



Cultivating Civic Discourse in Your Middle School Classroom

BETTY NORDENGREN

Overview

This lesson plan is intended to fit within any middle school learning unit in a variety of classes. This lesson should be included as a routine or method to be used repeatedly throughout the year, rather than as a stand-alone lesson to be taught once and forgotten. To help students improve their oracy skills they need frequent practice and scaffolding to be able to state their ideas with strong reasoning while respecting others' viewpoints, self-regulate their own behavior, and develop metacognition of their own thought process.



Prepare

Prior to this lesson, the teacher will have dedicated the previous class period to a class discussion on what group talk norms should be. The class will have created their own poster on talk norms, and it should have been posted on the walls. The norms poster can also be used to offer suggestions for group discussion behavior, and it can be posted in the classroom for students to refer to during group discussions as well. In addition, each student should have been provided with a copy of the sentence stems to scaffold their speaking interactions during today's discussion, and these sentence stems should also have been posted in the classroom for student reference. Previous discussion of healthy discourse norms and sentence stems will help the lesson to go smoothly.

Topic and Context

This lesson can be taught in many middle grade classes, including social studies, language arts, science, STEM, etc. The lesson will be included multiple times throughout the year to help students practice healthy discourse skills. Although the topic will change each time, the routines, class norms, talk stems, and Big Idea of the lesson will remain the same each time the lesson is repeated. As a topic for discussion, the teacher will preselect appropriate content from the resource [Both Sides](#). Teachers should choose topics that are appropriate for their students and the content they are teaching.

Objective

Students will learn how to productively consider and discuss different sides of a topic with support using class norms, talk stems, and information from the website [Both Sides](#). The class will practice active listening and healthy discourse skills to connect, challenge, support, and encourage their peers during productive group discussions.

Accessibility

Closed captions are available on the *Both Sides* videos to help students understand the video content. Multilingual learners can be paired with students of higher English proficiency to model and encourage them to participate in discussion. Talk stems and posters will be visible to students throughout the discussion to remind them of group norms and discussion starters.

Activate Prior Knowledge

Refer to the previously created class norms poster and talk stems mentioned in the Beforehand section to remind the class of behavioral expectations during discussion. Open the *Both Sides* website to the topic you have chosen for the class. Ask students for a quick feedback gesture to determine who has previously learned about the topic.

Vocabulary

If there are vocabulary words in the *Both Sides* lesson that need pre-teaching, present them now (introduce no more than four to six new words).

Rubric

Pass out two copies of the rubric to show students how they will self-assess at the end of the activity and how they will assess their partner at the end of the discussion.

Guided Practice: 25 minutes

The class will watch both videos from the *Both Sides* website on the topic you have chosen.

Allow students to take notes while watching the videos on points they may want to discuss

After the videos, the teacher will instruct the students to discuss the video topics in small groups, reminding them to follow the group norms and to use the talk stems for sentence starters. (The group size is at the teacher's discretion.)

The teacher circulates around the room to facilitate student discussions and to ensure that group norms are being followed.

At the end of this time period, students are asked to fill out one copy of the rubric to self-assess their own performance in the discussion, and they will also fill out one copy of the rubric to evaluate their partner in the discussion. Both copies will be collected by the teacher and noted before being passed back to the students at a later time.

Lesson Closure: 5 minutes

Summary: As a class, review the Big Idea of the lesson:

We may think differently, but we can all:

- State our ideas with evidence
- Respect others' viewpoints
- Challenge and encourage one another

As a class, students should discuss what they think they personally did well during the discussion, and what they see as an area to keep practicing. Review key points from the video discussed and ask if anyone's viewpoint changed as a result of the discussion.

Extensions

This lesson can be extended by having students further explore the topics by:

- Writing persuasive essays
- Creating presentations
- Researching topics discussed
- Formulating student surveys and using the resulting data to visualize student responses

Class Debate: Healthy Social Discourse Rubric

Category	4	3	2	1
Active Listening	Actively listened to all speakers by looking at the person talking, and paying attention to their words, without trying to interrupt	Actively listened to all speakers by looking at the person talking, and paying attention to their words, but may have been trying to start talking before they finished speaking.	Listened to the person talking some of the time, but may have been distracted, or unfocused on their words.	Only listened to a few of the speakers, and was mostly distracted.
Connecting/ Building	Spoke at least three times to connect with and build on other students' ideas.	Spoke at least twice to connect with and build on other students' ideas.	Spoke at least once to connect with and build on other students' ideas.	Did not speak to connect with and build on other students' ideas.
Agree/Disagree with Evidence	Spoke at least twice in response to another student's words to show that you agreed or disagreed, and you gave evidence for your agreement or disagreement.	Spoke at least once in response to another student's words to show that you agreed or disagreed, and you gave evidence for your agreement or disagreement.	Spoke at least once in response to another student's words to show that you agreed or disagreed, but did not give evidence or reasons for your thinking	Did not speak to show that you agree or disagree with another's ideas.
Encouraging/ Including	Spoke at least three times to encourage or include another student in the conversation.	Spoke at least twice to encourage or include another student in the conversation.	Spoke at least once to encourage or include another student in the conversation.	Did not speak to include other students in the conversation or try to include others.
Respect for All	All statements, body language, and responses were respectful and were in appropriate language.	Statements and responses were respectful and used appropriate language, but once or twice body language was not.	Most statements and responses were respectful and in appropriate language, but there was one sarcastic remark.	Statements, responses and/or body language were consistently not respectful.

Healthy Discourse Norms

#Talk
More

Actively listen • Stay on topic

Build on each other's ideas • Don't interrupt

Disagree respectfully • Encourage everyone to speak

Explain your thinking with reasons and evidence

**EVERYBODY CONTRIBUTES.
THIS IS A SAFE SPACE**

We strengthen each other when we
solve problems together. Listen to understand.

Respond to connect and share.

TALK MORE IN CLASS

Try these sentence starters...

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CONNECTING & BUILDING

I want to add to that idea... _____
This reminds me of _____, because _____
Building on that, I would like to say, _____
I hear you say _____, and I think _____
I think, _____, and I my evidence is _____

DISAGREEING & CHALLENGING

I disagree, because _____
I am not sure I think that. What is your evidence?
I think differently, because _____
I understand what you are saying, but I think _____
Could you tell me more about that? I want to understand your ideas.

AGREEING & SUPPORTING

I agree with _____, because _____
I like what you said, because _____
I also feel that way, because _____
I like the way you said that. because _____

ENCOURAGING & INCLUDING

What can you add to the conversation, _____
Your voice needs to be heard too, _____
I am really impressed with your words, because _____
_____, What do you think about it?