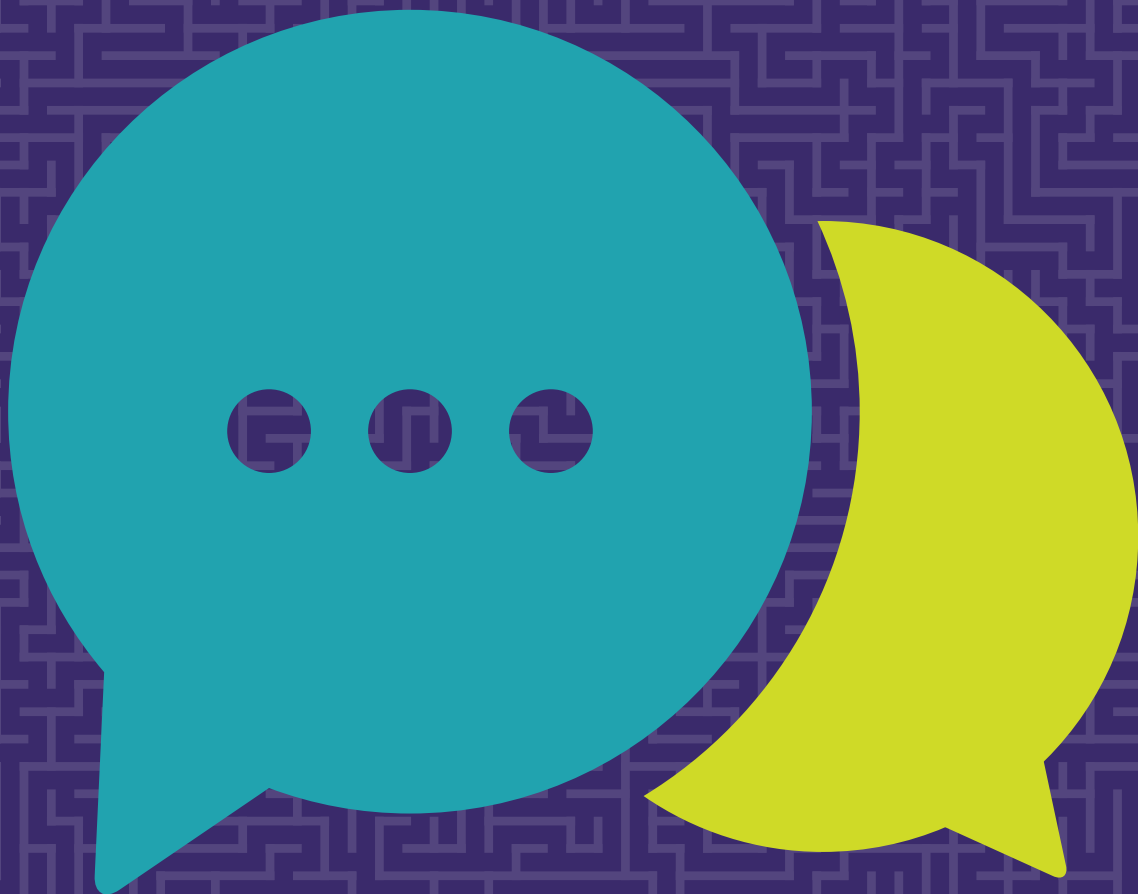


Fostering Civil Discourse

Difficult Classroom Conversations
in a Diverse Democracy



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Introduction

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

This guide contains tools and strategies to help classroom teachers hold conversations with their students on public policies, societal issues, controversial issues, and current events. Fostering civil discourse is an ongoing process, and we have designed these questions to offer structure and guidance for you so that it can feel less overwhelming and challenging. We encourage you to choose the sections of this guide and the strategies that feel right for your context as you consider the goals, desired outcomes, and structure of your classroom or program.

How we talk about issues 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 beliefs that are different from ours? 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?

Conversations that touch on emotional topics or spark controversy between students are often labeled “difficult”—but, as 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. In fact, research shows that when students engage in discussions of contemporary issues, they report being more engaged in school as well as a greater interest in politics, improved communication and critical thinking skills, increased civic knowledge, and a higher likelihood of participating in civic life as adults.³

The tools and strategies in this guide are designed to help students engage in difficult conversations on topics that matter to them, to their communities, and to our world. These conversations can focus on public policies, societal issues, controversial issues, and current events. Education researchers Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy note that classrooms should be places in which students engage in discussions about questions that ask, “How should we live together?” and with topics that help prepare young people for life in a community and in a democratic society.⁴

The term “civil discourse,” as used here, refers to a framework that allows us to show up with our mind, heart, and conscience and to be in dialogue and extend our understanding in connection with others. Political scientist Archon Fung writes:

