

A LEARNING FOR JUSTICE GUIDE

# LET'S TALK!

FACILITATING CRITICAL  
CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS



LEARNING FOR JUSTICE

A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER



## ABOUT LEARNING FOR JUSTICE

Learning for Justice seeks to uphold the mission of the Southern Poverty Law Center: to be a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements and advance the human rights of all people.

We support this mission by focusing our work with educators, students, caregivers and communities in these areas:

1. Culture and Climate
2. Curriculum and Instruction
3. Leadership
4. Family and Community Engagement

Since our founding as Teaching Tolerance in 1991, we have had a strong foundation of providing educational resources, and we are building on that foundation with expanded engagement opportunities for communities, especially in the South.

Our free educational resources—articles, guides, lessons, films, webinars, frameworks and more—help foster shared learning and reflection for educators, young people, caregivers and all community members. Our engagement opportunities—conferences, workshops, and school and community partnerships—provide space where people can harness collective power and take action.

Through this continual cycle of education and engagement, we hope that we can build and maintain meaningful relationships with communities and we can all move from learning for justice to creating it.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

*“Democracy begins in conversation.”*

Often attributed to John Dewey, this quotation holds significance for all educators. If we want our students to be active participants in a diverse democracy, we’ll need to teach them not only to think for themselves but also to talk to one another. This guide is designed to support you as you help students build these skills by practicing critical conversations.

So, what is a *critical conversation*? For the purpose of this guide, it’s any discussion about the ways that injustice affects our lives and our society. It’s a conversation that explores the relationships between identity and power, that traces the structures that privilege some at the expense of others, that helps students think through the actions they can take to create a more just, more equitable, world.

It’s important to remember that students *want* to talk about these issues. They recognize the injustice inherent in racism, gender bias, ableism, anti-immigrant sentiment, religious and anti-LGBTQ bias and more—and they see these prejudices at work in the world every day. In this guide, we’ve included strategies and resources to help you facilitate these discussions confidently and skillfully, whether you teach kindergarteners or high school seniors.

**Section I** of this guide, “Laying the Groundwork for Critical Conversations,” includes steps you can take on your own or with your students to create a classroom where critical discussions can thrive. Whether you plan it ahead of time or it arises organically, when a critical conversation begins you’ll be glad you’ve taken the time to lay the groundwork.

**Section II**, “Facilitating Critical Conversations,” offers a day-of guide for leading planned discussions in your classroom. This part of *Let’s Talk!* outlines steps to take at every stage of the conversation to ensure your students feel respected and heard.

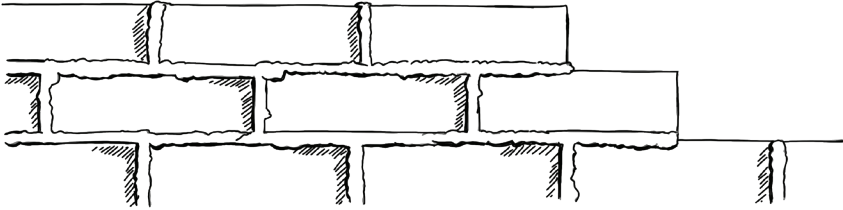
We hope you find this resource useful as you support your students, helping them to build empathy, agency and resilience. Congratulations on starting this important work!

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# LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

In this section of the guide,  
you'll find



two sets of recommendations you can follow to create the kind of classroom where critical conversations succeed.

“On Your Own” activities will prepare you to bring your best self to these conversations, whether you’ve planned them in advance or they’re spontaneous responses to student comments or interest. These activities should help ensure your classroom culture is built on a strong foundation. “With Your Students” activities will further establish an open and trusting foundation by engaging your classroom community in discussions that require students to think, talk and learn about identity, diversity, justice and action.

*All of the recommended practices align with Teaching Tolerance’s **Social Justice Standards**. You can learn more about using the standards to build a strong classroom community in our **Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education**.*

## 1. CLARIFY TERMS

### SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: IDENTITY, DIVERSITY, JUSTICE

Every critical conversation has its own context and content, but almost all touch on identity and injustice. Pinning down a few key terms can help you and your students think and talk about critical topics more clearly.

Read through these terms on your own, and look for opportunities to share them with your students.

### IDENTITY

**IDENTITY.** The set of visible and invisible characteristics we use to categorize and define ourselves and those around us (e.g., gender, race, age, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, marital/family status, ability, sexual orientation, etc.). Identity shapes our experience by influencing the ways we see ourselves and the ways others see us.

**IDENTITY GROUP.** A group of people who share one or more identity characteristics (e.g., women, Latinx people, teenagers, etc.). Members of an identity group can share a wide range of experiences, positive and negative.

**DOMINANT IDENTITY GROUP.** An identity group whose members share a common privilege. An individual may simultaneously belong to dominant identity groups (e.g., straight, white) and non-dominant identity groups (e.g., undocumented, experiencing poverty).

**INTERSECTIONALITY.** A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how each person belongs to multiple, overlapping identity groups, and the ways our identities overlap can result in multiplied oppressions or privileges.

### INJUSTICE

**BIAS.** Conscious or unconscious prejudice against an individual or a group, based on their identity. In the Social Justice Standards, Teaching Tolerance uses this term to designate the prejudice held by individuals.

**DISCRIMINATION.** Prejudice in action. Unfair treatment of a person or group based on their identity. In the Social Justice Standards, Teaching Tolerance distinguishes between *discrimination*, often executed by individuals (e.g., one bigoted person denying someone a loan based on their ethnicity) and *systemic discrimination*, which exists on a larger, institutional level (e.g., the longstanding policy of neighborhood redlining).

## 2. CONSIDER YOUR OWN IDENTITY

### SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: IDENTITY, DIVERSITY, JUSTICE

Most people belong to at least one dominant identity group. When your identity is dominant, it's easy to think of your experience as universal and to overlook or downplay the experiences of others. These kinds of biases are often unconscious. Thinking carefully about your own identity and the ways it has shaped your experience and influences your assumptions—including assumptions about your students—can help you recognize unconscious biases before you engage with critical topics in your classroom.

Start by considering your relationship to some common identity categories. After listing your identity group memberships, use the sample questions to consider how your various identities may shape your experience.

#### LIST A FEW OF YOUR IDENTITIES

- Ability
- Age
- Body type
- Ethnicity
- Gender identity
- Home language
- Immigration status
- Race
- Religion
- Sexual orientation
- Socioeconomic status

**Think about how your membership in different identity groups affects your daily life. Use these questions to get started, adapting them as necessary.**

- *What messages did I learn about ability growing up?*
- *How does being a person with/without a disability affect my day-to-day life?*
- *How often am I asked to adapt to other people's abilities/disabilities?*
- *What messages—both implicit and explicit—do I convey to my students about ability?*

**Continue your self-reflection by completing these statements:**

- *Talking about ability is challenging because ...*
- *Talking about ability is necessary because ...*
- *Talking about ability is beneficial because ...*

