

The Urgent Need for Free, Frequent Classroom Discussion



By Mike Schmoker

In these fraught, divisive times, K-12 educators have an opportunity to make a profound contribution to students' academic, intellectual, and civic maturity by giving civil, purposeful discussion the priority it deserves. With reading and writing, discussion is a co-equal leg of the tripod of literacy. By engaging in frequent discussions of challenging academic content, students could learn to *listen* (not just wait for their chance to *talk*), to offer their thoughts with an open mind, to fairly consider multiple perspectives, and to agree to respectfully disagree. They could carry these vital abilities with them into adulthood, which would prepare them to become more contributive citizens, better neighbors, and more productive employees. In fact, employers rank communication and interactional acumen among their highest priorities.¹

We've all seen how growing segments of the population, right and left, are refusing to look beyond their ideological horizons. Because of this, social psychologist and professor Jonathan Haidt is worried that young people growing up in these divided times will enter adulthood unable to communicate effectively and ami-

cably to solve urgent problems in our democracy.² Haidt attributes much of the current polarization to extremist social media and excessive screen time, and he urges us to turn away from our screens and talk with each other.

I wholeheartedly agree. But I also believe that K-12 educators could have a profound, even near-term impact on these problems by building text-based classroom discussion, in which every child participates, into every course. Public school teachers could equip a generation of students to become an articulate, fair-minded antidote to our society's current unwillingness, if not inability, to listen to each other. They could achieve this by infusing instruction with purposeful, civil, content-based argument grounded in reason and evidence. By doing so, they could even help right the ship of civic life.

In a moment, I'll describe how any teacher can conduct such discussions. I'll highlight schools where these discussions have led to both high engagement and significant academic gains. But before we get to *how*, we need a firm grounding in *why*.

The Case for Civil, Rational Argument in the Classroom

I often wish that teacher preparation programs did more to impart an appreciation of frequent classroom dialogue because of its indispensable contribution to education and to democratic self-governance. In the 19th century, the philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that human progress in every sphere hinges on our

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willingness to not only tolerate but *seek out and carefully consider* opposing arguments. As Haidt reminds us,

Mill said, “He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that,” and he urged us to seek out conflicting views “from persons who actually believe them.” People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you *make you smarter*, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain. People who try to silence or intimidate their critics *make themselves stupider*.³

Indoctrination and censorship—including self-censorship—are the enemies of progress in a self-governing society.

Eminent educators concur: “Free human dialogue,” wrote the late professor and culture critic Neil Postman, “lies at the heart of education.”⁴ For Gerald Graff, former president of the Modern Language Association, “*talk about* books and subjects is as important educationally as are the books and subjects themselves.”⁵ Not surprisingly, these views have been roundly validated. The University of Oregon’s David Conley conducted a landmark study on the skills and dispositions most essential to both college and career success. He found that tremendous advantages accrue to students who arrive at college able to participate effectively in discussions and to support their assertions with evidence from their reading assignments.⁶

I saw these educators’ wisdom many years ago while witnessing an extended dialogue in a high school chemistry class about the states of H₂O (liquid, solid, and gas) that was scheduled after students read about the concepts in their textbook. To deepen their understanding, students articulated aloud and speculated about the conditions by which each of these states were created and transformed. They referred regularly to the language and diagrams in the text as they interacted with one another—always politely, even where they disagreed. The teacher and his colleagues had been trained to keep them on track and to ensure that every student participated. All were deeply engaged as they explored the practical and scientific implications of their new knowledge. Several continued the discussion after the bell rang.

For all this, the greatest value of civil, logical, text-based discussion is civic and humanistic.

The “Lifeblood of Democracy”

“Genuine dialogue is the lifeblood of democracy, requiring an unending exchange—and testing—of ideas,”⁷ according to two Northwestern University professors, Gary Saul Morson and Morton Schapiro.

