



## FACILITATING BRIDGING DISCUSSIONS

*"When you get these jobs you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else."*

—Toni Morrison

### OVERVIEW

Educators will reflect on, and learn tips about, how to best engage in “bridging differences” discussions about justice and equity in the classroom.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To build a positive classroom climate at the beginning of the year
- To cultivate strong relationships between students
- To establish a deeper sense of accountability to the classroom community
- To help students understand and process when a social or ethical dilemma from the classroom, school, or greater community arises

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

#### LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- Adult

#### MATERIALS

- None

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Educators will:

- Reflect on their motivations and apprehensions for engaging in practices that support bridging difference and understanding and pursuing justice in their classrooms
- Prepare for engaging in these practices by considering supports, norms, structures, and sequencing that will best enable student learning
- Review important definitions related to justice, equity, and bridge building
- Learn methods for handling difficult conversations in the classroom

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Humanity
- Justice

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention
- Open Awareness
- Non-judgment

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Take a moment to reflect on your own comfort and skills as well as your classroom environment and student skill-level for bridging differences. Use the following questions to help you prepare to engage in these practices.

- What are your motivations for engaging in practices that encourage bridging differences and understanding and pursuing justice? Why is this work important to you?
- What is your comfort level? Have you had any practice facilitating these types of discussions with your students or colleagues?
- What are your hesitations or worries for engaging in practices that encourage bridging differences, and understanding and pursuing justice?
- With whom in your support system—in and out of school—can you discuss this work?

- What is your perceived understanding of your students' skills, comfort, and motivation to engage in this work?

## INSTRUCTIONS

### PREPARING YOUR CLASSROOM

- **Norms:** Create or use established [classroom norms](#) as a basis of trust and respect in your classroom.
  - If norms are used effectively, they can support trust and relationship-building and make discussing complex topics less challenging for students and educators.
  - Norms can also be used to redirect students and help educators during difficult moments in the classroom to maintain accountability and trust in the classroom.
  - If you already have established classroom norms, review them for cultural relevance and inclusivity.
- **Educator Support:** Consider your [support in and out of school](#) before you engage in this work. Coordinate with other staff such as counselors and administrators so that you're supported before participating in potentially difficult conversations.
  - Feeling connected to others is considered to be a fundamental psychological need, so it's important for teachers to experience a sense of connectedness at school—just as much as students. In fact, [studies](#) indicate that teachers' view of their school climate can be linked to their job satisfaction and self-efficacy in the classroom.
  - Consider practicing leading these conversations with other educators before doing it in real time with students.
- **Sequencing:** The sequence you choose when using these practices is your choice! Think about your classroom needs, including what will be most engaging, relevant, and impactful for your students.
  - Some practices, such as [listening with compassion](#) and [building norms](#), can help set a strong foundation of trust and care before engaging in practices such as [unpacking identity](#) and [understanding stereotypes and implicit biases](#).
- **Student Support:** Identify student supports, such as the school counselor or social worker, parents/caregivers, and mentors, within the school system that you can refer and connect your students to when they need support processing these practices.
  - Consider engaging in light rapport-building activities in advance of these practices, such as [I See You. Everyone Matters](#) or [1-2-3 Clap](#), to build classroom community and connection.
  - Engaging in difficult conversations requires energy and emotional capital. Giving students options, agency, and space, such as allowing students to self-select to take a break to recover, is important. Consider adding in 'brain breaks' after practices to help students transition out of the lesson as well.
- **Adapting Practices:** You know your classroom community best. To make practices engaging and relevant for your classroom, adapt lessons as needed, especially for unique communities and circumstances.

### IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS

Through these practices, students will engage in the following terms related to bridging differences and pursuing justice. Oftentimes conflict with others who seem different from us or who hold different opinions is caused by a

misunderstanding of terms and definitions. In other words, language. Hence, it is important for both you and your students to understand the terms listed below that are used in the practices when engaging in this work.

**Justice**: “fairness in the way people are dealt with.”

- Justice is both the action taken toward creating and the end result of an environment of respect where all people can flourish. For example, see the disparity by race in [school suspensions](#).

**Equity**: the situation in which everyone is treated fairly according to their needs.

- Equity is the guarantee of accessibility and opportunity for all. For example, offer curricula that [provide opportunities](#) for students to see themselves reflected in the material and develop their racial and cultural identities.

**Stereotypes**: A stereotype is a widely held and simplified belief about a specific group. Groups are often [stereotyped](#) on the basis of sex, gender identity, geography, race and ethnicity, nationality, age, socioeconomic status, language, and so forth. For example, the color blue is for boys and the color pink is for girls.