**Repeat this exercise, substituting other identity group memberships as necessary.**



### 3. EVALUATE YOUR COMFORT LEVEL WITH DIFFERENT TOPICS

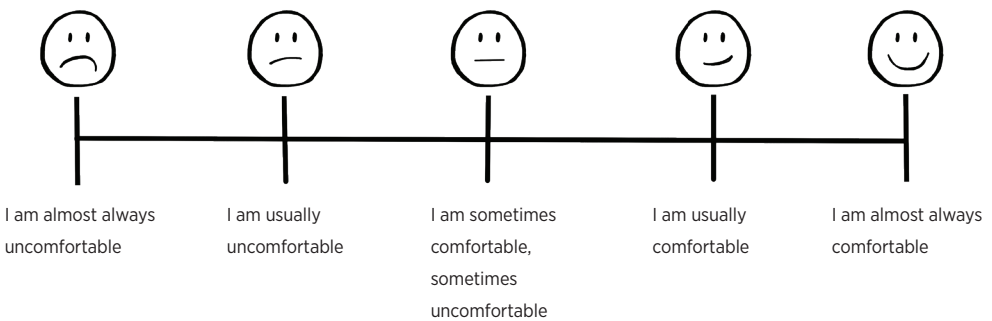
SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: DIVERSITY, JUSTICE, ACTION

#### COMMON TOPICS FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

- Ability/Ableism
- Age/Ageism
- Body type/Sizeism
- Ethnicity/Ethnocentrism
- Gender identity/Gender discrimination, Transphobia
- Immigration status/Xenophobia
- Race/Racism
- Home language/Discrimination against English language learners
- Religion/Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other religious prejudice
- Sexual orientation/Homophobia
- Socioeconomic status/Classism

Because we all bring a range of identities and experiences to any given conversation, we'll likely all bring a variety of comfort levels as well.

Use the questions on the next page to evaluate your comfort levels with different critical topics. Mark the chart to show how comfortable you feel discussing each topic with students.



**To evaluate your comfort levels, ask yourself:**

- *Which topics do I feel least comfortable discussing? Do I see any commonalities?*
- *Which topics do I feel most comfortable discussing? Do I see any commonalities?*
- *Which topics most affect me?*
- *Which topics most affect my students?*
- *About which topics do I know least?*
- *About which topics do I know most?*
- *With which topics do I have the least experience?*
- *With which topics do I have the most experience?*

## ONE EDUCATOR EXPLAINS

### STARTING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS EARLY

#### FROM “DESTIGMATIZING PRIVILEGE”

BY ELIZABETH KLEINROCK

So often when people hear the word privilege, it goes hand in hand with guilt. The word alone can be enough to trigger knee-jerk defensive reactions. Say the word and some people will list the obstacles and struggles they've faced just to counter the mere idea that they might possess privilege in any way.

My students hail from a myriad of racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. Privilege is a concept I introduce as a way for them to examine the power they have in certain situations—the power we all have, depending on our identities. It is unfair that some people have privilege while others don't, but I don't teach about it as a reason to feel guilty about one's identity. I want my students to see it as a tool that can be used to elevate others. At the same time, I want them to recognize the injustice that some people have access to resources and opportunities that others don't, based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability or financial means

## 4. FIGURE OUT WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK

### **SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: IDENTITY, DIVERSITY, JUSTICE, ACTION**

If you have identified critical topics you are uncomfortable discussing with students, these troubleshooting strategies can help. After reading, complete the graphic organizer “Critical Conversations: A Self-Assessment” (on page 11).

**CONCERN:** *I do not feel prepared to cover this content.*

**STRATEGY:** *Don't avoid the conversation; educate yourself.*

You don't have to be an expert in every topic—no one is. If you're afraid you don't know enough about a critical topic, commit to learning more. Study history, follow current events and familiarize yourself with anti-bias work being done around the issue. Be prepared to dive into the content you'll need to learn more about critical topics.

**CONCERN:** *It's not my place to lead these conversations.*

**STRATEGY:** *Create a space where these kinds of conversations can take place and let your students take the lead.*

In this guide, we offer recommendations for creating the space for these critical conversations, for getting students started and for ensuring that the conversation proceeds with respect. While you'll facilitate, your students will be the ones to lead the way. There will be times, in fact, when you'll consciously choose to put your voice aside.

Although it probably won't be your place to lead every discussion on critical topics between students, it *is* your place to show leadership by starting these conversations, nurturing a culture that allows them to take place and facilitating the discussion to ensure that no student ever feels devalued in your classroom.

**CONCERN:** *I'm the only one in my school addressing these issues in class.*

**STRATEGY:** *Find your community.*

If you don't have a trusted colleague to debrief with, join an online community to share ideas with other educators. Or approach a colleague you're friendly with and ask if they'd like to start a small professional learning community based on the Social Justice Standards.

**CONCERN:** *I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing or won't be able to manage my students' questions or emotions.*

**STRATEGY:** *Pinpoint your concerns and make a plan to address them.*

You may be concerned that you will say the wrong thing out of ignorance or frustration, that you'll respond poorly to a student question or that your students will reduce you to the spokesperson for an identity group. Whatever your fears, identifying them is the first step to developing a plan to address them.

Remember that students need opportunities to practice talking about critical topics. Begin by starting small. Share discussions about low-stakes identity topics, like where students fall in birth order and how that's affected their experiences, or whether they identify as introverts or extroverts. Offer students opportunities to practice listening to one another and connecting their experience to a larger topic before moving on to heavier issues of inequity or historical oppression.

## ONE EDUCATOR EXPLAINS

### WHEN THE NEWS IS THE CRITICAL TOPIC

#### FROM "DON'T SAY NOTHING"

BY JAMILAH PITTS

Students pay attention to everything we say and do. They particularly pay attention to our silence. ...

Many black and brown students are educated in school systems and classrooms where they, despite making up the racial majority, are taught how to understand a world by a staff comprised of a powerful minority. When their teachers choose to remain silent about moments of racial tension or violence—violence that may well touch students' own communities or families—these children are overtly reminded of their inferior place in society. ...

Students come into the classroom with ideas, hearts, passions, mindsets and understandings about their own humanity. They have been students of the news and their families' stories and experiences without you; they don't necessarily need you to understand certain aspects of the world. So if you feel that the conversation is too heavy or that the weight of having to end racism is in your lesson plan, humble yourself and relax. It isn't. Your students need you to allow them space, not to fix the world.

# DISCUSSING RACE, RACISM AND OTHER CRITICAL TOPICS WITH STUDENTS

Avoiding conversations about race and racism can arise from our own fears of being vulnerable. As you prepare to engage students in difficult conversations, consider this question: What will a conversation about this topic potentially expose about me?

Use this graphic organizer to list three vulnerabilities you worry could limit your effectiveness and three strengths you believe will help you to lead open and honest dialogues. Finally, list specific needs that, if met, would improve your ability to facilitate difficult conversations.

## DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: A SELF-ASSESSMENT

VULNERABILITIES	STRENGTHS	NEEDS
EXAMPLE: “My own family is multiracial. Can I remain calm and measured?” “I don’t know enough about the issues described here. Am I ‘allowed’ to lead a discussion while I also learn?”	EXAMPLE: “I have good rapport with my students.” “I use community resources to support learning.”	EXAMPLE: “I need clearer ground rules for class discussions.” “I need to learn more information about sex, gender and gender expression.”

## 1. TRY VALUES-BASED CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

### SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: JUSTICE

Discipline and classroom management are central to classroom culture. How are students encouraged to treat one another? What happens when they make poor choices or treat each other disrespectfully? What shapes student-teacher interactions?

Here are a few strategies you can use to apply values-based behavior management techniques in your classroom.



