

Dialogue Activities From the Constructive Dialogue Institute¹⁰

The following are practical, ready-to-go strategies designed to foster and facilitate constructive dialogue in the classroom.

You can choose to go through each resource sequentially, or you can peruse the options and pick one or two you prefer. When choosing which ones to use, you might consider your time constraints, your experience level with facilitating constructive dialogue, or your students' particular needs and interests.

Generally, these are activities and exercises that help *start* conversations. It can often be difficult to know how to broach divisive topics. These suggestions aim to structure conversation in an accessible way so that dialogue can flow constructively from there.

¹⁰ Fay, J., & O'Neil, E. (2022). *Constructive dialogue and elections: An educator guide to engaging students*. The Constructive Dialogue Institute. <https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/elections-guide>

The Questions Game

[15 MINUTES]

Suggested Language for Framing

“Constructive dialogue is about understanding, not changing, others’ minds. We are going to practice listening without responding, and asking questions that can get people to share even more. Good listening and thoughtful question-asking are fundamental skills of constructive dialogue.”

Silent Brainstorm

First, ask participants to think about a political opinion or value that they hold.

Suggested Language

“Start by thinking about a political opinion or value that you hold. To get you thinking, consider your answers to these questions: When you think about the problems of the world, what comes to mind as the most concerning? What is an issue that gets you really fired up and angry? What is the issue you are most likely to write to a politician about or to attend a protest about?”

Pair Work

Next, divide participants into pairs for 5 minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS

- **Person 1:** Share a political opinion or value that you hold.
- **Person 2:** Ask follow-up questions to understand more about your partner’s stance. Hold back on responding or sharing anything about your own stance—Person 2 should only ask questions during this time. The questions should have the intention of learning more about where Person 1 is coming from.
- **Person 1:** Share your responses.

After one 5-minute round, pairs should switch roles.

EXAMPLES OF CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS

- What makes you say that?
- Why is that issue so important to you?
- Did a person or experience influence your belief?
- Can you say more about what you mean when you say _____?
- Why do you think that is?
- Have you always felt that way?

Wrap-Up

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What did you notice or experience in your pairs?
- What did it feel like when you shared your political opinion or value?
- What did it feel like to just ask questions?
- Did anything surprise you?

Facilitator Considerations

- The Questions Game can be modified for varied skill levels or topics. Facilitators can make each pair segment longer or shorter, depending on how in depth you would like the sharing to be.
- Regardless of topic or depth, the key component should always remain the same: one person only asking questions, and the other person only answering those questions (and then switch roles).

Belief Spectrum: Election Edition

[20 MINUTES FOR THE ACTIVITY; 30 TO 40 MINUTES FOR DEBRIEF/DIALOGUE]

This activity prepares students to share about their stance on key issues and belief systems by arranging themselves across a physical spectrum between “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” Students share their positions (agree or disagree) by moving themselves along a spectrum. From this, students can share silently (which can be easier), and educators can learn which issues or topics represent the most diverse viewpoints among their students.

Set the Stage

1. Put two pieces of paper on opposite sides of the room (the floor or walls): “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree.”
2. Suggested language to set the stage:
 - “Everything between these two polar opposites is a spectrum. The middle of the spectrum can be thought of as neutral or unsure.
 - “I will read through a series of statements, one at a time. When you hear a statement, please move silently along the spectrum, based on your opinion or stance on that statement.
 - “The goal of the activity is to begin to see where we differ. So be as honest as you can—don’t just follow your friends.
 - “You’ll have the chance to discuss afterward, so please hold your comments or questions until that stage. This part is fully silent.”

Instruction Tips

1. Read statements twice so students can really think through their stance before moving, and pause for 10 to 15 seconds after reading each statement.
2. After the 10 to 15 seconds, ask students to look around and notice who is near them and who is not.
3. Read the next statement until you have gone through them all.

Instructor Considerations and Modifications

- For a more student-led activity, instructors can choose to ask students to generate their own list of statements in advance.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS

- I think there are things in my country that need to improve.
- I think that my country's political leaders accurately represent my views.
- I feel comfortable sharing my political views openly in this community.
- I think criticizing political leaders is patriotic.
- The best way to make change is to vote.
- The best way to make change is locally and in your community.
- The government has a responsibility to care for its people.
- The two-party system is a good thing for our country.
- I think people make assumptions about my political party that are untrue.
- I have had people unfairly stereotype me based on where I am from.
- I have had people unfairly stereotype me based on how I look.
- When people succeed, it is because of hard work.
- The media is a good place to learn about the world.
- It is better to be a member of a group than a leader of a group.
- I feel hopeful about this election.

Wrap-Up

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What did you notice about this exercise?
- What did you learn about your peers?
- What did you like about this activity? What was challenging about this activity?
- What questions do you have for your peers about some of the beliefs that surfaced within this activity? Be sure to ask questions from a place of curiosity rather than judgment.

Conversation Simulator

[15 MINUTES]



Follow the link in this QR code to an interactive program to learn three science-backed strategies for navigating difficult conversations and practice them through a personalized interactive online simulator. You will get a chance to practice the following:

- Establish a collaborative goal.
- Get curious.
- Tell a personal story.



When Discussions Get Too Heated¹¹

It is normal and expected that when talking about divisive topics that matter deeply to students, some conflict or discord will arise. Here are some ways to intervene to lower the temperature in the conversation.

SCENARIO	INTERVENTION SUGGESTION
<p>A student makes a statement based on misinformation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask questions to start. Begin from a place of genuine curiosity: "Can you tell me more about what you mean?" "What makes you say that?" "How did you come to believe that?" • Refer to group expertise. "What is it like to hear this?" "I'd like to hear some people's reactions." • Point out shared values. "I can see that many students care about democracy and truth." "Both of you value fairness."
<p>A student disengages from the conversation because it is uncomfortable and awkward.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer to norms: When establishing group norms, we suggest including "Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process." Remind students of that purpose when things get uncomfortable. • Then, consider changing the structure of the conversation to small groups or pairs. Check in with the student one on one to see how they want to proceed and what would help them feel better about staying in the conversation next time.
<p>A student has become frustrated after hearing a classmate's commitment to a candidate or stance with which they strongly disagree.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once each student has expressed their point of view, try naming the feelings being expressed. "It sounds like hearing that made you feel frustrated—is that right?" This gives everyone a chance to slow down and lets students know you are listening. • Ask constructive questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes you say that? • Why is that important to you? • How do you know? • Can you say more about what you mean when you say_____? • Why do you think that is?
<p>A student expresses feeling shamed because of their identity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect to norms and purpose: "Everyone is here to learn and understand. Learning and understanding new experiences or perspectives can definitely be uncomfortable." • Promote agency over shame: "Shame can be a strong reaction, and we want to empower students to feel the agency to create change based on what they see and hear, rather than focusing on guilt-based responses." • Ask the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "These conversations can feel really difficult at times. What do you notice in yourself that feels difficult or uncomfortable?" • "What are you learning right now about this group or the world around you? What do you wish were different?"
<p>A student has said something harmful or ignorant about a group of people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change the pace: "I could be wrong, but I want to pause and notice that something was just said that could possibly be harmful to some students" • Name the statement or assumption: "That statement assumes x, y, or z, which could feel hurtful or inaccurate to some of you. Given that the purpose of constructive dialogue is to learn and understand, I want to be sure we're sticking with those values." • Refer to group expertise: "I notice some of our class looks like they are withdrawing from the conversation. Would someone like to address the feelings that may exist or the reactions that are happening?" • Change the structure: Initiate a turn-and-talk: "Share with your partner how you are feeling about this dialogue and a question you may have."

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