It’s important to distinguish between two senses of civility. The first is a superficial kind of civility—being nice, refraining from insults or ad-hominem kinds of argument. The second is a deeper, more important (and older, for what that’s worth) sense of civility that is about behaving in ways that are necessary for cooperative projects such as schools and democratic societies to work well. This deeper sense of civility comes from the Latin *civilitas*—relating to citizens.⁵ Civility in this sense is behavior that is important for good citizenship.⁶

In order to ask students to listen and engage civilly, we have to work toward classrooms that are rooted in equity and have boundaries around speech that affirm the humanity of all while also leaving space for diverse perspectives. The term “civility” can be used to silence voices that challenge the status quo, but “civil discourse,” as we use it in this guide, does *not* mean prioritizing politeness or comfort over getting to the heart of an issue.

Understanding Yourself and Your Context

Before you introduce civil discourse on current or controversial issues to your classroom, take some time to consider your own background and approach, learn about state standards that might impact your teaching, coordinate with your administration, and consider how you could engage with caregivers and colleagues throughout the school year.

1. Start with Yourself

To create a learning environment that can effectively support civil discourse, we can start by examining how our own strongly held beliefs, political positions, and emotional responses influence the way we teach and interact with our students. Even as our goal as educators is to be objective and impartial, it is important to remember that you are not a fully neutral participant in your classroom and to 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>

Reflection Questions	Strategies
<p>2. How do my life experiences and beliefs influence my teaching? What topics do I find challenging to talk about in class? How do I handle conflict or challenging moments?</p>	<p>Choose a topic that you plan to facilitate a class discussion about. Complete the following phrase:</p> <p>“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 that students bring to the conversation?</p>



Space to Reflect:

2. Coordinate with Colleagues and Caregivers



KEY RESOURCE:

- [Teach Truth: Know Your Rights FAQ](#) (National Education Association)

Teaching about current or challenging topics can spark controversy among parents or within communities, and in some states, new laws affect how these topics can be addressed in classrooms.

Begin by letting your administrators know what your approach to teaching current or controversial issues will be, determining what school or district policies are in place that could affect the way you teach these topics, and discussing how the administration can support your approach. If you live in a state with restrictive legislation, you can use the state-by-state [Know Your Rights](#) handouts from the National Education Association to look up how your state laws do or do not impact your teaching.

Coordinating your approach with colleagues can also help strengthen your practice and ensure that your school is unified in the goals and approaches for these conversations. Civic education scholar Diana Hess recommends that teachers discuss with colleagues the topics and materials they plan to introduce in class, since hearing other perspectives and ideas can help with creating strong lessons as well as identifying any personal biases.⁷

Communication with your students' caregivers is also important. You can share your teaching goals with them at the beginning of the school year, as well as an explanation of how discussing current or controversial events advances both your teaching goals and state or national standards for your subject area. Keeping channels of communication open with caregivers throughout the school year can be helpful.

The European Association of History Educators, EuroClio, offers additional advice about how to handle situations in which caregivers express concerns about your approach to teaching about current or controversial events. EuroClio recommends that you listen openly, affirm these caregivers' values or any areas of agreement, offer any solutions you are able to implement, and remember to be confident in your expertise. It can also be helpful to set boundaries (such as limiting an initial conversation with caregivers to 20 minutes), exit a conversation that becomes adversarial, and reach out to your administration for support if needed. You can find more recommendations in EuroClio's guide [Dealing with Parents When Teaching Sensitive and Controversial Issues](#).

Reflect:

- What are one or two of your teaching goals this year that you think could be advanced by engaging in civil discourse? How does civil discourse support these goals?
- What school or state policies regulate your teaching of current or controversial events?
- How can you share your teaching philosophy, materials, and topics with caregivers?



Space to Reflect:

If you're interested in learning more, you can explore the following resource:

- [Dealing with Parents When Teaching Sensitive and Controversial Issues](#) (EuroClio)

Building Classroom Community and Routines

Students are able to engage most effectively in civil discourse when they feel a sense of community and trust with their teacher and classmates. This section offers ideas for how to build and maintain classroom community and how to practice the routines that make safe and brave conversations possible. Over time, you can incorporate the practices in this section that best fit your own classroom needs.

1. Consider Your Role



KEY RESOURCE:

- Video: [John Amaechi Discusses Identity](#)

A classroom community is in many ways a microcosm of democracy. It should be a place where explicit rules and democratic 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. The teacher is responsible for safeguarding the community and guiding conversations while at the same time ensuring that students have voice and agency. When hurtful comments, behavior, or conflicts arise, teachers also play a critical role in responding and in repairing the community.

What does it look like to foster safety and growth in a classroom?

