



From Controversy to Dialogue:

Strategies for Teaching Contentious Topics in the Classroom

@Eliza O'Neil | July 2023



Today's Agenda

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What is CDI?

2

What is Constructive Dialogue?

3

The Dialogic Classroom

4

Intervening in Moments of Conflict

5

What is *Perspectives?*

6

Q&A

What are your current challenges regarding teaching controversial topics in your classroom?

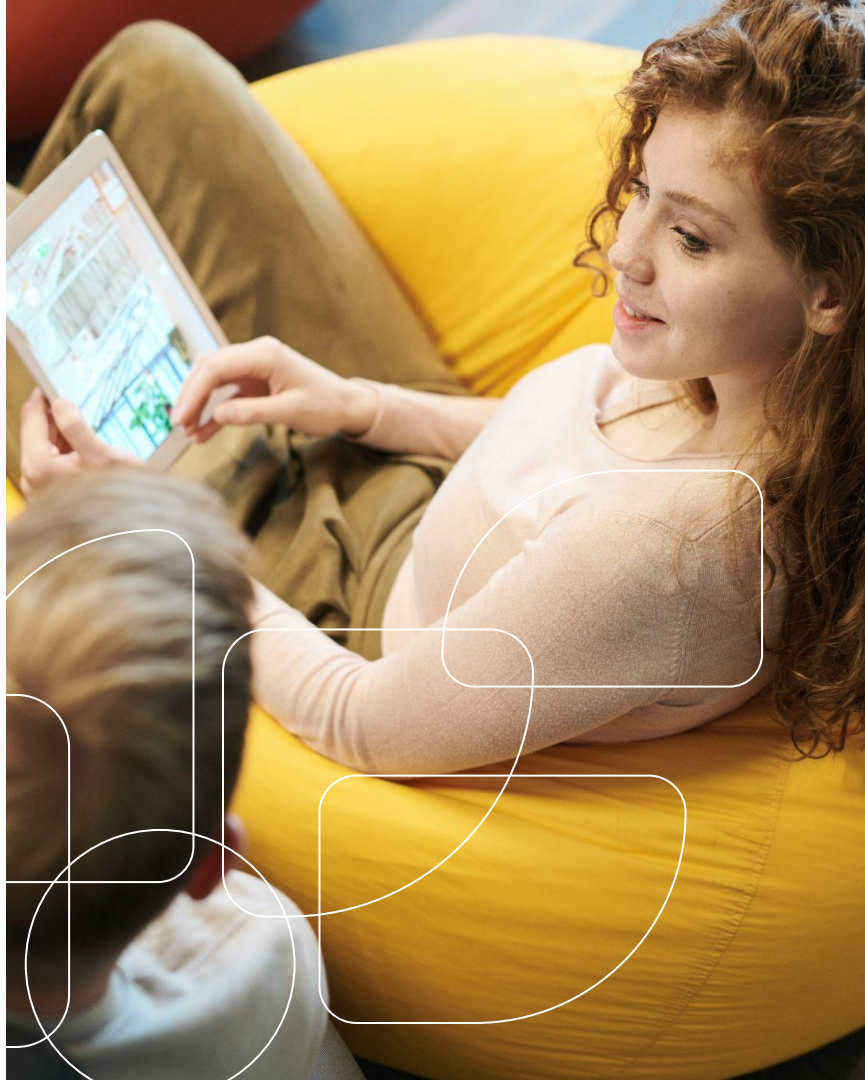


**What are you hoping
(more) dialogue will bring
to your classroom?**



About CDI

The Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) is a mission-driven, psychology-based education nonprofit helping communities communicate, collaborate, and problem-solve despite differences.



Communities We Serve

We implement programs at universities, high schools, companies, nonprofits, religious communities, and local governments across the country.

Through all contexts, we help build cultures where people **recognize our shared humanity, embrace diverse views as strengths, and problem-solve through dialogue.**

College and high school educators can use our online tools with their students for free, but we also create scalable packages for schools and institutions to effect cultural change more broadly.

Higher Education

1

High School

2

Workplace

3

Religious Communities

4

Local Governments

5

What is Constructive Dialogue?

A form of conversation where people with different perspectives try to understand each other — without giving up their own beliefs — in order to live, learn, and work together.





The Five Principles of Constructive Dialogue

Let go of winning.

1

Share your story and invite others to do the same.

2

Ask questions to understand.

3

Make yourself and others feel heard.

4

Find what's shared.

5

The Dialogic Classroom



Preparing Your Students to Talk

1

When it comes to engaging in constructive dialogue about issues that mean something to you, what do you most *hope for*?

2

What do you *worry about* or fear most when you think about these types of conversations?

3

What might you do to ensure this experience is what you hope for? What could you do to help mitigate, or avoid, the things you're worried could happen?

Building a Culture of Constructive Dialogue

1

Talking about Talking

- Setting intentions, goals, and norms
- Noticing and naming group dynamics
- Turning attention to the conversation itself

2

Establishing Trust and Connection

- Do people know one another?
- Is there a sense of relatedness and connection?
- Do people have a baseline of respect and trust in one another?

Key Practice: Norms

Explicit standards that describe both **what** students can expect to experience in a classroom and **how** they should expect to participate in that space.

