

## Introduction:

A finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction, Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* focuses on the tragic story of over two dozen illegal immigrants who were abandoned by their guide in the brutal desert west of Tucson, Arizona. Not only does Urrea recreate the personal lives of the people involved, he also presents information on the broader topic of illegal immigration, a matter of political and personal concern for all of us. Through outstanding investigative reporting and skillful writing, Urrea deftly illustrates the complexities of the issue.

This complexity may surprise students: they may be startled to learn that both the United States and Mexico make millions of dollars each year from illegal immigration. This economic reality makes it seem counterproductive to stop illegal immigration. Another seemingly contradictory impulse readers might feel is a desire for the immigrants to make it to the US and secure a better life for their families, despite the fact that the impulse is clearly counter to the laws of our country.

This guide is meant to help facilitate discussion of *The Devil's Highway* so students can have a more meaningful experience reading the book. We have included some suggestions for leading group discussions, a list of potential questions for students to discuss, and some ideas for locating additional resources, and we conclude with a troubleshooting guide that tries to anticipate some difficulties that could arise.

## Suggestions for Leading Small Group Discussion:

Most of us have become skilled at leading an entire group in discussion. However, leading smaller groups in a collaborative learning session is a less commonly utilized skill, requiring a slightly different approach.

At first, the terms “collaborative learning” and “group work” seem synonymous. These terms are slightly different, though. The goal of collaborative learners is more specific and clearly defined than the goal of group-work participants. Collaborative learners are working to reach their own consensus about the topic they are discussing; it is this focus on consensus that sets them apart. The necessity of reaching consensus—the process of coming to some sort of agreement about the issue, even if it is to agree to disagree—forces the students to participate more fully in the discussion. They are also working together as equal participants in a debate. This situation is very different from a traditional classroom, or even simple group work, where the teacher is in charge of the debate and there are clear-cut right and wrong answers.<sup>1</sup>

It might be a good idea to think of your small group discussion as an exercise in collaborative learning. The discussion should prove to be more productive if the participants are working together to achieve consensus. Harvey Wiener has a few tips for the leader of such a discussion:

- **Set a clear task for the group.** Participants in a group can benefit from having a definite task set down in writing about which to come to consensus. Requiring one member of the group to act as a “recorder” for that group can further benefit them: the person writing down the ideas and opinions of the group will make sure the group’s ideas are not contradictory and are well developed. This person’s role might be particularly effective if the recorder is also to be the “reporter” of the group’s ideas to the rest of the class.
- **Manage the classroom.** The participants need to actually collaborate, and this collaboration may be

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<sup>1</sup> Wiener, Harvey S. “Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation.” *College English* 48 (January 1986): 52-61.

difficult for them to achieve on their own. For example, some participants may dominate the discussion, while others may be hesitant to speak up. Keeping an eye on them as they work together, the leader can make suggestions to better balance the discussion. Every participant's ideas should receive respect from the discussion leader and the other participants; it is the leader's responsibility to establish this tone.

An important factor to consider when you are leading a discussion meeting is the size of the small groups: if you have a large group—for example, 20 or more participants—you will want to use different strategies and you will face different challenges than someone leading a smaller group.

### Large Group vs. Small Group Discussion

#### Large group tips:

- If possible, have the participants arrange their desks or themselves in a circle. This management will help facilitate discussion.
- If the participants are seated in rows, remember that they may have a hard time hearing each other. If the students in the back cannot hear the students in the front, they will not be in a position to participate in the discussion. One way to help with this is to repeat students' answers (or questions) back for the whole group.
- Encourage students to respond to each other. Instead of responding yourself, perhaps ask the group something like, "What do you all think of that?" or "Would someone with a different view like to respond?"
- Ask students to provide specific examples from the text to illustrate their points. By asking them to point to specific passages from the book, you will keep the discussion focused on the text.
- Act as a recorder for the whole group by documenting the discussion on the board, if one is available.
- You may wish to divide the large group up into smaller groups for a portion of the time. Smaller groups can look at separate issues, and discussion can be easier for shy members of the group.

#### Small group tips:

- If you are working with multiple small groups, go around the room from group to group answering questions and engaging them in conversation. This mild form of intervention can help them remain on task and voice their thoughts in a more coherent format.
- Allow the groups time to work alone. Although it seems contradictory, you can sometimes be a very effective discussion leader if you appear idle, perhaps even leaving the room for a few minutes after the participants are fully engaged in the process, thereby allowing the participants time to talk and work freely. Perhaps go out into the hall to get a drink of water. You can alternatively sit quietly off to the side and occupy yourself with some other task.

- **Synthesize the groups' conclusions.** Even though each group may have its own recorder/reporter who will repeat the group's findings to the class as a whole, the leader may wish to pool the groups' collective response by writing it on the board. This synthesis can then open the discussion up for the whole class to try to reach consensus, particularly if the groups disagree in their interpretation of one particular issue. If the small groups have been working with several different discussion questions, this activity can give the rest of the class a chance to think about and respond to other questions that may interest them.

