

# Fostering Civil Discourse

## A Guide for Classroom Conversations

'May you live in interesting times' is a phrase, often wrongly attributed to an ancient Chinese proverb, that lately has gained much traction, both online and in print. Its frequent use suggests that many feel it accurately reflects the uncertainty and difficulty that defines our current socio-political climate. These 'interesting times' of ours are characterised by tragic acts of violence on innocent civilians; the growth of populism and the alt-right; a Punch and Judy politics of insult-throwing, at national and international levels; and division: as highlighted by Brexit, our nation is divided, economically, geographically and politically. Sadly, our dependency on technology further risks promoting these trends in sectarianism and scapegoating: social media has created conditions ripe for the success of fake news; has allowed people to immerse themselves in echo chambers, which reinforce, rather than challenge, their beliefs; and has facilitated the rise in online trolls, those who hurl abuse they would not dare deliver in person from the safety of their home via Twitter tirades.

Given the potential for social discord, as educators we must be concerned about, and actively addressing, the lessons that today's young people might be absorbing about problem solving, communication, and the ability to make a difference. The next generation of voters needs role models to learn how to think critically, debate constructively and work for change; the strength of our democracy requires it. And if such behaviour is absent from society, then we must model it in the classroom.

The classroom should be a place where students learn to listen with patience and respect for different points of view, try out ideas and positions, and give - and get - constructive feedback without fear or intimidation. Through engaging in difficult conversations, students can develop critical thinking skills, embrace complexity and difference, cultivate a healthy skepticism to help them question and dissect the world around them, and, importantly, gain a vital skill: learning how to respectfully disagree.

Before using any of these strategies in the classroom, it is important to note that the implementation of them alone will not produce thoughtful and productive class discussions. It is crucial that teachers carefully consider the questions, readings, or other materials they use to introduce and frame these activities and how those introductory materials connect to current events. We recommend using open-ended questions where possible and resources that reflect the complexity inherent in contemporary issues, rather than those which provoke existing biases, as these tend to lead to meaningful learning experiences. We also advise carefully previewing any materials to ensure they are appropriate for the students you teach.

On the following pages, we have provided some tools and teaching strategies to help you prepare your students to be reflective thinkers who engage with the world around them constructively, respectfully and critically. They are divided into the following sections:

1. Start with Yourself
2. Create a Classroom Contract
3. Enable Students to Start with Themselves
4. Provide Opportunities for Student Reflection
5. Use Journals to Establish a Safe Space
6. Implement Effective Teaching Strategies

## Start With Yourself

In order to create a classroom environment that can effectively support difficult conversations, we must start by striving to model constructive civil discourse ourselves. We have to be aware of our own strongly held beliefs, political positions, emotional responses, and biases and be thoughtful about how they influence what we say and do when the headlines enter into the classroom. Remember that you are not a neutral participant in your classroom, and take ownership of the lens that you bring to the classroom community. Students may have experiences that are similar to, or different from, yours that inform their responses.

In this post from the Guardian's anonymous education blog, 'The Secret Teacher', a teacher shares their fears about political impartiality in their school, and how this biased behaviour may impact students, restricting empathy and ultimately limiting political participation. The writer makes a case for meaningfully engaging with opposing views to not only give students the skills in later life to defend and justify their own opinions, but to 'prepare students to be able to reach across political divides'. For any teacher who has not offered 'compelling counter narratives' for beliefs different to their own, this makes sobering reading. This post was the most widely read in the series in 2017.

I teach in a mixed comprehensive in a constituency where on 8 June over two-thirds voted Labour, where an overwhelming majority voted Labour in the most recent mayoral vote, and where Labour has been the largest party on the local council for decades. A large majority of staff at our school vote Labour.

As a Labour supporter, this thrills me; as a teacher, it makes me question whether my school is doing enough to help our students appreciate other viewpoints.

As teachers, we are bound by the 1996 Education Act to present different political beliefs impartially and to not promote partisan political views. Yet, probably unintentionally, my school is often an echo-chamber for the left-wing views of its staff and its students' parents.

