

3 Steps to Healthy Discourse in the Classroom

It is difficult to keep a cool head when discussing a heated topic, but respectful dialogues are the key to reaching mutual understanding. A healthy, civil discourse is a conversation in which there is a mutual airing of views without rancor. It is not a contest, but it is intended to promote greater understanding. Classroom teachers have a crucial role to play in helping students develop the skills of participating in civilized discussions. Here are 3 simple ways to help today's students learn to engage in productive, civil discourse in the classroom.

ONE: BEGIN WITH YOURSELF.

Modeling is the best way to teach civil discourse or any other positive value you want other people to emulate. Preparing to be an effective role model might require a bit of honest soul-searching. Here are some thoughts to consider:

- Can you remain calm when other people say things you dislike?
- Can you comfortably accept when students reach different conclusions on a controversial issue than you might have reached?
- Do you become emotional when you're having a hard time explaining why you think another person's views are wrong?
- Have you ever lashed out at another person during an argument?

If you struggle in any of these situations, imagine how difficult it is for students—with far less maturity—to handle themselves in a contentious discussion. This seems to be a skill in decline in our society, so the more practice students get with this, the better off our national discourse will be.

To foster healthy and productive dialogues in your classroom, you must make a firm philosophical commitment to the process. The goal is not for the class to reach any particular conclusions about a certain topic; the goal is to practice the skill of airing a variety of different views while behaving respectfully towards one another. A successful dialogue need not result in opinions being changed, but hopefully it will cause some students to consider fresh perspectives and realize that issues that seemed black-and-white may be more complex than they had previously thought.

The attitude required to facilitate civil dialogue is similar to what psychologist Carl Rogers calls “unconditional acceptance.” Students must know that you are on their side (even if you don't always agree with them,) and that you will not view them negatively if they say something that surprises you. They must believe that all views are welcome, and



that you will protect them from unfair attacks or humiliation if they “put themselves out there.” Unconditional acceptance means creating an environment where students are safe to be who they actually are and to say what they honestly think, without fear of facing ridicule, hostility, or harsh negative judgment. Unconditional acceptance also creates the conditions in which a student with rigid and extreme views could become willing to hear opposing viewpoints in a nonjudgmental, receptive attitude of openness. This is why it is so important.

Remember: the process of civil discourse is more important than the product (reaching the “right” conclusion). If students express and listen to a variety of views on a controversial topic, and they do so civilly, then the discourse is a big success, regardless of any intellectual conclusion reached.

TWO: CONTROL AND MONITOR YOUR CLASSROOM’S CLIMATE.

To foster a productive dialogue, the classroom climate must be “temperate.” This means it cannot be too “hot” or too “cold.” A “hot” climate leads to overly heated discussions, where students lose their tempers and become emotional, rather than rational. This can lead to personal attacks that are unproductive, disruptive, and hurtful. This can happen very quickly when dealing with immature students or a controversial topic. On the other hand, a classroom climate that is too “cool” can be too “chilly” for timid students to risk expressing unpopular or minority views. In this case, everyone will stick to mouthing safe platitudes with the hope of pleasing the teacher and staying out of trouble. This is also unproductive intellectually. Too hot or too cold, and nothing worthwhile is being learned in your classroom. Your goal is to keep it in the temperate zone!

Students have to trust you and your ability to keep the classroom environment safe for them to express themselves authentically before they will risk opening up and saying anything disputable.

State your dialogue expectations clearly from the start. You will need to set clear classroom discussion boundaries and then maintain them. This may require some discussion, but it is imperative that everyone knows the rules and can agree to adhere to them. Firm boundaries will make everyone feel safe and protected in a passionate dialogue. Unclear or shifting boundaries will leave everyone feeling guarded, uncomfortable, and anxious—including you!

The basic rule of healthy discourse is to be respectful and don’t make it personal. This means to stick to the issues. In a civil discussion, you use logic, persuasion, evidence, information and argumentation to make a point or defend a position, but you would not attack the other individual personally. (Incidentally, this is similar to the sort of “fair fighting” rules that a marriage counselor might teach an arguing couple, so learning these skills now can come in handy in relationships later in life, as well.) Each person in a civil discourse is entitled to his/her own opinions and is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity.