We are including some discussion questions on the following page. Feel free to copy and distribute these questions to participants in your groups.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What are the main problems explored in Luis Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*? The author focuses on the unfortunate experiences of the Yuma 14 (or Wellton 26), but does he allude to any greater issues concerning immigration or border management? If you had to express the principle concern that should be taken from this book, what would it be?
2. Is illegal immigration bad? Why? The book provides some evidence to the contrary; what is it, and how do you respond to that evidence?
3. Does the recounting of this horrific event point to a classic "bad guy" scenario? If so, who is to blame? Mendez? The Border Patrol? The immigrants themselves? Discuss and make a case implicating the culpable party (or parties).
4. Now that you've started to consider some of the responsibility for the tragic death and suffering of the victims, think about what could have been done differently. What social conditions and local policies were in place that enabled the actions of the walkers and their "guides?" What can we say about Mendez's bosses, including Don Moi and Chespiro? Can the actions of these men or the social conditions faced by the characters in the book be altered in some way? What impact, if any, would that have?
5. Think about the role of unemployment/underemployment/low working wages in the tragedy described in the book. How does economic hardship drive the conflict, resulting in the events described in the text? Can a clear cause-and-effect relationship be seen in the book, or is the matter less clear cut than that? Explain.
6. Urrea goes into great detail to chronicle the background for each member of the Yuma 14. Why? What elements were involved in their initial decisions to immigrate under dangerous and unlawful conditions? Given the choices that each man encountered, how might you have reacted in his place?
7. Let's take this discussion to a national-political level. According to the book, how are the governments of the United States and Mexico involved in this catastrophe? Do you believe that they are generally complicit in the deaths of illegal immigrants, or was this just an isolated incident?
8. Pretend, for a minute, that you are Vicente Fox and George W. Bush. As a world leader during this event, how would you have reacted? What, if any, high-level policies would you have attempted to implement in order to prevent future similar occurrences? Now, pretend that you are Felipe Calderon and Barack Obama, the current presidents of Mexico and the U.S., respectively. What would you do, today?
9. Think about the style and tone of the book. Do you like the tone the author uses? In your opinion, does this book exhibit a journalistic writing style? Why or why not?
10. Urrea seems to present a complete appraisal of this scenario. What aspects of the story did you find especially impactful? Perhaps it was the individual descriptions of the victims, or the particular details of their journey, the moments of their rescue, the point-of-view of the Border Patrol, or even the physical description of the harsh desert environment. Which of these added most to the development of conflict? How?

## Other Resources:

As part of the first “One Book, One Community” project, Luis Alberto Urrea will visit Fayetteville in October.

Urrea will conduct two open meetings with groups of students, faculty, staff, and community members. These meetings will take place at 12:30 p.m. and at 2:00 p.m. on Thursday, October 15<sup>th</sup>. Each of these meetings will last an hour and fifteen minutes. Also on October 15<sup>th</sup>, Urrea will hold a public lecture at 7 p.m. in the Reynolds Center Auditorium. Finally, on the following afternoon, the Fayetteville Public Library will host a “Gathering of the Groups” luncheon from 12:00 to 2:00.

This is may be the first time the participants in your group have been given the opportunity to actually meet the author of a book they are currently reading; if your discussion group is meeting before the author’s visit, be sure they know about the presentations. If the discussion you are leading is meeting after Urrea’s visit, you might be able to incorporate their thoughts about the visit into your discussion.

On August 26<sup>th</sup>, the “Daily Headlines” of the University of Arkansas published an article about Urrea’s visit. This article includes a schedule of the different events Urrea will be attending, as well as a good overview of the different groups around the university and within the Fayetteville community that will be reading *The Devil’s Highway*. This article can be found at the following url: <http://dailyheadlines.uark.edu/15531.htm>.

A full description of the author-related events can be found at the “One Book, One Community” website: [http://www.uark.edu/~univinfo/One\\_Book/index.html](http://www.uark.edu/~univinfo/One_Book/index.html). This comprehensive website contains a lot of useful information, including links to resources for teaching about immigration and links to other Hispanic Heritage Month activities. The Latin American and Latino Studies Program also has a detailed schedule of events surrounding Urrea’s visit and other Hispanic Heritage Month activities: [http://www.uark.edu/depts/lastinfo/Urrea\\_calendar\\_of\\_events.pdf](http://www.uark.edu/depts/lastinfo/Urrea_calendar_of_events.pdf).

The community reading of this book is part of a larger observation of Hispanic Heritage Month. There will be many other, unrelated events on the university campus and throughout the community that celebrate different aspects of Hispanic heritage. These events might be a fun and interesting way for students to experience Hispanic culture firsthand. A complete schedule should be available soon through the University of Arkansas’s website.