**Implicit bias**: Implicit bias involves automatic or unintentional attitudes, behaviors, and actions that are prejudiced in favor of or against one person or group compared to another. Sometimes implicit bias can [lead to discrimination](#), even when people feel they are being fair. For example, someone with implicit bias who is unintentionally influenced by the stereotype that young people are lazy and don't care about politics would not reach out to them to register to vote.

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## MANAGING DIFFICULT MOMENTS

Bridging differences and discussing equity and justice can lead to difficult, vulnerable, or uncomfortable moments in your classroom. While allowing students to share their beliefs openly, it is important to recognize when a comment is harmful to others or interferes with the protocol or safety of the classroom environment.

It is also important to make a plan to say this in advance of discussions in anticipation of difficult moments occurring, and repeating this preface often to clarify expectations. Furthermore, it's important to recognize if you don't have the resources or preparation to facilitate a given conversation. Consider taking small steps and having short conversations to begin so there is a build up of success and practice before more intense topics and lengthy discussions are planned.

At the same time, make a commitment to grow in your skills so that you can ensure that the perspectives of marginalized groups are heard. The inequities that marginalized people experience can be invisible to those who don't experience them. What's more, when they share their experiences, their peers can receive these perspectives with disbelief or defensiveness. While these conversations can be difficult to facilitate, they are essential to prepare for and have so that all voices—especially those that have been stifled historically—are welcomed and respected. You can seek out the support of trusted colleagues to build your skills and competence to navigate these important discussions.

Follow the tips below to help you prioritize maintaining a brave, safe space and student well-being while challenging students to identify, unpack, and confront biases and stereotypes as well as seek justice.

To identify if you should interject after certain statements or to identify if statements are harmful, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Does the statement follow classroom norms?**
  - If not, interject and let the student and class know how a norm has been broken. Support the student to follow the norms, and if the statement shared is not harmful (e.g., said to target specific individuals, express stereotype(s), or hurt others), ask the student to rephrase their statement in a way that keeps with specific norms. Continue the discussion if classroom emotions are not too high, and consider speaking with the student individually rather than publicly depending on the situation.
  - If the statement was harmful, follow the guidance below, and consider appropriate disciplinary measures. It is important to maintain accountability and transparency while engaging in these practices.
- **Is the statement a harmful stereotype?**
  - If yes, interject. Remind students that stereotyping violates your shared norms and that stereotypes are inadequate representations of reality, which can create harm. If the stereotype in question was a slur meant to cause harm, consider the needs of the class, appropriate discipline, and individuals within the class community who may be harmed in particular. Check in discretely and, when appropriate, with any students who might have been hurt by the stereotype. Make sure there is a supportive person in the school that students can talk to if something bothers them during the conversation, and let students know they can speak with this person anytime (e.g., a school counselor or social worker).
  - Check in with the student who used the stereotype to make sure they understand the impact of their words and why the statement was harmful. While the discussion protocol is meant to help students share personal beliefs, it should be clear in advance of the discussions and repeated that stereotypes that target specific groups of people are never allowed in the classroom. Also discuss in advance the harm to the person using the slur, such as the possible consequence of negative reputation and social exclusion, and that sometimes people will not accept an apology right away (or at all) after someone uses a slur.
  - Connect back to specific norms such as the following: take responsibility for your impact on others in the classroom; avoid sweeping generalizations; treat diverse opinions as an opportunity; remember that there are wide variations within and between races, ethnicities, economic classes; consider the diversity of the people in the room and imagine how others in the room might experience your comments; consider what responsibilities you are asking specific students to bear and who you are asking to bear them.
- **What is the intention?** Did this student mean to hurt others?
  - If a statement is said that comes across as hurtful or harmful, check if it transgresses on classroom norms and if it expresses stereotypes. If so, follow the tips above. While it is difficult to know students' intentions, share that the statement may have made others feel degraded or been perceived as hurtful. After the discussion, check in with the student privately about their intentions, sharing observations regarding the body language, tone, or words they used that made the comment hurtful. Check in about their perception of their peers' feelings and remind the student about norms connected to their comment.
  - It is important to note that even if the student didn't intend to hurt others, a harmful comment still needs to be addressed. This is an opportunity to normalize respectfully addressing and learning from these moments regardless of intent.
- **What is the environment?** Is the statement singling out certain students? What is the emotional energy of the room?

