

Setting the Stage for Civil Discourse

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Photo by Tom Kates

In the midst of a divisive United States presidential election; ongoing issues related to race, justice, and policing; and a series of tragic acts of violence around the world, educators are rightly concerned about the lessons that today's middle and high school students might be absorbing about problem solving, communication, civility, and their ability to make a difference. The next generation of voters needs models for constructive public discourse to learn from; the strength of our democracy requires it. But such examples seem few and far between.

How we talk about things matters, but we are not always well equipped. How do we express our personal opinion while leaving room for someone else's viewpoint? How do we engage when we may be embarrassed to reveal that we don't have all the information? How can we seek out and listen to those who hold different beliefs from our own and

try to understand their points of view? How can we respectfully disagree? Young people need to be taught these skills, and school is a natural forum to do so.

Start with Self-Reflection

We educators have an essential role to play. Classrooms should be places

where students learn to exchange ideas, listen respectfully to different opinions and experiences, try out ideas and positions, and give—and get—constructive feedback without fear or intimidation. In order to create such an environment, we must start by striving to model constructive civil discourse ourselves. We have to be aware of our own strongly held beliefs, political positions, emotional responses, and biases, and be thoughtful about how they influence what we say and do when the headlines enter into the classroom.

We should remember that we are not neutral participants in the classroom, and take ownership of the lens that we bring to the classroom community. Students may have experiences that inform their responses that are similar to or different from our own.

Create a Safe and Reflective Classroom

We cannot predict what will happen in our communities, our countries, or around the world that might elicit difficult questions from or spark heated debates between students at school. But we can better prepare our students to respond thoughtfully and respectfully together to such events by taking steps to cultivate a reflective classroom community throughout the school year.

A reflective classroom community is in many ways a microcosm of democracy—a place where explicit rules and

implicit norms protect everyone's right to speak; where different perspectives can be heard and valued; where members take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the group as a whole; and where each member has a stake and a voice in collective decisions. Once established, both we and our students will need to continue to nurture the reflective community on an ongoing basis through the ways that we participate and respond to each other.

We believe that a reflective, supportive classroom community is fostered by:

- Creating a sense of trust and openness
- Encouraging participants to speak and listen to each other
- Making space and time for silent reflection
- Offering multiple avenues for participation and learning
- Helping students appreciate the points of view, talents, and contributions of less vocal members

Even the way we use the physical space in a classroom matters. Some arrangements promote a reflective community better than others. When a whole-class discussion is going on, it is easier to talk to each other when participants can see the faces of fellow students. Arranging the furniture in a circle promotes a sense of community and can make a difference. Likewise, arranging chairs and desks in clusters for small-group work facilitates discussion. And then there's the wall space. Relevant pictures, posters, and student work can play a role in generating a thoughtful atmosphere.

More than anything, mutual respect must be the cornerstone of the classroom environment. Can students take risks? Will they be "shot down" or ridiculed by other students, or even by the teacher, for openly sharing their thoughts? How will the teacher handle it when one student personally insults or belittles another student? Will students

Creating a Class Contract

Here is a list of norms that have been used in Facing History classrooms:*

- Listen with respect. Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment.
- Make comments using "I" statements. ("I disagree with what you said. Here's what I think.")
- If you do not feel safe making a comment or asking a question, write the thought down. You can ask the teacher after class to help you find a safe way to share the idea.
- If someone offers an idea or asks a question that helps your own learning, say "thank you."
- If someone says something that hurts or offends you, do not attack the person. Acknowledge that the comment—not the person—hurt your feelings and explain why.
- Put-downs are never okay.
- If you don't understand something, ask a question.
- Think with your head and your heart.
- Share talking time—provide room for others to speak.
- Do not interrupt others while they are speaking.
- Write down thoughts, in a journal or notebook, if you don't have time to say them during class.
- Journal responses do not have to be shared publicly.

One way to help students develop a classroom contract is to have them envision what they would like to have happen during certain scenarios. Scenarios could be drawn from students' own experiences. They might include situations such as:

- When we have an idea or question we would like to share, we can ...
- When someone says something that we appreciate, we can ...
- When someone says something that might be confusing or offensive, we can ...
- To make sure all students have the opportunity to participate in a class discussion, we can ...
- If we read or watch something that makes us feel sad or angry, we can ...
- To show respect for the ideas of others, we can ...

To initiate the classroom contract, students can participate in a celebratory signing ceremony. Students can sign their own copies or a large copy that is posted in the room. Students may also make brief remarks about how they think the contract will help provide a safe, productive learning community.

*Excerpted from "Contracting" at www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/contracting



be respected and honored as thoughtful participants in a community of learners? A teacher's behavior in these situations sets the tone for the whole class.

We need to be explicit and put into practice our belief that a deep respect for each student is at the heart of our educational endeavor. Teachers can create the foundation for a safe community by jointly creating a classroom contract (see p. 273). But we also need to make clear that while we encourage the expression of different viewpoints and diverse voices, we will uphold a standard of civil discourse that keeps things safe for all participants. Given the tone of some public discourse in the press and social media, it is important to name when things cross the line, to create a safe community where teachers expect and maintain a level of kindness and decency from all students.

