

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. 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. Begin the year with activities that allow students to share their interests and backgrounds, and co-create a set of classroom norms (page 6).

De-centre Yourself

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

While interesting conversations may occur spontaneously in the classroom, student discussion can produce better outcomes when implemented with intention and structure, particularly at the beginning of the year. Using discussion protocols takes a bit more planning and effort but they can help build more equitable conversations and ensure more voices are heard.

Start Slow

When it comes to teaching discussion skills, don't feel like you have to jump into the deep end with your topics. Practicing with lower-stakes issues can help build skills and prepare for weightier discussions. Is Thor better than Captain Marvel? Should schools provide free lunches to students? Emotions can get high no matter the topic, but starting slow can help lay the foundation.

Recognize Different Discussion Approaches

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. Considering the different discussion styles of your students and using various discussion protocols will help you get the most out of these exchanges.

Go Small, Before Big

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