

Facilitating Critical Classroom Conversations

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Education must not simply teach work—it must teach life.”

— W.E.B. Du Bois

Preparing for Critical Classroom Conversations

Facilitating discussions about ethnic studies, the Holocaust and other genocides requires thoughtful preparation. Teachers must equip themselves and their students with the tools, knowledge and emotional readiness to engage in meaningful dialogue. Below are the essential steps to take before facilitating these discussions.

Know the Content

Deepen Your Knowledge

Build a robust understanding of the topic, including its historical context, current relevance and multiple perspectives.

Identify Key Concepts and Terms

Highlight essential themes, systemic connections and critical questions that students should explore.

Anticipate Complex Questions

Prepare for nuanced student inquiries by reviewing credible sources and identifying areas where further research may be needed. This information might be found in supplemental curricular materials or you may need to locate community leaders or content experts.

Reflect on Your Own Cultural Frames of Reference

Acknowledge Biases

Reflect on your own beliefs, cultural frames of reference and potential oversights. Consider how these might influence the way you facilitate the discussion.

Examine Power Dynamics

Recognize your authority as an educator, your diverse identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, language, ability), and how they shape interactions in the classroom.

Model Openness

Think about how you will approach the discussion with humility, demonstrating a willingness to learn alongside your students.

Understand Your Students

Consider Student Backgrounds

Learn about your students' cultural, social and emotional contexts, and how these may shape their engagement with and interest in topics.

Plan for Sensitivities

Anticipate moments that could be emotionally challenging for students, and have strategies ready to provide support.

Foster Trust

Create a classroom culture of respect and safety where students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives.

Establish Clear Objectives

Define Learning Goals

Clearly articulate and communicate what you want students to learn and achieve through the discussion.

Focus on Skills and Knowledge

Consider objectives such as critical thinking, empathy, understanding systemic connections and fostering action-oriented mindsets.

Share Objectives with Students

Help students see the purpose and relevance of the discussion by explaining how it connects to their learning and broader societal issues.

Plan Resources

Select Credible Materials

Use accurate, well-researched and diverse resources that reflect the complexity of the topic.

Center Authentic Voices

Include narratives from those directly affected by the events, such as survivor testimonies, oral histories and community perspectives.

Ensure Accessibility

Provide resources in multiple formats, such as translated texts or audio recordings, to meet diverse student needs.

Use Supportive Tools

Incorporate visual aids, reflective prompts or graphic organizers to guide student engagement.

Prepare the Physical and Emotional Space

Arrange the Classroom for Equity and Collaboration

Organize the physical space to foster inclusion, belonging and student agency, such as using circle seating for open dialogue or creating small group stations that encourage cooperative learning (Transformative SEL, S3).

Signal Inclusivity and Representation

Use visuals, posters and learning materials that reflect diverse identities, cultures and histories, ensuring all students see themselves represented (Transformative SEL, S1).

Set Shared Agreements for Respect and Participation

Co-create norms for respectful discourse, active listening and collaborative problem-solving, ensuring students play an active role in shaping classroom culture (Transformative SEL, S3,4).

Plan for Emotional Safety and Self-regulation

Provide students with strategies to manage emotions, navigate discomfort and engage in self-reflection, such as structured journaling, private reflection spaces or the option to step out for a moment (Transformative SEL, S2).

Acknowledge and Respond to Emotional Impact

Discussions of systemic oppression, genocide and historical trauma can elicit strong emotions. Create structured opportunities for processing and debriefing, encouraging collective care and resilience-building (Transformative SEL, S5).

Prepare the Students

Set Expectations

Share the purpose of the discussion and emphasize the importance of mutual respect and active listening.

Establish Norms Together

Collaboratively create participation expectations, such as confidentiality, inclusivity, checking assumptions, intentional listening, honoring diverse forms of participation and discourse and valuing all voices.

Build Context

Provide students with necessary background information, primary sources or pre-discussion activities to ensure they are informed and ready to contribute.