Develop a Classroom Contract

One way to help classroom communities establish shared norms is by discussing them openly through contracting. Some teachers already customarily create classroom contracts with their students at the start of each course. In classrooms that do not have contracts, it is a good idea to engage students in

creating one (see “Creating a Class Contract” on p. 273 for some sample rules).

Contracts typically include clearly defined rules or expectations for participation and consequences for those who do not fulfill their obligations as members of the learning community. Any contract created collaboratively by students and the teacher together should be consistent with the classroom rules already established by the teacher.

We should frequently remind students that, regardless of the classroom strategy we are using or the topic we are addressing, it is essential that their participation honors the contract they helped create and follows the classroom rules. In addition, it is an excellent idea to post the contract in a prominent location in the classroom. When students stray from the guidelines set forth in the contract, it is important to refer to the specific language in the contract and redirect them. When one student strays from the guidelines of the contract, other students might respond by citing the specific expectations listed in the contract.

Once the shared norms are established, teachers can provide students with the space needed to explore com-

plex and sensitive topics, through writing, facilitated discussion, and teaching strategies that integrate a variety of modes of expression.

Provide Opportunities for Student Reflection

Before engaging in small- or whole-group discussion, provide students with opportunities to formulate and process their ideas. Silence is one of the most powerful and underused tools in the classroom. Whether a teacher uses it to slow down his or her speech to emphasize a point, or adds an extended wait time after asking a question, silence can be invaluable. It creates space for thought and sends students the message that we trust them as thoughtful learners who need time to reflect.

Keeping a journal can provide that space for silent reflection and also help students develop their ability to critically examine their surroundings from multiple perspectives and make informed judgments about what they see and hear. Many students find that writing or drawing in a journal helps them process ideas, formulate questions, and retain information. Journals provide a safe, accessible space for students to share thoughts, feelings, and uncertainties, and a place where they can synthesize other viewpoints, information, and experiences.

Implement Effective Teaching Strategies

It is important to use teaching strategies that are particularly effective in facilitating discussions about difficult or sensitive topics, ones that create space for diverse viewpoints and encourage active listening and consideration of multiple perspectives. However, before introducing difficult topics in the classroom, we should note that teaching strategies alone will not produce thoughtful and productive class discussions. It is crucial that teachers carefully consider the questions, readings, or other materials they use to introduce and frame these activities, and how those introductory



materials connect to heated debates and partisan biases in current events.

Open-ended questions and resources that reflect the complexity and nuance often inherent in contemporary issues tend to lead to the most meaningful learning experiences for students. Questions and resources that lead to specific conclusions or provoke students' existing sensitivities or biases can be counterproductive. Teachers know their students best, and they should carefully preview any materials they will use for a class discussion to make sure they lend themselves to meaningful, civil dialogue.

The following teaching strategy, "Save the Last Word for Me," is one example of how teachers can effectively facilitate conversations about difficult topics, particularly if they have built a foundation of trust and safety within the classroom. 🌍

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Save the Last Word for Me

Rationale

This discussion strategy requires all students to participate as active speakers and listeners. Its clearly defined structure helps shy students share their ideas and ensures that frequent speakers practice being quiet. It is often used as a way to help students debrief a reading or film.

PROCEDURE

1. Preparation

Identify a reading or video excerpt that will serve as the catalyst for this activity.

2. Students read and respond

Have students read or view the selected text. Ask students to highlight a sentence or quote that particularly stood out for them and write each sentence on the front of an index card. On the back, they should write a few sentences explaining why they chose that quote—what it meant to them, reminded them of, etc. They may have connected it to something that happened to them in their own life, to a film or book they saw or read, or to something that happened in history or is happening in current events.

3. Sharing in small groups

Divide the students into groups of three, labeling one student A, one B, and the other C. Invite student A to read one of his/her chosen quotations and talk about when she chose it. Give the student a set amount of time, perhaps a minute, to speak. During that minute, Students B and C listen; they do not interrupt or interject. After the minute, Student B gets a chance to speak for one minute. She can either expand on Student A's thinking, say what questions it raised for her, provide a different idea, or challenge the thinking of Student A. When Student B talks, Students A and C listen. They do not interrupt or clarify. After Student B has a minute, Student C gets a turn to speak uninterrupted. Finally, Student A gets one minute to answer questions or respond to the other student's ideas. In this way, Student A gets the "last word."

The intent of this exercise is to create equity in a discussion, and for students to practice moments of listening without trying to immediately respond.

Each student should get a chance to start a round of conversation with the quote or phrase they pulled from the text and have the "last word." After each student has had a turn, it could be a good idea to open up the class to a larger, freeform discussion, in order to process all the structured discussions that the smaller groups had.

Additional Resources

Facing History has created a free, downloadable resource, "Fostering Civil Discourse: A Guide for Classroom Conversations," with additional information, resources, and teaching strategies to help teachers prepare for difficult conversations and foster civil discourse in their classrooms. Visit info.facinghistory.org/civil-discourse/sociald to download a copy.