

Facilitating Civil and Productive Classroom Conversations: Guidance and Lesson Plans

This set of lesson plans is intended to assist educators in increasing the frequency and quality of classroom conversations about community crises and current events to make them more civil and productive. It includes tips for teaching life-long skills for constructive and respectful discussions, even when disagreements will occur. The content is designed specifically for discussing societal events, community crises, and productive civic engagement. They can be modified to fit the local student and school context.

Intended Users

Intended users are district and school teams supporting K-12 teachers and other educators who are interested in supporting their students through providing the opportunity for civil dialogue and expression of thoughts and concerns. However, individual teachers who want to do this work can use it on their own as well.

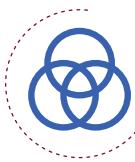
Rationale

Educators and students may be tempted to avoid discussing current events, community crises, and productive civic dialogue in schools. However, students are already getting information (sometimes incorrect) through media and other sources and may have complex questions about

current events. Students need to feel heard and know that their teachers care about them and their lived experiences. In addition, to become contributing members of an increasingly unique and dynamic society, students need skills for understanding their reactions to important events in society, communicating their feelings, and engaging with each other in civil and productive conversations.

Multiple Points of Entry for Individual Educators

We acknowledge that educators will feel varying levels of confidence in their skills in addressing current events or community crises in the classroom. Fortunately, there are many ways for individual educators to begin the conversation.



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For those just getting started on the journey, acknowledging students' experiences, feelings, and perspectives is an important first step. Regardless of individuals' confidence in leading these types of discussions, discomfort is likely, and planning for it will help. Teams may have access to district curricula that address skills such as using active listening, building consensus around respect for self and others, and self regulation.

Options to consider when planning for leading productive and healthy conversations include the following:

- 1. Share a statement.** State your care for your students and their lives, say you appreciate our different lived experiences, and acknowledge that we might be feeling many emotions (e.g., fear, anxiety, pain, guilt, shame, anger). You can then encourage students to talk with you after class or in passing periods (See sample lesson plans in Appendices A and B).
- 2. Teach important skills for engaging in civil and productive dialogue.** Many adults and students are not explicitly taught how to have conversations on difficult topics, and therefore conversations are unproductive or avoided altogether. Everyone can benefit from learning and practicing ways to share one's opinions and understand those of others (see Appendices C and D).
- 3. Facilitate class discussions.** Host a classwide dialogue about a current event or community crisis in school and society (see sample lesson plan in Appendix E).

Addressing Challenging Comments through Practiced Responses

Before teaching any lesson, it is helpful to consider what unproductive comments might arise and how to respond to them. Instead of having to figure out how to react on the spot, have a practiced response at the ready. By having a response at the ready, it's possible to make the conversation productive instead of end it completely. Some examples are provided here:

Use a Neutralizing Routine

A neutralizing routine is an alternative response to a harsh or snap-decision response when someone gets activated by another's behavior or comments. Although many adults use neutralizing routines regularly (e.g., take three deep breaths, pause and ask a different way), it is effective to develop, teach, and practice a schoolwide neutralizing routine (e.g., TRY; Take three deep breaths, Reflect on your Feelings, You got this [i.e., try again]) that both adults and students can use as replacement responses (Cook et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2021a, 2021b).

Teach Specific Conversation Skills or Responses

It is also helpful to teach how to respond when being the recipient of a hurtful comment, as well as being called out for saying hurtful things. Responses like "ouch and oops" can be used to provide easy communication in the moment (e.g., "ouch" when



hearing a hurtful comment, “oops” when being told “ouch”) and allow an opportunity to follow up with deeper conversation after the whole group discussion.

Establish a Community Agreement to Pause Conversations When Needed

When introducing the lesson and establishing agreements for conversations, consider adding an agreement that the conversation can be paused if a discussion becomes too heated. Teach both words and an accompanying hand signal (e.g., “time out” with a T symbol) so that anyone can use a gesture if it becomes too difficult to speak respectfully in the moment.