Practice Discussion Skills

Engage students in smaller preparatory conversations to build confidence and practice articulating their thoughts.

Prepare for Challenging Moments

Anticipate Tough Questions

Be honest if you don't know the answer, modeling inquiry with, "Let's explore that together."

Redirect Productively

Keep discussions focused on the learning objectives by using prompts like, "How does this connect to our broader theme?"

Support Emotional Responses

Acknowledge and validate students' feelings and provide space for reflection or individual processing as needed.

Foster Collective Problem-solving

When discussions touch on unresolved or complex issues, encourage students to brainstorm solutions or identify additional resources.

Teacher Moves for Facilitating Critical Conversations

Critical classroom conversations require skilled facilitation that fosters a safe, inclusive environment while encouraging critical thinking and meaningful engagement. Below are specific teacher moves aligned with various strategies, accompanied by hypothetical examples to illustrate their application in teaching ethnic studies, the Holocaust and other genocides.

Establishing Expectations for Discussion

Teacher Moves

- ⦿ Set expectations collaboratively with students to ensure a respectful and inclusive environment.
- ⦿ Reiterate expectations throughout the discussion.
- ⦿ Use sentence starters to model respectful disagreement, e.g., “I see your point, but I interpret it differently because...”

Example

During a discussion about the Holocaust, the teacher establishes an expectation of “honoring lived experiences” by emphasizing that survivor testimonies are to be treated with respect. When a student questions the credibility of a testimony, the teacher redirects the conversation by asking, “What might we learn from this perspective, even if it challenges our understanding?”

Modeling Inquiry and Reflection

Teacher Moves

- ⦿ Demonstrate how to ask open-ended questions and critically analyze sources.
- ⦿ Reflect on your own cultural frames of reference and biases aloud as a model for students.
- ⦿ Use probing questions to deepen student engagement, such as, “What assumptions are we making here?”

Example

In a unit on ethnic studies, the teacher introduces a resource about redlining and reflects aloud: “As someone who didn’t grow up in this neighborhood, I realize I might not fully understand its history. Let’s explore how these policies affected people living here and see if this resource captures those perspectives.”

Encouraging Empathy and Connection

Teacher Moves

- Share narratives or primary sources that humanize historical events.
- Encourage students to draw parallels between their own experiences and those of others.
- Facilitate activities, such as story circles, that allow students to listen to and learn from peers' perspectives.

Example

During a lesson on genocide, students read a survivor's testimony about fleeing violence. The teacher asks, "How might this story resonate with someone who has experienced displacement today? What can we learn from their resilience?"

Managing Sensitive Topics

Teacher Moves

- Anticipate potential triggers and prepare strategies to address them.
- Pause discussions to address emotional reactions and validate student feelings.
- Offer students the option to reflect privately through writing or art if a topic feels overwhelming.

Example

While discussing Holocaust memorials, a student becomes visibly upset. The teacher pauses the lesson to acknowledge, "This topic can be deeply emotional. Let's take a moment to reflect and write about how these memorials help us remember history."

Responding to Difficult Questions

Teacher Moves

- Validate the question by acknowledging its complexity.
- Be honest about not knowing an answer and commit to finding credible sources together.
- Redirect the question to the class to encourage collaborative inquiry.

Example

During a lesson on other genocides, a student asks, "Why didn't other countries intervene sooner?" The teacher responds, "That's a critical question. Let's explore the political and social dynamics of the time to better understand the delays in action."

Promoting Inclusive Participation

Teacher Moves

- ⦿ Use equitable strategies like think-pair-share or small-group discussions to ensure all voices are heard.
- ⦿ Provide multiple modes of participation, including written reflections or artistic responses.
- ⦿ Actively invite quieter students to share their thoughts while respecting their comfort levels.

Example

In a discussion about cultural contributions, the teacher asks students to first brainstorm individually, then share in small groups. One quieter student shares a family story, which the group highlights during the class discussion.

