



FOUR CORNERS

"The simple realization that there are other points of view is the beginning of wisdom."

— Charles M. Campbell

OVERVIEW

Students move to one of the four corners of the classroom to indicate their position on a controversial statement, then engage in discussion or debate about their opinions.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- As a warm-up before studying a new topic
- As a follow-up for students to apply what they've learned about a topic
- To help students refine their arguments before writing
- To encourage students to consider different points of view
- To give all students a chance to actively participate

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- Four signs, on poster paper or similar, labeled “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree”
- One or more controversial statements, potentially related to topic(s) being studied

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Decide where they stand on a controversial statement
- Discuss and summarize their position with others who share it
- Hear arguments from other positions, and change their stance if desired
- Reflect on the process and their final thoughts

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Think of a controversial issue that you have a definite opinion about. What are the main reasons for your position? What are the arguments for the other side?

INSTRUCTIONS

SET-UP

- Before class, come up with one or more controversial statements for the students to discuss. These could relate to a topic that the class will be or has been studying, or they could reflect issues that are interesting to students and/or important in society. For this activity to work well, the statement(s) should be debatable (i.e., there shouldn't be only one correct answer). Depending on the students' developmental level, examples could include:
 - Students should be required to wear uniforms to school.
 - Cell phones should not be allowed at school.
 - Companies should be allowed to use animals to test new products.

- The purpose of education is to prepare students for future jobs.
 - If laws are unfair, they should be broken.
- More examples and several online sources for debate topic ideas can be found [here](#).

THE PRACTICE

- Place the four signs (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree) around the room, one in each corner.
- Before beginning the activity, remind students about classroom norms for respectful discussions.
- Present the controversial statement to the students and give them a few moments to collect their thoughts about it.
 - You might consider using a handout or graphic organizer to allow students to respond in writing.
- Once the students have had time to think, read the statement aloud and ask all students to stand up and move to the corner of the room that best represents their opinion on the statement.
 - Ensure that everyone participates!
- Give the students 5-10 minutes to discuss within their groups the reasons why they chose that position.
 - Make sure that at least one student in each group is taking notes.
- Ask for a representative from each corner to share their group's main ideas with the class.
 - Encourage students to switch corners if they feel persuaded by another group's arguments.
- If time allows, give students the opportunity to raise and respond to questions about each other's ideas and reasoning.
 - Remind students that uncertainty is OK—that, in fact, it's a good thing to be able to take multiple perspectives into account.
- To scaffold students' reasoning at the end of the discussion, you might have the class work together to come up with the main arguments on both sides for you to list on the board.

CLOSURE

- Debrief by having students reflect on whether and how the activity changed or reinforced their opinion on the topic. Students could also write reflections in journals or as a written homework assignment, depending on the age group.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to this exercise? Was it an effective method for engaging students in controversial but respectful discussion? Did any students change their position after hearing others' perspectives, or seem more open to considering the merits of other opinions?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Active learning](#) techniques, in which students actively discuss and reflect on ideas rather than passively absorbing them, boost students' engagement and learning. Debate-type activities, in particular, in which students must consider other points of view and clarify their own, have been shown to improve students' [critical thinking](#), [perspective-taking](#), and [communication skills](#).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Students who are [more engaged](#) at school overall tend to do better in academics and in life. More specifically, activities like Four Corners promote the kind of critical thinking and communication skills that students will be able to apply across contexts, and that will thus [serve them well](#) in their future educational and career trajectories.

What's more, the ability and willingness to listen to, understand, and respond respectfully to different perspectives is critical in today's globalized world. To make truly ethical and responsible decisions, students must be able to [engage in dialogue](#) with others while developing their own ideas.