Appendix A: Classroom Statement on Community Crises or Challenging Current Events Lesson Plan (Primary Students)

The purpose of this lesson is to show to students that you care about them and their feelings, care about the issues that affect them, and maintain positive student-teacher relationships, especially after significant crises.

Lesson Details

- **Participants:** Students in kindergarten through second grade
- **Preparation:** Make sure you have taught and practiced classroom behavior expectations.
- **Time:** 5 minutes
- **Materials needed:** None

Steps

1. Share a statement of caring and affirmation. For example, say, *“I want all of you to know that I care about each of you. You all are both similar and different in many ways and that is what makes our classroom special and beautiful. Our world is also filled with people from many different places that all love their families and friends, just like we do. Sometimes things happen that can be scary and confusing, and each of us could have a different reaction, which is ok. There*

are no wrong feelings. I want to make sure all of you feel safe and cared for here every day.”

2. Let students know you are there for them. For example, say, *“If you don’t feel good about something going on in our classroom or in our world, I want you to know that I care and would like to listen when we have a break. I am here for you.”*

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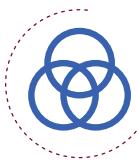
Reaffirm the statement with your students periodically, especially after community crises or challenging current events.

Alternatives

- Consider having the principal provide a similar message to all students before teachers follow up with this statement.
- Consider co-teaching this lesson with colleagues (e.g., other teachers, coaches) who may be more confident in the work.
- Consider holding a group discussion or ongoing circle with students about difficult topics (see Appendices D and E for samples).

Tip

It's good to acknowledge that you don't have all the answers but want to provide space to hear student voices. Sometimes the best thing we can do as teachers is listen to our students.



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Appendix B: Classroom Statement on Community Crises or Challenging Current Events Lesson Plan (Intermediate to Secondary Students)

The purpose of this lesson is to show to students that you care about them and their feelings, care about the issues that affect them, and maintain positive student-teacher relationships, especially after significant crises.

Lesson Details

- **Participants:** Students in intermediate and secondary grades
- **Preparation:** Make sure you have taught and practiced classroom behavior expectations.
- **Time:** 5 minutes
- **Materials needed:** None

Steps

1. Share a statement of caring and affirmation. For example, say, *“I want you all to know that like many of you, I have been noticing the current events in our community and society and understand the hurt or anxiety they may cause. I want our classroom to be a place where each student feels safe and respected, and I recognize that some of you may feel unsafe as a result*

of these events. I want to take the steps to help you feel safe here.”

2. Let students know are there for them. For example, say, *“I’d like to talk with any of you who would like to discuss more, share your feelings, or learn more about it after class or any time you’d like. I am here for you.”*

Following On

Reaffirm the statement with your students periodically, especially after community crises or challenging current events.

Alternatives

- Consider having the principal provide a similar message to all students before teachers follow up with this statement.
- Consider co-teaching this lesson with colleagues (e.g., other teachers, coaches, counselors) who may be more confident in the work.
- Consider holding a group discussion or ongoing circle with students about difficult topics (see Appendices D and E for samples).

Tip

It's good to acknowledge that you don't have all the answers but want to provide space to hear student voices. Sometimes the best thing we can do as teachers is listen to our students.

Appendix C: Preparing for Civil and Productive Classroom Conversations Lesson Plan (for School Personnel)

The purpose of this lesson is twofold: (a) to provide an opportunity to try out the difficult classroom discussions lesson plan before teaching it to students, and (b) to give school personnel sample community agreements and skills to use with each other in difficult conversations.

Lesson Details

- **Participants:** School personnel (e.g., faculty, staff)
- **Preparation:** Have a practiced response ready for any challenging comments. Identify a respected teacher to try out the student lesson ahead of time and share out their experiences.
- **Time:** 45 to 60 minutes
- **Materials needed:** Copies of the Preparing for Civil and Productive Classroom Discussions lesson plan ([Appendix D](#)). Posters of agreements and skills for difficult classroom conversations that could be used with students. Writing materials or devices for a writing activity. Flipchart paper for a T-chart activity.

