THE EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD PROJECT

TIPS FOR FACILITATING OPEN DISCUSSIONS [TEACHER RESOURCE]

Summary: For meaningful dialogue to occur in an open discussion, it is essential that all students feel they can speak openly and honestly. This kind of free expression begins with a classroom culture in which students feel safe, engaged, and challenged. Therefore, students should not only be encouraged to speak their mind, but they should also trust that negative, harmful, and oppressive language, should it arise, will be interrupted, and named.

Implementing open discussions requires teachers and students to take risks, which can feel vulnerable and sometimes uncomfortable. As the teacher, it's important to remember that it's an ongoing process that requires building comfort and trust with your students. This document includes tips for facilitating open discussions, and suggestions for how to respond to common challenges that arise in open discussions. We encourage you to use this document and the other resources we have prepared (Mindsets for Open Discussion and Agreement Setting) as starting points, and to make the appropriate adjustments and additions according to your students and their needs.

When leading open discussions, consider your role more as a facilitator than as a teacher. In other words, you are not there to "teach" or "lead" the discussion, but instead to pose questions that lead students towards peer dialogue that deepens understanding. Here are some tips, strategies, and resources to help you lead an open discussion.

Setting up group agreements or discussion agreements with students prior to discussions is a good strategy for productive, open conversations. For resources on establishing group agreements, see our document, Agreement Setting. We have included some resources in our reference section on community and group agreements.

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Invite student experiences and perspectives

- Focus on creating an open space in which students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives rather than performing their knowledge. Make sure students understand they are not being evaluated on their answers, but rather on their participation. This can help avoid causing students to shy away from sharing because they feel they aren't experts.

Ask questions and seek clarification

- As the facilitator of the discussion, your main task is to encourage dialogue between students. Asking questions and seeking clarification keeps the dialogue open. Try phrases like:
  - *Tell me more…*
  - *Can you explain more of what you mean by….?*
  - *What additional phrases or words come to mind when we hear…?*
  - *How would you define or describe…?*
  - *Does anyone have a different take on….?*

Move Back

- The role of the facilitator is to support students to talk to one another. If students are directing their comments or questions to you, redirect them to ask their peers. You can model this by asking the group if they share the sentiments just expressed.

Limit moderation

- During open discussions, it is important to limit moderation by the facilitator. Constant moderation can constrain student participation by centering the reaction or response of the teacher as a form of validation or repudiation. However, when students are inappropriate, perpetuate harmful stereotypes, or express hateful sentiments, this threatens the space of open exchange, and it is important for the facilitator to intervene.

Support "learning moments"

- Sometimes the greatest learning moments come when a group of students talks through something they didn't fully understand, or hold opposing views on. Support students to recognize the value of these "messy" (sometimes uncomfortable) moments by taking time to reflect on how they are feeling in the moment, and how they feel after the dialogue has finished. These "meta-discussions" can support students to navigate the natural tensions of open dialogue more smoothly.

"What Ifs" of Open Discussion

One student is dominating the discussion

- Acknowledge the student's contributions and solicit commentary from students that you hear from less frequently. When possible, reference something you noticed. For example, if a student's body language or facial expression suggest that they want to say something, you might call on them: "___, it looks like you might have something you're thinking about. Want to add something?" Or, if a student recently wrote or said something in class that relates to the discussion, try saying something like, "This reminds me of something _____ wrote in their reflection last week. ___, would you be willing to share?"

- You may also choose to talk to the more outspoken student later. Acknowledge their confidence and ideas as a strength and challenge them with a different task that can help them develop the other skills that contribute to a constructive dialogue (being able to share your thoughts is just one!). Ask them to pay attention to the tone of the discussion, the body language and facial expressions of others in the room, when and how opposing viewpoints arise, what perspectives might not be represented in the discussion etc. By asking them to develop these other skills, they are still fully engaged, but in a way that creates space for other students to practice the skill of verbalizing their thoughts and perspectives.

A *student* says something harmful

- Decide together ahead of time how you will handle harm as a class. Remember that each of us holds unacknowledged biases and assumptions and has the potential to unintentionally cause harm. Decide on collective protocols and provide students with the opportunity to share how they would like to be made aware of when they cause harm. This might mean intervening in the moment, checking in with the student after the fact, and/or addressing the language or actions as part of a class exercise.

***You* say something harmful**

- Follow the [group agreements](#) that you set as a class. Model humility and accountability by listening to why what you said or did was harmful, acknowledging the harm, and committing to concrete actions you will take so that it will not happen again. Check in with the student(s) who were hurt by you. See how they are feeling and what they need from you to repair the relationship.

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Discussion is getting sidelined or goes towards an unintended direction

- By design, open discussion follows students' thinking. Sometimes, however, the discussion can get off track or go in a direction that causes harm. As the facilitator, it's okay to interrupt a discussion and guide it back on track. You can say, "Thank you for sharing. This is an important perspective, but I do want to steer us back to the topic of the conversation."

- In the case of possible harm, first acknowledge what is happening: "we are starting to move in a direction that is reinforcing some harmful misconceptions/biases/beliefs." Once that has been openly acknowledged, you may choose to spend time having the students reflect on where these harmful beliefs may have come from, or why they are harmful. However, if you sense that any students may have been triggered by the comments (or you notice that you yourself are feeling emotionally escalated), you may choose to direct the conversation back to less charged territory: "now I want to steer us back towards the topic of the conversation." Either way, a pause can be enormously helpful. Invite students to take a quiet moment to reflect on how they're feeling in their bodies and what feelings are coming up for them. If you feel available to it, make an invitation for students to continue the conversation with you at a later point: "we're going to shift back to the original topic now, but if you want to talk about any of the ideas that were just shared, or what came up for you when you heard them, please feel free to come and talk to me at any time." Affirm that although you're redirecting the discussion, these are important conversations to have.

Lack of participation

- Come from a place of curiosity and make your thinking visible. Sometimes a simple observation is enough to prompt engagement: "I'm noticing that people seem hesitant to share right now." Other times, you may want to follow up with specific questions to understand why participation has diminished. Is it a lack of understanding? Lack of interest? If there is an understanding gap, work together to fill that gap. If it is a lack of interest, ask for student input around what you could do to make the subject more interesting, or shift the focus of the discussion to something that sparks interest.

Teacher Notes:

- This resource is part of the Edible Schoolyard Project's Understanding Organic curriculum and is a teacher resource of the preparatory unit of the curriculum.

References and Resources:

Resources For Leading Discussions: Learning for Justice has many great resources on teaching strategies for leading discussions, here are a couple of their resources that we especially like:

Moderating a Discussion (n.d). *Learning for Justice. Retrieved from* https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/civil-discourse-in-the-classroom/chapter-3-talk-it-over/moderating-a

Socratic Seminar (n.d). *Learning for Justice. Retrieved from* https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies/community-inquiry/socratic-seminar

Fishbowl (n.d). *Learning for Justice. Retrieved from* https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies/community-inquiry/fishbowl

Resources for Group Agreements and Classroom Culture:

Classroom Culture (n.d). *Learning for Justice.* Retrieved from https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/critical-practices-for-antibias-education/classroom-culture

Community Agreements. (n.d). Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation, University of Toronto. Retrieved from https://tatp.utoronto.ca/teaching-toolkit/effective-strategies/community-agreements

Group Agreements for Workshops and Meetings. Seeds For Change UK (n.d). Retrieved from https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/groupagree#how

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