Fostering Critical Thinking and Action

Teacher Moves

- ⦿ Encourage students to question sources and analyze the motivations behind narratives.
- ⦿ Connect historical events to current complex social issues, emphasizing actionable insights.
- ⦿ Use diverse pedagogical strategies to help students understand different perspectives.

Example

In a lesson on the Holocaust, students examine propaganda posters. The teacher asks, "What messages are these posters conveying, and how might they have influenced people's actions? How can we identify similar tactics in today's media?"

Differentiating and Scaffolding Discussions

Teacher Moves

- ⦿ Tailor questions and activities to align with diverse learning needs and backgrounds.
- ⦿ Provide sentence starters or graphic organizers to support student responses.
- ⦿ Scaffold discussions by breaking complex topics into smaller manageable parts.

Example

In a unit on genocide, the teacher uses a graphic organizer to help students analyze a primary source. Students fill out sections on "perspective," "intended audience," and "message," which they use to guide the discussion.

Strategies for Structuring the Discussion Space

Critical classroom conversations on sensitive topics such as ethnic studies, the Holocaust and other genocides require thoughtful preparation, an inclusive atmosphere and innovative strategies to engage students effectively. Below are five dynamic strategies educators can use to set up their spaces and foster meaningful, equitable dialogues. These methods aim to create a balance between intellectual exploration and emotional safety while centering student agency, creativity and critical thinking.

Story Circles

Story Circles are a practice rooted in Indigenous traditions, emphasizing respect, equality and communal learning. Students share personal or historical narratives in a structured format that encourages active listening and empathy. This method honors diverse voices, builds trust and deepens understanding of personal and historical experiences.

Steps to Implement

1. **Set the Stage:** Arrange chairs in a circle to eliminate hierarchy and foster a sense of community.
2. **Establish Expectations:** Ensure students understand that all voices are valued, people's stories are honored and confidentiality is respected.
3. **Guide the Discussion:** Pose a central question or theme, such as, "How does resistance manifest in the face of oppression?"
4. **Share and Reflect:** Each student shares a story, followed by a collective reflection on common themes and insights.
5. **Integrate Learning:** Connect the stories to the lesson objectives, encouraging students to draw connections between individual experiences and broader historical or sociopolitical contexts.

Example

In a unit about genocide, a teacher facilitates a Story Circle where students reflect on themes of resilience and loss. One student shares a family's migration story during a time of conflict, which the teacher connects to testimonies of survivors from a specific genocide. This fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of the human impact of such events.

User Experience Design for Critical Inquiry and Action

Adapted from user experience (UX) design principles, this strategy empowers students to design systems or solutions addressing complex social issues. This approach promotes creativity, critical thinking and actionable learning, linking classroom discussions to real-world problem-solving.

Steps to Implement

1. **Define the Problem:** Present a real-world issue.
2. **Empathize:** Encourage students to research and understand the affected communities.
3. **Ideate and Prototype:** Students brainstorm solutions and create mockups or proposals.
4. **Present and Iterate:** Students share their designs, receive feedback and refine their ideas.

Example

During a unit on local history, students design a community-based app to preserve oral histories of underrepresented groups. They interview local elders, incorporate user feedback and present their prototype to the class.

Peer-led Socratic Seminars

Students take ownership of discussions through structured student-led Socratic seminars that encourage inquiry and dialogue. Peer-led discussions promote student agency, collaboration and critical analysis.

Steps to Implement

1. **Prepare Materials:** Provide students with articles, primary sources or case studies.
2. **Assign Roles:** Designate discussion leaders, timekeepers and note-takers.
3. **Pose Guiding Essential Questions:** Examples include, "What systemic factors contribute to inequality?" or "How do historical events influence current policies?"
4. **Reflect:** Conclude with a class reflection on key insights and areas for further exploration.

Example

In a discussion on civil rights history, student leaders guide their peers through an analysis of redlining policies, connecting historical practices to current housing disparities. Students collaboratively explore solutions to address systemic inequities.

Reflective Collage and Artistic Expression

This creative approach allows students to process complex topics through visual or performative art, fostering emotional and intellectual engagement. Artistic expression encourages personal reflection, critical thinking and a deeper connection to the material.

