:

- What shifted in tone?
- How does this change the likelihood of resolution?

2

intensity dial exercise

Explain to students that they will explore how conflict doesn't always start with harsh words. Sometimes it starts with energy, tone, or body language.

Provide these instructions:

"You're going to say the exact same sentence at different emotional intensities and notice how it changes the impact."

Write on the board:

- 1 = Grounded and calm
- 2 = Mildly concerned
- 3 = Neutral but serious
- 4 = Frustrated or tense
- 5 = Highly reactive/explosive

Clarify that this exercise is about energy level, not about yelling or performing. Students should embody the emotion authentically while staying playful and respectful of their partners.

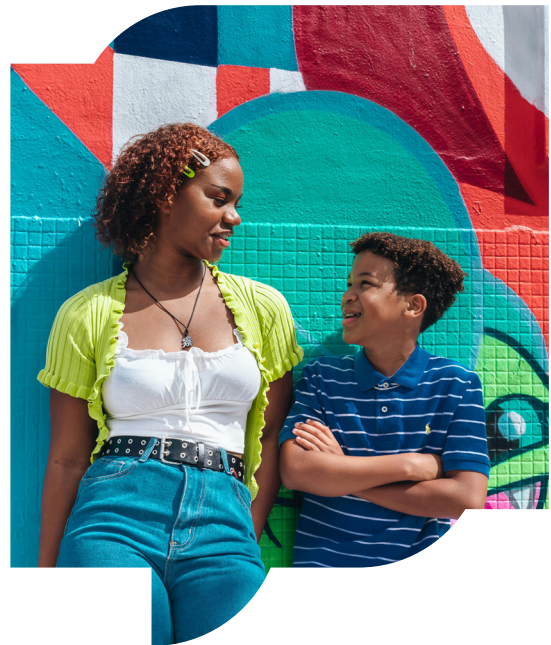
Place students in pairs. Ask them to repeat the sentence "We need to talk."

Explain that you will call out numbers from 1–5 in random order, and students must match the energy level called. After each number, they rotate to a new partner. (Tip: The random order is intentional — jumping between levels, such as going from a 5 directly to a 1, sharpens students' awareness of the contrast.)

Debrief after the exercise by asking the following questions:

- At which levels did your body feel tense?
- At what level does productive conversation become impossible?
- When did it feel safe vs. unsafe?
- Did anyone instinctively feel the need to defend themselves?
- How does body language reinforce tone?

Close by emphasizing that the same words can produce very different outcomes depending on how they are delivered, and that awareness of this is the first step toward more intentional communication.



3

making a scene**Identify the Conflict**

Place students in groups of 2–4. Each group selects or creates a conflict relevant to their age group. You and your students may choose your own conflict topics or reference the Sample Conflict Options document. Before building their scene, each group completes the following statements:

Person A wants _____. Person B wants _____.

This step grounds the scene in genuine competing needs rather than surface-level drama.

Build Two Versions

Each group creates one short scene (3–5 minutes total) that plays out in two versions.

Version 1: Escalation — Students show how the conflict intensifies through defensive tone, blame statements, interrupting, and physical tension.

Version 2: Transformation — Students replay the same scenario, this time using "I" statements, acknowledging the other perspective, active listening, intentional pauses, and collaborative problem-solving.

Guidelines for both versions: Keep it realistic rather than exaggerated, avoid physical aggression, and aim for emotional truth without melodrama. The contrast between versions is the point.

As groups rehearse, circulate and prompt their thinking with questions such as: What triggers the escalation? What specific moment shifts the scene? What does resolution require from each character?

Encourage students to use the Rehearsal Checklist to ensure they are meeting all the requirements of the activity.

Perform and Analyze

Groups perform their scenes for the class. After each performance, facilitate a brief discussion:

- What specific choices escalated the conflict?
- What shifted the dynamic in Version 2?
- Did the resolution feel authentic? Why or why not?
- What risks did characters take to de-escalate?

Encourage students to use analytical language when responding — tone, pacing, posture, subtext.

Peacebuilding Connection

Bring the full group together for a closing discussion:

- What new revelations came to you about conflict and resolution?
- What strategies can be applied to real conflicts in your life or community?
- Where do you notice escalation patterns in your community? In the media? Online?
- What responsibility does each person have in shifting conflict culture?