Being disrespectful is not engaging in civil discourse. Here are some disrespectful behaviors that are typically considered out of bounds: profanity, name-calling*,



derogatory terms (stupid, ignorant...), shouting or other attempts at intimidation, insulting body language (such as eye-rolling), insulting tone of voice (baby talk, speaking “down” to a person), open hostility, ridicule, biting sarcasm, any other disrespectful acts or ad hominem/ad feminem attacks, threats, or any other behavior that could get a person banned from a social media site.

Ultimately, the people involved in a discussion get to decide what is “civil” and what is not; some people can insult one another quite happily and remain friends. In a classroom environment, however, you will want to decide what your discussion rules are. You can post these rules on your wall or distribute them to students on a handout, for future reference.

Once you have determined and stated your classroom rules, you must commit to policing and enforcing them. (Incidentally, these rules could certainly be negotiated or altered according to agreement by the class. It is possible to be overly sensitive to causing offense, to the point that your classroom starts to feel like kindergarten and everyone is bored and feels infantilized. The key to avoiding this is to monitor student behavior and reactions and adjust accordingly. Likewise, responsible students will likely step forward to help you to police and enforce the rules, just as in any society.) Students will be watching very carefully to see if you mean what you say and they will test you to determine if the stated boundaries are going to be enforced. It is up to you to safeguard the environment so that civil dialogue can proceed on important topics worthy of discussion. Creating a supportive and safe environment means being vigilant and prepared to step in decisively when needed.

Students will test you, consciously or not, and those that are not testing you are watching and taking notes on how you respond when someone violates the rules of civil discourse.

THREE: START SMALL AND BUILD AS SKILLS DEVELOP

Like any other skill, the ability to engage in civil discourse requires practice. Don’t expect students to get it right the first time, and don’t expect them to be able to start with highly controversial topics right off the bat.

It is best to begin with activities that don’t feel personally threatening to individual students. This would be topics students are unlikely to take personally.

Watch Debates: One good way to start is by having students watch other people debate contentious topics in a peaceful fashion. This is an effective way of modeling the kind of discourse you are trying to promote. (You can find some of these at <http://www.intelligencesquaredus.org/>. Just be sure to preview the debate, first, so you can be sure it’s appropriate for high school viewing.) Then, the students can practice responding to the points made by the debaters and have a discussion about which points they agreed or disagreed with and why.

Silent, Private Journaling: Another similar strategy is to present students with a debatable statement and then have them either Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and state why they have chosen this position. This could be done



through silent journaling at first, to give students emotional space to contemplate their views. This strategy is respectful of student privacy and the sanctity of their thoughts and conscience. It is challenging for young people to “think out loud” in a pressured situation, so this activity can start to familiarize them with the practice of taking a position and defending it. If you want to move this activity to the next level, after students have stated which views they agree with, assign them the opposite view to defend. This forces the student to engage with and consider the opposing side and can help build empathy and reduce egocentrism. Some students may find this mildly threatening and fairly challenging, so be ready to provide plenty of support.

Take Public Positions: When students are accustomed to silent journaling, you could introduce an activity where the show of agreement or disagreement is public, either by a show of hands or by students arranging themselves in different locations in the room according to viewpoint. (Be mindful, however, that high school students can tend to gravitate to certain “safe” or popular positions, leaving other views undefended.) This could lead to a sharing of views and possible changing of minds, as people listen to different opinions. [The Institute for Civil Dialogue has created guidelines on how to facilitate such discussions; you can find more information about their process at <http://www.civil-dialogue.com/>. Their goal is to reacquaint the public with the notion that citizens “can have differing viewpoints or disagree without demonizing the opposition.”]

