How Do We Teach Civil Discourse in Our Polarized World?

Our Polarized World

Polarization threatens our nation's unity when people deliberately avoid engaging with one another due to differences. This division isn't limited to politics; it also strains relationships within families, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and religious organizations. In the end, it affects how well our society sticks together. As a teacher, you are in the unique position to empower students with depolarization skills by building healthy habits of conversation through civil discourse.

What's Stopping Us from Connecting with Diverse Perspectives in Our Own Lives?

We tend to surround ourselves with people who are similar to us. We often befriend those who share our political affiliations, religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, and interests. While this is a common tendency, it can create challenges when it comes to connecting with people from different backgrounds and perspectives.

Although the internet can connect us with a wide range of viewpoints, it often does the opposite. Online echo chambers tend to sort us on our social media feeds into groups with people who have similar views and interests. And news companies often present stories that are biased toward party affiliation. So, how can we try to understand the viewpoints of people with different backgrounds or beliefs when we don't often interact with them?

Civil Discourse to the Rescue

At the heart of all civil discourse is civility: respectful and courteous behavior. Civil discourse lessons are built on respectful conversations promoting understanding and constructive communication, especially when people have different viewpoints. It's a crucial part of freedom of speech and involves open, honest, and constructive dialogue aimed at benefiting society. By teaching our students civil discourse skills, we are teaching them how to talk civilly with people from all viewpoints.

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As a bonus, extensive research over the years has shown that developing robust civil discourse skills can significantly enhance students' performance across various academic subjects and in their lives as a whole. When students learn to communicate confidently and listen attentively through civil discourse, they experience success both in school and beyond.

Looking Inward

Before we teach civil discourse to our students, it's important for us to check our own thoughts and behaviors to make sure we understand and practice civil discourse in our own lives.

Ask Yourself These Questions:

- Are you sticking to your comfort zone by connecting only with people who share your views? Staying in your familiar friend group won't help you grasp different perspectives if everyone thinks alike. To bridge our political gaps, we need to get comfortable reaching out and trying to find common ground with people of opposite viewpoints. Whether it's in person or online, we should prioritize making respectful connections with diverse people. This involves authentically discussing topics with the goal of learning about the other person's perspective, rather than trying to convince them to see things our way.
- Could your behavior be perceived by others as being divisive? Inside and outside of school, we're responsible for speaking civilly when we disagree. We need to set an example for others. That means avoiding the use of divisive terms that may be perceived negatively. Even if we personally don't take offense to a term, it would be wise to avoid it in our discussions and on the internet. Using divisive terms feels like an insult to the person who is offended by it.

Tips for Teaching Successful Civil Discourse Lessons

Prevention is the best medicine

Communicate with the administration to enlist its support before beginning any civil discourse routines. This will help you get buy-in and support on the front end, so the administration will be in your corner if parents bring concerns to them.

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In the beginning of the year, share your plans with parents so that they understand and support your civil discourse efforts. Also, communicate with parents before addressing any controversial subject in a civil discourse lesson. This will alleviate any concerns from the outset. During communications, it is important to remind parents that civil discourse encourages all viewpoints to speak their truth. No attempts are being made to "brainwash" or convert students to one way of thinking. Remind parents that civil discourse discussions are moderated and must follow class norms of safety.

Careful lesson planning and preparation will ensure that your civil discourse lessons are successful. When crafting the discussion topic, ask yourself these questions:

- Is this topic within the state or local curriculum guidelines?
- How is this topic relevant?
- What structures are in place to make sure the discussion stays healthy?

What should I do if . . . ?

A student monopolizes the conversation:

- Refer them back to class norms.
- Use timed speaking limits if necessary.
- Guided student reflections on speaking behavior help develop awareness.

The class goes off course from the topic and moves on from being civil:

- Stop the discussion and refer the students back to class norms.
- Ask students to reflect in writing on their ideas about what happened.
- After things have calmed down, think-pair-share and discuss as a class.

A tragedy in the news takes over the students' thoughts:

- When a tragedy suddenly happens, this is not the time to debate the issue.
- Discussions should be focused on trauma-free and trigger-free subjects.
- This is a time to allow discussion to process feelings, not debates.

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