### HAVE STUDENTS GENERATE COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Involving students in setting classroom policies and norms can go a long way toward establishing buy-in and shared ownership of classroom culture. Issues such as identity, difference and power should be addressed explicitly. For example, a community agreement could include statements like, “Listen with respect to the experiences of others,” “Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment” or “Put-downs of any kind are never OK.” Ideally, students will develop the agreements as a class, but teachers can also work individually with students who need extra support understanding community agreements.

## INSTEAD OF ZERO TOLERANCE, TRY A ZERO-INDIFFERENCE POLICY

Zero indifference means never letting harmful or hateful conduct go unaddressed. In a zero-indifference classroom, teachers always name and respond to behaviors, but they do not automatically implement referrals, suspension, expulsion or other harsh punishments.

## EXPLORE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative justice prioritizes repairing harm and restoring relationships over punishing those who have engaged in misconduct. If you're considering incorporating restorative justice into your classroom, you can learn more about this approach to behavior management here: [tolerance.org/restoring-justice](https://tolerance.org/restoring-justice).

### ONE EDUCATOR EXPLAINS

## USING CANONICAL TEXTS TO START CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

### FROM “LEARNING TO SAVE OURSELVES”

BY CHRISTINA TORRES

Of course, there is something to be said for not teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* and instead teaching a book written by a person of color. I think that is a perfectly valid argument for moving away from the text.

That said, as uncomfortable as my realizations about the white savior trope made me feel, I also know that vulnerability and honesty are the best policies with students. As much as a part of me didn't want to deal with the intricacies of the novel's flaws, I also knew I'd be missing a huge opportunity to teach my students a valuable lesson about history, power, who gets to tell stories and how they get to do so. I needed them to understand that society has been feeding communities of color a lie about their self-worth.

Now, there are some important questions my students and I explore as we read the text and watch the film:

- What does it mean that Atticus fights for Tom because he is a “clean-living” black person? What does “clean-living” mean?
- What don't we hear from Lula and Calpurnia?
- In the novel, Tom is killed by guards and they find seventeen bullets in his body. However, in the film, Tom is killed accidentally by a police officer who was trying to “shoot to wound” and missed. Why did they make that change?

Asking these questions is hard, but they do more than assuage my own personal guilt when teaching the novel. In asking these questions, I am teaching my students to stop seeing texts—and authors—as infallible pieces of art to be placed on pedestals without question.

By teaching my students to question texts and their authors and to place both in historical context, I am also giving them the skills to question the media they consume today.

## 2. HONOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE

### SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: IDENTITY, DIVERSITY, ACTION

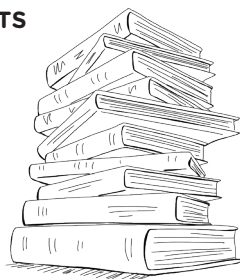
When asking students to explore issues of identity, we must provide spaces where they are seen, valued and respected. Honoring student experience also means providing opportunities for them to learn from one another's varied experiences and perspectives. Try these techniques.

#### SET UP YOUR CLASSROOM TO REFLECT THE STUDENTS IN IT

Try “reading” the messages conveyed by the images on the walls, the books in the library, the arrangement of furniture and materials, and the types of interactions taking place in your classroom. Ask yourself: “Is this room a place where kids are safe to talk about identity and justice?” If the answer is “no,” see *Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education* for ideas.

#### ENSURE YOUR CURRICULUM REFLECTS YOUR STUDENTS

Choose texts that reflect the cultural experiences of your students and offer writing assignments that provide you with information about their lives: their hopes, concerns and strengths. When you're working with texts, encourage students to consider the space allowed to characters with different identities. Discuss the absence of certain voices in the text, or bring in (or have students create) an analysis of the text from a different point of view.



#### INCORPORATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE INTO ASSIGNMENTS

See if you can replace a traditional essay or other research-based assignment with a community study or a student-led walking tour. Community studies can explore local demographics, strengths, concerns, conflicts and challenges via research, interviews, art, writing, video or other media. A walking tour can ask students to highlight neighborhood places they find meaningful in relation to a relevant topic.

#### BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

Curriculum decisions, reading assignments and field trips all offer opportunities to connect with your students' families. Invite them into your classroom or school to engage with students and the curriculum, for family nights or as guest speakers. Read-alouds, shared homework or other projects can also help families get involved. And home visits can build family engagement and lead to improved achievement, fewer disciplinary issues and improved parent- or guardian-child and teacher-child relationships. Check out our guidelines for planning effective home visits here: [tolerance.org/home-visits](https://tolerance.org/home-visits).



### 3. PRIORITIZE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS AND SAFETY

#### **SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: IDENTITY, DIVERSITY, JUSTICE, ACTION**

Students need to feel respected and valued if they are to fully participate in critical conversations. Here are a few strategies to try.

#### **IMPORTANT STEPS FOR CREATING A SAFE CLASSROOM CLIMATE:**

- Teach social emotional skills
- Model positive relationships and conflict-resolution skills
- Focus on understanding and appreciating differences
- Challenge bias and exclusion
- Encourage students to be upstanders

#### **IMPLEMENT AN EXPLICIT COMMUNITY-BUILDING CURRICULUM**

Many powerful community-building curricula, when integrated into the regular school curriculum, can build social emotional skills and teach students to manage conflict and strong emotions.

#### **TEACH THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTENT AND IMPACT**

Impress upon students that we have to be mindful of how our words affect other people. Making the distinction between intent and impact explicit—and giving students the language to explain why a statement or question might be hurtful even if the speaker wasn't intending harm—can help smooth the way for more civil discussions.

### 4. EQUIP STUDENTS WITH LANGUAGE AND SKILLS

#### **TALK WITH STUDENTS ABOUT EVIDENCE AND EXPERIENCE**

In “Starting a Critical Conversation,” we suggest laying the groundwork by talking with students throughout the semester about the difference between a claim supported by evidence drawn from research or experience and an opinion.

#### **GIVE STUDENTS OPPORTUNITIES AND LANGUAGE TO TALK ABOUT IDENTITY**

Teach students key terms for talking about identity and injustice. The more frequently you encourage students to engage with these topics, the better equipped they will be to participate in critical conversations.

# FACILITATING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

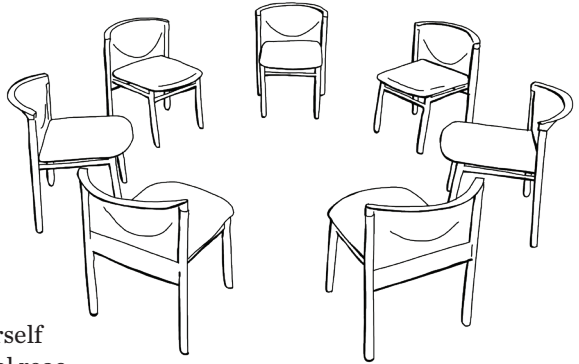
In this section, we offer recommendations you can use before, during and after planned discussions to help students navigate conversations about critical topics.

In “Before the Conversation,” you’ll identify steps you can take ahead of time to ensure the discussion goes smoothly and prepare yourself for the possibility of strong emotional reactions from students.

“Opening the Conversation” offers ways to introduce a critical topic and get the discussion off to a successful start.

“During the Conversation” includes possibilities for structuring the conversation, strategies for soliciting student feedback and suggestions for managing strong emotions.

Finally, in “Closing the Conversation,” you’ll find guidelines for helping students process the emotions and understandings that have developed during the discussion.



