

A Guide to How Youth Can Facilitate "Difficult" Conversations

WHAT:

As youth we've identified a lack of opportunity for dialogue and a culture of 'closed mindedness' in our communities, especially when discussing social and political issues. Therefore, we've created a platform for youth to navigate conversations with their peers on social and political matters, through an emphasis on listening to a variety of perspectives, in the hopes of reaching the following overarching goals of connection, empathy, and change.

WHY:

The current political, economic, and social divide in America is at an all-time high. People have conversations with like-minded people, but rarely talk to those who have different beliefs, ideas, and backgrounds. Young people in America today have the opportunity to reshape the way we interact. We can create an atmosphere where we seek out the difficult conversation. If America is to be truly 'great,' we need to have conversations with those all across the spectrum.

WHERE:

These conversations can be held anywhere, with anyone. However, we recommend the use of the classroom as a convenient medium to conduct these conversations.

WHEN:

During a class. After school. During free time. These conversations can be held anytime, but during class time will allow for a wider range of perspectives to be included. Ask your teacher if they are willing to use a class period for this!

HOW:

We created a guide to help you facilitate conversation. As a facilitator, it's important that you bring some initial, open-ended questions to spark conversation. By facilitating the conversation, as opposed to attempting to teach, it is more likely that the dialogue will be natural.

Possible Topics of Conversation:

- Race and Racism
- Socioeconomic Class
- Immigration
- Equality v. Equity
- Environmental Law
- Gun Rights
- Upward Mobility
- Implicit Bias
- Gentrification
- The Role of the Government

Things to Remember

Facilitators and Participants Should Try to Use the Items Below

1. Embrace Discomfort

2. Assume Everyone Is Coming from an Honest Place

3. What Happens in the Discussion, Stays in the Discussion

4. Allow the Participants to Guide the Conversation-- Remember You're the Facilitator

5. Seek to Understand, Not Persuade

6. Don't Be Afraid to Continue the Conversation

Example of Conversation Guide

This is a hypothetical situation. The issue could be race, homophobia, anything, and you could hold the discussion in any class or setting:

Let's say your school has been really divided over the election of Donald Trump. The liberal members of your class are no longer talking to Trump supporters, and the Trump supporters are feeling more and more excluded from the school, or vice versa. You know that your US History Class has been especially divided, and your teacher has been looking for a way to bridge the divide. This example plan might give you some ideas about how to facilitate a discussion in your class.

1. Prepare class for discussion a day or so before. Give them a prompt to think or write about so that they are ready for the class.
 - a. Example: Write one paragraph about why or why not you believe that Donald Trump is fit to be the president of America.
2. Name the objective. What do you want to get accomplished?
 - a. Example: Objective: To understand why people believe what they do about Trump either positive or negative.
(One of the big things that can come out of this is an understanding of someone who thinks differently than you. If everyone could understand the real reasons someone loves Donald Trump or fears him, then America would be in a much better place.)
3. State some ground rules.
 - a. Examples (Add or subtract as you deem fit):
 1. What happens in this room stays in this room.
 2. Don't attack people for their beliefs. Arguing with ideas is fine, but don't insult a person.
 3. Listen and think about what people are saying. Don't just listen to think of a counter argument.
 4. Seek to understand what people are saying.
4. After you begin the conversation, the next step is up to you. Some options, pick one or two (make sure you leave enough time for the discussion):
 - a. Opening activity where each person tells a partner about what they wrote about while the partner sits and listens. After they are done, the listener would be able to ask one question to the speaker if they would like. Stress that this question is for the listener's understanding, not to start a debate. Then, the roles would reverse. This will help to practice listening.
 - b. Ask each member of the class to give one word about how they feel about Donald Trump.

- c. Ask people to share what they wrote to the whole class. After they share, the group can talk about what they say.
 - d. Break into smaller groups to talk. This might be better if your class is larger than 30ish people. Remember we want natural discussion; if the class is too big, it might be more difficult to get people to be as authentic as possible. In creating these groups, be deliberate and make sure you get a wide range of ideologies in each group.
 - e. Any other activity you think would work well.
5. Get into discussion. You should prepare some questions for the discussion, but if you know that the class is especially charged, maybe ask if anyone wants to say anything to get things going. If you were talking about Trump, here are some example questions:
 - a. How does Donald Trump make you feel? Why?
 - b. Can you understand why someone might think what they do about Donald Trump?
 - c. What about Donald Trump do you like? What do you not like?
 - d. Why do you think Donald Trump has left such a divide in our school?
6. Cool Down. This step is critical, especially if things get heated during the discussion. *This is a tough step, but don't forget it. If emotions get high, try to de-escalate them before the class leaves. If everyone leaves the class in good spirits and can remember what they learned, then you accomplished something. If everyone leaves the class in anger, then a lot of what you did is lost.* There are a number of things you can do; pick one or two, or come up with your own:
 - a. 5-minute free write where each person in the class can talk about how they thought the class went, or whatever they want.
 - b. Ask each person to talk to their original partner about something that has nothing to do with politics (sports, gossip, prom, family, friends etc.) This reminds your classmates that everyone in the room is a person, and is more than their political beliefs.
 - c. Ask each member of the class to high five or hug three other people who they don't know well. I know it's cheesy, but again it de-escalates emotion.

Other things to remember:

Try to get people to not sit in two factions; for the example above, try not to have all the Trump supporters sitting on one side and all the Hillary supporters sitting on the other. This can easily foster a hostile, almost warring environment.