Such “genuine dialogue” is our best hedge against intolerance and extremism. But how can we cultivate it? Philosophy professor Jennifer Frey believes we must start with civility. She asserts:

When we teach civility to students, we must be clear that the basis of its demands is that we all deserve, as members of the learning community, equal respect and equal opportunities to succeed.... If true civility is promoted in our

schools, students will feel empowered to speak their minds because one fruit of civility is mutual trust between persons. When we respect one another in speech and deed, we come to trust one another as equals, and it is this trust that gives us the freedom to state our grievances, concerns, and objections without undue worry of retaliation or reproach. In a classroom where rules of civility are recognized and enforced, students can trust that they will be heard and understood and that disagreements will be handled respectfully.⁸

Having learned to exchange ideas with civility, students would be prepared to engage in what Haidt calls the “cure” for political entrenchment and civic enmity: frequent “interaction with people who don’t share your beliefs,” who will “confront you with counterevidence and counterargument.”⁹

The State of K–12 Discussion

Although research on classroom discussion is limited, it seems that most students don’t engage in nearly enough meaningful discussion across the curriculum:

Studies from the past several decades consistently show that students in most classrooms *rarely have the opportunity* to participate in an open, extended, and intellectually rigorous exchange of ideas, during which they get to formulate and defend their own opinions, and consider alternative propositions offered by their peers.¹⁰

This is especially unfortunate in light of a large-scale survey in which 83 percent of high school students identified “discussion and debate” as a way of learning that would excite them.¹¹

When I conduct demonstration lessons on text-based dialogue as a consultant, it immediately becomes apparent that most stu-

Human progress depends on our willingness to seek out and carefully consider opposing arguments.



dents have very limited experience with it. For many, this is the first time they've been *required to participate*, the first time they have received coaching and constructive feedback on speaking audibly enough for all to hear them, and the first time they have been gently coaxed to repeat a remark more clearly—or logically. They need such coaxing, from which they benefit immensely.

I try to be as gentle and affirming as possible when providing feedback. If students only utter a few words at low volume, I try to catch a word or two, repeat it, and tell them that I think they are

explain that view with reasons or examples. Almost invariably, these efforts result in clearer, more logical student thought.

In the course of these brief demonstrations, I often see students brighten as they learn to express themselves more effectively and as they are helped to see that their thoughts matter and are being taken seriously. I think this explains the positive feedback that observers often hear from students in the days after these discussions.

Without adequate opportunities to practice having civil academic discussions in K–12, many students will struggle in college, on the job, or in civic participation. Northwestern University professors Morson and Schapiro report that too many of their current students are often “remarkably confident in their views on nearly everything.” Therefore, “getting students to consider that they might just be wrong, to be comfortable articulating not only their opinions but willing to entertain the best arguments of those on the other side, is *the* challenge facing us today.”¹² To meet this challenge, the professors developed a course where structures ensure that students feel completely safe as they listen carefully to each other’s strongest arguments, voice their still-developing perspectives, and strive to learn from each other—and

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sometimes to modify or change their views.

on the right track and that we would like to hear more. So, could they please repeat their remark just a little louder, so all of us can hear? If they are looking down or are slumped in their seats (out of timidity or habit), I gently suggest that they sit up a little straighter in their chairs—not rigidly, but so that their voices project to the rest of the class. When students’ remarks are too brief or disjointed, I compliment them on the attempt and then ask them to try again, with a little more clarity or detail. I often suggest that they use sentence stems (which I write on the board) like “I think ... because...” Throughout, I remind them to cite evidence and then elaborate—to explain how an item in the text supports their response to the question or prompt. I sometimes ask if anyone has a different view or interpretation of the same item. If so, I help the next student to

A professor at Occidental College and one of his students also felt the need to increase dialogue among students. Together, they started “a club where students could discuss ideas openly and honestly, in a spirit of charity and good faith.” In the club, students are free from social pressures and classroom hierarchies; they are also expected to “relentlessly question beliefs—one’s own and those of others.”

The results have been gratifying: club discussions have promoted “not merely mutual respect but mutual affection.” Students report that open, logically argued disagreement “engenders deeper insight and understanding.” Best of all, it promotes “affective bonds of community” among participants.¹³

Versatile Focus Questions and Prompts for Text-Based Discussions

These questions and prompts are samples from chapters 4–7 of the second edition of *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*, which I published in 2018.

