

Teaching Discussion Expectations

“Discussion is a proxy for democracy itself. Discussions in democratic societies, especially if characterized by inclusion and widespread participation, are markers of...‘intrinsic equality’ – the fundamental assumption that the good of every human being is intrinsically equal to that of any other.” ~Diana Hess, Controversy in the Classroom

“There is in each of us a deep, powerful, and fundamental need to be seen and heard. We want to discover our own voice – and learn how to use it effectively.” ~Sam Chaltain, American Schools

Overview

To ensure successful and respectful student discussions, it is important that students are first taught procedures for appropriately conversing. In this activity, students will explore, develop, and practice effective ways to hold small group and class discussions.

Grades

6-8

Materials

- Overhead projector or data projector
- Questions and answers for 4 Corners, written on transparency or typed in a file that can be projected (see Step #3 under “Procedure” for sample questions.)
- Discussion Scenarios, attached
- Small Group & Class Discussion Expectations, example attached
- Chart paper & markers

Duration

At least 2 partial class periods should be allotted to teaching students how to appropriately have a discussion, including approximately 45 minutes on the first day the concept of discussion is introduced (see Day One of this activity) and around 20 minutes for review and follow-up in a future class period (see Day Two of this activity.) Teachers should provide time to revisit and reflect upon the procedure for discussions periodically though out the year, making sure to provide time for reflection after the first few times the class engages in whole class and small group discussions. (This can simply be asking students: “What did you do well with in terms of meeting discussion expectations? What can we improve upon for next time?”)

Teacher Preparation

Prior to class, label each corner of the room with a large number (1, 2, 3, and 4).

Procedure

Day 1

A “Physical Discussion”

1. Begin class by asking students to review the Community Expectations. This might be simply asking “What do you remember regarding expectations from our last class?”; reading through the expectations (see Carolina K-12’s “The Ideal Classroom Community Member: Establishing Expectations for Classroom Behavior”); or asking students to offer positive comments regarding which expectations they have been doing a good job with. Tell students that they are going to have a chance to continue practicing the expectations they have agreed upon, as well as learn new things about one another without even speaking, by participating in a game called “4 Corners.”

2. Prior to class, label each corner of the room with a large number (1, 2, 3, and 4). Tell students that you will project a question with 4 possible answers. Students should go to the corner of the room (Corner 1, Corner 2, Corner 3, or Corner 4) based on their answer. Point to the number labels hanging in the four corners of the room, so students know which corner coincides with which number. In addition to following Community Expectations, tell students they must also abide by these specific rules of the game:
 - You must remain silent throughout the game.
 - You must participate and make a decision for each question.
 - Be brave enough to answer for yourself; don't pick a corner based on where your friends go.
 - Remember, you are safe to express your opinions in this classroom community, and you will be respected regardless of your answer.
 - Be sure to move about the room carefully.

3. Once students understand how to play, project and read out loud questions with 4 possible answers. Questions should be fairly simple in nature and not require students to share anything too serious. The last few questions posed might be a bit more thought provoking in nature, but should not make students anxious about answering. Teachers should spend around 6-8 minutes posting questions. Example questions might include:
 - Where were you born?
 - 1...In this city
 - 2...In another North Carolina city
 - 3...In another state
 - 4...In another country
 - In your family, what is your birth order?
 - 1...Oldest
 - 2...Middle
 - 3...Youngest
 - 4...Only child
 - Which type of pet do you like best?
 - 1...Dog
 - 2...Cat
 - 3...Hamster
 - 4...Other or you don't like pets.
 - Which would you rather do?
 - 1...Watch TV or play video games
 - 2...Read
 - 3...Go out somewhere (mall or movies)
 - 4...Talk on the phone
 - In which area would you want to earn fame?
 - 1...Courageous act
 - 2...Athletic accomplishment
 - 3...Artistic creation (music, dance, drama, art...)
 4. Intellectual/medical/scientific breakthrough
 - What are your politics?
 - 1...Republican
 - 2...Democrat
 - 3...Independent
 - 4...Undecided or don't want to share
 - What is your favorite North Carolina college?
 - 1...UNC
 - 2...Duke
 - 3...NCSU

4...Other

- In the past, how have you felt about <insert your course name - i.e. math, science, social studies, language arts, etc.>
 - 1...Absolutely LOVED it!
 - 2...It was just “alright.”
 - 3...I had a really hard time with the subject.
 - 4...It was awful.
- Which do you hope to accomplish by the end of the year?
 - 1...Make A honor roll
 - 2...Make all A’s and B’s
 - 3...Make the sports team I am trying out for
 - 4...Graduate top of my class