Steps

1. **Introduce the lesson and its purpose.** For example, say, *"To become successful members of a civil society, students need to be able to have conversations about difficult topics. It's not easy for us adults either, but it's important for us as a community of learners. To support our students in building these skills, we are rolling out a specific lesson for having difficult classroom conversations. Because it may be new for our students, we are going to walk through the lesson plan as a group, so we can get some practice before we teach it and also have a protocol for having difficult discussions as a group of adults as well. That way we will be able to model the skills we teach and be a higher-performing team here."*
2. **Complete a free-write warm-up (or partner activity).** For example, say, *"Just as you'll see in the lesson plan, please spend the next 3 minutes writing about a time when you felt [insert schoolwide expectations, such as respected] by a colleague here at this school. What was the other person(s) saying and doing that made you feel that way?"*
3. **Discuss.** Invite participants to share their responses with the whole group. Ask participants to identify similarities and differences. For example, ask, *"What are you noticing about what others have offered? What similarities or differences did you hear? Is there something that never occurred to you?"*
4. **Anchor norms for discussion to the school-wide expectations.** For example, say, *"It's important for us to anchor this work in our schoolwide expectations, so students can see how they can pertain to group discussions. I'm going to role-play this with you all now. Who can give me an example of what it looks and sounds like to show respect when others are talking in a whole-class discussion, and why is it so important?"* Provide both examples and non-examples.
5. **Introduce a purpose for the activity.** For example, say, *"We want to be clear about the purpose of this lesson. Here is a suggested introduction: We are a community of learners. Some of our classroom discussions might be controversial for us, which provide an extra challenge. For these discussions, we will use*



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some additional agreements and communication skills to keep the high levels of respect and care for each other that I know we can expect from each other."

6. Try out a set of community agreements or norms for engaging in challenging conversations. For example, say, "Within our schoolwide expectations, it can be helpful to have a set of agreements or specific examples of following our expectations during difficult classroom conversations. Here is an example that you can use or adapt for your classrooms, and we will try them out here as a staff for our conversations as well. We will use four agreements:

- **Listen with the Intent to Learn** [an example of showing Respect]. We all need to be here and attend to the conversation, even if we feel like some issues don't relate to us personally. We will become a stronger community by trying to understand what is said in this group, especially if we don't agree with it initially. There may be parts that bring us understanding and closer connections. That is harder to do if we are focusing on what we are going to say next.
- **Share What Is True to You** [an example of showing Responsibility]. Each of us has our own experiences, and those experiences might be different from others. We will share our perspectives and know that other perspectives are just as valid. We do that using I-statements, where we speak only for ourselves.
- **Lean into Discomfort** [another example of showing Responsibility]. Some of our topics may make us uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable is not a bad thing because we can learn from it. So it's okay to be uncomfortable at times when we talk.
- **Make Mistakes and Allow Others to Make Them Too** [an example of showing Safety]. Each of us, including me, will use the wrong words, get our

facts wrong, or misinterpret situations. Because we are a community of learners, we use any mistakes as an opportunity to grow. Because some of these are abstract, it'll be important to ask students for examples and non-examples. What are some you think they would say?"

Ask participants to provide examples of what following these agreements looks and sounds like, providing performance feedback as needed.

