

Create the Conditions for Conversations about Sensitive Issues



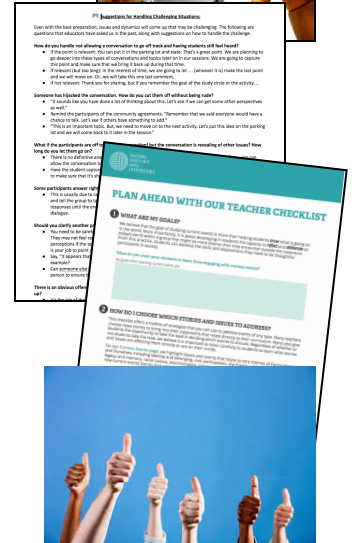
No one can deny that what is happening in the country and the world has a big impact on the way many students, families, and staff show up at school and work every day. We believe that ignoring outside issues undermines the relevance of the curriculum for our students and diminishes an educator’s ability to understand the needs of our families and colleagues.

While these conversations may feel scary to initiate, discussions about current events and race do not have to be contentious or out of control. The Equity Initiatives Unit provides support and resources that help leaders and staff organize, lead, and engage in productive dialogue.

- [Organize a Facilitated Dialogue](#) – Although there are several types of circles, the Equity Initiatives Unit’s **Study Circles Program** provides trained facilitators, curriculum, and coaching to help staff, students and parents develop the relationships, awareness, and skills necessary to engage in productive dialogue around challenging issues.
 - We have formats for Leadership Teams, Professional Learning Communities, Parents and Staff, and Students and Staff. We also provide training for staff and students to develop the skills to lead these kinds of dialogue.
- Click here for [Tools to create the conditions for conversations about sensitive issues](#) and [Tips for handling challenging situations](#).

Steps

1. [Do your own personal reflection.](#) Before you can help others engage in dialogue, you need to understand your personality and hot button issues.
2. [Use this check sheet to create a lesson plan for issues important to your community](#)
3. [Review common challenges and facilitator tips and sample facilitator questions](#)
4. [Create Community Agreements.](#) Start the year off by taking the time to set some real community agreements that can help create a safe environment to have conversations about sensitive issues. Don't wait for the issue to come up.



Do your own personal reflection.

For conversations about sensitive topics, a teacher or leader's responsibility is to create and maintain a *safe* environment for students/staff to engage in honest productive dialogue. Responsibilities include:

- Helping students/staff understand the [difference between dialogue and debate](#)
- Encouraging students/staff to examine issues from many points of view
- Making each student/staff feel like their opinion is valid and welcome
- Identifying group dynamics and intervene appropriately
 - Encourage quiet students/staff to share
 - Cut off dominating or overly talkative students/staff in supportive manner
- Challenging outrageous statements by asking questions
- Bringing up ideas and perspectives that students/staff are not addressing

Check the statements that you most identify with in the context of leading conversations about sensitive issues.

- I am passionate about some issues.
- I am able to focus on facilitating without participating through sharing my opinions.
- I feel compelled to share my opinions and have difficulty facilitating without participating.
- I am comfortable with chaos.
- I am comfortable adapting/improvising as we go.
- I am comfortable with conflict.
- I tend to avoid or try to steer people away from conflict.
- I am comfortable sharing my own personal stories to build relationships with students/staff
- I am comfortable leading a conversation about race with students? With staff?
- I am comfortable leading a conversation about political issues with students? With staff?

1. **What did you learn about yourself? What skills do you need to work on?**
2. **What are some of your "hot button" issues? What are some behaviors that make you frustrated or uncomfortable?**
3. **How do you stay aware of the different experiences and perspectives your students or staff have?**

Suggestions for Handling Challenging Situations:

Even with the best preparation, issues and dynamics will come up that may be challenging. The following are questions that educators have asked us in the past, along with suggestions on how to handle the challenge.

How do you handle not allowing a conversation to go off track and having students still feel heard?

- If the point is relevant: You can put it in the parking lot and state: That's a great point. We are planning to go deeper into these types of conversations and topics later on in our sessions. We are going to capture this point and make sure that we bring it back up during that time.
- If relevant (but too long): In the interest of time, we are going to let ... (whoever it is) make the last point and we will move on. Or...we will take this one last comment.
- If not relevant: Thank you for sharing, but if you remember the goal of the study circle or the activity...

Someone has hijacked the conversation. How do you cut them off without being rude?