Psychologist John Amaechi describes the close relationship between identity, the creation of a safe learning environment, and the potential for student learning:

Teachers have to create this emotional space where it's safe but challenging, where people can be themselves, where people can take chances and fail, where people can tell stories about them[selves] and reveal things about themselves, without risk of derision, without fear of being marginalized. Without safety, there is nothing. There is no learning.

To learn more about how students' safety serves as a foundation for growth and challenging learning, watch the video [John Amaechi Discusses Identity](#).

Similarly, the term “[brave space](#)” was first popularized by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens in 2013 as a way to expand beyond ideas of safe spaces.⁸ Arao and Clemens identify five main elements of a brave space within a classroom environment:

1. “Controversy with civility,” where varying opinions are accepted
2. “Owning intentions and impacts,” in which students acknowledge and discuss instances where a dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another person
3. “Challenge by choice,” where students have an option to step in and out of challenging conversations
4. “Respect,” where students show respect for one another’s basic personhood
5. “No attacks,” where students agree not to intentionally inflict harm on one another

These norms and suggestions can help you generate ideas for the type of classroom community you want to foster. It may be helpful to choose one or two concrete steps to focus on at a time and to remember that building a classroom community is an ongoing process.

What does it look like to create a democratic classroom?

Carla Marschall describes a democratic classroom as a place that “engages students in living democratically by promoting values such as inclusion, voice, representation, and participation.”⁹ By establishing democratic norms and routines, teachers can foster student-centered discussions in which students feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives, shaping conversations, and eventually taking the lead with time and scaffolding.

These are among the characteristics of a democratic classroom that Marschall highlights:

- High-trust relationships and shared power between teachers and students
- High degree of student voice and agency
- Respect for students’ ideas and contributions
- Intentional sharing of diverse perspectives, including those about challenging issues
- Use of dialogue and group decision-making, often through protocols
- Development of the whole self, including students’ critical consciousness

You can watch the video [Student Centered Civic Discussion & Deliberation](#) from Educating 4 Democracy to hear teachers and students in Chicago talk about their experiences with student-centered discussion.

Reflect:

- Consider your own experiences as a student or learner. When have you felt that you were in a space that was both safe and challenging? What went into creating that environment?
- What are one or two of your current classroom practices that help to create a safe and brave space for students that you would like to continue to implement? What are one or two classroom practices that you would like to add?



Space to Reflect:

If you're interested in learning more, you can explore the following resources:

- [Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces](#) (NASPA)
- [The Power of a Democratic Classroom](#) (Edutopia)
- Video: [Student Centered Civic Discussion & Deliberation](#) (Educating 4 Democracy)

2. Get to Know Your Students and Prioritize Relationships



KEY RESOURCE:

- [First Week of School Activities](#)

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. The following ideas can help you check in with your students and help your students connect informally with each other:

- Ask your students for clues about themselves, and then play a guess-the-student game by sharing the clues and guessing the student.
- Write icebreaker questions on a beach ball; when each student catches the ball, they answer the question facing them.
- Write different icebreaker questions on notecards. Students walk around the room, pair up, answer the questions on their cards, trade cards, and then find a new partner.
- Create a bingo card or scavenger hunt with clues that relate to your students and their interests.
- Play musical chairs with your students, and ask them to change chairs when the person in the middle shares something about themselves that is true for them too.
- Set aside time during class for students to write or share appreciations for each other or acts of kindness.
- Spend a few minutes each Friday celebrating students.

You can find more ideas for how to build and nurture community in your classroom in Facing History's [First Week of School Activities](#) resource collection.

Reflect:

- What strategies can you use to learn more about your students throughout the school year, including their interests, worries, and community contexts?
- What opportunities can you build in to help your students get to know each other better?



Space to Reflect:

3. Co-Create Community Norms



KEY RESOURCES:

- Teaching Strategy: [Contracting](#)
- [Untitled Poem by Beth Strano](#)
- [Speaking Up Without Tearing Down by Loretta J. Ross](#) (*Learning for Justice*)

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 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.

To create a class contract, you can use Facing History's [Contracting](#) teaching strategy. You can also read [Untitled Poem by Beth Strano](#) with your students, which invites them to think about brave spaces. Then ask students to consider how the poem impacts their thinking about the purpose of creating a class contract, any connections they can make between the poem and your class norms, and how they would define the concepts of "safe space" and "brave space."

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

“We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”

—Robert Jones Jr.

When co-creating your contract, it is important to consider what speech or behaviors are outside the bounds of your class norms. Read the above quote from writer and activist Robert Jones Jr. Then 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 intentions that has a hurtful impact.