- **Teacher Note:** After students have chosen their location based upon their answer, teachers may want to tell students to look around the room and notice similarities and differences. Is it often that they find themselves grouped with the same people over and over? Or, does who is standing in their various corners seem to vary each time?
 - **Optional Variations:** Following the same expectations and rules (i.e. silent participation, not following the opinions of friends, etc.), other formats for leading this activity include:
 - Teachers can create a list of statements that illicit an “agree” or “disagree” response from students. Label one side of the room with a large “Agree” sign and the other side with a “Disagree” sign. As the teacher reads each statement, students will choose the side that corresponds with their opinion.
 - Label the length of the room (or hall if additional space is needed) with the numbers 1-10, 10 being the strongly agree/like and 1 being strongly disagree/dislike. Pose various statements to students and allow them to place themselves along the line based on the depth of their agreement/disagreement with the statement, or the depth of their like/dislike of the subject matter described.
4. Once you have gone through your questions/statements, instruct students to return to their seats and reflect upon how they did during the game. Discuss:
- What did you do well with while playing the game? Did you follow instructions? Which Community Expectations did you exceed? (Allow students to offer positive feedback about themselves, then point out positive behaviors you witnessed. For example, “I was really impressed that even though all 28 of us were moving around the room at the same time, you were all careful to not bump in to each other and took turns moving about the room safely.”)
 - Was anything about that activity challenging? Did you find yourself wanting to respond out loud (laughing, speaking, asking follow-up questions of your classmates)? How did you stop yourself?
 - Are there any expectations you might need to improve upon? Explain.
 - When you heard a statement, did you choose how you physically responded based on your friends? Why do students sometimes silence their own opinions to be in agreement with their friends?
 - What did you notice about our class as a whole based on our answers? Who did you find that you had similarities with that you perhaps didn’t about before?

Class Discussions

5. Point out to students that they just expressed some facts about their lives, experiences, opinions, etc., respectfully and through movement. Since the activity was conducted in silence, there was no need to explain or defend responses and there was no opportunity to be criticized by others. Discuss with students how it is important that they also have time to verbally share thoughts and opinions in class through discussions. During discussions in small groups and with the entire class, students can hear other perspectives on the topic and learn from one another. Explain to students how being exposed to deep discussions and being able to contribute thoughts appropriately is also important not only for this class,

but is a crucial college and career skill. Let students know that just as they respected one another when physically sharing, the class must be equally respectful when having class and small group discussions.

6. Solicit some student feedback regarding discussion, noting their thoughts on chart paper:
 - What does a deep, meaningful, and successful discussion involve? (Write down student thoughts as they share.)
 - When we have verbal discussion, how do we ensure the discussion is successful?
 - Why is it important that we not feel nervous, defensive, disrespected, or not listened to during a class or small group discussion?
 - What is enjoyable or valuable about participating in discussions and hearing the opinions of your classmates?
7. Tell students that they will be working in groups to determine specific rules to govern discussions that take place in class. Give students the following instructions:
 - Assign the following roles in your group:
 - Reader
 - Note taker
 - Summarizer
 - Rule reporter
 - The reader should read the scenario out loud then lead the group in discussing the questions provided. The note taker should take notes on your group's thoughts.
 - Compose a rule for discussion based upon the scenario you read. Once you have brainstormed this and decided upon your final language, the note taker will write your rule on the sheet of chart paper provided.
 - The summarizer will read your scenario to the remainder of the class and summarize your group's conversation regarding the questions.
 - The rule reporter should read the rule you created to the class. The remainder of class will offer feedback on this rule, so be prepared that it might be edited.
8. Review expectations and procedures for group work, divide students in 6 groups, and let them know where in the room their group will meet. Give each group one of the attached scenarios, a piece of chart paper for their final rule, and a marker. Let groups know how long they will have to complete the activity (8-10 minutes should suffice) and circulate around the room as students work.
9. As each group finishes writing their rule, teachers should give it a quick review and instruct students to hang it on the wall. Once all rules are hung, allow each group to describe their scenario and their thoughts regarding the scenario as guided by the discussion questions. (Teachers may want to ask for additional thoughts and feedback regarding the scenarios from the remainder of class.) Then, have each group read aloud the rule they created based on the scenario. Allow the remainder of class to offer any suggestions they may have for improving the rule, noting these changes on the chart paper
10. Once all groups have reported back to the class and any edits have been made, congratulate the class on their hard work. Ask students to give all of the posted rules, as well as their initial brainstorm list, a final review and discuss:
 - Why are these expectations and rules that you have created important to follow when we are having class or small group discussions?
 - Why is learning the appropriate way to participate in a discussion an important skill not only for success in this class, but in college, your future career, and life in general?
 - At the beginning of class we all respectfully expressed our opinions silently and we witnessed how we have many differences between us in our preferences, views, likes and dislikes, etc. Why is it important to be able to express our thoughts out loud just as respectfully? Why must we ensure we listen to others, even if we don't agree with their opinion?