For fiction: These questions can be adapted for virtually any short story, novel, or book chapter.

- What is your opinion of key characters, and what do we learn from analyzing their words, actions, interactions, or development?
- What do we learn about human nature or about our own (or another) time, place, or culture?

For fiction or nonfiction: These prompts will require more adaptation to suit the content you are teaching, but they should offer some guidance.

- Compare and contrast key aspects or accomplishments of two or more people, phenomena, cultures, etc., such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.; Thomas Jefferson and John Adams; bodily systems (respiratory, cardiovascular, digestive); Aztec and Incan cultures.
- Evaluate/rank order relative reasons/causes; musical/artistic/historical epochs; scientific theories; nations or regions (e.g., causes of World War I; Romantic

and Impressionist periods; continental drift; quality of life in several countries in a region or continent).

- After analyzing pertinent information and data, argue for or against respective options for a policy or solution regarding an issue or problem (e.g., alternative energy sources, higher minimum wage, rank-order voting, universal healthcare).
- On a controversial topic, identify and discuss the strongest arguments from two or more writers with divergent perspectives on the topic.

—M. S.

Such courses should be the model for K–12 educators as they devote more time to intellectually oriented discussions, grounded in evidence and subject-area content. Consider New Dorp High School in Staten Island, New York, which accomplished a dramatic two-year turnaround after being marked for closure because of low achievement. The effort, which centered on teaching students expository and persuasive writing, included explicit instruction in how to read analytically, listen carefully, and then interact across the curriculum. To support respectful, effective interactions, the teachers learned to model the use of simple sentence stems. For instance, when commenting on each other’s remarks, students were taught to respond with one of the following:

- “I agree/disagree with ___ because ...”
- “I have a different opinion ...”
- “I have something to add ...”
- “Can you explain your answer?”¹⁴

Each discussion centered on one major focus question or prompt, such as Willy Loman’s state of mind and what might be contributing to it in the opening of *Death of a Salesman*.

Faculty discovered that such text-based questions motivated and lent purpose to students’ reading, refined their analytic thinking and expressive skills, and were excellent preparation for writing. During this period, New Dorp’s English state assessment scores soared, making the school an educational mecca.¹⁵

How Teachers Can Facilitate Rich, Civil Discussions

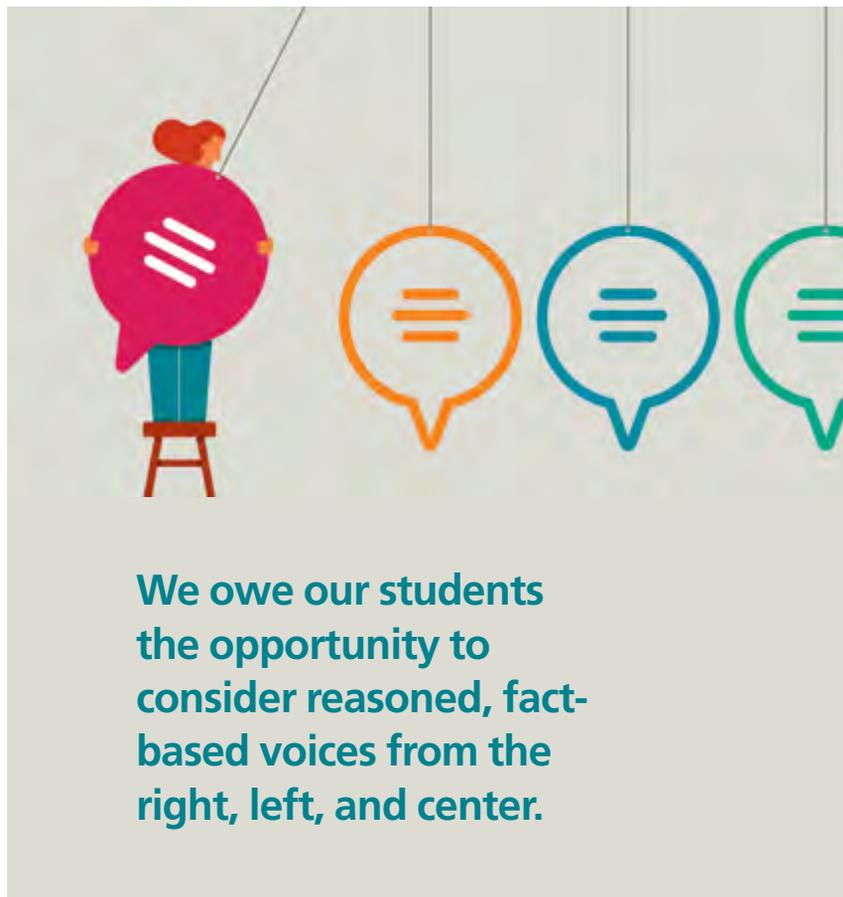
Like any instructional approach or strategy, facilitating rich discussions takes practice.* With each try, you’ll hone your craft. Here, I’m sharing tips I’ve learned through my own experience and by talking with educators who routinely make time for student dialogue.

