

Fostering Civil Discourse

How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter?

How we talk about things matters. The philosopher Hannah Arendt said that the essence of being human is participating in discourse with others:

However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows. . . . We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human.¹

Yet we are not always equipped for these conversations. We may be able to share our views easily with those who agree with us, but how do we express our opinion while leaving room for someone else's viewpoint? How can we seek out or listen to those who hold different beliefs from our own? How can we ensure that our discussions are rooted in reliable information and that we treat each other with dignity and respect while discussing potentially contentious topics? Engaging in civil discourse means bringing your mind, heart, and conscience to reflective conversations on topics that matter, in ways that allow you to extend your understanding in dialogue with others. It does *not* mean prioritizing politeness or comfort over getting to the heart of the matter.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), 24–25.

Conversations that touch on emotional topics or spark controversy between students are often labeled “difficult,” but Derisa Grant asks in an *Inside Higher Ed* article, “what if these conversations are not actually difficult, but simply unpracticed?”² Students develop knowledge, skills, and informed civic responsibility when they are invited into conversations that are emotionally engaging, intellectually challenging, and relevant to their own lives. Creating a classroom environment for deep, democratic learning requires a thoughtful approach.

The ideas and tools in this guide are designed to help you prepare your students to engage in civil discourse, whether you are teaching in-person, remotely, or transitioning between the two.

1 Start with Yourself

To create a learning environment that can effectively support civil discourse, we must start by examining how our own strongly held beliefs, political positions, and emotional responses influence how we teach and interact with our students. Remember that you are not a neutral participant in your classroom, and take ownership of the lens that you bring to your class community. Your students, colleagues, and other community members may have identities and experiences that are similar to or different from yours that inform their reactions to the topics you discuss.

Use the following reflection questions and strategies to help you examine how your identity affects the way you facilitate reflective conversations with your students.

Reflection questions	Strategies
<p>1. Who am I? What factors make up my identity? How is my identity shaped by power and privilege?</p>	<p>Read one or more of these educators’ reflections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How I Faced My Identity When Teaching the Reconstruction Era • Teaching While Queer: One Teacher on Being Out in the Classroom • After Eric Garner: One School’s Courageous Conversation • A letter to the students of colour who were in my History classes <p>Then, using one of these personal essays as a model, write your own reflection.</p>
<p>2. What topics do I find challenging to talk about in class? Why do I find these topics challenging, and how might my perspective be different from those of my students and colleagues?</p>	<p>Choose a topic that you plan to facilitate a class discussion about with your class. Complete the following phrase: “I mostly feel _____ when discussing this topic because _____.”</p> <p>Then, consider the following: What are the reasons why you feel this way when discussing this topic? How might your emotional response to this topic be similar to or different from your students’ emotional responses? Could your emotional response make it challenging to facilitate a reflective conversation? How can you respect the perspectives participants bring to the conversation?</p>

² Derisa Grant, “On ‘Difficult’ Conversations,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 15, 2020.

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Build Community and Trust

We cannot predict what will happen in our communities, our countries, or around the world that might elicit strong emotional reactions from our students or spark heated debates between them. But we can better prepare our students to respond thoughtfully and respectfully together to such events by taking steps to nurture classroom community.

Prioritize relationships

The first step in preparing your class to engage in civil discourse is building relationships. Students will be more likely to engage, take risks, and support each other if they feel a sense of trust and belonging with their classmates and teacher.

One way to foster a strong class community is to give your students opportunities in the opening weeks of the school year to share aspects of their identities and experiences. Building relationships at the beginning of your time together—and then nurturing those relationships throughout the year—will help your students feel a sense of agency over their learning and belonging in your class.

KEY RESOURCE

Our [Back to School 2021](#) collection offers resources for supporting students' social-emotional skills and nurturing an open and supportive classroom community.

When Teaching Remotely

Consider how you can create a welcoming environment that prioritizes care, relationships, and community, regardless of how and where your students are learning. Our collection of [Activities for the First Days of School](#) can help you and your students:

1. Reorient students to school
2. Get to know each other and build relationships
3. Create classroom community

Co-create community norms

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.

