



Helping Educators Create the Context for Civil Discourse

The following suggestions are offered for educators wanting to build a classroom/school environment that is conducive to civil discourse. Additional references and supporting materials can be found in References.

Educators Get Ready

This is your opportunity to explore your own values and perspectives through self-reflection and awareness of your own strongly held beliefs, political positions, emotional responses, and even potential biases. You can learn how to set a constructive tone even in challenging times of strong opinions. Paying attention to how you feel when people disagree with you may give you insights into how to guide your students and colleagues towards problem-solving strategies that circumvent incivility.

Acknowledge That Civil Discourse is Not Easy.

Civil discourse can be accompanied by anxiety and discomfort as we struggle to understand viewpoints that contradict our own. You can explicitly teach students that we all occasionally fall short of living up to our values and our principles; we share a common humanity, and we are not perfect. Praise students who are trying to practice civil discourse.

Make Explicit the Values and Norms of Civil Discourse:

Civil Discourse values and norms (caring, compassion, kindness; humility; integrity; mutual respect; and the ability to engage honestly with others' perspectives) protect everyone's right to express diverse viewpoints. These values require all to take ownership for their ideas and demonstrate care for each other. Make these values a priority in the classroom by talking about them and displaying them on classroom walls. Provide students with examples of individuals from various cultures who exemplify these virtues. Educate students about the benefits of civil discourse to the individual, in the classroom, and in society and call attention to when you are using one of these values, thus modeling it for students. Show students the difference between integrity and traits such as pride, boasting, arrogance, humiliation, or vanity. Teach students the difference between humility and low self-esteem.

Establish Guidelines or "Rules for Discussions" Collaboratively with students.

If students are engaged in setting the rules, they are more likely to buy into them and conform to them. You can collaborate with students to create a "Civil Discourse Contract" that fosters a classroom climate that is safe, authentic, honest, and trusting - in other words, a safe space for discussing sensitive topics. Use the *Civil Discourse Self-Assessment* to build this contract. You also might include suggestions from Facing History and Ourselves' [Fostering Civil Discourse](#). These guidelines can be posted on classroom walls.

Set High Expectations for the Civil Discourse Behaviors:

Teach students what the behaviors on the *Civil Discourse Self-Assessment* mean and what these behaviors look like in practice. Acknowledge when you see them being enacted and draw attention to your own application of these behaviors to serve as a model for the students. Additionally, acknowledge instances when you may have failed to use them, to demonstrate that you know how challenging this work is.

Tie Civil Discourse to your Curriculum.

Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) has [teaching strategies](#) aimed at enhancing literacy skills, critical thinking, and a respectful classroom climate. Learning for Justice also has suggestions in [Teaching Civil Discourse in the Classroom](#). Also see the [Resources](#) for Teaching Civil Discourse.

Choose the Right Issues to Discuss.

There are many issues in state-approved curriculums that have no settled answers. These include many historical accounts, literary works, and scientific theories. It is vital to prepare students with prior knowledge related to the discussion topic so that they have background information to use while they

think about the issues. Teach students how evidence can strengthen an argument. The project, Teaching Into Civil Discourse, by Kirkwood Schools offers teachers a set of questions that can serve as a guide to considering issues and planning for instruction in Civil Discourse. They include:

- “Is the issue appropriate for your students, given their age, maturity, culture, knowledge, and interests?”
- Does the issue contribute to the attainment of district goals and objectives, consistent with the approved curriculum framework?
- Does the issue provide for the study of differing positions and opinions?
- Can the issue be presented impartially and objectively?
- Will there be an accurate, factual, and balanced presentation of materials, readily available for all students?
- Can credible sources be cited if materials are prepared for discussion or distribution?
- Is it necessary to discuss the rationale for studying the issue and/or the approach to instruction with a principal? If unsure, default to yes.
- Does information need to be shared with parents/guardians in advance or as a follow-up to the conversation?
- Should students/parents have the right to opt out of the conversation or pursue an alternative assignment?
- How might you anticipate and prepare for possible student comments or responses, particularly those that may be extreme or particularly biased? How might you prepare your students for these situations?
- How might you help students explore arguments on opposite sides of the issue, as well as identify and clarify possible prejudices and biases?”

Teach that Agreeing to Disagree is a Fundamental Life Skill.

Throughout their lives, students will inevitably encounter situations where they do not fully understand or agree with another person’s perspective. Teach students that mastering the skills of Civil Discourse can lay the foundation for these life skills.

Consider the Right Classroom Layout and Grouping for Discourse:

Arranging chairs or desks without a ‘front’ or ‘back’ will help all students feel included in the discussion. Assign students to groups in such a way that encourages diversity, encompassing aspects such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and more. This approach can facilitate rich and varied interactions.

Help Students Build Respectful Relationships:

Rimm-Kaufman (2021, p. 56) writes that four conditions are

necessary for students to learn to build relationships with people who differ from them: Students (1) are working on a common goal, (2) consider themselves to be equal in status to their team members, (3) recognize their shared interests, and (4) are in environments that actively promote and facilitate inter-group interactions.

Show you value diversity of viewpoints (Grüter & Meyer, 2014) and provide videos and books about the value of diversity (See Aboud, 2012 for review of literature).

Allow Sufficient Time:

It takes time to fully discuss complex issues. Ensure there is enough time to ‘initiate’ the discussion, allow all students to participate actively, and to summarize and debrief at the conclusion of the discussion.

Teach Communication Skills:

In addition to learning how to generate informed arguments, proponents of civil discourse (e.g., Israel, 2020; Funk & Funk, 1989) suggest that active listening is central to being engaged in civil discourse. As an educator, you should devote some time to helping students develop good listening skills.

When Civil Discourse Breaks Down:

If the guidelines for civil discourse are broken, teach students to pause, take a deep breath and then ask for evidence that supports the statements made. Show them how to relax, stay calm, and consider taking a break from the conversation. Indeed, instances of breakdowns present us with valuable opportunities to ask, “How do we continue to improve in our civil discourse?” In fact, *The Civil Discourse Self-Assessment for Educators* asks everyone who completes it to develop an action plan aimed at improving their Civil Discourse behaviors.