Views that fall outside the accepted liberal-left spectrum get short shrift in my staffroom. I have watched teachers react incredulously – almost to the point of tears – when colleagues have tried floating a reasonable case for Brexit. This would be harmless enough if it did not put in doubt their ability to empathise with views opposed to their own.

Unfortunately, I see that lack of empathy in the classroom. It worries me that few of my colleagues seem to understand why Conservatives think as they do. In lessons discussing the general election, I have seen teachers make half-hearted attempts to present a right-wing line of reasoning about the major issues. Their bored or frustrated tone of voice says it all.

In theory students are introduced to a range of ideologies through studying government and politics. But I have only heard Labour politicians being criticised by fellow teachers for being too right-wing. We have had assemblies celebrating feminists and the campaign for a living wage, which are excellent and informative, but with no attention given to right-of-centre subjects (none that weren't heavily critical, anyway).

The latter were balanced presentations insofar as they covered arguments on both sides, although dissenting views were always delivered under an arched eyebrow. Perhaps this is unavoidable. After all, I do not think it is unreasonable for teachers to share their political views, provided they make caveats about these being personal views. In its guidance to schools, Ted Huddleston of the Citizenship Foundation warned that "it does young people no favours to shield them from views they are likely to encounter in society".

In schools like mine, however, where students are already immersed in political uniformity, we do them no favours by merely presenting different views. What we should do is offer compelling counter-narratives, so that students can appreciate why people might reasonably hold different political views from their own, regardless of differences in background.

Teachers at my school didn't tell students to vote Labour on 8 June – they are just as nervous about being overly partisan as many others in the profession. But by shaping our students' climate of political opinion, my colleagues implicitly define what students come to regard as reasonable and acceptable political views.

It often seems like few other authority figures in my students' lives are preparing them for life outside their Labour bubble, where, for example, austerity is not automatically a term of abuse, and welfare not always accepted as a good thing. The net effect is to restrict their intellectual curiosity about, and ability to empathise with, others of different political persuasions.

I see evidence for this every week when I hear otherwise bright and articulate students justify their political opinions with vague, lazy arguments. As John Stuart Mill foresaw, since they have never learned to defend value judgments that seem entirely natural to them, they will struggle to respond to their opponents beyond the school gates.

This is about more than education. With our politics increasingly polarised, it saddens me to see my students being initiated – deliberately or not – into an essentially Manichaean view of politics, with a checklist of "goodies" (leftists, trade unions, Corbyn) and "baddies" (Tories, Brexiteers, anyone who uses the phrase British values without irony).

Given this, don't my colleagues and I have a responsibility to do more than offer, in the words of the Education Act, "a balanced presentation of opposing views" – which in practice is often just paying lip service? Ought we not to make a habit of playing devil's advocate?

Only an active commitment on the part of all teachers to resisting the status quo in our students' lives – whatever that might be – will prepare them for meaningful political participation. This involves making the effort to articulate an intellectually rigorous and persuasive case for political views far removed from ours – and from theirs.

Teaching active empathy with different political views than our own might require more time and work on our part but it would better prepare students to be able to reach across political divides in later life. Surely we could use some of that right now.

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Remember that you are not a neutral participant in your classroom

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You can read [this post](https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/series/the-secret-teacher) and others in 'The Secret Teacher' series here: <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/series/the-secret-teacher>.

# Create a Classroom Contract

To help prepare students for life beyond school, classroom communities should, in many ways, be microcosms of democracy - a place where explicit rules and implicit norms protect everyone's right to speak; where different perspectives can be heard and valued; where members take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the group as a whole; and where each member has a stake and a voice in collective decisions. However, such behaviours are not a given, they are consciously learned and adherence to them is developed over time. A great way to initiate this democratic community is to establish shared norms by discussing them openly through a process called "contracting".