One way to help classroom communities establish shared norms is through contracting. Contracting is the process of openly discussing with your students expectations about how classroom members will treat each other with dignity and respect. Some teachers

KEY RESOURCES

See our [Contracting](#) teaching strategy for guidance on how to discuss classroom norms with students and then draft and agree to a formal contract of behavior.

Read [Untitled Poem by Beth Strano](#) (located at the end of this guide) with your students and discuss how the poem impacts their thinking about the purpose of creating a class contract.

may already create classroom contracts with their students at the start of each course. If you do not typically do this, we recommend that you engage your students in co-creating one.

How will members of your learning community hold each other accountable to your norms?

When co-creating your contract, it is important to consider what speech or behaviors are outside the bounds of your class norms. Reflect:

What speech might *not* be within the bounds of reflective and respectful discourse within your class?

Your contract should make it clear that while you encourage the expression of different viewpoints and diverse voices, members of your community will hold each other accountable for what each of you says or does in class in order to maintain an environment that respects the dignity and humanity of all. Consider how you and your students can respond if someone in your class violates your norms or makes a comment with good intent that has a hurtful impact.

Human rights educator Loretta Ross writes about when and how teachers can call students in—or confront them about hurtful behavior with the goal of teaching rather than shaming:

It's a moment most educators will recognize: A student has said something biased or promoted a stereotype. There's a ripple through the classroom, but the speaker hasn't noticed. Students look to you expectantly, and you know the statement can't go unaddressed.

Most teachers look for opportunities to build a human rights culture and to counter hatred, bigotry, fear-mongering and intolerance. One way to do this, when students make a mistake, is to call them in rather than calling them out. Doing so prepares them for civic engagement by encouraging a sense of hope and possibility.³

For ideas on how to address problematic comments in the classroom, read the rest of Ross's article [Speaking Up Without Tearing Down](#), published in *Teaching Tolerance* magazine.

3 Loretta J. Ross, "Speaking Up without Tearing Down," *Teaching Tolerance Magazine*, Issue 61, Spring 2019.

When Teaching Remotely

Since remote learning deeply affects how students communicate and connect with their classmates and teacher, it is important to create a version of your class contract that addresses the different circumstances involved in remote learning, so that students feel engaged, valued, respected, and heard, whether you are meeting in-person or virtually. Our teaching strategy [Contracting for Remote Learning](#) offers guidance for educators who are preparing to teach remotely for at least part of the school year on creating two contracts with their classes, one for in-person learning and one for remote learning.

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Facilitate Reflective Conversations

Thoughtful conversations between students in both small and large groups are the core of civil discourse. When facilitating reflective conversations with your class, it is important to offer students multiple ways to participate and learn. Make sure students have time to reflect on topics individually, listen and share their thoughts in small groups, and engage in discussion with the whole class.

You know your students best and should carefully preview any materials you're considering using in a class discussion to make sure they lend themselves to meaningful dialogue. It is important to note that implementing specific teaching strategies alone will not produce thoughtful and meaningful class discussions. It is crucial to carefully consider the questions, readings, or other materials you use to introduce and frame these activities and how those introductory materials connect to heated debates and partisan biases in current events. Our [Current Events Teacher Checklist](#) can help you find reliable news sources and strategies for discussing current events with your class.

Provide opportunities for individual reflection

It is often helpful to provide students with time to gather their thoughts and articulate their ideas privately, before asking them to engage in small- or whole-group discussions. Silence is one of the most powerful and underused tools in the classroom. Whether a teacher uses it to slow down their speech to emphasize a point or to add 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 learners who need time to reflect.

As a tool for silent reflection, keeping a journal helps students develop their ability to critically examine new information and ideas. Many students find that writing or drawing in a journal helps them process ideas, formulate questions, and retain information. Journals make learning visible by providing a safe, accessible space for students to share

KEY RESOURCE

See our [Journals in a Facing History Classroom](#) teaching strategy for guidelines on using journals to support learning.

thoughts, feelings, and uncertainties. In this way, journals can help teachers better understand what their students know, what they are struggling to understand, and how their thinking has changed over time. Journals also help nurture classroom community and offer a way for you to build relationships with your students through reading and commenting on their journals. Frequent journal writing helps students become more fluent in expressing their ideas in writing or speech.