7. Teach a set of communication skills. These skills will be helpful in navigating difficult topics. Here are some examples: "In addition to the agreements, there are a few communication skills that will be helpful. Here are four skills we recommend for communicating with respect:

- **One Mic.** One of us will speak at a time, using a talking piece. When you have the talking piece, you have the floor, and the rest of us will listen to understand, staying quiet until our turn.
- **Pass.** At any time, you can pass the piece or choose not to answer in front of the group.
- **Ouch and Oops.** If someone says anything that hurts our feelings, we can simply say "ouch," and others will stop what they are saying or doing, regardless of why. Likewise, if someone says "ouch" to us, we can say "oops" to acknowledge the hurt in the moment, and then apologize and repair the harm at a time when we are both ready.
- **Thumb Check.** Anytime I ask for a thumb check, hold your thumbs out. Up means I agree or I'm comfortable with that. Down is I disagree or I'm very uncomfortable with that. And sideways is something in between. There will be times when we aren't all in agreement, and we may need to move on. Students will need practice using them, and we will practice them in our discussions as well."



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- 8. Provide a teaching testimonial.** Identify a respected educator who has already taught the student lesson. Ask them to share out their experiences with the group, including positives and recommendations they would have for the group, and allow time for questions and answers.
- 9. Discuss and debrief.** Ask personnel to review the lesson plan in grade-level teams and job alikes, identifying how they would use or modify these lessons, agreements, and skills to meet their needs. Consider using a t-chart activity for identifying things that might help and hinder successful teaching of the lesson plan. Ask what

support teachers would need to teach the lesson successfully. Examples could be co-teaching the lesson, roleplaying with other adults, or viewing a video of an actual lesson.

- 10. Close the session.** For example, say, *“Thank you for your time and energy in helping to create a trusting and respectful community of learners. As adult models for the students, we can practice these agreements and skills regularly with each other so we build our confidence in leading students in classroom discussions about difficult topics.”* Provide clear directions for when the lessons are to be taught.

Following On

- Refer to the agreements periodically in staff meetings, labeling when colleagues follow them and providing constructive feedback when not.
- Practice using the communication skills with more and more difficult topics.

- Use strategies to ensure lesson implementation, such as using a common schedule or lesson log to sign off when the lesson is completed.
- Provide any additional support personnel identify as needed to be successful.

Alternatives

- Consider using your schoolwide expectations to frame conversations in place of adding specific community agreements or norms.
- Consider piloting this lesson first with a smaller group (e.g., leadership team, PBIS team) for fine tuning before using it with the whole staff.

- Consider using roleplays of the student lessons in grade-level teams.
- Consider co-teaching this lesson with colleagues (e.g., other teachers, coaches, counselors) who may be more confident in the work.

Tip

Have a practiced response (e.g., neutralizing routine) ready when colleagues share statements that violate the expectations or agreements and need to be addressed in front of the group (e.g., to maintain a safe and respectful learning environment). Treat it as a teachable moment and model how to respond in lessons with students.

Appendix D: Preparing for Civil and Productive Classroom Conversations Lesson Plan (Intermediate to Secondary Students)

The purpose of this lesson is to provide an opportunity to learn and practice discussion ground rules and communication skills to support the classroom in discussing potentially challenging topics.

Lesson Details

- **Participants:** Students in intermediate and secondary grades
- **Preparation:** Make sure you have taught and practiced class-wide behavior expectations, with student input as appropriate. Complete work to prepare yourself for this lesson (see [Embed within Existing Systems](#)).
- **Time:** 45 to 60 minutes
- **Materials needed:** Posters of classroom matrix, agreements, and skills for difficult classroom conversations. Writing materials or devices for a free-write activity.