*When developing goals, turn to Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards for inspiration. The anchor standards are broken out into learning outcomes for grades K-12.*

## BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

### 1. SET YOUR CLASSROOM UP FOR DISCUSSION

Before the critical conversation, make sure your classroom is arranged so your students can all see and hear one another. You want your students talking to one another, not filtering their discussion through you.

### 2. CONSIDER YOUR GOALS FOR THE CONVERSATION

Here are a few goals that could apply to any critical conversation.

#### STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- Connect a critical topic to shared principles like respect, fairness and individual worth.
- Demonstrate an understanding of perspectives and experiences different from their own.
- Explore ways they can put their ideas into action.
- Respect and respond to the experiences of their classmates.

### 3. TEACH UP TO THE CONVERSATION

In the first part of this guide, we stressed the importance of teaching students about identity so they have the foundation to understand critical topics when they arise organically in your classroom. If you're planning critical conversations, you can build on this knowledge and scaffold your teaching to the critical topic.

#### ASK YOURSELF:

*What context or vocabulary will my students need to speak clearly and honestly on this topic?*

*How can students connect this critical discussion to our curriculum and to their lives?*

### 4. BE RESPONSIVE TO YOUR STUDENTS

While it's perfectly normal for students to feel uncomfortable during a critical conversation, you'll want to anticipate that some students might be strongly affected by the discussion. Consider in advance what you'll do to prevent students from feeling triggered, tokenized or singled out.

#### A FEW OPTIONS:

- *Check with students, as a class or individually, before the discussion to gauge their feelings. You may want to introduce the topic early and invite students to speak with you privately if they have questions, or you may want to check in with individual students if you're confident that this won't make them feel singled out.*
- *Get in the habit of bringing guests into your classroom, including colleagues, guest speakers or community advocates. This gives you the opportunity to ensure*

*that a student isn't the only member of an identity group present without drawing attention to that fact.*

- *Address your concerns directly with the class before the discussion, reminding them that no one person speaks for an entire group and that no one should be expected to.*
- *Plan ahead to prevent students from putting a classmate on the spot. For example, when setting your class agreement you might talk about how it's an uncomfortable feeling to have everyone look to you to speak about an issue.*

If you think a critical topic affects you in a way that's different from the way it affects your students, then address that head-on. By acknowledging differences in identity and experience, you're modeling for students the kind of self-awareness and respect for others that you expect them to bring to the conversation.

## ONE EDUCATOR EXPLAINS

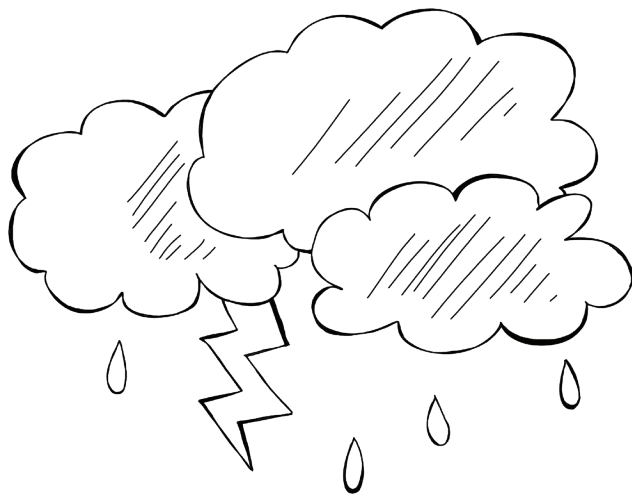
### ADDRESSING IDENTITY DIFFERENCE

#### FROM "I'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED WHITE GUILT"

BY SARAH WEBB

In addition to general racial stereotypes, when black teachers talk about racial issues, others might assume a high level of racial bias on the part of the teacher. White students who have not engaged in critical discussions about race and racism might assume that black teachers are being "too sensitive" or that we cannot be objective about the issue. While no racial or ethnic group is "neutral" in discussions about race, people of color are typically the ones suspiciously viewed as having personal agendas.

In response to this challenge, I prioritized transparency. No hidden agendas. I openly and directly positioned myself in the classroom. I spoke about the various dynamics of being the instructor, a PhD student, a black woman, able-bodied and so forth, explaining the various aspects of my identity that have historical significance and social meaning. I did this partly to model how one might examine their own position in social settings and in society as a whole, and to dispel the myth that any position is the neutral, objective position. It was also a way to very clearly establish the fact that, in this classroom, we do see color and all other various parts of people's identities—not to reinforce hierarchies, but to correct for them.



## 5. ANTICIPATE STRONG EMOTIONS

Critical conversations about identity and injustice often hit close to home, and they can provoke a range of responses from students.

As you plan the discussion, remember to make space for students' emotional responses and consider how they could affect the conversation. Their experiences may trigger anger, for example, that could manifest in interruptions, loud talking, sarcasm or explicit confrontations; trauma or shame might lead to crying. If they're not thoughtfully addressed, these strong emotions can immobilize a critical conversation and traumatize or retraumatize students.

If strong emotions do arise, remain calm and assess the situation. Students may be uncomfortable, but discomfort alone isn't reason to end the conversation. If the tension in the room prompts dialogue and encourages learning, be prepared to let the discussion play out.

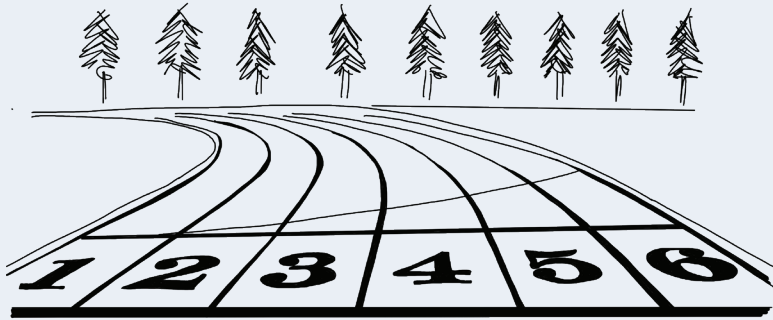
If the tension boils over into confrontations that jeopardize students' emotional or physical safety, you'll need to diffuse the situation. The graphic organizer "Responding to Strong Emotions" and the suggestions in "Managing Strong Emotions" offer a few techniques you can try.

## DISCUSSING CRITICAL TOPICS WITH STUDENTS

Use this graphic organizer to think ahead about how you can create emotional safety in your classroom. The suggested strategies are general; use your knowledge of yourself, your students and your classroom culture to create a specific and personalized plan.

### RESPONDING TO STRONG EMOTIONS

EMOTION	STRATEGIES TO USE IN THE MOMENT	YOUR PLAN
<b>Pain/ Suffering/ Anger</b>	<p>Check in with the students.</p> <p>Model the tone of voice you expect from students.</p> <p>If crying or angry students want to share what they are feeling, allow them to do so. If they are unable to contribute to the class discussion, respectfully acknowledge their emotions and continue with the lesson.</p>	
<b>Blame</b>	<p>Remind students that the systems that benefit from and sustain inequality took a long time to build. These systems hurt all of us, but we can work together to end them.</p>	
<b>Guilt</b>	<p>Have students specify what they feel responsible for.</p> <p>Make sure that students are realistic in accepting responsibility primarily for their own actions and future efforts, even while considering the broader past actions of their identity groups.</p>	
<b>Shame</b>	<p>Encourage students to share what is humiliating or dishonorable. Ask questions that offer students an opportunity to provide a solution to the action, thought or behavior perpetuating their belief.</p>	
<b>Confusion or Denial</b>	<p>When students appear to be operating from a place of misinformation or ignorance about a particular group of people, ask questions anchored in class content or introduce accurate and objective facts for consideration.</p>	



## NAVIGATING A POLARIZED CLASSROOM

One concern we're hearing more and more from teachers is that increased political polarization has seeped into the classroom and that students are more divided than ever.