Open Classroom Debates: As you begin open debating, it is wise to begin with relatively easy, non-threatening topics, so students can become comfortable with this new, freewheeling format. It can also be a good idea to ask students to suggest possible topics or to ask for volunteers to participate in classroom debates, since some students may enjoy participating while others may prefer observing and commenting on debates. Both are valuable experiences.

A word on egos and peer pressure:

High school students tend to have very fragile egos, and are prone to confusing criticism of their positions with criticism of themselves. When feeling thus threatened or cornered (perhaps by a strong counter-argument), they are likely to lash out and attack in response.

Now, add in the public spectacle of the classroom discussion situation, with all the accompanying peer pressure and fear of ridicule, and you begin to understand why it is essential for the teacher to create a safe environment for the discussion to proceed. Be mindful that it is very threatening for a young person to state an unpopular viewpoint publicly in the current academic climate.

For this reason, another important way to safeguard the civility of your classroom is to maintain some balance. It is unfair to expect one or two students to defend a particular position if there are 30 classmates taking the opposing view. (A few bold, extroverted students may enjoy these odds, but most students will not.) It is best to structure discussions so that this situation does not occur, but if it somehow does, then you would want to provide extra support to those in the minority, or to students who become



confused or tongue-tied, so that they do not feel hopelessly outnumbered, cornered or threatened.

Another very important way to fend off potential trouble is to make sure that students are intellectually prepared to defend their positions. If each student has 3 pieces of evidence to back up their arguments, they will not feel overwhelmed when it is their turn to speak. Without this material, however, students are liable to resort to personal attacks to defend themselves.

Highly charged topics:

Certain topics are more likely to arouse emotion in students than others. (Race, Gender and Class tend to be the three “hottest” topics in academia, and since they deal with personal identity, don’t be surprised if students “personalize” these issues.) It is probably best not to begin practicing civil discourse with these topics, since many adults do not handle these discussions well. Any emotions unleashed will be magnified by their maturity level of the students and the fact that they are in the presence of peers. Don’t ramp up to hot, personal topics until you are confident that students have sufficient practice engaging respectfully. Just be sure to continually reinforce and monitor the rules, and adjust strategies if signs of trouble erupt. (See the discussion at the end of this report on “Managing the Emotional Temperature in your Classroom” for more on how to do this.) For instance, if things become too heated during a discussion of a particular topic, you can quickly downshift to silent journaling as a way to process and conclude the session. Don’t expect all high school or even college students to be able to manage large, freewheeling discussions that even adults struggle with without guidance and supervision.

You can, of course, refer to the Public Debate Forum for ideas on developmentally appropriate topics for high school students and official debating rules. You can find this information at <https://highschooldebate.org>.

It is also wise to provide students with safe ways of responding to another person’s position that might leave them feeling vulnerable or off guard. For example, no matter what point the other person makes, a student can always respond with a non-committal statement such as: “I see what you’re saying,” “Hmm, that’s interesting,” or “I never thought of that.”

Teach Argumentation and Logical/Rhetorical Fallacies: If your students are enjoying debating and open civil discourse, the next step would be to formally teach them the rules of competitive debates, argumentation, critical reasoning, logic, and rhetorical fallacies. Individual students who are highly motivated could also pursue this as an independent study activity.

THERE YOU HAVE IT!

Civil Discourse doesn’t happen on its own. You must decide to teach the skills and responsibilities of civil discourse in your classroom, and to monitoring the process to ensure that you are succeeding.



Civil Discourse is an ideal worth striving for, and with these guidelines in place, you will be able to improve your students' ability to engage with challenging and controversial material while remaining friends with one another.

*Name-calling can include words ending in -ist, or -phobe or beginning with anti - and similar critical terms. These are modern, politicized variations on name-calling but are still labels that can be considered hurtful and counterproductive when used to condemn or demonize a person or their ideas. They can diminish a person's dignity while stifling the ability to engage in open dialogue. All name-calling can be considered dehumanizing and an attempt to reduce and minimize a complex person to one diminished thing in order to then dismiss his/her argument without considering it. In a civil discussion, you attack the argument, never the person making it.

