

Civil Discourse in the Classroom

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In a school community, it is easy to find like-minded friends who have shared values and ideas. However, it's also easy to make assumptions about one another in our classrooms and our communities. One assumption is common enough to have a name -- the "[false-consensus effect](#)," which is a cognitive bias that causes people to believe their values and behaviors are shared by those in their daily lives.

This assumption, especially in the lives of younger students, cultivates feelings of security, safety, and support. As students enter adolescence, however, they will begin to recognize that school communities and classrooms are full of people with diverse values and ideas. While this awareness may cause cognitive dissonance as old assumptions are lost, it is also a perfect opportunity to introduce our students to the basic tenets of civil discourse.

Civil discourse is defined generally as constructive conversation intended to enhance understanding and support societal good. In the article, [What is Civil Discourse](#), [American University](#) expands on this to say it is not polite or performative, but truthful, productive, and requires taking responsibility for truly listening and talking.

Educators have a unique opportunity to bring the work of civil discourse into their middle school and high school classrooms. Engaging in our differences constructively is incredibly valuable. Civil discourse can grant insight, improve decision making, and connect our students with one another and the larger world. It is also an essential skill for our next generation of leaders and citizens of a diverse democracy to develop.

The University of Arizona National Institute for Civil Discourse covers the basics of beginning this process in their article, [Engaging Differences - Key Principles and Best Practices](#). They explain that the key to success in this practice is active listening and finding common ground. From there, showing empathy, humility, and respect will help lead constructive conversation and help heal divides. As vision for the process, they recommend: “Empathy instead of vitriol; listening for understanding instead of hearing to overpower; and humility instead of all-knowing.”

Further enhancing the spirit of empathy can be done by beginning classroom conversations by reminding students to keep these questions in mind: “How did the person speaking come to this place of decision making? How is it we all come to hold these different values and perspectives?”

[LivingRoomConversations.org](#) suggests offering even more form to the civil discourse process by working within conversation agreements. They offer principles and practices for a conversation agreement, [outlined here](#), which, when reviewed and agreed to by students, can work to foster a spirit of authenticity, curiosity, and respect among peers.

In addition to helping to frame tone and intent for classroom conversation, conversation agreements establish important ground rules. Most people will not raise their voices or insult others, but may need guidance on giving others space to talk without interruption or cross talk, which is defined as someone jumping in with an anecdote or story of their own (supportive or otherwise).

In the same vein, a teacher can guide students to keep discussions purposeful and on topic and can reference the conversation agreement to help facilitate civil discourse. This can help students have a more productive time if they have read, reviewed, and agreed to the conversation agreements and know the ground rules before classroom conversation begins.

It's equally important for teachers to understand their own cognitive bias before beginning or facilitating civil discourse within their classrooms. Cognitive bias can also be an important lesson and conversation topic on its own in the classroom. The website, [All Sides for Schools](#), offers great resources for teachers to help give perspective on political and philosophical divides as specifically related to school communities.

The website offers “left, right, center” news sources; a Red/Blue dictionary to show how people from across the U.S. political spectrum define, think, or feel differently about the same term or topic; and guides for prioritizing relationships in conversation and appreciating others even during disagreements.

Connection is key to community both inside and outside the classroom, but differences do not have to break this connection. While students spend time in school building character and social

emotional intelligence, explicitly teaching civil discourse as a skill is an essential next step. Knowing the parameters and tenets of engaging in civil discourse -- tolerance, compromise, and mutual respect -- will help our students make the world a better place after they leave our schools. Civil discourse is a leadership and citizenship skill that students need to learn in order to contribute to the future of the world with clear and creative thinking, compassion, moral strength, and courage.