

Helping Students Build Comfort with Debate and Civil Dialogue

“Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” —Robert Frost

The proper mindset to adopt during an academic debate is one of detached, calm reasoning. That doesn’t mean that you can’t passionately argue for your side, but it does mean that you remain logical and stick to the issues at hand. The teacher must explain and enforce certain ground rules, insisting that students stick to the topic and that they do not judge or label students for the positions they support. Without the confidence that the teacher will maintain and enforce such civility, the dialogue will break down and students will retreat to safe/neutral positions. Similarly, if one position becomes dominant or one side becomes confused, the teacher must be ready to step in to bolster the weaker side so that students have the opportunity to hear the best arguments on both sides of a controversial issue.

Here are steps for building comfort with classroom debates and civil dialogue:

WATCH DEBATES: One good way to start is by having students watch other people debate contentious topics in a peaceful fashion. This is an effective way of modeling the kind of discourse you are trying to promote. (You can find some of these at [IntelligenceSquared](#) or the [Oxford Union](#) or [City Club of Cleveland](#) or the [National Speech & Debate Association](#). Just be sure to preview the debate, first, so you can be sure it’s appropriate for high school viewing.) Then, the students can practice responding to the points made by the debaters and have a discussion about which points they agreed or disagreed with and why.

PRACTICE DEFENDING AN ASSIGNED SIDE: It is helpful, in the beginning, to be assigned a side in a debate. This absolves the student of responsibility for being personally associated with a position publicly, which can be very threatening to a young ego. (And—let’s face it: in this polarizing age, it can be very threatening for anyone of any age!)

PRACTICE TAKING A SIDE ON A CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE: This is actually a highly threatening situation for a student in a classroom, so you will want to proceed carefully and respectfully, without discounting the fear and pressure that students may feel. Students will be afraid of being targeted by their peers for taking the “wrong” or “unpopular” position, of disappointing their teacher by choosing a view that might differ from his/hers, or of being exposed as ignorant or inarticulate if they can not explain the reasons for their views.

There are a few ways to help students gain a sense of comfort with taking sides on a controversial issue. Their level of comfort will depend on peer/social pressure, personal temperament, and the classroom climate that is fostered and maintained by the teacher. In an unskillfully managed

classroom, it would not be surprising for students to avoid taking controversial positions and to side with the majority to avoid being forced to defend a minority position and the risks of being isolated and attacked or ridiculed.

One way is to begin anonymously. This could mean posing a controversial topic and then asking the students to write on a folded slip of paper (with no name) whether they “Agree” or “Disagree” with the position. The teacher could then collect the folded pieces of paper and sort them into piles. You could include several categories, such as “Strongly Agree,” “Disagree Somewhat” and “Unsure/Neutral” (although you run the risk that a large number of students will select the Neutral position to avoid controversy).

You could then ask for volunteers from each group to share the reasons why they either Agree or Disagree with a position and then solicit comments. After discussion, you could pose the question again to see if any students had changed their positions.

A teacher could also have 5 chairs in the front of the classroom and ask for volunteers to represent different positions on a controversial issue: Agree Strongly, Agree Somewhat, Unsure/Neutral, Disagree Somewhat, Disagree Strongly. Students who volunteer are likely to be among the stronger personalities in the room, but this is a good opportunity to begin to familiarize the entire class with the process of taking and defending a position without placing them in the position of feeling publicly exposed or threatened. The volunteers can state their arguments and the rest of the students can ask questions and add commentary in a supportive role. After the discussion, students can be asked by a show of hands where they now stand and if any have changed sides.

To include everyone in taking sides, you could mark the 4 walls of your classroom with signs indicating the 4 different positions: Agree Strongly to Disagree Strongly. The middle of the classroom could be for Unsure/Neutral students. The students in each of the positions, as a group, could be asked to argue for their position on the controversial topic and then the neutral students could be instructed to move from the center of the room to a position on the walls, indicating which side they are now willing to take. Likewise, students who have already taken a position could be allowed to switch sides, if their view has changed in light of the discussion.

Teachers will have to be sensitive to the fact that some hesitant students are likely to watch where most of the students in the class are heading before deciding which position to pick. This is a way to try to hide among the crowd. It is possible that the majority of the class will choose the Neutral position. Likewise, it is possible that a particular position may have no one, or very few, defending it. It is a good idea, in this situation, for the teacher to take this position to help balance the odds and make it clear that it is acceptable to be in any position, and that it is also acceptable to switch positions.

PRACTICE DEFENDING YOUR SIDE: The next step would be asking students to select a side on a controversial issue and then to defend it individually, rather than as a group. This can be a big challenge and is a psychological risk for any one, but if students have gained comfort with taking public positions and if the teacher has done a good job creating psychological “safety” in the

classroom, students will begin to be able to approach this high-level task. Teachers must stand on guard against personal attacks from other students and to help bolster flagging arguments, or to propose thought-provoking counter-arguments, when the discussion bogs down.

Students who are engaging in written preparation for delivering an oral argument can be guided to accumulate at least 3 pieces of evidence supporting their view. Having this prepared evidence in hand is very helpful in giving students the confidence required for public speaking/position taking.

It is also extremely important to always give students a safe “out.” Much like the game show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?”, teachers could allow students to request help from the teacher or help from the “audience” (class), if they run out of things to say. This way, students will know they have support if they need it.

PRACTICE SWITCHING SIDES: An extra level of challenge, and one that is suitable for advanced or extraverted students who willingly take and defend controversial positions, is to ask students to “switch sides” or “switch roles” during a debate/dialogue. This forces students to look at the same question from multiple angles and requires them to engage with the other side’s position.

Being assigned positions, and being able to switch sides, helps develop cognitive flexibility and guards against blindspots and biases. (This is similar to what has been called the “Turing Test,” named after Alan Turing’s assertion that we’d know we’d created artificial intelligence when a human who was talking to a computer wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between it and a real human. The Ideological Turing Test is when you’re able to argue a position to someone, and they can’t tell if you really support that position or not.) This is how we learn to look at issues from all angles and find the shortcomings in our own arguments. It’s also the way that good lawyers prepare for a trial: they prepare *both* sides of the case in order to anticipate the arguments that the other side