Class contracts typically include several clearly defined rules or expectations, and are created collaboratively by students and the teacher. Whilst these should be consistent with the classroom rules already established by the teacher, they may contain additional ideas proposed by the students. The process of creating a contract is a democratisation of the classroom space, as students are given an opportunity to express their views and reservations concerning the ideal learning space, and to collectively debate the relevance of any proposed rules, discarding any that are inappropriate or rewording any that require clarification to ensure all members feel comfortable with them. The following is a list of suggested items for your classroom contract. As you work together to create your own, you may want to discuss, include or modify any or all of the items on this list:

- Respect each other.
- Listen with patience and respect. Try to understand what someone else is saying before rushing to judgment.
- Make comments using "I" statements. ("I disagree with what you said. Here's what I think.")
- If you do not feel safe making a comment or asking a question, write the thought down. You can ask the teacher after class to help you find a safe way to share the idea.
- If someone says something that hurts or offends you, do not attack the person. Acknowledge that the comment - not the person - hurt your feelings and explain why.
- Put downs are never acceptable.
- If you don't understand something, ask a question.

- Think with your head and your heart.
- Share talking time - provide room for others to speak.
- Do not interrupt others while they are speaking.
- Write down thoughts in a journal or notebook if you don't have time to say them during the class.

We encourage you to frequently remind your students that, regardless of the classroom strategy you are using or the topic you are addressing, it is essential that their participation honours the contract they helped create and follows your own classroom rules. In addition, we strongly recommend that you post the contract in a prominent location in your classroom and refer to its specific language when you redirect students who stray from the guidelines set forth in the contract. You might find that when one student deviates, others will respond by citing the specific expectations listed in the contract.

You also need to make it clear that while you encourage the expression of different viewpoints and a right for people to speak without judgment, certain standards must be upheld. It is important to point out when things cross the line in order to create a safe community. A teacher's behaviour in these situations sets the tone for the whole class, and ensures that mutual respect remains the cornerstone of the classroom environment.

We cannot predict events that might elicit difficult questions from, or spark heated debates between, students in classrooms, but by creating a contract and embedding its values into our learning environment we can create a classroom community that will better prepare our students to respond thoughtfully and respectfully to such events.

# Enable Students to Start with Themselves

At the start of a project or term, or before tasks that require students to understand another's perspective, motivations or actions, encourage students to start with themselves, reflecting on who they are, why they think what they do, and why they behave as they do. By doing so, you can foster conditions that encourage students to be conscious, and critical, of their own lens whilst facilitating an understanding of oneself and others, which is a necessary precondition for feeling empathy.

## Identity Charts

Identity charts are a graphic tool that can help students consider the many factors that shape who they are as individuals and communities. Use identity charts to deepen students' understanding of themselves, groups, nations, and historical and literary figures. Sharing their own identity charts with peers can help students build relationships and break down stereotypes. In this way, identity charts can be used as an effective classroom community-building tool.

## Procedure

1. Ask the class to brainstorm categories they consider when thinking about the question, "Who am I?". These could include familial roles (e.g. daughter, brother), hobbies and interests (e.g. football fan, piano player), backgrounds (e.g. religion, race, nationality), personality traits, and physical characteristics. It is often helpful to show students a completed identity chart before they create one of their own.
2. Give students a set period of time, perhaps ten minutes, to complete their own identity charts in silence.
3. Ask students to share their charts in pairs or groups, explaining each of the features of their identities, and comparing how their content and categories differed.
4. Begin a class discussion about identity, allowing students to volunteer to share their identity charts with the rest of the class. You can then facilitate a discussion about which categories were most used and why this could be, or about what these charts show us about identity (i.e. that it has many different strands), why this is important and why this can be a cause of conflict.
5. Students can then create identity charts for groups, nations, historical and literary figures, or any individuals

that are relevant to the content being studied.

Alternatively, you could begin this activity by having students create identity charts for themselves. After they share their charts, students can create a list of the categories they have used to describe themselves and then apply this same list of categories as a guide when creating identity charts for other people or groups.