Human rights educator Loretta Ross writes about when and how teachers can “call students in”—or confront them about the impact of their hurtful behavior, with the goal of teaching and learning—rather than “calling students out,” or publicly shaming them for their behavior or statements:

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.¹⁰

Loretta Ross suggests discussing the terms “calling in” and “calling out” with students and giving them opportunities to practice calling each other in during lower-stakes conversations. She shares the following sentence stems as helpful starters for call-in moments that both teachers and students can use:

“I need to stop you there because something you just said is not accurate.”

“I’m having a reaction to that comment. Let’s go back for a minute.”

“Do you think you would say that if someone from that group was with us in the room?”

“There’s some history behind that expression you just used that you might not know about.”

“In this class, we hold each other accountable. So we need to talk about why that joke isn’t funny.”¹¹

For more ideas on how to address problematic comments in the classroom, read the rest of Ross’s article “[Speaking Up Without Tearing Down](#),” published in the magazine *Learning for Justice* from the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In the next section, we discuss how you can establish routines in your classroom to give students opportunities to practice navigating challenging moments.

Reflect:

- What norms do I appreciate and value in my various communities?
- How can I co-create norms with my students and revisit them before navigating difficult conversations?
- How will we hold each other accountable to our norms so that we can sustain an environment that respects the dignity and humanity of all?



Space to Reflect:

If you’re interested in learning more, you can explore the following resource:

- Video: [Loretta J. Ross: Don’t Call People Out – Call Them In](#), TED Talk (3:23–9:25)

4. Establish Classroom Routines



KEY RESOURCES:

- [Establishing Opening and Closing Routines](#)
- [Straight A's for Facilitating Crucial Conversations](#)

Classroom routines can be a key component of a brave and reflective classroom community. Beginning and/or ending class with routines can help students experience school as a predictable, meaningful, and supportive part of their day. You can explore this [collection of opening and closing classroom routines](#) that will set a welcoming tone, allow students to connect with one another, and encourage goal-setting.

Routines are particularly valuable when integrating discussion into your classroom. Familiar conversation routines help students know what to expect and how to engage so that they can focus on deeper and more complex thinking about the topic at hand. This also helps students develop skills and capacities for difficult conversations by giving them opportunities to practice over time and with a variety of topics. The skills and capacities students can develop through classroom discussion routines—including sharing their points of view, hearing the perspectives of others, practicing empathy and perspective-taking, learning how to agree and disagree respectfully, developing their voice, and exercising their agency—are all essential to learning to live in a community and participate in a democracy.

Class conversations will, at times, spark controversy or potentially become emotionally challenging. Introduce and practice routines to help your class navigate those difficult moments. For example, you can share sentence stems such as the [Straight A's for Facilitating Crucial Conversations](#) and ask students to use these during discussions.

Reflect:

- What routines do I already use that support civil and brave classroom conversations?
- What are one or two new routines I can add to establish a welcoming tone and allow my students to connect with one another?
- What are one or two routines I can use to support my students best in difficult moments and conversations?



Space to Reflect:

Planning and Facilitating Class Discussions

Intentional planning and preparation can help students engage in civil discourse. This section offers guidance on how to choose a topic that will allow students to engage, establish background information to support the conversation, choose discussion strategies that meet your learning goals, and select strategies for meaningful reflection.

1. Select Topics and Craft Strong Discussion Questions



KEY RESOURCE:

- [Using Controversy as a Teaching Tool: An Interview with Diana Hess](#) (Kappan/PDK International)

A good discussion question for a class conversation is relevant to students' lives, creates space for multiple perspectives, and connects to the topics students are studying. Questions that already have an agreed-upon answer in our society, such as whether or not women should be allowed to vote, do not lend themselves to open discussion about different public policies or societal perspectives. As you prepare to bring critical issues into your classroom, it is important to consider what is open for discussion and what is not. The [open and settled framework](#) from civic education scholars Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy can serve as a tool for evaluating the kinds of topics, issues, and questions you can bring to your students that will create space for productive conversations.

- Open questions are those for which there are multiple and competing reasonable views. While we may have personal opinions about the best answer to these questions, students should be encouraged to decide the issue for themselves. Examples: Should the voting age in the US be lowered to 16? Should the federal minimum wage be raised to \$15/hour?
- Settled (or closed) questions are those that may have been open in the past but are no longer controversial and that usually contain an ethically or morally important component. Therefore, students should be taught that there is one

agreed-upon answer to the issue. Examples: Should women have the right to vote? Should minors under the age of 14 be allowed to work instead of attending school?¹²

Teachers may also choose to hold off on topics that they believe are legitimately open questions but are not suitable for their class at this time. Among the reasons why teachers might choose to avoid certain topics are that the issue is too controversial for productive engagement in their class; the issue impacts members of the community in personal ways; the topic is more suited to individual emotional reflection than an intellectual discussion; or the issue requires skills or background knowledge in order to productively engage that the class still needs to develop. Starting the school year with issues that are less challenging and building toward more complicated topics later in the year, once your classroom community is established and your students have developed a range of discussion skills, is also a helpful approach.

