

# Classroom Discourse as Civil Discourse

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**With the help of these instructional strategies, educators can teach students to turn controversy into conversation.**

One look at social media, talk shows, or the comment sections of online articles reveals an uncomfortable truth: Few people are able to exercise civility as they exercise their right to free speech. Personal attacks and inflammatory language are the norm. Potentially healthy, invigorating debate quickly devolves into shouting matches and emotional accusations. John Dewey's (1899) observation, "There's all the difference in the world between having something to say, and having to say something," has never been more evident.

That the *adults* in our society struggle to engage in—and model—productive dispute does not bode well for younger citizens. For most children, school is the first place where they encounter unfamiliar perspectives and viewpoints. Whose job is it to teach students how to engage in challenging conversations, rather than retreat from them? Who should show students the difference between mudslinging and measured debate, or what it means to voice without venting? Although it "takes a village" to show the next generation the "dos and don'ts," teachers have considerable power—and responsibility—to use the classroom as a place to model and practice civil discourse.

## Acquiring the Skills of Civility

Preschool and kindergarten teachers are often very intentional about showing students how to talk to and interact with one another. As students get older, this kind of explicit instruction can fall by the wayside or feel like an "add-on." It's easy to assume that "the kids should be able to do that by now." Coupled with the ever-present pressure to cover "real" content, giving lessons on civility seems far less important than what's on the state assessment.

However, if civility is an acquired habit in a democracy, as opposed to an inherent one, it must be cultivated and integrated into every subject and grade level in increasingly sophisticated ways. Hallmarks of civil discourse such as empathy and discernment can be woven into lessons in a manner that supports the development of disciplinary content knowledge, general discussion skills, and analytical and critical thinking.

Toward achieving these goals, we offer three approaches—with classroom examples for each. These strategies have the potential to invite and harness passionate discussion; spark exploration of issues and topics from multiple perspectives; maintain a sense of equity, diplomacy, and order; require thoughtful, evidence-based opinions and arguments; and scaffold the language of respectful dialogue. Adopted as a way of classroom life, these efficient approaches can cultivate civility and support academic growth.

## Adopting Roles or "Lenses"

Sometimes the best way to help students investigate or discuss issues more objectively is to give them a specific role. Stepping back from their personal views as they read or discuss a topic can help students clearly consider the intricacies of an idea, without publicizing or risking their own beliefs. When accompanied by guiding prompts, such roles can direct investigation and focus discussion.

*Listening lenses* and *discussion duties* (Doubet & Hockett, 2017) are ideal tools for elementary-aged students and can be used in discussions about fiction, historical events, and mathematical thinking. Ms. Martinez<sup>1</sup> asked her 3rd graders to assume one of the following listening lenses as she read aloud from a novel:

- *Matchmaker*: Make connections to parts of the story.
- *Fortune Teller*: Predict what might happen next.
- *Detective*: Hunt for clues that help us figure out how to solve the "problem."
- *Defender*: Decide whether this character made a wise choice.

Ms. Martinez paused periodically in her reading to allow students to discuss their findings in "like-lens" pairs. After taking a few moments for independent reflection, students shared their thoughts with their partners, compared and contrasted these findings, and came to consensus on what to share with the class.

Then students moved to a full-group discussion and shared their thinking. Before this discussion, the class had developed criteria for what a democratic discussion would look like, sound like, and feel like. They devised discussion duties for students to take on (such as to stay on topic, listen respectfully, and ask for more details). The class displayed the duties prominently in the room along with soundbites that someone assuming each duty might say. Students referred to these prompts as they engaged in full discussion; they also directed one another to an appropriate prompt if classmates got stuck, off-track, or disrespectful. With the whole class monitoring the tenor of the discussion—rather than just the teacher—all students remained actively engaged.

*Analytical role cards* (Doubet & Hockett, 2015) accomplish similar goals for older students. Each student chooses or is assigned the role of director, lawyer, detective, philosopher, psychologist, or architect. Each role card provides both a lens for reading, analyzing, and discussing an issue, as well as directions for responsibilities during small-group discussion.