When Teaching Remotely

Journals can help students process their thoughts and feelings during the uncertainty of these times. Journaling can also be a helpful routine to maintain if students are moving between remote and in-person learning, and students may benefit from having added opportunities to reflect individually before participating in remote discussions. Read the tips included in our Teaching Idea [Student Journaling during Coronavirus](#), as well as our teaching strategy [Journals in a Remote Learning Environment](#), for guidance on how to organize student journals while teaching remotely.

Facilitate small-group discussions

Small-group discussions give students the opportunity to test out ideas and promote equity of voice in conversation with their classmates. For this reason, small-group work invites a wider range of perspectives and helps students build their confidence. The strategies listed in this section can also lead to a full-class discussion, but only after students have worked with a small group of peers.

KEY RESOURCES

Big Paper uses writing and silence as tools to help students explore a topic in-depth by writing out their responses to a stimulus, such as a quotation or historical document. This process slows down students' thinking and allows them to focus on the views of others.

Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn asks students to reflect on a topic in their journals, share their reflections in a small group, and then present their ideas to the whole class. This structured format helps students develop their discussion skills with a focus on strengthening their listening skills.

Save the Last Word for Me requires all students to participate as both active speakers and active listeners. Working in groups of three, students follow a pattern of sharing and discussing their responses to a text.

When Teaching Remotely

It can be helpful for students learning remotely to work with consistent groups so that they can build strong relationships with their group members. You may want to give students choice in whom they work with for this same reason.

The teaching strategies listed in the key resources box for this section include adaptations for remote settings. Before group work begins, give students instructions on how to use the strategy and clarify any questions they have about it. You may want to use a limited number of discussion strategies with your students during remote learning so that they feel confident in how to use them. If students will be meeting through video or voice calls without you, ask them to submit an **exit card** summarizing their discussion, as well as any questions or concerns they might have.

Facilitate full-class conversations

Class discussions give students the opportunity to co-create knowledge with their classmates, create space for diverse viewpoints, and encourage active listening and speaking skills. The teaching strategies linked in this section can be particularly effective in facilitating reflective conversations with your full class. To lead to the most meaningful learning experiences, use open-ended questions and resources that reflect the complexity and nuance often inherent in contemporary issues. Questions and resources that lead to specific conclusions or provoke students' existing sensitivities or biases can be counterproductive. Examples of open-ended questions include:

- What do you think about this text/topic?
- What are the most significant ideas in this text?
- What could a different perspective on this topic/text be?
- What assumptions do you think the author is making?

During conversations, take note of which students are participating most. Consider: Are students with certain identities more dominant in the discussion? How can you invite in a wider range of perspectives?

KEY RESOURCES

Graffiti Boards are a shared writing space (e.g., a large sheet of paper, a whiteboard, or a shared virtual platform such as Google Docs) where students record their comments and questions about a topic. The purpose of this strategy is to help students “hear” each other’s ideas.

Barometer helps students share their opinions by asking them to line up along a continuum based on their position on an issue. It is especially useful when you want to discuss an issue about which students have a wide range of opinions.

Wraparound asks students to share aloud a quick response to a prompt. It provides an efficient way for all students in a classroom to share their ideas about a question, topic, or text, revealing common themes and ideas in students’ thinking.

When Teaching Remotely

If you have the opportunity to meet synchronously with your full class, tell students what to expect from the conversation ahead of time so that they can prepare emotionally and intellectually. All of the teaching strategies listed in this section include adaptations for synchronous remote learning. It can be helpful to share reflection questions before your session and ask students to prepare responses to submit during the discussion—for example, a photo of a piece of art or passage from a journal entry. You can also invite students to share short responses or questions in your platform’s chat function, as a way to more fully engage all students on the call.

To organize an asynchronous conversation with your class, use a platform such as VoiceThread, which allows students to record their voices and comment on classmates’ posts. Share a prompt or question with students to structure their conversation or consider using a discussion strategy such as **Big Paper** that can be adapted to asynchronous learning.

4

After the Conversation

Emotional engagement is a fundamental aspect of the learning process, and reflective conversations are likely to elicit emotional responses—as well as new ideas and insights—from both you and your students. It is important to give your students space to process and learn from their feelings after a reflective conversation, for example, by debriefing as a class, returning to individual reflection, or in some cases, following up with specific students. Reserve the final ten minutes of the class for debriefing and reflecting.