To help you identify topics you might select for classroom discussion, you can engage your colleagues in an activity where you reflect together and discuss the extent to which various topics would be categorized as “open,” “settled,” or “not yet” questions for discussion.¹³ You can use the following criteria to help you identify open questions for discussion:

- Does this question have multiple and competing answers, or am I leading students to a particular response? (An open question should create space for multiple perspectives.)
- Does this question now have a generally agreed-upon answer? (If a question has an agreed-upon answer, it is closed and not generative for discussion.)
- Could this question be harmful to the identities and lived experiences of students in my class if answered in an unproductive way? (Questions that require high levels of discussion skills and deep capacities for respectful and civil discourse should wait until students have developed these necessary skills.)
- Do colleagues or other people I know with a different lens see bias in this question? (Open questions should allow for multiple perspectives and not lead students to one perspective.)

In addition, it's helpful to draw on your knowledge of your students, the school community, and your state and regional context to identify authentic issues that are relevant to your students and your course goals and aims. By drawing on these authentic issues, teachers can craft compelling questions that help to cultivate inquiry, exploration, and further development of questions that students may ask in order to understand the complexities of human behavior and their social and civic worlds.

Reflect:

- Which colleagues or other members of your network might be interested in collaborating with you on crafting open discussion questions?
- What ideas do you have for open questions you could discuss with your class that relate to your curriculum and students' interests?



Space to Reflect:

2. Prepare Students for Discussion



KEY RESOURCES:

- [Teaching Current Events: Educator Guide](#)
- Teaching Strategy: [Journals](#)

You know your students best and should carefully preview any materials you're considering using in a class discussion to make sure they are high-quality, fair, and 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 also important that students have enough information and background knowledge to meaningfully engage on the issue, as well as space to process information and reflect.

Our [Teaching Current Events: Educator Guide](#) can help you find reliable news sources and strategies for discussing current events with your class. Other websites such as the [AllSides Media Bias Checker](#) and [Ad Fontes Interactive Media Bias Chart](#) can help you consider bias in news sources and where to find multiple perspectives across the political spectrum on the topics that you and your students are studying.

What kinds of media literacy skills and tools do students need to determine the reliability and accuracy of information they find?

As students search for information related to topics you discuss in the classroom, they will need media literacy tools to assess what they find and to consider the ethics of what they read and share. In our media landscape, we are flooded with news, which makes it hard to tell what information is accurate and reliable. An increasing number of youth and adults turn to social media to learn about key current events, which can make it even more difficult to determine the reliability or perspective of a news story. Even reliable news sources have political perspectives that affect their coverage. You can ask your students to consider and discuss the following:

- How do you learn about what's happening in your community, your country, and around the world?
- How do you get your news (from peers, parents, teachers, newspapers or magazines, online news sources, social media)?
- How do you feel about the news from the last few months? What stories have been particularly memorable?
- Do you think the news sources you follow reinforce what you already believe, or do they challenge you with a broader array of perspectives?

The media literacy organization [Project Look Sharp](#) offers additional questions that your students can use to help them evaluate sources they find in their research. To help your students explore media bias in recent news coverage of controversial events and think about what healthy news habits they want to adopt, you can use our mini-lesson [Where Do We Get Our News and Why Does It Matter?](#) You can also use our [How to Read the News Like a Fact Checker](#) mini-lesson, which trains students to use the technique of reading “laterally” to evaluate the credibility of the news they encounter on social media feeds or elsewhere online.

How can individual reflection help students prepare?

It is also 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 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. To find more ideas for integrating journals into your class, you can explore our [student journaling teaching strategy](#).

Reflect:

- How can I learn about my students' media habits and where they get their news?
- What has helped me in the past to find high-quality and fair materials that lend themselves to meaningful dialogue? What new strategies can I try?
- What are one to two media literacy strategies or tools I can integrate into my teaching that are aligned to my learning goals for my students?