- "It sounds like you have done a lot of thinking about this. Let's see if we can get some other perspectives as well."
- Remind the participants of the community agreements. "Remember that we said everyone would have a chance to talk. Let's see if others have something to add."
- "This is an important topic. But, we need to move on to the next activity. Let's put this idea on the parking lot and we will come back to it later in the session."

What if the participants are off topic (to your question) but the conversation is revealing of other issues? How long do you let them go on?

- There is no definitive answer. Is the conversation useful? Does it appear to be additive? If yes, you can allow the conversation to continue until it becomes repetitive.
- Have the student capture their ideas on a piece of paper. Say, "This sounds important to you and we want to make sure that it's shared with the school, please write your point on the parking lot."

Some participants answer right away while others don't participate in large groups.

- This is usually due to communication styles and comfort level. Before getting responses, ask the question and tell the group to take a few minutes to think about or write down their answers. Don't take any responses until the end of the allotted time. This will give "thinkers" time to get their answers before the dialogue.

Should you clarify another participant's statement when you know the whole group is confused?

- You need to be careful with clarifying. Students may think you are putting your own slant on the subject. They may not feel comfortable contradicting you if you get it wrong. Also, be aware of cultural/racial perceptions if the teacher restates a comment made by a student from a different background. However, it is your job to point out the confusion. You can then ask someone else to clarify.
- Say, "It appears that some people are confused by your comment. Would you mind clarifying or giving an example?"
- Can someone else help clarify what ___ is trying to say? (Then make sure you go back to the original person to ensure it was clarified correctly). "Does that capture what you were saying?"

There is an obvious offense in the room but no one has said anything about it. Should you/how do you bring it up?

- It's the job of the teacher to point out group dynamics and get the students to discuss contentious issues. So, don't just let it pass if no one says anything. Some ideas include:
 - "How are others feeling about what ___ just said? Do you agree, or are there different perspectives?"

- “This is similar to an issue that came up in a different class. In that class, some participants felt differently. Their perspective was _____. What do others feel?”
- If you don’t think people are ready to talk about it right away, write down the comment. Bring it back at another time to get input.

A student is dismissed after responding to another student with emotion.

Do not further invalidate the participant by moving on.

- Pause and say, “_____just expressed a very passionate view. Are there others who feel the same way? Have others had the same experience?”
- “Are there others who can understand why _____ feels this way?”

Untimely humor or laughter occurs in response to or during a serious comment made by another student.

It’s important to remember that people react differently to the discomfort of racial conversations. Some try to relieve the tension by making a joke, while are not comforted by the humor or are offended.

- Point out these differing feelings and reactions, and ask the group to please be mindful of both.

A student, or a segment of the class, is resistant to the information/activity and shuts down.

You could say,

- “It feels to me like we have lost some participation with this conversation or activity. Is anyone willing to share what they need from the group in order to comfortably reconnect?”
 - If no one responds, you could say, “If you’re not comfortable sharing in the group, please talk to me after class so that we can best meet your needs.”
- You can pass out index cards and have students write down their current feelings. Collect the cards, but make sure they stay anonymous. You would then use the information on the cards to plan for your next conversation.

Sample Facilitator Questions

Open-ended questions can't be answered with a quick "yes" or "no." Open-ended questions can help people look for connections among different ideas. Keep this list of questions with your agenda and use when you are not sure how to follow up.

General Questions:

- What seems to be the key point here?
- Do you agree with that? Why?
- What do other people think of this idea?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What experiences have you had with this?
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What do you think is really going on here? Why is that important?
- How might others see this issue?
- Do you think others in the group see this the way you do? Why?
- How does this make you feel?

Questions to Use When There is Disagreement:

- What do you think he is saying?
- What bothers you most about this?
- What is at the heart of the disagreement?
- How does this make you feel?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead a reasonable person to support that point of view?
- What do you think is really important to people who hold that opinion?
- What is blocking the discussion?
- What don't you agree with?
- What do you find most convincing about that point of view?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- Could you say more about what you think?
- What makes this so hard?
- What have we missed that we need to talk about?

Questions to Use When People are Feeling Discouraged:

- How does that make you feel?
- What gives you hope?
- How can we make progress on these problems? What haven't we considered yet?

Closing Questions:

- What are the key points of agreement and disagreement in today's session?
- What have you heard today that has made you think or has touched you in some way?