# Universe of Obligation

Sociologist Helen Fein coined the phrase ‘universe of obligation’ to describe the group of individuals within a society “toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.” In other words, a society’s universe of obligation includes those people who that society believes belong, who deserve respect and whose rights it believes are worthy of protection.

By creating, and comparing, their own universes of obligation, students are able to understand and critique the implicit norms and beliefs that govern their own behaviour and that of those belonging to the society in which they live. Such self-reflection and understanding paves the way for critiquing the impact these implicit norms could have on those who are in the outer circles or those who do not appear in it at all.

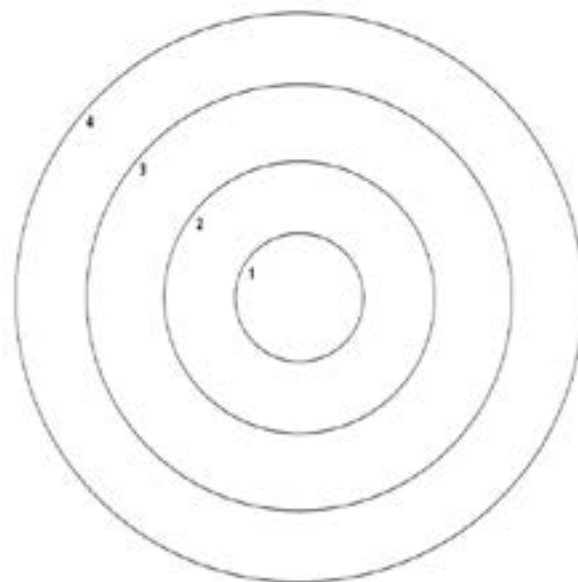
## Procedure

Explain to students the concept of a universe of obligation, and how to fill one out:

1. In Circle 1, students write their own name. In Circle 2, they write the name of people to whom they feel the greatest obligation, for example, people for whom they would be willing to take risks or put themselves in danger for. In Circle 3, they then note down those to whom they have some obligation, but not as great as in Circle 2, and in Circle 4, they note down those to whom they have some obligation, but not as great as in Circle 3.
2. Before filling in their own sheet, students may wish to mindmap the different sorts of things they could include in their universe of obligation. It does not need to just include people, it can include concepts, beliefs, commitments, animals, etc.
3. Give students a set period of time to complete their universes of obligation in silence.
4. Ask students to share their universes of obligation in pairs or groups, explaining their choices and what they included, and comparing how their content differed.
5. Begin a class discussion, allowing students to volunteer to share their universes of obligation with

the rest of the class. Did any patterns emerge? You can then facilitate a discussion about how universes of obligation vary between groups in different societies, and groups in the same societies, and what problems this can pose.

6. Students can then create universes of obligation for any individuals, groups or societies (be they fictional or real) related to class study to understand the motivations and social conditions that make people behave the way they do towards others.



# Provide Opportunities for Student Reflection

Silence is one of the most powerful and underused tools in the classroom: it creates space for thought and sends students the message that we trust them as thoughtful learners who need time to reflect. It is, therefore, vital that students are given opportunities to silently meditate on topics covered in class, to compose and understand their thoughts.

## Journaling

A journal is a tool for silent reflection that provides students with opportunities to formulate and process their ideas, to critically examine their surroundings from multiple perspectives, and to make informed judgments about what they see and hear. Moreover, many students find that writing or drawing in a journal helps them process ideas, formulate questions, and retain information as well as providing them with a safe space to share thoughts, feelings and uncertainties. In this way, journals can also be an assessment tool - something teachers can review to better understand what their students know, what they are struggling to understand, and how their thinking has changed over time.