Steps to Implement

1. **Assign a Theme:** Examples include “Acts of Resistance” or “Identity and Resilience.”
2. **Provide Materials:** Offer a variety of resources, such as magazines, markers and digital tools.
3. **Create and Share:** Students create visual or digital collages, perform skits or write poems, and then present their work to the class.
4. **Discuss Connections:** Facilitate a discussion on how the artwork connects to the themes of the complex social issues being explored.

Example

During a lesson on the Holocaust, students create collages representing the theme of “resilience in the face of persecution,” drawing from survivor testimonies and historical images. They share their collages and discuss how artistic expression can honor lived experiences and foster understanding.

Prompts and Questions for Facilitating Critical Conversations

Encouraging thoughtful and sustained student participation requires teachers to ask open-ended questions, prompt deeper thinking and guide discussions to explore multiple perspectives.

Critical Thinking and Analysis

- ⦿ What assumptions or biases might we see in this resource or perspective?
- ⦿ How do we know this information is authentic or credible?
- ⦿ What evidence supports or challenges the ideas presented here?
- ⦿ How might the historical context influence the events or decisions we're discussing?
- ⦿ What patterns or connections do you see between this historical event and current issues?

Empathy and Perspective-taking

- ⦿ How might someone who lived through this experience feel or respond?
- ⦿ Can you imagine how this event might have impacted individuals or families?
- ⦿ What might this perspective teach us about resilience or resistance?
- ⦿ How does this narrative compare to your own or others' lived experiences?
- ⦿ Why might different groups view this event in different ways?

Connecting to Broader Themes

- ⦿ What systemic factors contributed to this event or outcome?
- ⦿ How does this event fit into the larger global or historical context?
- ⦿ What lessons can we draw from this for addressing current challenges?
- ⦿ How do the decisions made by individuals or groups shape larger systems of power or resistance?
- ⦿ What parallels do you see between this event and other historical or contemporary issues?

Interrogating Validity and Authenticity

- ⦿ Who is telling the story?
- ⦿ Who do you think the storyteller is, and what makes their voice significant in this context?
- ⦿ What perspective does the storyteller bring, and how might their background shape the narrative?
- ⦿ Are there other voices missing that could add depth or balance to this story?
- ⦿ How does the storyteller's proximity to the events (e.g., lived experience or expertise) impact the story's credibility?

For what purpose is the story told?

- ⦿ Why do you think this story is being told?
- ⦿ Who is the intended audience?
- ⦿ What might the storyteller hope to achieve by sharing this narrative?
- ⦿ How does the resource acknowledge or address potential biases in its purpose?

With what intention?

- ⦿ What emotions or actions does this story seem to encourage in its audience?
- ⦿ What do you think the storyteller's motivations were in writing or sharing this story?
- ⦿ How does the narrative's intention align with our goals of fostering equity and dignity?
- ⦿ Are there aspects of the story that seem to oversimplify, sensationalize or misrepresent events?

How is the story used?

- ⦿ How is this narrative framed? What perspective or point of view is being emphasized?
- ⦿ Do you think this story is presented as fact, or are you encouraged to question and critique it? Why?
- ⦿ What strategies or tools can you use to evaluate the accuracy and bias of this narrative?
- ⦿ How might this story shape your understanding of the topic? What assumptions does it challenge or reinforce?

Encouraging Student Voice

- ⦿ How do you interpret this resource or event? What stands out to you most?
- ⦿ Do you agree or disagree with this perspective? Why?
- ⦿ What questions does this raise for you?
- ⦿ How might we approach this issue differently if we were in this position?
- ⦿ What connections can you make to your own experiences or those of your community?

Fostering Action and Solutions

- ⦿ If you were in this situation, what actions would you take, and why?
- ⦿ What changes might help prevent this type of event in the future?
- ⦿ How can we apply what we've learned to address similar issues today?
- ⦿ What role do individuals or communities play in driving change in similar contexts?
- ⦿ What small steps can we take to contribute to justice or equity in our own communities?
- ⦿ What attempts have been made to address these issues? How effective were they? What insight does this give us about how to improve future efforts?