The recommendations throughout this guide should help you navigate a polarized classroom, but there are some additional steps you can take when discussing a politicized topic.

### ➔ CONTRAST CLASSROOM NORMS WITH POLITICAL RHETORIC.

When you work with your students to establish norms for your discussion, ask them to consider how your conversation should differ from political discourse surrounding this issue and why. Build their responses into your norms for classroom discussion.

### ➔ STRESS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN IDENTITY AND IDEAS, INTENT AND IMPACT.

Remind students that a productive critical conversation—one in which participants work toward better understanding one another—doesn't mean no one will disagree. It's OK if participants challenge each other's ideas, but it's not OK to insult one another's identities. Re-emphasize the difference between intent and impact, and remind students that in your classroom community, they won't be able to walk away from the impact of their statements.

### ➔ DON'T BE AFRAID OF DRAWING RED LINES.

There are some debates, arguments or opinions that you simply may not accept in your classroom, points where you've decided you'll step in and

either address a student's statement or pause the conversation to redirect. When drawing a red line, be clear with students about where you're drawing the line and why. A direct, simple explanation—"The humanity of other people is not up for debate in this classroom."—should suffice.

➔ **HAVE A PLAN TO ADDRESS "FAKE NEWS."**

Depending on the critical topic, you may need to address questions of fact. Before beginning your conversation, talk with students about reliable sources. (Resources for this include Teaching Tolerance's Digital Literacy Framework and lessons on choosing and evaluating reliable sources.) As you set your norms for the conversation, encourage students to draw evidence from experience and from reliable sources.

➔ **ENLIST HELP WHEN NEEDED.**

Every educator should be aware that adolescents are recruited online by extremists of all stripes. If a student refuses to engage or repeats talking points that concern you, reach out to colleagues or consult the anti-extremism resource listed at the end of this guide.

➔ **FOCUS ON COMMONALITIES.**

In your curriculum or in your classroom, look for ways to highlight experiences that those on opposite ends of the political spectrum might share in common. If a class discussion becomes particularly divisive, you might pause to refocus students on shared experiences and ask them to consider why these similar experiences resulted in such different arguments.



## 1. BE POSITIVE

Your students take their cues about how to approach the conversation from you. When you engage critical topics with confidence, respect and a genuine curiosity about your students' ideas and experiences, you encourage them to speak thoughtfully and truthfully and to value one another's contributions.

## 2. ESTABLISH NORMS

Begin the discussion with a collaboration; setting norms together helps students build ownership in the conversation. It may reassure students to know that the discussion will have a clear structure. It also demonstrates your respect for student identities by including them in the shaping of the discussion. And they will likely have ideas that you haven't considered.

There are any number of ways you can work with students to establish norms, from whole-group brainstorming and small-group collaboration to journaling and sharing.

### **YOU COULD LEAD STUDENTS THROUGH A “SOUNDS/LOOKS/FEELS” MODEL.**

Ask students three questions:



#### **1. WHAT DO WE WANT OUR CONVERSATION TO SOUND LIKE?**

Some norms will probably be obvious—no insults—but others should be more complex. Students may agree to limit their contributions until everyone's been heard or ask that everyone begin by restating the idea they're responding to.

A review of vocabulary can cut down on misunderstandings. Reminding students about people-first language, for example, or about the difference between sex and gender can help ensure that everyone has the language they need to communicate clearly.

*“People-first” language is a way of talking about identity that prioritizes an individual’s humanity over their identity group. For example, we would say, “black people” or “white people” in place of “blacks” or “whites” or “transgender people” in place of “transgenders.”*

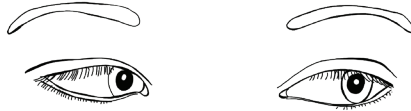
**HERE ARE A FEW STEMS THAT STUDENTS CAN USE TO QUESTION OR DISAGREE WITH CLASSMATES:**

*“What did you mean when you mentioned... ?”*

*“I agree and would add... ”*

*“I agree when you say... but disagree when you say... ”*

*“I disagree when you say... because...”*



**2. WHAT DO WE WANT OUR CONVERSATION TO LOOK LIKE?**

These suggestions will likely address respect. Students could suggest that desks be arranged in a circle, that listeners turn to the speaker and that phones, devices and computers be put away.

This is a good time to remind students once again of the difference between intent and impact. You can also address tokenism at this time, reminding them that no individual can speak for an entire group and that we shouldn't expect them to.

**3. WHAT DO WE WANT OUR CONVERSATION TO FEEL LIKE?**

It may be more difficult for students to generate responses to this question, but answers could include that students expect to feel respected and believed.

If you've laid the groundwork for productive critical conversations, your students should have confidence that their identities and experiences will be valued. Remember that feeling safe and valued are not the same as feeling comfortable. Address this directly: Your discussion may at times be uncomfortable, but discomfort is a necessary part of growth.

**ALTERNATIVELY, YOU COULD ASK STUDENTS TO CREATE AND SIGN A COMMUNITY AGREEMENT.**

This is a more formal way to encourage students to take responsibility for the classroom climate. The community agreement might include statements like:

- *I will listen to understand, not just to respond.*
- *I will engage in dialogue, not debate.*
- *I will build on others' ideas by restating what they've said before I add my thoughts.*
- *I will use evidence, including facts or my own experience, to support my point of view.*
- *I will not make assumptions about the experiences of others.*
- *I will speak directly to my classmates, not just to my teacher.*
- *I will suspend my first judgment of people's ideas.*

- *I will challenge and question ideas or assumptions, not people.*
- *I will ask for clarification when I'm unclear about what's been said.*

For models of community agreements from the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, see [t-t.site/crlt-classroom-interactions](https://t-t.site/crlt-classroom-interactions).

### 3. ESTABLISH GOALS

Students should know why a critical conversation is taking place and what you expect them to gain from it. Talking through goals with your students also eases the class into the discussion. If you generally begin with an essential or compelling question, try involving students in its development. This offers an easy way to connect a critical discussion to the lesson, event or news that sparked it.

### 4. OFFER A SHARED STARTING POINT

However a critical topic finds its way to your classroom, remember that connections that seem obvious to you may not be clear to students. Instead of requiring them to be ready to jump into a critical conversation, provide a prompt to connect the discussion to their lives and to the curriculum.

#### ONE TEACHER EXPLAINS

### FIGHTING FALSE EQUIVALENCIES

#### FROM "DO YOU TEACH ABOUT IDEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY?"

BY JONATHAN GOLD

In the classroom, teachers cannot simply rely on a model of presenting supporting and opposing views on issues. The views of Islamophobes, for example, do not deserve equal consideration, but on issues on which there is legitimate or high-profile disagreement, teachers have a responsibility to present and unpack a variety of viewpoints. Determining that line is perhaps the most challenging part of teaching in today's political climate. For example, even though we wouldn't want to promote a false equivalence between climate change denial and climate change acceptance, we also can't pretend that denial doesn't exist.

