



TIPS FOR FACILITATING OPEN DISCUSSIONS

This document is a teacher resource that accompanies the [What is Organic?](#) lesson plan.

Our lesson titled [What is Organic?](#) focuses heavily on creating a space for open discussions. The goals of the lesson are not for students to immediately know what organic means, but rather for them to explore what organic represents to them. This could mean that students respond in the initial discussion with misinformation or misunderstandings. As a teacher, the instinct might be to move quickly to correcting students and telling them what they should know. Instead, prioritize the dialogue knowing that misconceptions will be clarified later in the lesson.

To ensure that students are speaking openly and honestly, it's important for teachers to create a safe space where all students can freely express their thoughts. Such free expression is essential to meaningful dialogue. It is also important to interrupt and name negative, harmful, and oppressive language if it arises. Setting up group agreements or discussion agreements with students prior to discussions is a good strategy for productive, open conversations.

We have included some resources in our reference section on community and group agreements. When leading discussions, consider your role more as a facilitator than as a teacher. In this way, you are not there to “teach” or lead the discussion, but instead to pose questions that lead students towards peer discussions that deepen understanding. Here are some tips, strategies, and resources to help you lead an open discussion.

- **Try not to fact-check.** 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. Students shouldn't 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 keep the conversation moving and 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..xyz
 - How would you define or describe...
 - Does anyone have a different take on _____
- **Step Back.** The role of the teacher is to support students to talk to each other. If students are directing their comments or questions to you, redirect them to ask their peers or ask if their peers share their sentiments.
- **Limit moderation** except for when students are inappropriate, perpetuate harmful stereotypes or express hateful sentiments. Constant moderation can constrain student participation by centering the reaction or response of the teacher as a form of validation or repudiation.
- **Support “learning moments.”** Sometimes the greatest learning moments come from moments when a group of students talks through something they didn't fully understand.



TIPS FOR FACILITATING OPEN DISCUSSIONS

References and More Resources:

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

Moderating a Discussion (n.d). Teaching Tolerance. Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/civil-discourse-in-the-classroom/chapter-3-talk-it-over/moderating-a>

Socratic Seminar (n.d). Teaching Tolerance. Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies/community-inquiry/socratic-seminar>

Fishbowl (n.d). Teaching Tolerance. Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/teaching-strategies/community-inquiry/fishbowl>

Resources for Group Agreements and Classroom Culture:

Classroom Culture (n.d). Teaching Tolerance. 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>

Disclaimer: All videos and references are used for educational purposes only. The Edible Schoolyard Project does not endorse any brands, labels, organizations, or businesses included in videos or references.