

**Fostering Effective Discussions with
the Teaching *The Levees* Curriculum
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What can teachers do to help their students create powerful and effective discussions of the many highly discussable topics embedded throughout the curriculum?

1. Teach students the difference between a discussion, debate, and other forms of classroom talk. Throughout the curriculum are lessons that call for a variety of different kinds of classroom talk—this is as it should be for we know that effective teachers rarely rely on just one form of learning. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the word “discussion” is often used and interpreted as synonym for any classroom talk that involves students. For example, a teacher’s lecture occasionally punctuated with questions to the students is often viewed as a discussion. Similarly, when a teacher engages her students in recitation-style talk (asks students a question, a student responds, then the teacher evaluates the response), it is often confused with discussion.

Although there are many differing definitions of discussion, virtually all of them share two common features. First, discussion involves dialogue between or among people that, at a minimum, includes the exchange of information about a particular topic (which could be a controversial issue, a problem, an event, a person, etc.). Second, discussion is an approach to constructing knowledge that involves exchange, inquiry, and critique. In a discussion, we want students to express their ideas, ask questions, respond to questions, listen to others’ ideas, and be challenged to think more broadly than and beyond what they could before the discussion. There is evidence that little genuine discussion occurs in most classrooms in the United States, which is why it is so important not to assume that students already know what you mean when you say, “we’re going to have a discussion today.”

2. Set high standards for respectful behavior during discussion and teach those standards explicitly. Students who feel they are being browbeaten or disrespected by other students or the teacher rarely view discussions as interesting or democratic. Just the opposite—to them discussions are often frightening and intimidating. The introduction to the curriculum contains excellent advice about how to encourage students to treat one another with respect.

3. Recognize that high quality spontaneous discussions are so rare that it is better to go with the odds and rely on planned discussions. The first step when planning for classroom discussion is to select a topic where multiple “right” answers collide. Helpfully, the *Levees* curriculum is replete with such topics—most typically framed as questions for which there are multiple and competing points of view. The next step is to make sure that everyone—students and teacher alike—is prepared for the discussion. Few effective discussions occur without preparation; either they devolve into “bull sessions”

or too few students participate. Whether preparation is done in class or as homework is immaterial; what matters is that students become acquainted with the discussion topic and engage in enough initial thinking about it to have something to say. Throughout the lesson-plans in this curriculum you will notice many different types of activities that students are asked to engage in *before* discussion. These carefully designed activities will make it more likely that discussions are high quality and marked by widespread student participation. Bear in mind that evidence from research shows fairly consistently that more than 90% of students say they are more likely to speak in a discussion if they come into it with some knowledge about the topic.

4. Given that few students have highly developed discussion skills, in most classrooms it is unrealistic to expect students to self-facilitate. Instead, most skillful discussion teachers assume the facilitator role themselves. The way in which teachers facilitate is extremely important to the overall success of the discussion. While there is no single best way to facilitate, most masters of the craft have two similarities: they do not talk too much and what they do say enhances both the quality of the discussion, and the participation of many students. For example, one researcher who specializes in classroom discussion reports that the most effective teachers do not stay silent in discussions, but instead ask “authentic” questions that elicit students’ ideas instead of the mere recitation of information. It is also clear that effective discussion facilitators are conscious of the need to make sure that students are considering multiple and competing views fairly—especially in classes that are relatively ideologically homogenous. Sometimes this means playing “devil’s advocate” and in other instances it may be as simple as asking students to imagine and articulate the reasons for a different point of view. Regardless, the point is that effective discussions—especially when the issue is highly controversial—depend on a consideration of multiple and competing perspectives.

5. Decide how your opinions on the topics and issues discussed will enter the classroom and aim to do that in a way that promotes a democratic ethos. Note that I am not suggesting that it is possible for teachers’ opinions to stay out of the classroom—they will come in one way or another. But it is helpful for teachers to think through their views on how they will share their views with students and it may even be helpful to communicate their personal policy on that issue to students.

6. Because of how challenging it can be to teach students to participate wisely and well in discussions of important topics and issues, it is sometimes tempting to forego these discussions in favor of less demanding forms of pedagogy. It is critical for teachers to resist this temptation because the benefits of discussion to students and to society are plentiful and powerful. First, because many of the most important questions in our society have multiple and competing answers, a form of classroom discourse is needed that teaches students how to sift through and evaluate competing claims and the evidence and values on which they are based. High quality discussion requires students to articulate their understandings, explain their arguments, listen to how others think through the same question, and challenge others’ responses. In sum, discussion helps students learn important content and use it to think through the complicated dimensions of a complicated world. A second benefit of discussion is that it can improve students’

abilities to dialogue across differences. Research shows that many classes are more racially, ethnically, religiously, and ideologically diverse than most other venues where young people spend time. This diversity, when treated as strength to be nurtured instead of a threat to be managed, can help students learn how to talk with people who differ from themselves. This can also cause them to understand that difference, per se, is not a problem—but a vital component of a democratic society. Finally, discussions can help young people learn how to exercise their political voice. Democratic theorist Robert Dahl cautions us that “silent citizens may be perfect subjects for an authoritarian ruler; they would be a disaster for a democracy.”¹ Dahl is reminding us democracy can only work if “we the people” talk.

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¹Robert Alan Dahl. *On Democracy* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 97.