While there are many effective ways to use a journal as a learning tool, below are five questions we suggest you consider:

1. What is the teacher’s relationship with students’ journals? Will you read everything they write? Is it possible for them to keep something private? Will their journals be marked? If so, by what criteria? You can set limits on the degree to which you have access to students’ journals. Many teachers establish a rule that if students wish to keep information in their journals private, they should fold the page over or remove the page entirely.
2. What is appropriate content for journals? It is easy for students to confuse a class journal with a diary (or blog) because both formats allow for open-ended writing. Teachers should clarify how the audience and purpose for this writing is distinct from that of writing in a personal diary. To avoid uncomfortable situations, many teachers find it helpful to clarify topics that are not suitable material for journal entries. Also, teachers should explain that they are required to take certain steps if students reveal information about possible harm to themselves or another student.
3. How will journals be evaluated? Many students admit that they are less likely to share their true thoughts or express questions when they are worried about a mark based on getting the “right” answer or using proper grammar or spelling. Therefore, we suggest that if you choose to mark students’ journals, which many teachers do, you base these marks on criteria such as effort, thoughtfulness, completion, creativity, curiosity, and making connections between the past and the present. Moreover, there are many ways to provide students with feedback on their journals besides traditional marking, such as by writing comments or asking questions.
4. What forms of expression can be included in a journal? Students learn and communicate best in different ways. The journal is an appropriate space to respect different learning styles. Some students may wish to draw their ideas rather than record thoughts in words. Other students may feel most comfortable responding in concept webs and lists instead of prose. When you introduce the journal to students, you might brainstorm different ways that they might express their thoughts.
5. How should journal content be publicly shared? Most Facing History teachers have found that students are best able to express themselves when they believe their journal is a private space. Therefore, we suggest that information never be publicly shared without the consent of the writer. At the same time, we encourage you to provide multiple opportunities for students to voluntarily share ideas and questions they have recorded in their journals. Some students may feel more comfortable reading from their journals than speaking “off the cuff” in class discussions.

## Use Journals to Establish a Safe Space

Journals can be the first port of call in assisting teachers to address difficult topics in the classroom - e.g., issues related to race, sexuality, immigration, and religion. Often before entering a period of constructive debate, it is helpful to first acknowledge the possible discomfort of participants and reassure them that their feelings are valid and their contributions to the discussion are valuable.

The following activity is designed to help create a safe space. You can replace the word “race” with whatever sensitive topic you’re focused on.

1. Start with a journal prompt: Tell students that the following writing exercise is a private journal entry that they will not be asked to share with anyone, so they should feel free to write their most honest reflection. Have students take several minutes to complete this sentence: “I mostly feel \_\_\_\_\_ when discussing race, because \_\_\_\_\_.”
2. Now that students have gathered their thoughts, tell them that you are going to do a group brainstorm. They should not make “I” statements or share how they feel or what they wrote. Tell students: Let’s put words on the board that represent the feelings that we think may be in the room when we discuss race. At this point, we will just list and not comment on them.
3. Now look at the list. Ask students: What do the words have in common? (*Usually the words are mostly, but maybe not all, negative.*) What else do you notice? (*The words are not just surface observations; they are deeply personal feelings.*) Do you have any other important reflections? (*The words*

*represent a wide and varied range of responses.*) Which of these feelings are most valid? (*They are all valid. You may want to acknowledge that this is a rhetorical question, but it is important to validate everyone’s feelings.*) Where do these feelings come from? (*Personal experiences, the media, stereotypes, etc.*)

4. It’s important for teachers and students to acknowledge that these feelings are in the room and that they need not be afraid of them. Each person should be allowed to enter this conversation wherever he or she is without being judged or shut down. Everyone needs to feel free to participate without fear of being called racist or given any other label.

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Sometimes it is helpful to first acknowledge the possible discomfort of participants.

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## Implement Effective Teaching Strategies

The following teaching strategies can be particularly effective in facilitating discussions about controversial or sensitive topics. These strategies can create space for diverse viewpoints and encourage active listening and consideration of multiple perspectives.