Just as the content we choose can promote diverse perspectives and key values, so can the skills we seek to foster in students. So, when students in a Boston high school classroom were introduced to the ideas of the "alt-right," they brought to their learning a well-honed toolkit of critical literacy skills and the values of inclusivity and tolerance. Their teachers could trust that the students would see this movement for what it is. The planned setting of a scaffolded curriculum is exactly the right place to learn how to separate viable, inclusive ideology from bigotry, conspiracy theories and paranoia.

## TEXT-RESPONSE PROMPTS

Text-based prompts give students an opportunity to begin discussing a critical topic without immediately requiring that they share their own experiences. Choose a text—an image, a video, a song or a piece of writing—to share with students. Begin by letting them study the text, offering time for reflection or freewriting. Then ask students to respond.

### TRY ASKING THESE KINDS OF QUESTIONS:

- *Describe the text. What is happening? Who is taking action? What are they doing?*
- *Who in this text has power? How can you tell?*
- *Is there unfairness or injustice? How can you tell?*
- *What assumptions, misinformation or biases might be used to justify this injustice?*
- *Who benefits from these assumptions, misinformation or biases? Who suffers from them?*
- *What about this text do you think will surprise most readers (viewers, listeners)? Did it surprise you? Why?*
- *What would justice or fairness look like in this text?*
- *How can you relate this text to a critical topic like gender bias, ableism, anti-immigrant sentiment, religious bias or anti-LGBTQ persecution?*
- *How can you relate this text to your own experience or community?*

## PERSONAL-RESPONSE PROMPTS

Personal prompts, which open a discussion with questions, are particularly effective ways to build student interest in a critical topic. You might have students respond anonymously and then review their answers prior to the discussion. Or you could ask them to write as a way to start thinking through a topic before they'll be asked to share. One thing to keep in mind is that students with dominant cultural identities may struggle to articulate the ways that their identities have shaped their experience—this may be one of the few times they've ever been asked to do so. Consider including questions about multiple identities, providing model responses or simply reordering the questions below to ensure that all students are engaging with the critical discussion from the beginning.

### HERE ARE A FEW QUESTIONS TO TRY WITH SECONDARY STUDENTS:

- *What are your earliest memories of race?*
- *What messages did you hear about your own race as you were growing up? What messages did you hear about other races? Where did these messages come from?*
- *How often have you thought about your race in the last 24 hours? In the last week?*
- *How does your race factor into the way you make everyday decisions? What about important life decisions?*
- *Have you ever experienced a situation where your race seemed to contribute to an uncomfortable situation?*

- *Do you think our school is racially diverse?*
- *Have you ever witnessed or experienced a “racially charged” situation at school, one that created discomfort or anger around race? How did people react?*
- *If you could change one thing about our school that’s related to race, what change would you recommend? How would you implement it?*
- *How would you compare the attitudes about race you see on our campus to those you see in our town? In our state? In our nation?*

*These questions are adapted from materials by the Office of Student Diversity, Engagement and Success at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.*

**AND HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS:**

- *How are the students in our school diverse?*
- *Do you have a friend who is a different race than you?*
- *When you look at your cafeteria, do students group themselves in a certain way? Why do you think that happens?*
- *Think about the characters in your favorite movie, TV show or book. How are the characters like you? Different from you? Would you say the characters are diverse?*

For very young students, consider having them mark a piece of paper with plus or minus signs to indicate their level of comfort or familiarity with a topic. For example, if your critical discussion has been prompted by a current event, you might ask students if they’ve heard about what happened, with “+” for yes and “-” for no. This will help you determine the level of background you’ll need to provide.

*A quick word of caution: Although you are encouraging students to speak about their feelings, don’t require them to share anything too personal. It isn’t fair, for example, to require students to share about a time when they were the victims of discrimination and make them revisit that experience during class. Instead, try a sentence stem like, “One word that comes to mind when I hear the word ‘immigration’ is ...” or “One word to describe how I feel talking about race is ...”*

## DURING THE CONVERSATION

### 1. STRUCTURE THE CONVERSATION

Planning a structure for your critical conversation will ensure that all students have the opportunity to contribute. There are any number of structures you can try; here are three we recommend (see our Resources section for more).

When choosing a structure, be sure to consider not only the personalities and culture in your classroom but also the topic with which you'll be engaging. When you choose a debate format, for example, you're communicating a clear message to students: Both sides of the debate are equally valid. This works well when students are exploring questions like whether boycotts encourage or discourage free speech. But choosing this format to discuss family separation at the border or the right of transgender people to serve in the military could result in some students being forced to argue against the basic humanity of their classmates—and it signals to all students that you believe some people's humanity is up for debate.

### ENCOURAGING OPENNESS

#### ➔ FOCUS ON UNDERSTANDING, NOT PERSUASION.

Take the role of listener, mediator and prompter rather than evaluator, judge or interpreter. Neutral phrases like, "Please tell us more about that," and questions like, "What experiences have led you to this conclusion?" can encourage students to explain further without feeling defensive.

#### ➔ MODEL CONTRIBUTING AND LISTENING.

Model openness by sharing some of your own experiences. If you feel comfortable doing this, it can be a really great way to build connections in your classroom. Model active listening skills for students, using phrases like, "What I heard you say is ..."

#### ➔ KEEP THE DISCUSSION STUDENT-CENTERED.

Avoid lecturing students, even if you disagree with their claims. Instead, look for ways to make space for students to engage with one another.

#### ➔ GET COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE.

Often, in an attempt to make students more comfortable, educators will jump in to fill silences during critical conversations. But these pauses give students a moment or two to reflect and consider what they want to say next. Try waiting for just 30 seconds: Generally, students will break the silence themselves.

#### ➔ MAKE SPACE FOR IMPERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS.

Create opportunities for students to contribute comments that aren't too personal. Ask questions that clarify or expand ideas and allow quieter students an opportunity to join in without volunteering anything too personal. You might try questions like, "Where do the assumptions or ideas about this topic come from?"

### **MODIFIED SOCRATIC SEMINAR**

A Socratic seminar encourages students to work together to better understand a text. During a Socratic seminar, the facilitator asks open-ended questions that participants answer, using the text as evidence. If your critical conversation began as a way to better understand your curriculum, a modified Socratic seminar—in which students answer questions by connecting the text to their own experience—can help them build connections between your curriculum and their own lives.

### **DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE**

Unlike a debate, where the goal is to win by convincing listeners that one side is right, a deliberative dialogue sets the goal of collaborating with others in conversation to develop a deeper, more complex understanding of a topic or question. Instead of bringing one another from “the wrong side” of an argument onto “the right side,” students test their ideas against one another, expand their knowledge and adapt their understanding in response. Ultimately, they identify some common ground where they agree. Deliberative dialogue stresses listening, weighing evidence, re-evaluating ideas and collaborating to reach understanding.

### **SERIAL TESTIMONY**

For this activity, the facilitator opens with a question. Students draw on their experiences to answer one question, but serial testimony is neither debate nor dialogue: Each student speaks, uninterrupted, for a set period (generally around a minute). They don’t need to connect their responses to those of their classmates, and the goal is for students to hear and understand one another rather than convince their listeners. This activity can be particularly useful if emotions are running high and a primary goal of your discussion is fostering understanding and empathy.