Closing Message

Conflict is inevitable in diverse communities. Escalation is not. The choices we make in how we communicate, listen, and respond determine whether differences divide us or deepen understanding. Theatrical exercises like this give us a rehearsal space to practice the kind of engagement we want to bring into the real world.

Teachers are encouraged to record this role-playing exercise and submit the photos or videos to [Students Rebuild: Unique & United](#). These short scenes highlight students' creativity and their ability to show how differences can be handled with empathy and respect. Sharing their work allows student voices to contribute to a larger, positive impact beyond the classroom.



HANDOUT 1: CULTURAL ROLE CARDS

MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL

Cut along the dotted lines

The Purple Culture: You are eager to interact with new people and communicate your respect for them. In your culture, there are several ways you show respect for others:

- You start every conversation by placing your hands together quietly in front of you with your palms touching.
- You keep one arm's length distance between you and the person you are talking with, avoiding physical contact.
- You begin everything you say with the following words "no harm, no harm..."

The Green Culture: You are eager to interact with new people and communicate your respect for them. In your culture, there are several ways you show respect for others:

- You sit and look down to show that you are listening when someone else is speaking.
- When you are asked a question, you count to five before you respond to make sure the person has finished their thought.
- You only answer questions, you never initiate conversation to show you care about what the other person might be wanting to say.

The Blue Culture: You are eager to interact with new people and communicate your respect for them. In your culture, there are several ways you show respect for others:

- You start every conversation by clapping your hands together loudly while extending your arms in front of you to show that communication can be verbal or physical.
- When speaking to someone, you always stand shoulder to shoulder to show that you are listening carefully.
- You talk with your eyes looking at your feet to not make anyone else look directly at your face. You are not more important to look at than anyone else in the room.

The Orange Culture: You are eager to interact with new people and communicate your respect for them. In your culture, there are several ways you show respect for others:

- You always maintain direct eye contact when speaking or listening to show that you are engaged in the conversation.
- You smile and laugh after every sentence anyone else says to show you have heard them.
- You never allow silence in a conversation to avoid making others uncomfortable.

SAMPLE CONFLICT SCENE OPTIONS

(For Teacher Curation or Student Selection)

1. One Game, Two Ideas

- Character A wants to play soccer.
- Character B wants to play tag.
- Conflict grows when neither wants to compromise.
- Calms when they listen and make a shared plan.

2. The Shared Supplies

- Two students want the same art material or book.
- Conflict grows through blaming or grabbing.
- Calms with turn-taking or sharing.

3. Feeling Left Out

- One character feels excluded from a group activity.
- Others don't realize how it feels.
- Calms when feelings are shared, and the group listens.

4. Loud vs. Quiet

- One character wants quiet time.
- Another wants to talk or play loudly.
- Conflict calms when both needs are acknowledged.

5. Group Project Disagreement

- Group members disagree about ideas or roles.
- Conflict grows when people interrupt.
- Conflict calms when they take turns and plan together.

6. Taking Turns

- Two characters want to go first.
- Conflict grows with arguing or rushing.
- Calms when they agree on a fair system.

7. Different Rules at Home

- Characters have different expectations about rules.
- Conflict grows through confusion or judgment.
- Calms through explanation and respect.

8. Borrowed Without Asking

- One character uses something that belongs to another.
- Conflict grows when feelings are ignored.
- Calms when responsibility and apology are shown

REHEARSAL CHECKLIST: ARE WE READY?

Before we perform, check each box together:

Our Scene

- Our scene is **fictional** and safe for a school audience
- Our scene is **2–5 minutes long**
- We are showing **one clear problem**

Conflict Gets Bigger

- We use **blame words** (like “You always...” or “You never...”)
- Our voices get louder or faster
- Our bodies look tense or upset
- The audience can tell the conflict is growing

Conflict Calms Down

- We switch to **feeling words** (like “I feel...” or “I need...”)
- Our voices slow down or get calmer
- Our bodies relax or open up
- The problem is solved or gets smaller

Acting Choices

- We use our **faces, bodies, and voices** to show feelings
- We listen and respond to our partners
- We stay in character the whole time

Final Check

- The change from **big conflict** → **calm conflict** is clear
- Everyone knows their role and feels ready