Strong facilitation begins long before the first discussion. To set the stage in your classroom, you need ground rules to ensure the civil, open, fair-minded exchange of ideas and perspectives. These can be crafted by both students and teachers. One ground rule I always contribute is that participants’ claims are mere opinions unless they are supported with facts and evidence.

Once you think the class is ready to engage with open minds, consider selecting texts that allow them to practice using the new ground rules on an arresting but not highly charged curriculum topic. More contentious issues can come later; there is ample material in a solid curriculum that creates opportunities for productive discussion. In my demonstration lessons, I often use an article that contains arguments both for and against nuclear power.

Then, be sure to set aside time for a crucial step in preparation for such discussions: you must *carefully read the text or texts* that

*We should bear in mind that educative discussion and debate must be situated within a curriculum rich in literature, history, civics, economics, the sciences, and the arts. As a society, we have scanted these for decades—devaluing the liberal arts in higher education and focusing on reading and math test scores in K–12. For a discussion of the benefits of a rich curriculum, see “The Spark of Specifics” in the Winter 2010–2011 issue of *American Educator*: go.aft.org/x1u.



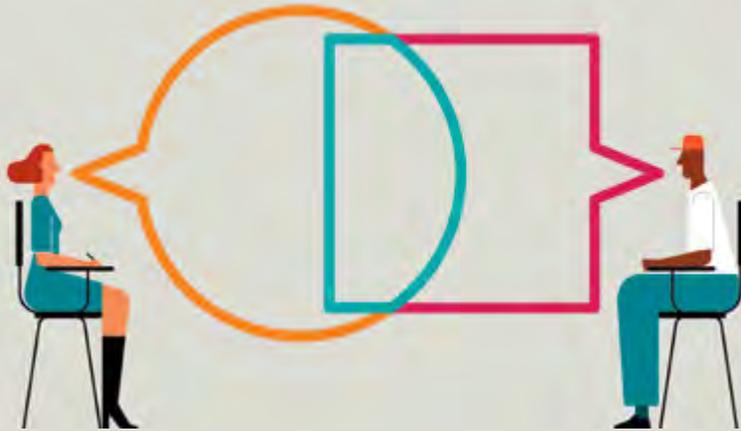
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will form the basis of discussion. This may be the most critical (and overlooked) aspect of lesson planning. Take notes as you try to predict which aspects of the texts may be most challenging for your students. And, when their discussion takes turns you did not predict—as it surely will—be prepared to respond with interest and a willingness to do more research; don’t feel like you have to have the answers. A discussion is about exchanging ideas, not providing answers or even winning others over.

