

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 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 a 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.

Creating a Discussion-Friendly Classroom

Norms of Agreement

Creating a social contract or norms of agreement helps establish clear guidelines about behaviour and expectations, enables students to feel safe expressing their opinions, increases the range of voices heard in the classroom, and can help reduce instances of incivility.

Norms of agreement that are meaningful to your students require giving them ownership of what goes in it. Co-creating this agreement will help students feel that their voices matter and encourage them to hold each other accountable when norms are violated.

Once established, it is helpful to revisit the agreement in advance of and following your first few classroom discussions, and update it as needed. Afterwards, reviewing the agreement monthly is a good strategy to promote commitment.

Please use or adapt the activities below as you see fit. You may want to split up the activities over multiple days.

1 Reflection on Discussion: Hopes and Concerns (20-25 minutes)

This activity allows students to understand the purpose of discussion, reflect on past experiences, and identify positive and negative characteristics associated with classroom discussion. It is designed to promote a group commitment to creating an environment in which students feel comfortable and confident participating.

- a) Begin with an introductory conversation about discussion. Have students discuss in pairs for a few minutes and then discuss as a whole class.

Guiding questions:

- What is the goal of discussion?
- How can we learn from discussion?
- Why is discussion important?

- b) As a class, create a working definition for discussion based on responses from the previous step, or provide the following definition: “the act of exchanging ideas with others through focused conversation on a specific problem, question, or issue.” Draw attention to the fact that discussion is different from debate, where the focus is on winning an argument, or pointing out weaknesses in your opponent’s argument. The purpose of discussion is to exchange and deepen our understanding of a topic.

For an extended activity, ask students to work in pairs to complete a graphic organizer to further refine their understanding of discussion.

c) Next, collect student feedback related to their concerns about classroom discussion. Post the following prompts on chart paper or as headings on the board.

- Classroom discussion doesn't work very well when...
- A reason I might not want to speak in class is...

Provide students with a few sticky notes to write their ideas for each prompt privately. Ask students to add their sticky notes to the chart paper for each prompt. Afterwards, review the answers as a class, ensuring anonymity.

Alternatively, you could use Google Forms for this activity to ensure students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.

d) Repeat the process above using the following prompts related to effective classroom discussion:

- I feel comfortable participating in discussion when...
- What I like about a good class discussion is...

e) As a transition into the next part of the activity, let students know that the responses will provide a starting point for creating class norms.

2 Understand the Purpose of Norms (15 minutes)

a) Review the concept of norms. Classroom norms inform us of our responsibilities and how we are expected to behave towards each other.

Ask students to discuss the following questions using a Think-Pair-Share protocol.

- Why is it important to have a shared understanding of norms and expectations?
- What could happen if we did not have a set of norms?
- Should students be part of establishing classroom norms or should the teacher provide a list? Why?

b) Draw on student responses from Activity 1 (Reflection on Discussion) to anticipate scenarios or problem areas, and brainstorm ways in which students and/or the teacher can respond in those situations. Some examples might include:

- A teacher wants to hear the opinions of all students before determining the focus topic of an assignment
- A classmate says something other students consider offensive
- Some students dominate classroom discussions
- Some students may not feel comfortable speaking in front of others
- Students want to share ideas with their teacher to improve the classroom environment
- A student uses their phone during a peer's presentation

3 Co-Create Norms (35 minutes)

Once students have understood the purpose of establishing classroom norms, you can give them the opportunity to consider what they want these norms to include as individuals, in small groups, then as part of the class.

1. Through a 'Placemat' activity, have students propose norms they believe are important in the classroom. 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 norms.
 - a) Divide students into groups of 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 also be conducted with an online app, such as a Google Doc or Jamboard.
 - b) Ask students to individually write down their proposed norms in their allotted space (suggested minimum of 3 norms per student).
 - c) Provide time for each student to share their recorded responses with the rest of their group without discussion from the other students.
 - d) Next, have each group decide, collectively, on the five most important norms and record them in the centre of the placemat – it is essential that all group members agree with the group list.
2. As a class, create norms of agreement for the classroom. As each statement is agreed upon, include a discussion about the reasons for it and/or possible examples and characteristics. Consider using a T-Chart with the norms on the left and reasons on the right (e.g. left column: "Raise our hands when we speak," right column: "To ensure one person is speaking at a time, and to show respect").

Sample Norms

- Listen actively (e.g., be attentive, check your body language).
- Show empathy.
- Respond with curiosity instead of judgement.
- Make comments using "I" statements.
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Give everyone the opportunity to speak.
- Avoid making assumptions or generalizations about others.
- If you don't understand something, ask a question.
- Do not ask people to speak for their social/ethnic group.
- If someone shares an idea or opinion that helps your own learning, show appreciation.
- The right to pass.
- If you say something that offends someone, apologize, even if the offence was not intended.
- Always presume good intentions of those involved in the discussion.
- Strive for equitable participation from all members in the discussion.

4 Practice and reflection (25 minutes)

Practice these norms by having a discussion on a low-stakes topic, such as ‘cats are better than dogs.’ Start with the discussion in small groups and then move to a whole-class discussion.

Afterwards, debrief with the class:

- What went well and why?
- Did the class uphold the norms and expectations?
- Is there anything that can be improved?
- Revise the list as necessary

5 Assessment (10 minutes)

Provide students with a 1-1-1 Exit Card:

- One norm that was easy for you to practice
- One norm you know that you have to work on
- One topic you would like to discuss as a class in the future