- **Big Paper:**  
Building a Silent Conversation
- **Barometer:**  
Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues
- **Save the Last Word for Me**
- **Four Corners Debate**

Before using any of these strategies in the classroom, it is important to note that implementing specific teaching strategies alone will not produce thoughtful and productive class discussions. It is crucial that teachers carefully consider the questions, readings, or other materials they use to introduce and frame these activities and how those introductory materials connect to heated debates and partisan biases in current events.

Open-ended questions and resources that reflect the complexity and nuance often inherent in contemporary issues tend to lead to the most meaningful learning experiences for students. Questions and resources that lead to specific conclusions or provoke students’ existing sensitivities or biases can be counterproductive. Teachers know their students best and should carefully preview any materials that they will use for a class discussion to make sure that they lend themselves to meaningful, civil dialogue.

### Facilitate Debate

One of the best ways you can prepare students for the world beyond school is by creating the conditions in which they can effectively communicate with each other. Lessons should not be a ping-pong dialogue between student and teacher. Teachers must take a step back, allowing students to guide discussions and to develop their speaking and listening skills. By encouraging students to speak and listen to each other, you help them appreciate the points of view, talents, and contributions of class members. The way you use physical space during these activities is important: rows facing the teacher do not facilitate group discourse. During a whole-class discussion, it is easier for participants to talk to each other when they can see the faces of their fellow students, so it is wise to arrange the chairs in a circle. For small group work, placing chairs and desks in clusters facilitates discussion.

Additional strategies can be found at [facinghistory.org/teaching-strategies](https://facinghistory.org/teaching-strategies).

# Big Paper

## Building a Silent Conversation

This discussion strategy uses writing and silence as tools to help students explore a topic in depth. Having a written conversation with peers slows down the thinking process, giving students an opportunity to reflect on their thoughts, and to acknowledge and respond to the views of others. It can ensure shy students are able to express their views, and can facilitate thoughtful, silent meditation on a topic. This strategy also creates a visual record of thoughts and questions that can be referred to later.

### Procedure

- Preparation**  
Select the “stimulus” - the material that students will respond to. This could be comprised of questions, quotations, historical documents, and excerpts from novels, poetry, or images. Groups can be given the same stimulus for discussion or different texts related to the same theme. This activity works best when students are working in pairs or triads. Make sure that all students have a pen or marker (it may be useful for students to use different colours to make it easier to see the back-and-forth flow of a conversation). Each group also needs a “big paper” (typically a sheet of poster paper) that can fit a written conversation and added comments. In the middle of the page, tape or write the “stimulus” (image, quotation, excerpt, etc.) that will be used to spark the students’ discussion.  
to wherever the students take it. The teacher can determine the length of this step according to the stimulus provided.
- The importance of silence**  
Inform the class that this activity is completed in silence and all communication is done in writing. Tell students that they will have time to speak in pairs and in large groups later. Before the activity begins, go over all of the instructions and ask students if they have questions. This will avoid questions during the activity and minimise the chance that students will interrupt the silence once it has begun.
- Comment on your Big Paper**  
Each group receives the Big Paper, which they inspect in silence before commenting on it, writing any questions, or responding to those of a peer. They are all allowed to write simultaneously. The written conversation must start on the text but can stray
- Comment on other Big Papers**  
Give students the chance to participate in other silent conversations. This can be done as a walk around activity or as a carousel. Still working in silence, students either switch silent conversations with another group or walk around the room reading those on other tables. Students can write comments or further questions for thought on these other sheets. Again, the teacher can determine the length of time for this step based on the number of Big Papers and his/her knowledge of the students.
- Return to your own Big Paper**  
Instruct groups to revisit their original silent conversation. They can now break the silence and have a free, verbal conversation about the text, their own comments, what they read on other papers, and comments that their fellow students wrote back to them. You might ask students to take out their journals and identify a question or comment that stands out to them at this moment.
- Class discussion**  
Finally, debrief the process with the whole class. The conversation can begin with a simple prompt such as, “What did you learn from doing this activity?” This is the time to delve deeper into the content and use ideas from the Big Papers to bring out students’ thoughts. The discussion can also touch upon the importance and difficulty of staying silent and the level of comfort with this activity.