Space to Reflect:

If you're interested in learning more, you can explore the following resources:

- [AllSides](#)
- [Ad Fontes Media](#)
- [Project Look Sharp](#) (Ithaca College)
- [Where Do We Get Our News and Why Does It Matter?](#)
- [How to Read the News Like a Fact Checker](#)

3. Identify Discussion Strategies Aligned to Your Goals



KEY RESOURCES:

- [Facing History's Teaching Strategies Collection](#)
- [Thinking Routines Toolbox](#) (Project Zero)
- Teaching Strategy: [Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn](#)
- Teaching Strategy: [Fishbowl](#)

Classroom discussion provides students with opportunities to practice civil discourse. Identifying a discussion strategy can help create a supportive structure and offer students multiple ways to participate and learn. First, consider what your learning goals are: Do you want your students to dive deeper into and learn more about an issue? What skills do you want your students to practice that will help foster civil discourse? Do you want them deliberate about what they might do to solve a problem in their community or society? The discussion strategy you choose can help you meet those learning goals. You can explore our [Teaching Strategies Collection](#) and [Project Zero's Thinking Routines Toolbox](#) to see what strategies align with your learning goals.

Next, consider how you will structure the conversation and leverage the discussion strategy you have chosen. Education researcher Paula McAvoy and colleagues advise teachers to focus on student-centered discussions where students are engaged and exchanging ideas with one another, as well as structured discussions that can help to ease fears of navigating political conversations in the classroom. By studying various approaches, they found that structured discussions equalize participation, reinforce norms of civility, and enable students to learn what their peers think. To learn more about their recommendations, you can read the article "[Discussing Politics in Polarized Times: How Structure Can Help](#)" from the journal *Social Education*.

When and how can I use small-group and large-group strategies to facilitate civil discourse?

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. Strategies such as [Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn](#) enable 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 in small groups before joining the whole class.

Whole-class discussions create space for diverse viewpoints, encourage active listening and speaking skills, and give students the opportunity to co-create knowledge with their classmates. For example, the [Fishbowl](#) strategy helps students practice being contributors and listeners in a group conversation and is useful when you need a structure for discussing controversial or difficult topics.

To lead to the most meaningful learning experiences, use open-ended prompts 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 already know about this topic?
- What do you think about this topic?
- What could a different perspective on this topic be?
- What assumptions do you think people might make about this topic?

During conversations, take note of which students are participating most. Consider: Are there students who are more dominant in the discussion? How can you invite in a wider range of perspectives? In addition, consider how you can amplify students' voices and agency in the context of classroom conversations. Engaging in difficult conversations and focusing on challenging issues in the news or our society can be disheartening and overwhelming for students if they do not have avenues to feel agency or act. You can find more strategies and resources by reading our resource [Foster Student Agency While Teaching Current Events](#).

Reflect:

- What structured, student-centered discussion strategies have worked well in your classroom in the past? What are one to two new strategies that you can incorporate?
- How can you foster your students' voices and agency so they feel hopeful and empowered?



Space to Reflect:

If you're interested in learning more, you can explore the following resources:

- [Discussing Politics in Polarized Times: How Structure Can Help](#) (*Social Education*)
- [Foster Student Agency While Teaching Current Events](#)

4. Reflect and Debrief



KEY RESOURCE:

- Teaching Strategy: [Exit Tickets](#)

After a discussion, it's helpful to give students time either individually, in small groups, or as a whole class to reflect on both the content and the process of the conversation. In terms of content, setting aside time and space for students to reflect on their new ideas and insights is a fundamental aspect of the learning process. It's also important for students to have the time and space to make connections between their identities and lived experiences and what you discussed. They can reflect on and learn from their feelings and emotional responses to the topic as well.

At the end of a conversation, also take time to debrief the process of the discussion itself with your students. Students can reflect on their experience with the structure or protocol you used, the skills they are building, and the quality of the exchange of ideas that occurred as a result of the process. Your students can also provide you with valuable feedback about what went well and what could be improved. In addition, this is a time when your class could reflect on the extent to which they were able to uphold your classroom norms and what more they can do to support civil and brave conversations moving forward. It's important to do this in a constructive way that is focused on learning and growing and not on accusing, finger pointing, or calling anyone out.

Students may also appreciate the opportunity to share their reflections directly with you after engaging in civil discourse. At the end of a class period, you can give students time to fill out an [exit ticket](#). One potential set of prompts to include on an exit ticket or card is:

I came in thinking/feeling . . .

I'm leaving thinking/feeling . . .

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 also want to consider connecting students with additional support staff at your school, such as their advisor, homeroom teacher, dean of students, or other wellness staff.

Reflect:

- Consider your experiences as a learner. How does reflection help you make connections, process, and learn?
- What kinds of reflection experiences have been most successful and meaningful to your students in the past?
- How can you gather feedback from your students that will help you and your classroom community improve their ability to engage in civil and brave conversations?



Space to Reflect:

Planning for Unplanned Moments

The strategies provided in this guide up to this point are designed to help you and your students prepare for meaningful and productive conversations. Planning quality learning experiences and building community in your classroom are the foundation for fostering civil discourse. In every classroom, though, there will be moments that come up that interrupt your plans, whether this is a breaking news event that you want to process with your class or a breach of classroom norms that derails a discussion. This section of the guide provides suggestions for what to do in these unplanned moments.