Managing Challenging Moments

- ⦿ That's an important point—can you explain a bit more about what you mean?
- ⦿ How might we reframe this question to explore another angle or perspective?
- ⦿ This is a complex topic. How can we approach it respectfully and thoughtfully?
- ⦿ Does anyone have a different interpretation or perspective they'd like to share?
- ⦿ Let's pause for a moment—what feelings or thoughts are coming up for you as we discuss this?

Closing Activities for Critical Classroom Conversations

Effective closing activities ensure that critical classroom conversations leave students with a sense of resolution, even if all questions or topics remain open-ended. These activities provide opportunities for reflection, synthesis and ongoing engagement, emphasizing that the dialogue continues beyond the classroom.

Living Wall of Inquiry

A dynamic alternative to traditional parking lots, the Living Wall of Inquiry creates an evolving space for student questions, reflections and connections. It can promote ongoing dialogue and ensure student voices are central to the learning process. It also demonstrates that their questions and reflections shape the direction of future lessons.

1. Create the Wall

- ⦿ Use a digital tool (e.g., Padlet) or designate a physical space in the classroom.
- ⦿ Divide it into sections like “Lingering Questions,” “Connections to Life or Current Events,” “Ideas for Further Exploration” or “Unanswered Perspectives.”

2. Encourage Contributions

- ⦿ At the end of the discussion, students add sticky notes (physical or digital) under the appropriate section.
- ⦿ Use color-coding for clarity:
 - Blue: Questions for deeper inquiry.
 - Green: Personal connections or insights.
 - Yellow: New perspectives or resources.

3. Revisit and Build

- ⦿ Dedicate time in future lessons to revisit and address items from the wall.
- ⦿ Use student contributions as a springboard for additional lessons, research projects or small-group discussions.

4. Reflect on Progress

- ⦿ At the end of a unit, review the wall with the class to highlight growth, address unresolved questions and celebrate contributions.

Exit Tickets

Students complete short reflective prompts to summarize their thoughts, identify key takeaways or pose lingering questions. Prompts might include

- ⦿ What is one thing you learned today that changed how you think about this topic?
- ⦿ What question or thought are you leaving with that you would like to explore further?
- ⦿ What is one action you feel inspired to take after today's discussion?

Teacher Reflections

To refine facilitation skills and ensure student needs are met, teachers engage in their own reflective practices. Ask yourself

- ⦿ What themes or questions stood out most today?
- ⦿ Were there moments when the discussion veered off-course, and how was it brought back?
- ⦿ Were all students able to engage equitably? What could be done differently next time?
- ⦿ Did the discussion meet the objectives I set?

Then, follow up by

- ⦿ Reviewing student exit tickets and the Living Wall of Inquiry to inform next steps
- ⦿ Adjusting future discussions to address gaps or recurring themes

Teacher-Student Follow-ups

For sensitive discussions, following up with individual students may be necessary to ensure emotional well-being.

- ⦿ Check in with students who appeared disengaged, upset or particularly vocal during the discussion.
- ⦿ Offer opportunities for students to share additional thoughts privately if they were uncomfortable speaking in class.
- ⦿ If you are concerned about a student's wellbeing, speak with the school counselor and follow up with parents to work together to ensure the student receives timely care.

Strategies for Incomplete Conversations

Critical classroom conversations often leave participants feeling like there's more to say. Teachers can emphasize that learning is ongoing.

- ⦿ **Reiterate Continuity:** "This is part of a larger conversation we'll continue throughout the year."
- ⦿ **Introduce Future Topics:** Highlight upcoming lessons that build on today's discussion.
- ⦿ **Assign Research Projects:** Encourage students to investigate lingering questions or themes.
- ⦿ **Reflect as a Group:** Dedicate time in subsequent classes to revisit key ideas or unresolved points.