

# How to use classroom conversation to improve learning

Discussion is a powerful tool in helping students to understand new concepts, but it needs to be inclusive and structured



For children to talk in class they must feel emotionally safe and secure, says Lucy Kuper. Photograph: Alamy

## Lucy Kuper

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A classroom that's alive with debate is one of the most enjoyable places to learn. It's also the perfect environment for promoting students' understanding: children are much better equipped to write their ideas down once they have discussed them. Talking helps students to gather their thoughts, process information and remember it.

But there's an art to holding a successful student discussion. Unless you want your classroom to descend into mayhem, you'll need to think carefully about how to structure your debate, pose effective questions and keep students on track. Here are some ideas for getting started.

## Kick off with a question

At the beginning of the lesson, ask a question that provokes discussion but isn't heading towards a single, correct answer. For example, what is the one thing you'd most like to change about the world? How would you describe an elephant? Who is the most important scientist in the world?

Try posing an either/or question, such as: would you rather travel to the past or the future? Avoid leading questions or ones that might limit discussion, for example: I think Charles Dickens is brilliant, don't you?

This strategy ensures that you can begin the class with 100% participation. You can encourage two or three of the more passive students to explain their answers. A well-posed question can turn the lights on in students' heads - but badly-formulated ones will bore them.

### **Try solo free writing**

Begin your lesson by giving students five minutes to write down everything they know about a given topic - this is called solo free writing. It offers a useful way of making students confident, independent writers and bringing together previous knowledge and understanding.

### **Ask students to talk each other**

Getting pupils to address each other (rather than you) opens up the debate and can help prevent big characters dominating the discussion. When students have contributed, ask for feedback and the class to explain whether or not they agree with what was said.

### **Try dividing the class into two groups**

Get the class to physically divide into two or three groups: those in favour, opposed or those who are undecided. For example: do you agree that the second world war could have been prevented if Hitler had been stopped earlier? Once you have discussed the issue, ask if anyone has changed their minds and get them to reflect on why.

### **Give students time to think**

When you pose a question, give pupils up to 15 seconds to consider their responses. This may be the first time that students have come across certain ideas, so thinking time is important to allow them to get to grips with new concepts and gather their thoughts.

### **Be positive**

For children to talk in class, they must feel emotionally safe and secure. For every negative comment, make four positive ones. Avoid shouting and moaning too much; students will try harder in an atmosphere that is motivational.

### **Dealing with red herrings**

When a student offers a what my English teacher used to call a "red herring" (an incorrect or off-topic response), it's important to steer them back to meaningful discussion. As a teacher, you can turn the conversation around and say "I'm glad you brought up that topic, it helps us to understand that it's important to the discussion because...". By addressing red herrings quickly and cleverly, you can get your class back on the right track.

Keeping discussion at the heart of your lesson planning will ensure that your classes build critical thinking skills, as well as knowledge. Through talking, concepts are explained, ideas are discussed and long-lasting understanding is built.

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