Create Community Agreements

1. Explain why are you creating the conditions from the beginning.
 - a. Throughout the year, we will have conversations about current events or a subject in our curriculum that may be emotional. For example, immigration, racism, shootings, and the presidential elections. Since we all have different experiences and beliefs, some issues may impact us more than others. We are going to set up some agreements on how to have these conversations so we can learn from each other, deepen our understanding of issues, and ensure that everyone feels heard and safe.
2. Explain why it is often hard to talk about these issues.
3. Put up the slide *Why is it hard to talk about race* and go over each bullet.
4. Ask students to raise their hand if they have ever been in a conversation about racism, politics, or current events that was frustrating or didn't go well.
5. Say...Talking about race with students and teachers can be hard.
 - a. There are a lot of reasons why this can be hard.
 - i. Many people have had bad experiences with conversations about race, politics, so they are hesitant about engaging again.
 - ii. We are afraid there may be repercussions if we say the wrong thing. These repercussions might come from the teacher, other students, parents, or the administrators.
 - iii. Many of us have been told all our lives not to talk about race and politics with people who are different from us.
 - iv. We feel so passionate about this issue. We want the other person to understand our perspective but are not interested in hearing theirs.
 - v. We are often talking about different things. For issues like racism, some of us are talking about our personal experiences, while others of us are talking about a system of oppression.
 - vi. Most of us don't intend to hurt each other. However, sometimes the words we use or the things we say have a very negative impact on the people we are talking with. We need to pay as much attention to the impact as we do to our intent.
 - vii. And, we are afraid to be vulnerable and expose ourselves in front of other students and teachers.
 - b. Does this make sense? We want to create some agreements and some structures that help us overcome these challenges when they arise.
6. Create Community Agreements that will help overcome these kinds of issues. Say...
 - a. We are going to create some community agreements that we will use throughout the year.
 - b. Think about what keeps you from engaging in these conversations in class. Then think about what you need from the teacher and other students to feel safe to engage. Write one or two ideas down.
7. Go over a list of possible agreements one by one. Say...
 - a. I'm going to put up some possible agreements that have worked in other classes. Afterwards, we'll decide which agreements we want and what we need to add.
 - b. Lean in and Lean out
 - If you are someone who easily jumps into a conversation, we ask you to lean out. That means, count to 10 to give space for quieter participants to lean in.
 - If you are typically quiet or sit back, we ask that you try to lean in more quickly than you normally would.
 - ii. Listen to understand
 - Usually, we are listening to someone else so that we can either agree or refute them. For this dialogue, we want to try to listen just to understand their

- experience.
- iii. Speak for yourself, don't try to speak for "your group," use "I" statements. Remember, that no one else is representing "their group".
 - iv. If you feel hurt by what someone says, say "Ouch" and say why
 - Typically, if someone says something that bothers or offends us, we either get respond angrily or just keep quiet. Frequently, the offender doesn't even know they offended anyone. We ask that if someone says something that offends you, you say ouch. We will then give you a chance to explain why it bothered you and then give the other person a chance to clarify their thoughts.
 - v. What's said in this class, stays in this class.
 - We need to feel confident that what we say here, stays here.
 - vi. Try to suspend you own beliefs to hear someone else's experiences
 - vii. Talk about the *impact* and not just the *intent*
 - viii. Try to be vulnerable
 - ix. Understand that it's okay to disagree
 - As I said earlier, this class is not a place where we all have to agree or try to convince someone else. We want to better understand different perspectives. Its okay if we disagree.
8. Have students raise their hands to suggest an agreement.
 9. Make sure to get consensus for each agreement before writing anything on the chart paper. Say...
 - a. It's only a community agreement if everyone agrees. Ask each other for clarification or speak up if you disagree.
 - b. After each agreement, I will ask for a thumbs up. If everyone agrees, we will put it on the chart paper. If not, we can talk about it some more. If we can't get agreements, we may end up putting it on the parking lot and come back to it later
 10. Read through the agreements and make sure everyone is okay. Then say...
 - a. It is up to everyone to hold everyone accountable to these agreements. Not just the facilitators.

A Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

Our goal is to better understand the issue and each other. We will look at different viewpoints and encourage a wide range of perspectives; we don't have to agree. How we talk to one another is as important as what we say. The chart below will help you understand how the process of dialogue differs from debate.

<i>Dialogue</i>	<i>Debate</i>
Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.	Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.	In debate, winning is the goal.
In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.	In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.
Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.	Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.
Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.	Debate defends assumptions as truth.
Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.	Debate causes critique of the other position.
Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.	Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.
Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and to change.	Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other people's reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.	In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.
Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.	Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.
In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.	In debate, one searches for glaring differences.
In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.	In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.
Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.	Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.
Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and together they can create a workable solution.	Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.
Dialogue remains open-ended.	Debate implies a conclusion.