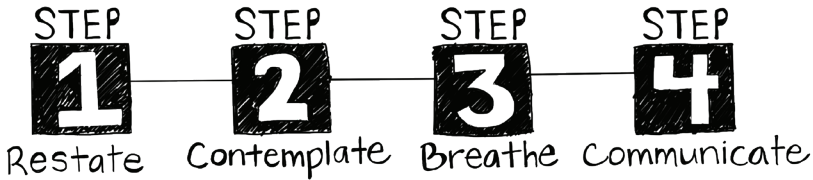
## **2. PLAN WAYS TO SUPPORT AND CHECK IN WITH STUDENTS**

These strategies are designed to help students communicate with you and with one another. Each strategy is first presented for use in 6–12 classrooms and includes an adaptation for K–5 students. Like many of the other approaches in this guide, these check-ins can feel a bit awkward at first. But with practice—from both you and your students—they can quickly become invaluable tools for powerful communication.

## STRATEGY 1

### RESTATE ☉ CONTEMPLATE ☉ BREATHE ☉ COMMUNICATE

Explain to students that these four steps can help us communicate while feeling difficult emotions. Taking time to restate, contemplate, breathe and communicate won't stop or change the emotions we feel, but these steps can help us all self-regulate.



#### **STEP 1: RESTATE. REPEAT WHAT YOU'VE HEARD IN YOUR OWN WORDS.**

This step enables students to reflect on what was said instead of what they think they heard. Restating decreases the likelihood that students will misunderstand one another.

**STEP 2: CONTEMPLATE. COUNT TO 10 AND REFLECT ON COMMUNITY NORMS.** Taking a moment for self-reflection lets students figure out how to challenge a statement, rather than the person making it, and consider the intent and the impact of their words.

**STEP 3: BREATHE. CONSIDER A RESPONSE.** This step gives students time to settle any emotions they may be feeling before they respond.

**STEP 4: COMMUNICATE. SPEAK WITH COMPASSION AND THOUGHTFULNESS.** When students are given space to feel and process their emotions, it's easier to speak to others respectfully, assuming good intentions and seeking understanding.



**(K-5): REPEAT ↔ FEEL ↔ THINK ↔ BREATHE ↔ CONNECT**

Use age-appropriate language to rephrase the steps for students, and add an extra step: Repeat, *feel*, think, breathe and connect. Use symbols along with words when you introduce the strategy to help students understand and remember the process. You will probably want to demonstrate these communication expectations and practice them several times as a class before you engage students in discussion.



**Step 1: Repeat**

Say it again.



**Step 2: Feel**

Put yourself in their shoes.



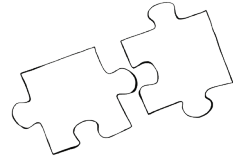
**Step 3: Think**

Count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.



**Step 4: Breathe**

In through the nose;  
out through the mouth.

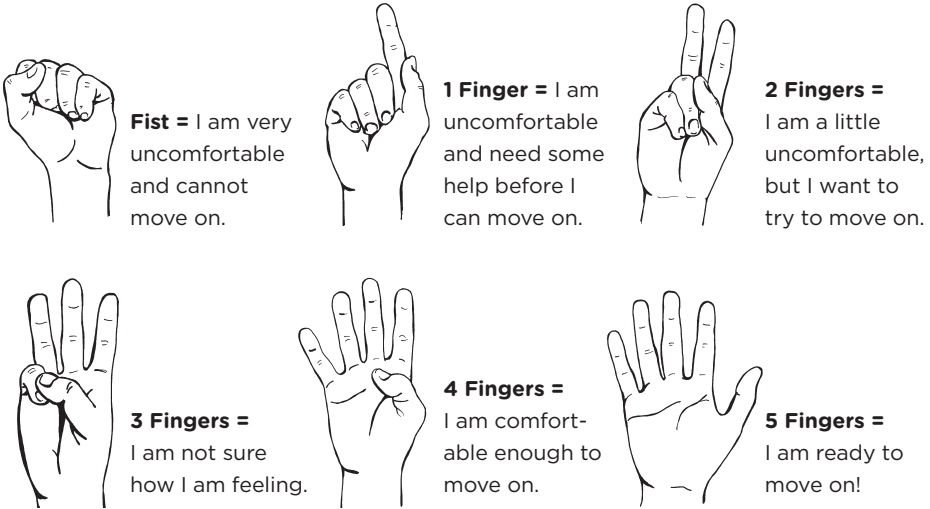


**Step 5: Connect**

Share your thoughts  
with your classmates.

## STRATEGY 2: FIST TO FIVE

Staying on top of the emotional temperature in the room and checking in with students about how they are feeling helps you know when to pause the conversation to address strong emotions. One simple nonverbal check-in that lets you gauge any number of student responses (including readiness, comprehension or emotional response) is asking students to give a quick “fist-to-five” hand signal. Depending on your class, you may choose to have students put their heads down or signal under their desks to ensure they feel comfortable providing honest responses.



### **(K-5): THUMBS UP/THUMBS DOWN**

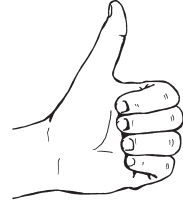
“Fist-to-five” can work well with many K–5 students, but teachers of younger children might also consider using the simpler “thumbs up/thumbs down” when first introducing the strategy. This gives students a simple way to safely engage critical conversations when they may not feel comfortable speaking up. Depending on your class, you may choose to have students put their heads down or signal under their desks to ensure privacy.



**Thumbs Down =** Whoa!  
That doesn't feel good.



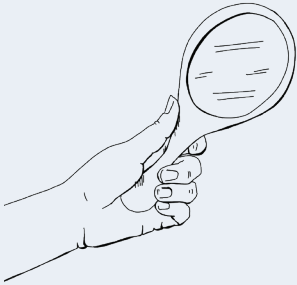
**Thumbs to the Side =**  
Huh? I need some help.



**Thumbs Up =** I am  
ready! Let's go!

## MANAGING STRONG EMOTIONS

No matter how well you plan, there is a possibility you'll need to address strong emotions in your classroom. Here are a few ways to intervene and redirect the conversation if high levels of emotion impede discussion. Remember, students will follow your lead. If you model calm, they can also use this moment to catch their breath and calm down.



### ➔ REVIEW YOUR NORMS

If emotion derails the conversation, “press pause” to review your shared norms and remind students to challenge ideas or assumptions—not people. Avoid singling out a particular student for reprimand, and instead remind everyone of the behavior that you agreed upon. You might try saying something like: “You probably won’t convince each other to change your minds, but

it’s important to hear and understand different perspectives of the issue. Let’s talk, one at a time.”

### ➔ ASK QUESTIONS

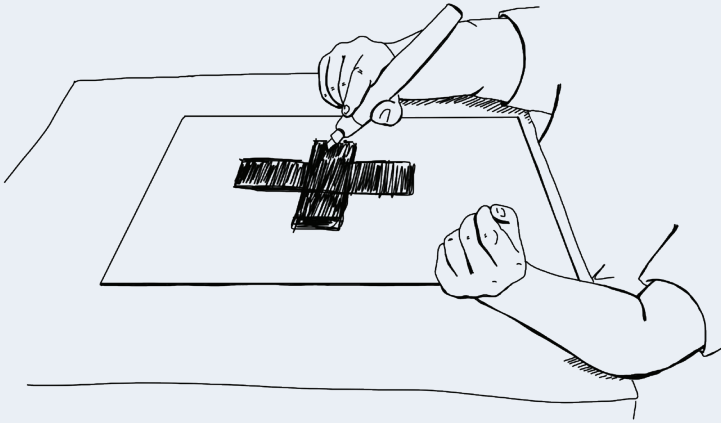
If a student takes an extreme or antagonistic position on an issue, you may need to step in to engage them directly. Instead of confronting them, try teasing out the reasons behind their beliefs. Acknowledge that they feel strongly about the issue and ask them how and why they came to have such a strong reaction.