Debrief as a class

At the end of a discussion, take time to reflect with your students on their experience of discussing the topic and what new insights they gained from the conversation. Your students can use this time to process their emotional responses to the conversation and provide you with valuable feedback about what went well and what could be improved.

When Teaching Remotely

When you are not in the same physical space, it can be more difficult to gauge your students’ reactions to a conversation, especially if you are not using video. This makes it even more important to invite student feedback at the end of a conversation. You may want to consider giving students multiple avenues to express their reactions. Some students may feel comfortable speaking live during a synchronous session, while some may prefer to submit their feedback in writing or talk to you individually.

Return to individual reflection

Students may appreciate the opportunity to return to silent reflection after engaging in civil discourse. Give students time to fill out an exit card with their new ideas and insights. Then, collect and review the cards to learn about how your students are thinking and feeling, what went well, and what could be improved for your next discussion. One potential prompt to include on an exit card is:

- I came in thinking/feeling . . .
- I'm leaving thinking/feeling . . .

KEY RESOURCE

See our [Exit Card](#) teaching strategy for guidance on how to use exit cards.

When Teaching Remotely

Create exit cards for remote learning using Google Forms, Google Docs, Padlet, or Flipgrid. When students are learning from home, exit cards can help teachers build in regular check-ins so students can share what they are feeling, raise technology issues, get support with time management, and connect privately with their teachers. It is important that students' ideas are valued and heard. Use their responses to inform future planning and one-on-one communication with students.

Follow up with specific students

Certain topics and conversations may raise emotions and questions for some students that they need help processing. Take note of how students react during your discussion and follow up individually with any students who seem distressed or defensive, for example. You may want to consider connecting a student to a mentor who shares some aspects of their identity for follow up conversations or to wellness staff at your school.

When Teaching Remotely

Because it can be difficult to monitor your students' emotional reactions to conversations when you're not together in person, it is important for you to build relationships with your students and for your students to know how and when they can reach out to you for support. You may want to consider setting up office hours—times when students can contact you through video or voice calls, through a chat, or by email.

Additional Resources to Foster Civil Discourse

Here are some additional resources to help you foster open, thoughtful, and respectful dialogue in your classroom. Please visit our website, [facinghistory.org](https://www.facinghistory.org), to learn more about the full range of services we offer for professional development and resources to support every stage of your career as an educator.

Teaching current events can be challenging: The news cycle moves quickly, stories are complex, and the issues can spark strong emotions. But engaging students with current events is a crucial part of their development as informed citizens in a democracy. Visit our [Current Events in Your Classroom](#) collection to find:

- Our [Current Events Teacher Checklist](#), which includes recommended news sources and strategies for navigating emotionally difficult or complex topics
- Teaching Ideas and Explainers for addressing breaking news and ongoing issues
- Tools and media strategies for teaching students about media literacy and current events

Bolster conversations about difficult societal issues by approaching them through the lens of history and literature. Not only can this help students better understand the roots and underlying nuances of these issues, but such an approach can also provide some distance to explore issues of human behavior in the past while allowing time for students to make connections to our world today. Facing History's core case studies integrate history and human behavior in order to help students think critically about the choices they make every day and about how they want to participate in the world. Examples include:

- [Choices in Little Rock](#)
- [The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy](#)
- [Holocaust and Human Behavior](#)
- [Teaching Mockingbird](#)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) named Facing History and Ourselves as one of only nine middle or high school SEL programs (among nearly 400 nominated) in the US that has a proven positive impact on students, such as increased empathy or more prosocial behavior. Among these few middle and high school programs which CASEL endorses in their guide, Facing History is just one of two which work at both the middle and high school level.

Untitled Poem by Beth Strano

There is no such thing as a “safe space” —

We exist in the real world.

We all carry scars and have caused wounds.

This space

seeks to turn down the volume of the world outside,

and amplify voices that have to fight to be heard elsewhere,

This space will not be perfect.

It will not always be what we wish it to be

But

It will be our space together,

and we will work on it side by side.¹

¹ Beth Strano, “Untitled,” posted to Facebook, June 25, 2021.