

## TEACHER'S GUIDE TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

<b>Build relationships with students</b>	<p>Build rapport with your students to encourage a classroom with open dialogue. Give your students opportunities to interact with you individually. This ensures you can check in with students to make sure they do not have any questions or feel uncomfortable in class (Hammond, 2015).</p> <p>For example, as students are entering or exiting class, speak to them by name and ask students questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● What did you do this weekend? Do you have any plans this weekend?</li><li>● What is your favorite class today?</li><li>● Tell me about your (game, job, extracurricular activity).</li></ul> <p>More resources for building relationships with students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <a href="#">Building Community With Student-Driven Conversations</a></li><li>● <a href="#">Growing Student Achievement through Teacher-Student Relationships</a></li><li>● <a href="#">Touch Point Pointers</a></li></ul>
<b>Establish ground rules</b>	<p>Create a set of guidelines with students for participating in difficult conversations. Refer to these guidelines if a conversation becomes tense.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● One person speaks at a time.</li><li>● Maintain respectful tones.</li><li>● Respect all points of views.</li><li>● Listen to understand.</li></ul> <p>Resource for creating guidelines with students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <a href="#">Video: Social Contracts Foster Community in the Classroom</a></li><li>● <a href="#">Video: How to Set the Stage for Challenging Classroom Discussions</a></li></ul>
<b>Let all students be heard</b>	<p>Provide multiple ways for students to contribute their perspectives and encourage the sharing of cultural perspectives without mandating it. When teaching a sensitive subject, it can help to provide time for students to jot down their thoughts or to express their views in other forms such as art. Provide a safe space for students to collect their thoughts on their own views before sharing with others. Then, consider pairing up students or putting students in small groups to discuss the topic before having a whole-class discussion. Students might feel more comfortable speaking to each other in small groups before sharing as a class.</p> <p>Strategies to help students collect and formulate their own views:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <a href="#">Chalk Talk</a></li><li>● <a href="#">Parking Lot</a></li><li>● <a href="#">Cognitive Comics</a></li><li>● <a href="#">Chain Notes</a></li></ul>

	<p>Strategies to help structure how students discuss their ideas with others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Agreement Circles</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Affinity Process</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Four Corners</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Magnetic Statements</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Say Something</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Yes Because</a></li> </ul> <p>Resource for encouraging all students to contribute:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Increasing Student Participation: Strategies to Build Opportunities for Teamwork, Collaboration, and Group Discussion in the Classroom</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Consider how sharing your personal views could shape the conversation</b></p>	<p>Be intentional about eliminating bias. Everyone has biases that influence how we talk and relate to students (Krasnoff, 16). Students may ask for your point of view. Decide whether sharing your opinion will further the conversation or shut it down.</p> <p>Consider these questions as you interact with your students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How can I refrain from saying comments that might minimize a student's perspective?</li> <li>● How can I remain neutral when speaking to students about controversial topics?</li> <li>● How can I provide a counterpoint or different perspective for students to consider multiple aspects of an issue?</li> </ul> <p>Resource for addressing bias:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Interrupting Bias: Calling Out vs. Calling In</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Guide the conversation</b></p>	<p>Maintain control as a facilitator, but do not control the conversation itself. Your role might include correcting misinformation, asking for clarification, and reviewing main points.</p> <p>As you facilitate conversations in your classroom, consider asking yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How can I guide the conversation but let students take the lead?</li> <li>● How can I ask students to provide evidence for their reasoning?</li> <li>● How can I provide students with open-ended questions that support deeper explanations and explorations of a topic?</li> </ul> <p>Strategies to help support student conversations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Claim, Evidence, Reasoning (CER)</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Debate Team Carousel</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Philosophical Chairs</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Chat Stations</a></li> </ul> <p>Resource for guiding discussions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics: Including Everyone</a></li> </ul>

**Expect the unexpected**

Conversations about controversial subjects can cause strong emotional responses. Have a plan for responding to students if the situation becomes tense or turns inappropriate.

Examples:

- Model the tone of voice you expect from students.
- Stop the conversation and tell students to take a few deep breaths. Refer back to established classroom ground rules. After a breather, tell students to listen to their conversation partners, striving to understand them, before replying with their own thoughts.
- Make the conversation about finding solutions (everyone versus the problem), not blaming one another (us versus them).

Resource for moderating discussion:

- [Getting Started with Managing Classroom Conflict](#)

*References*

Hammond, Z. L. (2015). Chapter 3. In *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2000). *Constructive controversy: The educative power of intellectual conflict*. *Change*, 32(1), 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091380009602706>

Krasnoff, B. (2016). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Guide to Evidence-Based Practices for Teaching All Students Equitably*. Region X Equity Assistance Center at Education Northwest.