

# Guiding Principles for Classroom Discussion

While discussion can occur in all kinds of settings, formal and informal, the classroom affords educators the opportunity to approach discussion in a uniquely structured and intentional way. This is not to say that spontaneous or unstructured discussion is not valuable. Some of your best classroom discussions may be spontaneous.

However, with intention, preparation, and practice, educators can help students systematically build constructive discussion habits regardless of context.

Students often want to discuss thorny or controversial questions, and school is a place where this can happen effectively.

Here are some guiding principles you may want to consider within the context of classroom discussion.

## Build Community

Students will be more likely to contribute to a discussion if they feel like they are in a safe and comfortable environment. Use with activities that allow students to share their interests and backgrounds, and co-create a set of classroom norms.

## Let Students Lead

Teachers are often used to doing most of the talking in a classroom. Discussion can often look like a lighthouse, with the educator at the centre engaging sequentially with students, often the most vocal in the class. The best discussion occurs when students are engaging with each other, with the teacher acting as a facilitator.

## Embrace Structure

Student discussion can produce better outcomes when implemented with intention and structure. Using discussion protocols can help build conversations that are more equitable and ensure more voices are heard.

## Recognize Different Discussion Styles

Some students will be outgoing and chatty while others are reserved and quiet. Many will be somewhere in-between. Some students formulate their thoughts by talking, and others need to think for a bit first before they feel comfortable contributing. Taking into account these different discussion styles and using various discussion protocols will help you get the most out of these exchanges.

## Start Small

Students may initially feel more comfortable voicing their opinions in smaller groups. For any discussion, consider starting with groups of two or three before moving to larger or full class discussion. Consider trying different combinations with small groups, such as mixing reserved and outspoken students, or keeping students with similar discussion styles together. Both strategies have their pros and cons.

For more best practices and a description of different discussion protocols, please refer to CIVIX's *Constructive Discussions Guide* at [www.politalks.ca](http://www.politalks.ca)

# Establishing Classroom Norms

Creating classroom norms is one way to foster a sense of belonging among students and create a productive learning environment. A norms agreement helps establish guidelines about behaviour and expectations, enables students to feel safe expressing their opinions, and reduces instances of incivility.

Classroom norms that are meaningful to your students requires giving them ownership of what goes in it. Co-creation also helps students feel that their voices matter and encourages them to hold each other accountable when norms are violated.

Once established, it is helpful to review the agreement regularly to foster commitment and update it as needed.

Please use or adapt the activities below as you see fit. You will likely need to split up the activities over multiple days.

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## 1 Hopes and Concerns (20 minutes)

This starter activity allows students to reflect on their hopes and concerns for our classroom discussions for the new school year. It is designed to promote inclusivity and give students an opportunity to be heard.

- a) Distribute several sticky notes or pieces of paper to each student. Ask students to write down 3-4 hopes for the year. One idea per sticky note.

Prompts:

- What are my hopes for the school year?
- What do I hope for my classmates?
- What would I ask my classmates to do to help make the year better?

- b) Have students post their sticky notes on a chart paper titled OUR HOPES. Alternatively, you can collect the notes from each student so that their answers are completely confidential. Afterwards, review the responses as a class and organize the ideas so that similar ones are grouped together.

- c) Now, ask students to share their concerns or fears for the new school year. Ask students to write down 3-4 concerns for the year.

Prompts:

- What are my concerns for the school year?
- What makes me anxious or uncomfortable in the classroom?
- What would I like to avoid?

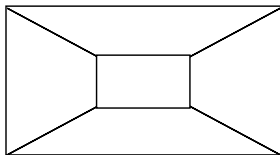
- d) Have students post their sticky notes on a chart paper titled OUR CONCERNS. Alternatively, you can collect the notes from each student so that their answers are completely confidential. Afterwards, review the responses as a class and organize the ideas so that similar ones are grouped together.

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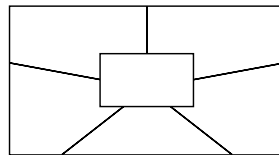
## 2 Understanding Community and Values (30 minutes)

A strong classroom community is one in which students feel valued, respected, and empowered to take an active role in their learning environment.

- a) Review the idea of community and sense of belonging in the classroom. A **classroom community** is a space where students come together as a class to work towards the common goal of learning.
- b) Discuss the concept of **values**. Review:
  - Values are things you believe are important in relation to how you live your life.
  - A community's shared values influence how individuals act and interact with community members.
  - Examples: appreciation, collaboration, compassion, courage, dedication, empathy, enthusiasm, friendliness, gratitude, honesty, inclusivity, integrity, kindness, open-mindedness, perseverance, positivity, reliability, respect, being supportive.
- c) Through a 'Placemat' activity, have students propose which values they believe are important for their classroom community. This cooperative learning strategy allows students to individually think about, record, and share their ideas in groups and then reach a consensus on the most important values.
  - Divide students into four or five. You can provide each group with one large sheet of paper divided into sections (one for each student and a centre block for the final group list). Alternatively, the activity could be conducted with an online app, such as Google Docs or Jamboard.
  - Ask students to write down their proposed five values in their individual space. Consider providing students with a list.
  - Provide time for each student to share their recorded responses with the rest of their group without discussion from the other students.
  - Next, have each group decide, collectively, on the five most important values and record them in the centre of the placemat — it is essential that all group members agree with the group list. Each group should also be prepared to share the reasons behind their choices.



Four person group



Five person group

- d) Review each group's list as a class. Afterwards, create an agreed upon class list with 6 to 8 values.

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## 3 Co-creating Norms (45 minutes)

Once students have understood the purpose of establishing classroom norms, you can give them the opportunity to co-create norms to align with the classroom values developed in Activity 2.

- a) Review the concept of norms. **Classroom norms** inform us of our responsibilities to the community and the ways in which we are expected to behave towards each other.
- b) Ask students to discuss the following questions using a Think-Pair-Share protocol.
  - Why is it important to have a shared understanding of a set of norms and expectations in the classroom?
  - What could happen if we did not have a set of classroom norms?
  - Should students be part of establishing classroom norms or should the teacher provide a list? Why?

- c) Divide students into groups and provide each with a Bristol board or chart paper. Assign each group one value and ask them come up with a few norms or behaviours that represent the value. Encourage students to make connections to Activity 1 and their hopes and concerns.

Prompt: What does (value) look like in the classroom?

Students can write out their value, a list of norms and any images associated with the value to create a poster.

Examples:

### **Empathy**

- Avoid judgement, remember everyone comes from different circumstances
- Ask questions with curiosity
- If you say something that offends someone, apologize, even if the hurt was not intended

### **Respect**

- Raise our hands before speaking
- Listen actively (e.g., be attentive, check your body language)
- Everyone has the right to pass (from answering a question)

### **Inclusivity**

- Give everyone the opportunity to speak or share their ideas
- Interact and build friendships with all your classmates

### **Gratitude**

- If someone shares an idea or opinion that helps your own learning, say thank you

- d) Post each group's poster around the classroom or in the hallway. Organize a Gallery Walk so each group can travel around to review each group's responses and add their own ideas or suggestions on the poster directly or on sticky notes.

- e) Review the posters and norms together as a class and develop a consolidated list of norms. You can keep them linked to the values or distinct. Some norms may relate to multiple values. Afterwards, consider posting the norms in a visible way so that you can point to them regularly.

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## **4 Assessment (10 minutes)**

Provide students with a 1-1-1 Exit card (page 11):

- What is one takeaway you have from learning about classroom values and norms?
- What is one norm that is easy for you?
- What is one norm that you know you have to work on?