Ms. Conner used analytical role cards to help her high schoolers debrief scenes from *Lord of the Flies*. She assigned students to the four roles that made the most sense for the text and asked students to meet in like-role groups to gather evidence that aligned with their prompts:

- *Director*: Capture the scenes, passages, or lines of dialogue that shed light on power dynamics in the group of boys.
- *Philosopher*: Relate the events and characters to this saying: "People are inherently savage."
- *Detective*: Search for clues about which characters will survive and why.
- *Lawyer*: Gather evidence that either supports or refutes the claim that Ralph is a hero.

After recording key ideas and textual evidence in their like-role groups, the students moved into quads of mixed roles to present their findings and to debate the essential question, "Does power corrupt?" The debate became more about the intellectual task of defending with evidence than about airing personal opinions, especially because each role card also listed specific discussion roles on the backside. For example, directors kept the discussion moving, while philosophers prompted their groups to return to the essential question whenever they got off-track. The detectives encouraged group members to return to the text for support, and the lawyers made sure all sides of the issue were examined during the discussion.

## Examining Issues and Claims from Multiple Perspectives

In today's classrooms, some issues are sensitive or highly complex and call for multifaceted investigations. An adaptation of the *Six Thinking Hats* technique, which was originally developed to facilitate creative problem solving in

the business world (de Bono, 1999), prompts students to examine content to distinguish the varied aspects of a complex issue. When students metaphorically don a "thinking hat," they assume one of the following perspectives:

- *White Hat*: Compile and relate facts and figures related to this idea.
- *Red Hat*: Make an emotions-based case for and against this idea.
- *Yellow Hat*: Highlight the positive aspects of the idea.
- *Black Hat*: Probe the weaknesses in the idea.
- *Green Hat*: Generate new or creative ideas related to the idea.
- *Blue Hat*: Explore the relationships among the other hats.

Mr. Reed wanted his 7th graders to decide whether they thought the electoral college should be abolished or upheld. Most students based their opinions on what they heard their parents and other students say or on recent election results. Mr. Reed wanted students to develop informed positions that would hold steady against the stream of popular opinion—no matter what they decided. The teacher had introduced the Six Thinking Hats at the beginning of the year to examine the class norms they had developed. He asked students to assume each hat and then modeled and guided an evaluation of class rules through those frames of mind. He also provided sentence stems to help students maintain those perspectives (fig. 1).

**Figure 1. Thinking Hat Sentence Stems**

<p><b>White Hat (Factual)</b></p> <p>"One fact we do/don't know is ..."</p> <p>"The data/information show(s) that ..."</p> <p>"According to [the story, the author, the article] ..."</p> <p>"The evidence suggests ..."</p>	<p><b>Red Hat (Emotions)</b></p> <p>"I feel that ..."</p> <p>"I wonder how ___ would feel about ..."</p> <p>"At first glance, this seems ..."</p> <p>"My gut says ..."</p>	<p><b>Yellow Hat (Positives)</b></p> <p>"This is promising because ...!"</p> <p>"One of the strengths of this ..."</p> <p>"That would work because ..."</p> <p>"I like the idea of ..."</p>
<p><b>Black Hat (Weaknesses)</b></p> <p>"One problem I see is ..."</p> <p>"What about when/if ...?"</p> <p>"We should be careful about ..."</p> <p>"In real life ..."</p>	<p><b>Green Hat (Possibilities)</b></p> <p>"What about this idea ...?"</p> <p>"Here's a new thought ..."</p> <p>"I can imagine ..."</p> <p>"One possibility is ..."</p>	<p><b>Blue Hat (Zooming Out)</b></p> <p>"I see a connection between ..."</p> <p>"What ___ is saying makes sense with ..."</p> <p>"Overall, it seems like ..."</p> <p>"In the bigger picture ..."</p>

For the electoral college inquiry, Mr. Reed assigned each student to either the red, white, yellow, or black hats. Like-hat pairs did "prep work" for the discussion, conducting research, brainstorming, and bouncing ideas off one another. Next, students returned to the full group to discuss their findings, donning the blue hat as a means of concluding their discussion. After students decided where they stood on the issue, Mr. Reed asked them to put on their green hats to

propose a plan for a new system of electing the President of the United States. Students who supported keeping the system were asked to develop a fresh take on defending it. Mr. Reed was proud that his students could discuss such a contentious issue in a noncombative manner.