Steps

1. **Complete a free-write warm-up (or partner activity).** For example, say, “Please spend the next 3 minutes writing about a time when you felt [insert school-wide expectations, such as respected] by a teacher or other classmates. What was the other person(s) saying and doing that made you feel that way?”
2. **Discuss.** Invite students to share their responses. Ask students to identify similarities and differences. For example, ask, “What are you noticing about what others have offered? What similarities or differences did you hear? Is there something that never occurred to you?” It may be useful to model for students with a think aloud.
3. **Revisit expectations for classroom behavior for whole group activities.** For example, say, “Who can give me an example of what it looks and sounds like to show respect when others are talking in the whole group, and why is it so important?” Provide both examples and non-examples.
4. **Introduce a purpose for the activity.** For example, say, “We are a community of learners. Some of our classroom discussions might be controversial for us, which provide an extra challenge. For these discussions, we will use some additional agreements and communication skills to keep the high levels of respect and care for each other that I know we can expect from each other.”
5. **Share a set of community agreements or norms for engaging in challenging conversations.** The following sample agreements have been helpful to educators): “We will use four agreements:
- **Listen with the Intent to Learn** [an example of showing Respect]. We all need to be here and attend to the conversation, even if we feel like some issues don’t relate to us personally. We will become a stronger community by trying to understand what is said in this group, especially if we don’t agree with it initially. There may be parts that bring us understanding and closer connections. That is harder to do if we are focusing on what we are going to say next.



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- **Share What Is True to You** [an example of showing Responsibility]. Each of us has our own experiences, and those experiences might be different from others. We will share our perspectives and know that other perspectives are just as valid. We do that using I-statements, where we speak only for ourselves.
- **Lean into Discomfort** [another example of showing Responsibility]. Some of our topics may make us uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable is not a bad thing because we can learn from it. So it's okay to be uncomfortable at times when we talk.
- **Make Mistakes and Allow Others to Make Them Too** [an example of showing Safety]. Each of us, including me, will use the wrong words, get our facts wrong, or misinterpret situations. Because we are a community of learners, we use any mistakes as an opportunity to grow. Because some of these are abstract, it'll be important to ask students for examples and non-examples. What are some you think they would say?"

Consider asking students to provide examples of what following these agreements looks and sounds like, or provide explicit instruction with examples and non-examples. Although it may feel contrived, it can be helpful to practice offering sincere apologies before the need arises.

6. Teach a set of communication skills. These skills will be helpful in navigating difficult topics. Here are

some examples: "We have four skills we are going to use to communicate with respect.

- **One Mic.** One of us will speak at a time, using a talking piece. When you have the talking piece, you have the floor, and the rest of us will listen to understand, staying quiet until our turn.
- **Pass.** At any time, you can pass the piece or choose not to answer in front of the group.
- **Ouch and Oops.** If someone says anything that hurts our feelings, we can simply say "ouch," and others will stop what they are saying or doing, regardless of why. Likewise, if someone says "ouch" to us, we can say "oops" to acknowledge the hurt in the moment, and then apologize and repair the harm at a time when we are both ready..
- **Thumb Check.** Anytime I ask for a thumb check, hold your thumbs out. Up means I agree or I'm comfortable with that. Down is I disagree or I'm very uncomfortable with that. And sideways is something in between. There will be times when we aren't all in agreement, and we may need to move on."

Practice each of these, either as a class or in small groups, until students give a thumbs up that they are confident they can use them correctly.

7. Close the session. For example, say, "We're going to practice these agreements and skills regularly so we build our confidence in having class-wide discussions about difficult topics."

- Practice using the communication skills with more and more difficult topics (see [Appendix E](#)).

Following On

- Refer to the classroom discussion agreements periodically, labeling them when students follow them and providing constructive feedback when not.

Alternatives

- Consider forming small groups of students for initial discussions.
- Consider the use of virtual platforms for students to share their comments, but make sure to moderate comments instead of projecting them automatically.
- Consider co-teaching this lesson with colleagues (e.g., other teachers, coaches, counselors) who may be more confident in the work.

Tip

Have a practiced response when students (or other adults) share statements that violate the expectations or agreements and need to be addressed in front of the class (e.g., to maintain a safe and respectful learning environment).

Appendix E: Discussing Community Crises or Challenging Current Events Lesson Plan (Intermediate to Secondary Students)

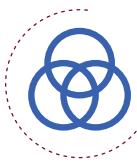
The purpose of this lesson is to provide students with an initial opportunity to share their experiences and feelings and feel heard regarding recent crises (e.g., conflict or violence in the school or community). Additional purposes are to demonstrate and practice the skills needed to hold constructive dialogue about important and difficult topics with civility and respect.