1. React to Breaking News



KEY RESOURCES:

- Teaching Strategy: [Head, Heart, Conscience](#)
- Teaching Strategy: [Exit Tickets](#)
- Teaching Strategy: [Wraparound](#)
- Teaching Strategy: [Graffiti Boards](#)

Discussions on current or controversial events function best when you have time to plan and students are prepared. However, when breaking news events impact students' feelings of well-being or safety, or news impacts their ability to concentrate on other material, it may be necessary to set aside your planned curriculum in order to acknowledge the event, give students space to process what happened, and potentially allow for students to share reactions or surface questions. The guidance in this section focuses on what you can do in the face of breaking news that is destabilizing or frightening.

Before deciding to address breaking news in class, we recommend that you take time to process your own reactions and perspective. You may wish to reach out to your own support network or colleagues before raising the issue with your students. It can also be helpful to coordinate with colleagues around which class periods will be designated for reflecting on the event to ensure that students are not asked to engage

in the same conversation multiple times throughout the school day. As stated at the beginning of the guide, it is important to connect with your school administrators and review your school or district policies to learn what guidelines are in place on practices for teaching current events or controversial topics.

How can you introduce breaking news to your class?

When you introduce the unplanned conversation to your class, begin by acknowledging the event and how it might impact different groups of people in your community. It may be helpful to share information from one or more news sources in order to establish background knowledge for students. You should let students know why you are giving them space to reflect on the event, revisit your norms, and allow students to opt out of any sharing.

Provide students with structured space to reflect and share their reactions or questions. For example, you can ask students to journal on prompts such as those in the [Head, Heart, Conscience](#) teaching strategy, or you could use the following prompts:

- What feelings do you have when you think about this event?
- Is this event impacting you or the people you are close to, and if so, how?
- What questions do you have about this event?
- Is there anything that you want your teacher to know?

In order to learn how students are reacting, you can ask them to share aspects of their reflections with you on an [exit ticket](#).

It may be enough in the first class period after the event to acknowledge what happened, provide students with space for individual reflection, and give students the option to share their reflections directly with you. This approach can allow you to take time to review students' reflections and carefully prepare and select materials for a follow-up conversation.

If you would also like to create structured space for sharing as a class during your initial response, you can use the [Wraparound](#) teaching strategy to invite each student to share one word or phrase from their journal entry. Then ask students to reflect on what they heard from their classmates. You can also use the [Graffiti Boards](#) teaching strategy to collect students' questions and reactions.

Consider how you will follow up with students about the event. You may want to give them the opportunity to talk with you directly outside of class, and you may need to return to the discussion in future class periods in order to provide more discussion space or information about the event as it unfolds.

Reflect:

- Consider your own experiences as a student or learner. Did your teachers ever discuss a breaking news event in class? Were there ever times when you wished your teacher would acknowledge an event but they did not? What types of events, if any, did you think warranted a response in school?
- Consider your own experiences as a teacher. Have you ever set aside your planned curriculum to discuss a breaking news event? If so, which events, and how did students react to these conversations?
- Think about breaking news events that could happen in the future. How might you decide to respond to these events in your class?



Space to Reflect:

2. Address Misinformation or Inaccurate Information

The spread of misinformation and disinformation related to current events is an increasingly prevalent issue, and it is likely that your students, along with other members of your community, have been exposed to false news stories related to the topics you discuss in class. When students reference information during a class discussion that you know or suspect to be false, it can present a dilemma: as a teacher, you want to ensure that your class discussions are rooted in accurate information, but it is not necessarily productive to act as a fact-checker in the moment. This challenge can be particularly acute if the false news stories have a partisan slant, since you may be wary of being perceived as biased if you challenge the information.

If a student brings up misinformation or disinformation during class, it is best not to attack the source of the information or criticize the student for sharing it. Engaging in either of these tactics can make students feel shamed or defensive, which will not encourage them to think critically or be open to new information. Research shows that people of all ages are susceptible to misinformation and disinformation.¹⁴

Instead, encourage your students to think critically about the news reports they come across. You can suggest to your class that they use any media literacy strategies you have learned about to verify information, or you can share a selection of the following ideas with them:

- Do a search to investigate whether the source of the information is reliable. What do other people or organizations write about the source? Is it known for publishing accurate information? Is the source known for having a certain political perspective?
- Look to other news sources. Are these news sources also covering the event? If so, how is their coverage similar to or different from the original piece's coverage?
- Read, watch, or listen to the piece again:
 - What facts does the author share? Can you verify these facts in other sources?
 - What opinions does the author share? What conclusions do you think the author wants you to reach?
 - Are there any moments when the author of the piece appeals to your emotions? What do you think they are trying to make you feel?
 - What knowledge does the author assume you already have? Are there any questions you would want to have answered so you could better understand the piece?
- Wait a week and read the news coverage again, since reports can change as new information emerges. Is the news coverage now different from the coverage a week ago? What new information has emerged?