- What should we do if someone violates one of the expectations that we have agreed upon?

11. Let students know that you will be taking all of their comments and suggestions and compiling a list of “Small Group and Class Discussion Expectations” that you will provide them with the next time class meets (see the attached example.) While teachers will have their own list of expectations they know students need to adhere to, students will likely have noted these same ideas, or similar versions of such, in their group work. Thus, they will have more ownership over the expectations and will be more likely to follow them.

Day 2

Small Group and Class Discussion Expectations

12. Either at the start of class or right before addressing discussion expectations once more, ask students: “What do you remember from yesterday regarding discussions?”
13. Hand out a list of guidelines for group and class discussions (example attached) and have volunteers read each aloud. As students take turns reading, discuss each expectation and why it is important. Remind students that they had input on these and congratulate them on a job well done.
14. Once finished, solicit 5-6 student volunteers (ideally, these will be students who are outspoken and willing to speak in front of the class). Tell the student volunteers that you want them to illustrate for the class how to have a successful discussion. Have them arrange their desks in a circle in the front of the room and give them a topic they can easily discuss with not preparation. For example: Discuss things that your parents or younger siblings do that drive you *crazy*. Tell the remainder of the class to observe this discussion and note all of the positive behaviors they see exhibited.
15. Once sufficient time has passed, stop the volunteers and discuss as a class:
- Evaluate this group’s discussion. How did they do following the expectations you designed? What specific expectations did they do most well following?
 - Is there anything this group could have improved upon in terms of following expectations?
 - Of all of the discussion expectations, which do you think is most important and why? Which do you think might be most challenging to meet and why?
16. At this point, teachers can continue into content of the day’s lesson, which might include the entire class participating in their first class discussion. (It is recommended that students have the opportunity to practice discussion fairly soon after introducing the expectations.) Teachers may also choose to again devote the beginning of a Day 3 class to discussion expectations. Following the same procedure as above (beginning with a review of each expectation) ask a group of student volunteers to illustrate an unsuccessful discussion in front of the class. Again, have students debrief what they witness. Teachers should always have students review the expectations before any discussion ensues, particularly during the first weeks of school.

Discussion Scenarios

1. A group of students is discussing a math problem as part of their group assignment. Jeff thinks he's finally figured out the solution and excitedly tells his group mates that the answer is 26. As he walks them through how he came to this conclusion, Shondra interrupts him. "Are you an idiot? You forgot to carry the remainder, Jeff. How dumb can you be?"

Discuss:

- Characterize Shondra's response to Jeff. How do you think her response made Jeff feel?
- Based on what Shondra said to Jeff, what could happen next in this scene?
- How could Shondra have let Jeff know his answer was incorrect in a more respectful way?
- Compose a rule that addresses critiquing an idea, comment, or answer rather than the person offering it.



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2. Jose, Kelley, Maurice, and Paul are having a small group discussion based on a Newsweek article the class just read. As Kelley is sharing her opinion regarding the article, Jose and Maurice are turned towards her, looking at her and nodding as she speaks. Paul however has his head down on his desk and is looking out the window. In the middle of one of Kelley's sentences, Paul yawns.

- Do you think Paul is listening to Kelley? Why or why not?
- How do you think Paul's body language and yawn made Kelley feel? If Kelley was nervous about expressing her opinion, how might Paul's reaction have affected her?
- What improvements could Paul make so that Kelley feels respected and heard?
- Compose a rule that addresses active listening.



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3. During history class, the entire class gets really involved in a discussion regarding whether or not Christopher Columbus deserves credit for discovering the "New World." Jeb raises his hand and explains to the class that Columbus absolutely deserves the credit, since he was the first person to take the voyage and report back successfully regarding his discovery. Katlin then raises her hand and begins to explain how she disagrees with Jeb. She is unable to finish her comment however, because Raul interrupts her when he calls out that if anyone deserves credit, it's the Native Americans who were already living there.