If a student shares something in class that is untrue, you can gently offer a correction and pause a moment to discuss reliable sources. Remind the class why this is important: “Sometimes, if we hear the same misinformation or stereotype repeated over and over again, we assume it’s true. Part of being fair is knowing what the facts are.”

That said, be careful about overwhelming an unyielding student with hard facts. Research suggests that the presentation of information does little to change strongly held beliefs. In fact, sometimes these beliefs become more ingrained when challenged with facts.

### ➔ CHALLENGE ZERO-SUM THINKING

Sometimes students think that if one group of people benefits from a policy, program or attitude—particularly a group that has historically been disempowered—another group must be losing something. This type of thinking can lead to strong emotions. Students may not even realize that this is the root of their feelings, so it’s important to help



students reframe zero-sum thinking, or the idea that any given situation must result in a winner and a loser.

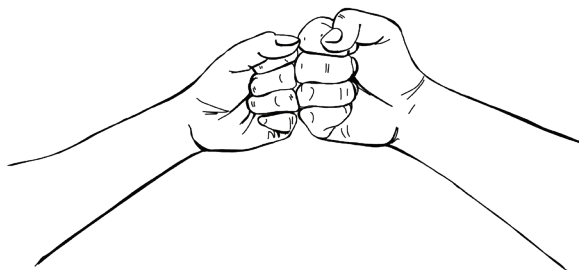
During the critical discussion, pause the conversation when you hear zero-sum thinking. Ask the student why they feel or believe that one group must lose if another benefits. Encourage them to consider situations in which zero-sum thinking won't apply, and (if you can) stop the conversation long enough to discuss some of the possible effects of this kind of thinking.

If you're planning your critical conversation in advance, think through some examples of mutually beneficial progress that apply to your critical topic (e.g., be prepared to provide examples of ways diversity can make a city better or how equal access to education improves schools). Introducing specific examples is a particularly effective way of challenging this kind of oversimplification.

These techniques can help you call students in, ensuring that your conversation continues rather than shutting down if emotions run high. To learn more strategies for calling in, see [tolerance.org/calling-out](https://tolerance.org/calling-out).

## CLOSING THE CONVERSATION

The deliberate approach you've brought to planning and facilitating your critical conversation should continue through the close of the discussion. Students need time to process and reflect on these conversations, and time to let the emotions that may have arisen during the discussion recede. Here are a few strategies you can use to guide this process.



### 1. WRAP UP THE DISCUSSION

In addition to asking for anonymous feedback that can make your next discussion smoother, try one or more of these ideas.

#### **SUMMARIZE WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED**

Ask students directly: “What are some of the discoveries we’ve made today?”

Encourage responses that speak both to the critical topic (e.g., “I saw firsthand how ‘jokes’ can hurt people.”) and to the discussion itself (e.g., “I learned that we can disagree and still respect one another.”).

#### **REVISIT YOUR GOALS**

Ask students whether they think the discussion has met the goals you set or answered the compelling question you established at the start of the conversation, and why. To prepare students for the end-of-class assessment, ask them to identify moments when they felt the discussion was best working to meet your class goals or answer the compelling question.

#### **SHARE APPRECIATION**

Invite students to thank one another for sharing and to also recognize how their classmates have helped them better understand the critical topic.

#### **IDENTIFY SHARED EXPERIENCES OR VALUES**

Ask students to brainstorm experiences, identities or beliefs that connect them to any subjects of your discussion and to one another. This might be something as straightforward as being a teenager or as nuanced as believing that immigration policy should be reformed in a specific way. Ask students to identify someone in the class with whom they have something in common they didn’t know about before today.

## **REVIEW YOUR COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS**

Ask students whether (and how) they think the community agreements you developed at the beginning of class helped the conversation proceed. Work together to brainstorm at least one new idea for the next time you have a critical discussion.

## **PLAN FOR FOLLOW-UP ACTION**

Brainstorm ways that students can take action. Make a list of steps, big and small, that students can take to engage with this topic. This might range from something as simple as talking to a family member about their immigration story or reading a chapter of *The New Jim Crow* to learn about racism in the justice system. Or it might be as involved as attending a school board meeting or volunteering with a voter registration drive.

## **2. ALLOW TIME AND SPACE TO DEBRIEF**

Even if you end the conversation on a positive note, everyone involved will still need time and space to let go of emotions before they leave the classroom. These strategies can help students debrief what they learned *and* the experience of learning it.

### **TALKING CIRCLES**

Gather students in a circle and provide an object to use as a talking piece. As circle keeper, pose a question or statement to begin. It could be something as straightforward as “How do you feel about today’s lesson?” The student holding the talking piece can answer, then pass the talking piece to select the next student to answer. Once students are familiar with the process, they can be circle keepers as well.

### **JOURNALING**

Journaling helps students process emotions on their own terms and at their own pace. You can decide whether you’d like journals to be kept private or if you’d like them to serve as a space where you can dialogue with students by writing back and forth.

### **DRAWING**

Drawing can also provide students with a valuable opportunity for personal reflection and emotional processing. Like journals, student artwork can be shared or kept private.

### **PUPPETS OR PLAY OBJECTS (GRADES K-5)**

In addition to the strategies above, younger students may also respond well to role-playing with puppets. They help students to communicate playfully and safely and can make them feel more comfortable asking or answering questions. Create a space for students to debrief using puppets or other play objects, or consider using puppets in more formalized ways (such as in a talking circle).

### 3. SOLICIT ANONYMOUS FEEDBACK

Some students may feel uncomfortable contributing to a critical conversation. They may also be reluctant to critique classmates or to let you know what they wish you were doing differently. Asking for anonymous feedback can help ensure their concerns are heard, and you can use the feedback to guide the discussion, recalibrate the conversation or prepare for the next time you engage with a critical topic. Soliciting thoughtful feedback is perhaps the most effective way to ensure that your practice improves each time you facilitate a critical discussion with your students.

#### **START/STOP/CONTINUE (GRADES 6-12)**

Hand out “start/stop/continue” sentence stems. After the discussion, ask students to anonymously tell you:

*Next time we discuss a critical topic, please start ...*

*Please stop ...*

*Please continue ...*

#### **(GRADES K-5)**

Younger students may be reluctant to recommend changes to your teaching, so frame these sentences as things “we” should do differently. This can be done verbally or in writing.

*Next time we discuss a topic like this, I hope we start ...*

*I hope we stop ...*

*I hope we continue ...*



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Lessons, student texts, articles and more are available at no cost through Teaching Tolerance’s website. Users can narrow their searches by resource type, grade level or social justice topic (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, class) at [tolerance.org](https://www.teachingtolerance.org).

An excellent resource for independent or collaborative professional learning, the case studies available through Justice in Schools provide examples of scenarios that might provoke critical conversations. Published by Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education, they are available through [justiceinschools.org](https://www.justiceinschools.org).

And for educators concerned that hateful ideologies have influenced their students, the Western States Center has created the toolkit “Confronting White Nationalism in Schools,” available for download at [westernstatescenter.org/schools](https://www.westernstatescenter.org/schools).

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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