## Developing Support for Different Sides of a Controversial Issue

The strategies discussed thus far ask students to explore stories, ideas, and issues from multiple perspectives and come to their own conclusions. But the art of the "counter-claim" takes that skill a step further and requires students not only to see multiple sides of an issue, but also to be able to articulate them. *Debate team carousel* (Himmele & Himmele, 2011)—used alone or as a follow-up to other strategies—helps students adopt and argue from a perspective that might not reflect their own.

Sitting in groups of four, each student folds a piece of paper into four boxes (fig. 2). The teacher poses a dilemma or challenging issue (for instance, whether recycling should be mandatory for all city residents). The carousel begins:

**Figure 2. Debate Team Carousel Format**

1. Make a claim:	2. Support the claim in Box 1:
3. Argue against the claim in Boxes 1 and 2:	4. Bring the discussion to a satisfying close:
Adapted from <i>Total Participation Techniques: Making Every Student an Active Learner, 2nd Edition</i> , by Persida Himmele and William Himmele, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. © 2017 by ASCD. Used with permission.	

- In Box 1, students make a claim and provide reasons and evidence for it. They then pass their paper clockwise to a peer.
- In Box 2, each student writes something to make the argument in Box 1 stronger, regardless of whether they agree with what was said, using reasons and evidence. They then pass the paper clockwise to another peer.
- For Box 3, each student reads what is written in Boxes 1 and 2 and makes a counterclaim with supporting reasons and evidence. Students pass the paper again.
- For Box 4, each student reads what is written in Boxes 1, 2, and 3 and adds his or her "two cents."
- Students return the papers to the original owners and read their classmates' responses.

Debate team carousel can also be used as a lesson or unit launch. Health teacher Mr. Dove used the strategy to discover students' misconceptions about an upcoming unit. He posed a statement with which students had to both agree and disagree during the carousel: "A person's health is mostly influenced by genetics." He provided statement frames to help students stay constructive—and civil—in their responses (fig. 3). He followed up with a whole-class discussion in which students offered opposing viewpoints, continuing to use the constructive frames introduced within the carousel.

**Figure 3. Statement Frames to Promote Civil Debate**

Validating or Extending (Box 2)	Probing or Challenging (Box 3)	Summarizing or Closing (Box 4)
<p>"You made a good point when you said ..."</p> <p>"Am I correct in understanding that ...?"</p> <p>"I like that idea. In addition, ...."</p> <p>"I hadn't considered that ... It makes me wonder ..."</p>	<p>"Although ... may be true, it's also important to consider ..."</p> <p>"I see what you're saying, but I also think/wonder ..."</p> <p>"I understand that ... On the other hand ...."</p> <p>"What about this idea ...?"</p> <p>"How does that mesh with ...?"</p> <p>"Some people might say ..."</p>	<p>"It seems like we agree that ... but that we disagree that ..."</p> <p>"I/we need to better understand ..."</p> <p>"A next step might be ..."</p> <p>"The bottom line seems to be ..."</p> <p>"Taking all perspectives into consideration ..."</p>

The strategy ensured that all students "spoke" and all students "listened" within the written debate. Because they had the chance to formulate their thinking and phrasing during the activity, more students contributed during the follow-up discussion, transferring their ideas and language from the statement frames.

## A Worthy Investment

The strategies we've described allow students to explore perspectives and voice their opinions in constructive and academically focused ways. These strategies also harness passion while fostering compassion and empathy. They turn controversy into conversation and prepare students to use the language of civil disagreement in a democracy. To become habit, however, students must use these practices frequently and purposefully. Teachers who take time to deliberately teach and model civil discourse—and to provide time for regular rehearsal and reflection—will increase the likelihood that students will transfer the language and skills of civility to new situations, both in and out of the classroom. Mary Wortly Montagu (1997) said, "Civility costs nothing and buys everything." If our students will inspire and lead change in this century and beyond, then the time spent practicing informed civil discourse is a worthwhile investment.

### EL Online

For more about classroom discussions, see the online article "[Creating a Space for Open Dialogue](#)" by Yekaterina McKenney.

## References

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## Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> The teachers mentioned in this article are based on hypothetical scenarios. The examples described are based on our experiences working with educators on these strategies.

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