Finding informative websites and articles about the book and the author might help you develop additional questions or strategies for your discussion section. One particularly good resource is Luis Alberto Urrea’s website, <http://www.luisurrea.com/books/books.php>. This website includes a complete list of Urrea’s other books and an author bio. Urrea also maintains a blog on his website, and this might be of interest to you or to the participants in your discussion section.

Interviews with the author can be found on the internet. Many of these interviews discuss *The Devil’s Highway*, but some of them focus on Urrea’s other work, as well. These interviews can provide interesting insight into Urrea’s writing process and his own personal feelings about the larger issues involved.

In addition to interviews, discussion questions and interpretations of the book can be found by googling the topic “*The Devil’s Highway*” or “*The Devil’s Highway* Discussion Questions.” A discussion section is also included in the back of *The Devil’s Highway*. As long as the student uses these sources to develop his or her own ideas, rather than assuming the “answers” that can be found on the internet are somehow the “right” answers, these may be a valuable resource for both you and your group members.

## Troubleshooting:

One good technique for preventing unpleasant or aggressive arguments in any discussion is simply to remind the participants to be respectful of each other and to establish some ground rules. This policy usually sets a good tone for the discussion right from the start. Sometimes, however, problems do occur.

### Lack of participation:

Suppose, for example, your discussion group seems to have no desire to discuss the book. This is a very common problem people encounter in leading any discussion; it seems most often to be rooted in a failure to have read the material or in shyness/fear of peer judgment from the participants.

If the students haven't read the literature, they are not going to be prepared to discuss the book, so providing some incentive for them might be useful. In a classroom setting, this can take the form of a quiz. In a voluntary discussion group in a dorm, presenting the discussion meeting as a place to go after reading the book in order to discuss the book rather than as a place to be taught about the book might help; after all, it is possible that they may think of the discussion group as a place to be lectured about the book without having to read the book. Therefore, letting them know in advance what to expect might help them better prepare.

Shy students are often much more willing to talk after they get to know the other people in their group. Sometimes they will start talking on their own, but other times, it can help to encourage them, either by having them introduce themselves to the group, or putting the students in smaller groups and letting them get acquainted on their own. Another technique is to simply let them talk among themselves for a couple of minutes, either by leaving the room or arriving a minute or two late. If more proactive measures are needed, you can ask them about something unrelated, such as a recent Razorback game, the weather, or the difficulties they experience finding a parking place on this end of campus. They are often more willing to talk about something informal, and this willingness can be a good icebreaker.

### "Texting," side conversations, and other impediments to the learning process:

As a group leader or instructor, you have to remember that one of your main roles is to create and sustain an environment suitable to comfortable learning. Some of the members will have a legitimate interest in the material, while others (at least at the start), will be distracted and disruptive.

Of course, actions such as texting or other cell phone uses are really unnecessary to the group discussion process and can dramatically change the level of participation from the students in the group, which can in turn change the mood or atmosphere of the group in a negative way. Asking them not to use their phones for the duration of the meeting will make them more able to fully pay attention to the discussion. This can even be included in the ground rules for the discussion.

Also, side conversations will inevitably occur, which might draw in other group members or slow the momentum of overall consensus building. Everyone should be reminded that each member has a right to learn and contribute without interference—as the leader, you should take constant care to keep the discussion on track.

### Dogmatism:

Dogmatism itself is an enemy to open discussion. Some students may have preexisting notions on the issue of illegal immigration. *The Devil's Highway* should open their minds and provide them with a friendly place to reexamine their beliefs and help them identify or develop reasons to support or even change those beliefs.

### Suppression of thought and expression:

Apart from those obvious intentions to hurt or offend other persons (or subvert the overall management of classroom learning), group members should be encouraged to speak their minds on the issues encountered in the group discussion. Some of the topics concerned with immigration are controversial and devoid of any one, correct solution. As such, fruitful conversations will depend on active group involvement and engaged contributions from all viable sides. This constructive presentation of opinions will allow for the use of persuasive and argumentative communication—something that will serve everyone well in the understanding of the text and the movement toward consensus. Above all, though, each member should be responsible and considerate of others.

### Tense or emotionally charged discussions:

One of the most obvious concerns we can have in discussing such a divisive issue as illegal immigration is that the argument can become too heated. For example, the participants might have a very emotional response to the book: perhaps the death of the immigrants will deeply sadden some students, which by itself can change the mood of the discussion. If some other group members come into the discussion with dogmatic, impersonal views that the immigrants “deserved” what happened to them, this might lead to some tension during the discussion.

This tension can be handled most often by allowing the students to work through the issue themselves while providing a safe, structured format, as long as they are mindful of the ground rules for the discussion. If they do seem to need slight redirection, there are a number of options you might try. Perhaps you could call on other students, or throw the question back out to the group as a whole. A different option might involve reminding everyone that there are no right answers, that you're just discussing possibilities.

In the event that a situation arises that seems to be escalating or turning violent, call the UAPD at 479-575-2222 or call 911. They will be best equipped to deal with a dangerous situation.

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