Once you have shared ideas with students for how they can find more information and think critically about the event, you can pivot the discussion to questions about what needs or values might be motivating people's responses to current events. Using the media literacy strategies in the subsection **Prepare Students for Discussion** can help students learn how to identify accurate information when they are learning about an issue.

Reflect:

- Consider the topics you plan to discuss with your class. What misinformation do you think students might have heard that relates to these topics?
- What media literacy strategies or questions can you share with your class before discussions? Which strategies can you share in the moment if students bring up false or unverified information?



Space to Reflect:

If you're interested in learning more, you can explore the following resources:

- [Disinformation Is Rampant. Here's How Teachers Are Combatting It](#) (EducationWeek)
- [Confronting Conspiracy Theories and Organized Bigotry at Home](#) (Western States Center)

3. Repair and Strengthen Community

Establishing classroom norms and a strong class community can help ensure that discussions go smoothly. However, every community experiences moments of conflict, and it can be helpful to plan ahead for how you will address a breach of class norms during a discussion or moments that create a rupture in your community.

Using the “calling in” framework described in the subsection **Co-Create Community Norms** can help you think through how you would respond to problematic statements that students might make during a discussion. If a class conversation moves into an area that is unproductive or harmful, it can be helpful to pivot the discussion to questions about students’ values or needs rather than directly discussing the topic. Moving students toward individual reflection can also give them space to think and gain perspective. For example, you might ask students to discuss (or reflect on in their journals) questions such as:

- What do you think people are worried about in relation to this topic? How might those worries impact the way people discuss the topic?
- Who is affected by this topic and how?
- What voices might be missing from the class conversation that could give additional insight on this topic?
- How do you want your own values to guide the way you respond to this topic?

It is important to follow up with students after a challenging moment. Check in one-on-one with students who were directly involved with or impacted by the incident, and set aside class time for community-building activities, such as those you conducted at the beginning of the school year.

Some teachers may choose to use restorative circles as an ongoing practice throughout their school year to respond to breaches in community norms. For more information on how to implement these circles and other restorative practices, you can consult the *Learning for Justice* [Peace-Building Circles](#) toolkit.

Reflect:

- For you, when does a conversation move from being merely controversial to one that is controversial and potentially harmful?
- Consider controversial conversations you have engaged in while teaching or in your personal life. What questions or approaches do you think exacerbate conflict? What strategies or approaches do you think diffuse conflict?



Space to Reflect:

If you're interested in learning more, you can explore the following resource:

- [Toolkit: Peace-Building Circles](#) (Learning for Justice)

Endnotes

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), 24–25.
- 2 Derisa Grant, “On ‘Difficult’ Conversions,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 14, 2020.
- 3 Jonathan Gould, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Peter Levine, Ted McConnell, and David B. Smith, eds., *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* (Philadelphia: Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, 2011).
- 4 Paula McAvoy, “Political Discussions in the Classroom: What Should Educators Be Trying to Do?,” *The Line* (Frontline Education), 2019.
- 5 Although the term “citizen” is often used to denote legal status, it can also have a broader meaning—a member of the community, a positive contributor to society and civic life—as in the phrase “a citizen of the world.” That more expansive definition of citizenship in a country, available to all people regardless of documentation, is what Facing History means when we use the word “citizen.”
- 6 Nora Delaney, “For the Sake of Argument,” *Harvard Kennedy School Magazine* (Spring 2019).
- 7 See the Facing History & Ourselves professional development on-demand resource [Teaching about Controversial Issues in Polarized Times](#) (a conversation with Dr. Diana Hess).
- 8 Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, “From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces” (Chapter 8), in Lisa M. Landreman, ed., *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators* (Routledge, 2013).
- 9 Carla Marschall, “The Power of a Democratic Classroom,” *Edutopia*, July 27, 2021.
- 10 Loretta J. Ross, “Speaking Up Without Tearing Down,” *Learning for Justice*, Southern Poverty Law Center (Issue 61, Spring 2019).
- 11 Loretta J. Ross, “Speaking Up without Tearing Down,” *Learning for Justice*, Southern Poverty Law Center (Issue 61, Spring 2019).
- 12 Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (Routledge, 2015).
- 13 Adapted from a worksheet prepared by Meira Levinson and work by Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy (2016).
- 14 Sarah Schwartz, “Disinformation Is Rampant. Here’s How Teachers Are Combatting It,” *EducationWeek*, November 25, 2020.