- How would you characterize the students in this scene?
- How do you think Katlin felt when Raul interrupted her?
- How would this discussion be affected if all of the students began calling out whatever thoughts popped into their minds?
- Compose a rule that addresses speaking one at a time.



4. The entire class is having a discussion about the artist Monet during art. Ashley comments that she believes Monet's use of pastel colors is what made his nature paintings such a big hit. Several other students offer their opinion, when Jason decides to comment on Monet's use of pastels also. He says, "I think the pinks and blues in particular attracted people to his work. Just like that girl over there said earlier – what's her face over there– she mentioned the pastels, and I agree."

- Jason might have been agreeing Ashley's comment, but how do you think she felt when he disregarded her name?
- Why is it important to address one another by name and ensure we pronounce one another's names correctly?
- Compose a rule that addresses using each other's names during discussion.



5. During a discussion about terrorism, Jasmine was explaining that she believes the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center were motivated by religious beliefs. "I think that the terrorists who flew the planes into the WTC and the Pentagon really believed they would go to heaven for what they did..." However, before she could finish her explanation, Ricardo became very offended and cut her off. "I can't believe you are saying that all people who are religious are terrorists," he yelled. "I go to church every Sunday but you don't see me bombing a building!"

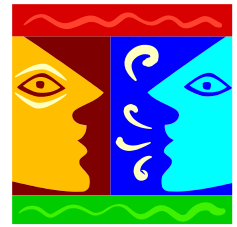
- In what way did Ricardo misinterpret what Jasmine was saying?
- What better choice could Ricardo have made to address what Jasmine was saying, rather than cutting her off and jumping to conclusions?
- Write down a question Ricardo could have asked Jasmine to clarify her point:
- Compose a rule that addresses listening carefully and asking clarifying questions to ensure you understand a classmate's point.



6. During a math class assignment, students were discussing the state of the economy in small groups. Tristine was sharing that her father, a single dad, lost his job over a year ago. Because he had not been able to find another job and his unemployment benefits had ran out, they were relying on food stamps to help them purchase groceries. As she finished sharing, Drew asked, "Isn't your dad embarrassed about being a lazy, welfare bum? There is no way my dad would ever take public assistance. We'd just sell a few of our cars or our beach house in order to survive for awhile."

- What closed-minded assumptions did Drew make regarding Tristine's situation?
- How do you think Tristine felt when Drew made his comment?
- Compose a rule that addresses the importance of being open-minded and not judging people who are different than you.

Name: _____



Small Group and Class Discussion Expectations

1. Actively listen to others (look at the person speaking, nod for support, look interested, etc.)
2. Remain open-minded and do not judge others who are different than you. Respect other's opinions and be willing to consider perspectives that differ from your own.
3. Speak one at a time without interrupting each other.
4. Do not blurt out or talk off topic.
5. Address one another using names and refer to comments others have made.
 - "I agree with Tyrone, and I'd like to add..."
 - "Brianna and Ashley said..."
 - "I'd like to go back to the point that Courtney made earlier..."
6. It is OK to DISAGREE...Just do so respectfully. Never yell at or insult another participant. Critique the idea – NOT the person.
 - "LaTonya, I hear what you are saying, but I disagree. I think that..."
 - "I see where you are coming from Jessica, but I have a different thought..."
7. Back up your ideas with FACTS. For example, when we are discussing a text, refer back to it. This makes your comment stronger.
 - "Here in the second line of the Declaration of Independence, it says 'All men are created equal' ...that is why I believe we all have the same rights..."
8. Give everyone a chance to contribute and encourage others to voice their opinions.
9. Pose your own questions to the group and ask classmates to further explain their comments:
 - "Shane, you said you agree with President Bush's policy on the war. Can you tell me why?"
 - "Did anyone else in the class think that Amari should have run away sooner in the novel?"
10. Everything you have to say is valued, so if you don't get to express your thought, write it down...we can come back to it when time permits.
11. I WILL call on you when your hand is not raised during class discussions, not to embarrass you, but to get you involved. When you do not have an answer, you may say "I think I need some help with that", or "Could you please come back to me while I think". You cannot say, "I don't know" or "I don't get it".
12. Please, never leave upset. If something has bothered you during the discussion, let's talk about it and get things resolved.

****During *Socratic Seminars*, all of the above discussion guidelines will apply, but you are not required to raise your hand.**