# Save the Last Word for Me

This discussion strategy requires all students to participate as active speakers and listeners. Its clearly defined structure helps shy students share their ideas, ensures that frequent speakers practice being quiet and enables students to practice moments of listening without trying to immediately respond. It is often used as a way to help students debrief a reading or film.

### Procedure

- Preparation**  
Identify a reading or video excerpt that will serve as the catalyst for this activity.  
A’s thinking, say what questions it raised for him/her, provide a different idea, or challenge the thinking of Student A. When Student B talks, Students A and C listen; they do not interrupt or clarify.
- Students read and respond**  
Have students read or view the selected text. Ask students to highlight three sentences that particularly stand out for them and to write each sentence on the front of an index card. On the back, they should write a few sentences explaining why they have chosen that quote - what it means to them, reminds them of, etc. They may connect it to something that has happened to them in their own life, in history or in the present, or to a film or book they saw or read.  
After Student B has a minute, Student C gets a turn to speak without interruption.  
Finally, Student A gets one minute to answer questions or respond to the other students’ ideas. In this way, Student A gets the “last word.”  
The intent of this exercise is to create equity in a discussion and for students to practice moments of listening without trying to immediately respond.
- Sharing in small groups**  
Divide students into groups of three, labeling one student A, one B, and the other C. Invite student A to read one of his/her chosen quotations and talk about why he/she chose it. Give the student a set amount of time, perhaps a minute, to speak. During that minute, Students B and C listen; they do not interrupt or interject.  
Each student should get a chance to start a round of conversation with the quote or phrase they pulled from the text and have the “last word.” After each student has had a turn, you may want to open up the class to a larger discussion in order to process all the structured discussions that the smaller groups had.  
After the minute, Student B gets a chance to speak for one minute. He/she can both expand on Student

# Barometer

Taking a Stand on Controversial Issues

This teaching strategy helps students share their opinions by lining up along a continuum to represent their point of view. It is especially useful when trying to discuss an issue about which students have a wide range and variety of opinions.

## Procedure

- Preparation**  
Identify a space in the classroom where students can create a line or a U-shape. Place “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree” signs at opposite ends of a continuum in your room. Or you can post a statement and then, at the other end of the line, post its opposite.
- Contracting**  
Set a contract for this activity. Since it deals with students literally putting themselves and their opinions on the line, it has the potential for outbursts that result from some not understanding how classmates can hold certain opinions. Reiterate your class rules about respect for the opinions and voices of others and call for them to be honest, but not insulting. Readdress ways to constructively disagree with one another, and require that when offering their opinion or defence of their stance, they speak from the “I” rather than from an accusatory “You.”
- Formulating an opinion**  
Give students a few minutes to reflect on a prompt that calls for agreement or disagreement with a particular statement. If desired, the students can first respond to the prompt in their journals.
- “Take a stand”**  
Ask students to stand on the spot of the line that represents their opinion, telling them that if they stand on either extreme, they are absolute in their agreement or disagreement. They may also stand anywhere in between the two extremes, depending on how much they do or do not agree with the statement.
- Explain positions**  
Once students have lined up, ask them to explain why they have chosen to stand where they are. Encourage students to refer to evidence and examples when defending their stance. It is probably best to alternate from one end to the middle to the other end, rather than allowing too many voices from one stance to dominate. After about three or four viewpoints are heard, ask if anyone wishes to move. Encourage students to keep an open mind; they are allowed to move if someone presents an argument that alters where they want to stand on the line. Run the activity until you feel that most or all voices have been heard, making sure that one person does not dominate.
- Debriefing**  
There are many ways to debrief this exercise. You can ask students to reflect in their journals about how the activity changed or reinforced their original opinion. Or you can chart the main for and against arguments on the board as a whole-class activity.