- Throughout the discussion, be mindful of the classroom environment. What are the emotions in the room? Are students engaged? Are students avoiding certain topics? Are certain students bearing the weight of topics on sensitive matters such as race, class, or religion? To maintain transparency, accountability, and emotional wellness, acknowledge what you notice in class and practice following norms, checking in with students and encouraging your class to practice strategies that will help them navigate difficult emotions such as engaging in 'brain breaks' (e.g., [Shake It Off](#) or other movement activities), grounding activities (e.g., [Finger-Tracing](#)), or encouraging students to journal or discuss their thoughts and emotions with friends and support system.
- If conversations become heated and individuals or groups of students become overwhelmed or belligerent, try to reroute students to the goal of the discussion or specific topic. If emotions are high and students are not open to refocusing, acknowledge the emotions in the room and take a cool-down break from the conversation. Give students an opportunity to take a break for five minutes, practicing coping skills (e.g., getting a drink of water, walking around, taking a stretch break, connecting with a friend, etc.) while you check in with any students who you think might need some immediate attention. Based on your assessment of the atmosphere, you can try returning to the issue once everyone is calm, or you can opt to move on to something else and return to the conversation the next time your class meets. If you opt to move on, consider how you can reach resolution on the issue and, if possible, consider inviting in the school counselor when you continue the topic.

To further prepare your class, in addition to using class norms, encourage students to pay attention to questions that may concern or cause direct harm and degradation, or shaming or putting someone down, particularly based on their identity (e.g., religion, nationality, sexuality, race/ethnicity, gender, disability).

A difficulty that attempting to talk across difference often brings up is the question of moral authority in the classroom: What's moral, and who's to say? For example, should teachers invite diverse views on same-sex relationships in a class where they have religious students who think that homosexuality is a sin along with LGBTQ students who will not only feel attacked by this view but may be subject to harassment outside of class? Many students may believe that immigrants tend to be criminals or that low-income families lack a work ethic — is it acceptable for immigrant or lower-income students to have to sit through, let alone engage in, such conversations?

In the discussion of group norms, tell your students that, while one of the goals of these practices is to create a space where people with different opinions can peacefully discuss, listen, and learn, not all opinions are equal, and opinions that advocate for harm and violence or that are supported by degrading ideas about groups of people are not acceptable. Encourage students to look through the lenses of harm and degradation as they consider the arguments they and their peers make to consider who might get hurt and whether or not that is acceptable. For more guidance on handling difficult emotions, consider reviewing this [guide](#).

Generally, remember that things might be difficult or unclear in the heat of the moment and that your immediate intervention might not fully resolve the issue. In those cases, you may want to reflect on and make meaning of what happened with trusted colleagues immediately following the interaction. Once you've had the opportunity to debrief with colleagues, you can make a plan about how to return to the issue as soon as you can after the escalation point. When possible, coordinate in advance with other staff such as counselors and administrators so that you're prepared and supported before tough conversations and have plans to address hot issues that might come up.

For more guidance on how to diffuse difficult moments and avoid pitfalls see the [Harvard Bok Center](#) and [Vanderbilt Center for Teaching](#) resources.

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Teens need support in building their skills to participate in solving problems within existing structures within society. They also need to learn how to recognize when these societal structures perpetuate inequities and how to take collective action to foster justice.

[Researchers](#) compared two different high school programs in the United States where students learned about democracy and citizenship. One program focused on participatory citizenship in an East Coast suburban/rural high school (almost all students were European Americans). The other program focused on justice-oriented citizenship in a West Coast urban high school (38% African American, 38% Asian or Pacific Islander, 5% Latino, 5% White, 10% Other; 40% lived in public housing).

The results? Both programs were successful in achieving each of their goals, but also had different outcomes based on their priorities. Compared to before each of the programs, teens in both groups followed the news more frequently, felt greater civic efficacy, and supported greater government responsibility for those in need after completing the programs.

Teens in the participatory citizenship program also felt greater personal responsibility to help others and greater leadership efficacy following the program. They also had a clearer vision of what to do for their community, and had greater knowledge of the skills needed for community development. What's more, teens in the justice-oriented citizenship program also had greater understanding between structural and individual explanations for poverty, and greater interest in politics following the program.

The researchers highlighted that teens benefit from both types of program priorities—nurturing participation and cultivating the ability to analyze the underlying structural biases that lead to injustice—because focusing on promoting one does not guarantee the other will be fostered automatically in teens as well.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Equity and justice involve [basic human rights](#) for all people, but the majority of children across the world are living with inequity and injustice. What's more, these unfair realities affect not just the development of children from marginalized identities because privileged children bear witness and are influenced by the existence of inequity and injustice, as well. In many cases, privilege is derived from exploiting children and communities from particular identities, which have negative ripple effects on entire societies.

## SOURCE

[Making Caring Common](#), Harvard Graduate School of Education