Lesson Details

- **Participants:** Students in intermediate and secondary grades
- **Preparation:** Make sure you have taught and practiced both classroom behavior expectations and agreements and skills in having difficult classroom discussions ([Appendix D](#)). Have a practiced response (e.g., neutralizing routine) ready for any harmful comments from a student or other adult.
- **Time:** 45 to 60 minutes
- **Materials needed:** Posters of classroom matrix, agreements, and skills for difficult classroom conversations. Writing materials or devices for a free-write activity.

Steps

1. **Revisit expectations for classroom behavior for whole group activities.** For example, say, “Who can give me an example of what it looks and sounds like to show respect when others are talking in the whole group, and why is it so important?” Provide both examples and non-examples.
2. **Introduce a purpose for the activity.** For example, say, “We are a community of learners. Some of our classroom discussions might be controversial for us, which provide an extra challenge. For these discussions, we will use some additional agreements and communication skills to keep the high levels of respect and care for each other that I know we can expect from each other.”
3. **Revisit the agreements for engaging in challenging conversations taught in the previous lesson ([Appendix D](#)),** such as Listen with the Intent to Learn, Share What is True to You, Lean into Discomfort, and Make Mistakes. Ask students to provide definitions in their own words and examples and non-examples.
4. **Practice any previously taught communication skills ([Appendix D](#)),** such as One Mic, Pass, Ouch and Oops, and Thumb Check. Ask students to share examples and non-examples.
5. **Complete a free-write activity.** For example, say, “Please take the next 5 [or so] minutes to write for yourself your thoughts about or experiences with [the crisis or difficult topic]. These are for your reference. I will not be collecting them, so please write freely.” Alternatively, you could collect these statements and read selected comments anonymously. Possible prompts (either for free-writing or discussion) include:
 - Please share what you are thinking or feeling right now about [recent event].



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- Write about a time when you felt unsafe because of what someone else did or said. What happened, and how do you feel about it now?

6. Hold a discussion. Use your discussion norms (e.g., talking stick in a classroom circle) to invite students to share their experiences. Reaffirm that students should use their discussion skills (e.g., One Mic, Pass, Ouch and Oops). Make sure to model these skills for students. Use Ouch if you can perceive that a statement hurts students, but they don't say it themselves. Use thumb checks as needed but do not enforce an expectation of consensus or closure.

Allow students to speak and be open to where the conversation goes, even if it ends prematurely.

7. Let students know are there for them. For example, say, *"I'd like to talk with any of you who would like to discuss more, share your feelings, or learn more about it after class or any time you'd like. I am here for you."*

8. End the session with positive feedback. For example, say, *"Thank you for being honest and engaged in this conversation. This is not easy, and I appreciate how you've treated each other in this discussion."*

Following On

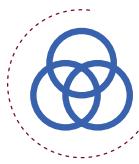
Consider what the next lesson or discussion should be. Identify whether individual students may benefit from individual dialogue and support.

Alternatives

- Use a specific current event (e.g., a local or national crisis) as a concrete starting point for students to share their feelings in Step 5.
- Consider forming small groups of students for initial discussions.
- Consider the use of virtual platforms for students to share their comments, but make sure to moderate comments instead of projecting them automatically.
- Consider co-teaching this lesson with colleagues (e.g., other teachers, coaches) who may be more confident in the work.

Tips

- Have a practiced response when students (or other adults) share statements that could cause harm or violate norms and need to be addressed to maintain a safe and respectful learning environment.
- It can be helpful to acknowledge that you don't have all the answers but want to provide space to hear student voices. Sometimes the best thing we can do as teachers is listen to our students.
- Accept the fact that discussions can be helpful but will not solve all problems. There will likely be unknowns and uncertainty about how to move forward.



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