To prepare your students to discuss the texts:

- Provide them with brief *background* for the topic and texts and remind them of the ground rules for discussions. Also, let them know that you will be cold-calling on students during the discussion and that full participation (including close listening) is necessary for a worthwhile discussion.
- Provide a substantive, higher-order *primary question or prompt* to focus their reading and create an arresting purpose for the discussion. For examples, see “Versatile Focus Questions and Prompts for Text-Based Discussions” on page 36.
- Teach them—carefully *model*—how to underline and *annotate or take notes* in response to the prompt. Be sure to explain, including by “thinking aloud,” how these relate to the focus question.
- Provide sentence stems or starters, such as “I think/agree/disagree ... because ...” that can facilitate discussion when students are making their early attempts to offer their thoughts in a logical, ordered fashion.
- Ask students to *share thoughts and interpretations in pairs* to rehearse for whole-class interaction.

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With this preparation, virtually every student will be primed for the ensuing discussion. Don't be surprised if those least apt to raise their hands are ready and willing to make solid contributions.

During the discussion:

- Cold-call liberally, but not exclusively, on pairs and individuals to ensure maximum participation. Punctuate cold-calling with opportunities for students to volunteer responses to each other's remarks.
- Direct students to turn toward, and give eye contact to, whoever is speaking.¹⁶
- Pause periodically to give students a moment to write about how a peer's remarks influenced their previous thinking.
- Listen carefully to ensure that students are accurately referencing the text as well as their peers' comments, reasoning logically, and speaking audibly—and always with utmost civility. When they aren't (as is often the case), thank them for their thoughts and then *gently, encouragingly* request that they repeat or revise their remarks to be just a little clearer, more logical, or more courteous.

After a discussion, you may want to have students write a reflection on the strongest arguments of those with whom they disagree, and then share those reflections with the class. This will enable them to better understand and give serious consideration to each other's thoughts—and perhaps to identify areas of agreement or where compromise is possible.

In my experience, offering such structure and coaching is typically well-received. I've seen how just a few such discussions enable students to make great strides toward becoming more effective, confident listeners and speakers.

When I conduct demonstration lessons using such processes, observers are often surprised at how much students enjoy them—and are shocked at how almost all students participate. They shouldn't be: it only makes sense that students will be ready, even eager, to share and be called on when first given a reasonable purpose to read, when they are taught how to analyze the text, and when they are given a few moments to test their fledgling thoughts on each other in pairs. With such preparation, cold-calling actually becomes something closer to what one friend calls “warm calling.”

Once your students have had a few civil, engaging discussions, they may be ready to take on contentious issues.* It is vital that you do your best to maintain a disciplined neutrality. This doesn't mean dignifying Holocaust or election deniers. But we owe our students the opportunity to consider reasoned, fact-based voices from the right, left, and center. Anything less is indoctrination, not education.¹⁷

There will be a learning curve, but practicing with such protocols as members of a professional learning community will accelerate your command of these processes.

Along those lines, we should celebrate the availability of rich, well-organized resources for fostering discussions like AllSides for Schools and ProCon.org. These remarkable, free websites provide a spectrum of news and views on major controversies. They provide both summaries and links to an abundance of literary, historical, scientific, and current topics and texts. They even provide discussion questions.

Perhaps our primary goal should be what Socrates advocated for—that we enter into dialogue not to win the argument but to learn from each other as we seek the truest, most rational, evidence-based conclusions and solutions. In a democracy, we should acknowledge the need for *compromise*: it is a pillar of healthy self-government.¹⁸ That is a high, necessary ideal, since real differences will always be with us.

Based on my classroom experiences, I believe that even a few years of regular, structured opportunities for genuine dialogue could leaven our discourse and—who knows?—help to produce a generation that is more objective, fair-minded, and willing to listen to all sides. It just might begin to alter the disposition and rational capacities of tens of millions of future voters, to make a significant contribution to comity, prosperity, and the health of our democracy. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2023/schmoker.

*Once students are skilled in grounding their views in facts and evidence, they may also benefit from opportunities to analyze and discuss popular (if often mindless) slogans and their impact. Such analyses, which could require them to prepare by finding and considering existing critiques, will help them develop what Ernest Hemingway dubbed a “crap detector”: the capacity to understand and thus arm themselves against slick, misleading language.