# Four Corners Debate

Four Corners Debate is a variation on the Barometer teaching strategy. Similarly, it requires students to show their position on a specific statement (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) by standing in a particular corner of the room. This activity elicits the participation of all students by requiring everyone to take a position. It can be used as a warm-up activity, drawing out students’ opinions on a topic they are about to study, or it can be used as a plenary activity, asking students to apply what they have learned.

## Procedure

- Preparation**  
Label the four corners of the room with signs reading: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree.” Generate a list of controversial statements related to the material being studied. Statements most likely to encourage discussion typically do not have one correct or obvious answer, elicit nuanced arguments (e.g., “This might be a good idea some of the time, but not all of the time”), and represent respected values on both sides of the debate.
- Introduce statements**  
Distribute statements and give students the opportunity to respond to them in writing. Many teachers provide a graphic organiser or worksheet that requires students to mark their opinion (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) and then provide a brief explanation.
- Four Corners discussion**  
After students have considered their personal response to the statements, read one of the statements aloud, and ask students to move to the corner of the room that best represents their opinion. Once students are in their places, ask for volunteers to justify their position. When doing so, they should refer to evidence from history or sources they’ve been studying, as well as other relevant information from their own experiences. Encourage students to switch corners if someone presents an idea that causes a change of mind. After a representative from each corner has defended his/her position, you can allow students to question each other’s evidence and ideas. Before beginning the discussion, remind students about norms for having a respectful, open discussion of ideas.
- Reflection**  
There are many ways to debrief this exercise. You can have students reflect in their journals about how the activity changed or reinforced their original opinion. Some of their views may have been strengthened by the addition of new evidence and arguments while others may have changed altogether. It is quite possible that some students will be more confused or uncertain about their views after the Four Corners Debate. While uncertainty can feel uncomfortable, it is an important part of the understanding process and represents an authentic wrestling with moral questions that have no clear right or wrong answers. To clarify ideas shared during the discussion, you can chart the main for and against arguments on the board as a whole-class activity.

# Additional Resources to Foster Civil Discourse

Here are some additional resources to help you foster open, thoughtful, and respectful dialogue in your classroom. Please visit our website, [facinghistory.org](http://facinghistory.org), to learn more about the full range of services we offer for [professional development](#) and [resources](#) to support every stage of your career as an educator.

- Subscribe to our blog, [Facing Today](#), to hear each week from teachers, students, staff, and supporters with practical tips about using Facing History in the classroom. Some related posts to review include:
  - [8 Components of a Reflective Classroom](#)
  - [Creating Space for Student Voices](#)
  - [Teaching in a Time of Terrorism](#)
  - [Teaching Empathy: Its More than Fun and Games](#)
  - [Lets Address Racism in the Workplace, Just Like We Do in Schools](#)
- Help students become responsible consumers and producers of news and information by understanding the role of confirmation bias in how they interpret news and information, weighing the impact of social media on the traditional news cycle, learning how to verify sources of information, and considering their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy. Explore [Facing Ferguson: News Literacy in a Digital Age](#).
- Bolster conversations about difficult societal issues by approaching them through the lens of history and literature. Not only can this help students better understand the roots and underlying nuances of these issues, but such an approach can also provide some distance to explore issues of human behaviour in the past while allowing time for students to make connections to our world today. Facing History's core case studies integrate history and human behaviour in order to help students think critically about the choices they make every day and about how they want to participate in the world.

Examples include:

- [Holocaust and Human Behaviour](#)
- [Teaching Night](#)
- [Choices in Little Rock](#)
- [Teaching Mockingbird](#)
- [Crimes Against Humanity and Civilisation: The Genocide of the Armenians](#)
- [Teaching Red Scarf Girl](#)
- Bookmark our [Facing History UK page](#) to see existing and upcoming materials to support History, Citizenship, PHSE, RS education. Resources include:
  - [Standing up for Democracy](#)
  - [Identity and Belonging in a Changing Great Britain](#)
  - [Civic Dilemmas: Turning Points](#)
  - [Recognising Antisemitism in British Football](#)

## Find Out More

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