- 1 Co-created
- 2 Collectively Upheld
- 3 Resilient and Adaptable

Group Norms Sample List

1 Communicate your perspective thoughtfully and with the intention of being understood.

2 Give others the benefit of the doubt: listen with curiosity first, rather than judgment.

3 Speak for yourself – use “I” statements.

4 Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process.

5 Honor confidentiality – others’ stories remain theirs to tell.

6 You can “pass” or “pass for now”

Group Norms Sample List

1 Communicate your perspective thoughtfully and with the intention of being understood.

2 Give others the benefit of the doubt: listen with curiosity first, rather than judgment.

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4 Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process.

5 Honor confidentiality – others’ stories remain theirs to tell.

6 You can “pass” or “pass for now”

Discuss: What would you change about this list? Is there something missing? Is there something you disagree with? Do you have questions about a norm?

Spotlight

- 1 Popcorn-style questions
- 2 Time-bound
- 3 Importance of “pass” and “pass for now”



Spotlight

Try It:

- Ask your partner as many questions as you can, and listen to their answers.
- Switch after 2 minutes. Dig into your curiosity and see what you can learn.



Preparing for Dialogue: A Recap

- 1 Preparing Students to Talk**
 - Activity: Hopes and Concerns
- 2 Building a Culture of Constructive Dialogue** through establishing trust and connection, building structure, and talking about talking
 - Activity: Co-Creating Resilient Group Norms
- 3 Forging New Connections Through Stories**
 - Activity: Spotlight

Supporting Your Students Through Dialogue: The Basics

1

Building Skills

- Activity: Asking Questions of Curiosity
- Activity: Listening to Understand

2

Instilling Mindsets

- Curiosity
- Intellectual Humility
- Both/and Thinking

3

Using Structure to Invite Sharing From All

- Small Group
- Go-Rounds
- Think/Write/Speak

Skills-Building Practice: Asking Questions of Curiosity and Listening to Understand

1

Devil's Advocate Questions

Don't you think that...?
But what about...?
How could you say that
when...?
Shouldn't you be worried
about...?

2

Understanding Questions

What makes you say that?
Can you say more about why
you believe that?
Have you always felt that
way?
What makes you care about
this issue?

3

Debrief

What did you notice about
each round?
What surprised you?
What stood out?

The Intervention

Sometimes, the best laid plans go sideways.

But remember...

- 1 It is normal.
- 2 Take a breath, relax.
- 3 Lean on your preparation.

Internal Monologue

- 1 Is this uncomfortable and vulnerable, but still constructive?
- 2 What might I be missing? How is my own reaction shaping what I think I should do?
- 3 What are the benefits of intervening? What might be the drawbacks?
- 4 What might happen if I *don't* intervene? Does silence send a message?
- 5 How might my role or relationship with this person affect how the intervention is taken?



Interventions, Interventions...

- 1 Ask questions
- 2 Structure
- 3 Pace
- 4 Connect to norms
- 5 Name tension



Intervention Workshop

Try It:

- Read the scenario.
- Think about if and when you would intervene, as well as what the intervention would look like.
- What's your reasoning?
- Talk it out with your group.



Scenario 1: Someone makes a statement based on misinformation

Scenario 2: Someone disengages from the conversation because it is uncomfortable and awkward

Scenario 3: Someone has said something harmful

Scenario 1: Someone makes a statement based on misinformation

Intervention Suggestion

Ask questions to start. Begin from a place of genuine curiosity: *“Can you tell me more about what you mean?” “What makes you say that?” “How did you come to believe that?”*

Refer to the expertise of others. *“What is it like to hear this?” “What makes you worried or confused about what you’ve heard?”*

Point out shared values. *“I can see that many of you care about democracy and truth.” “Both of you are really committed to fairness.”*

Scenario 2: Someone disengages from the conversation because it is uncomfortable and awkward

Intervention Suggestion

Refer to norms: When establishing group norms, we suggest including “Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process.” Remind people of the purpose of the conversation.

Then, consider **changing the structure of the conversation** to small groups or pairs. Consider checking in with the disengaged person one-on-one later, to see how they want to proceed, and what would help them feel better about staying in the conversation next time.

Scenario 3: Someone has said something harmful

Intervention Suggestion

Pause: “I want to pause and notice that something was just said that could possibly be harmful to those in this room. I could be wrong, but I want to check.”

Name the statement or assumption: “That statement assumes XYZ, which could feel hurtful or inaccurate to some of you. Given that our intention is to learn and understand, I want to be sure we’re holding strongly to those values in this space.”

Name group dynamics: “I’m noticing some people in this room look like they are withdrawing from the conversation. Would someone like to speak to the feelings that may exist or the reactions that are happening?”

Change the structure: Initiate a turn-and-talk: “Share with the person next to you how you are feeling about this conversation, and a question of curiosity you have.”

Putting it All Together: The Anatomy of a Dialogue

1 Prepare: Set the Stage for Dialogue

- Introduce role of facilitator and purpose for gathering
- Hopes and Concerns
- Group Norms
- Spotlight/Speed-Mingling

2 Support: Building a Skillset to Talk Across Lines of Difference

- Listening, Asking Questions, Telling Stories
- Choose a structure to invite sharing

3 Intervene: What to do when Conversations Go Sideways

- Ask Questions
- Change the Structure and/or Pace
- Return to Norms and Purpose

4 Debrief

- How did the conversation go?
- What could go differently next time?

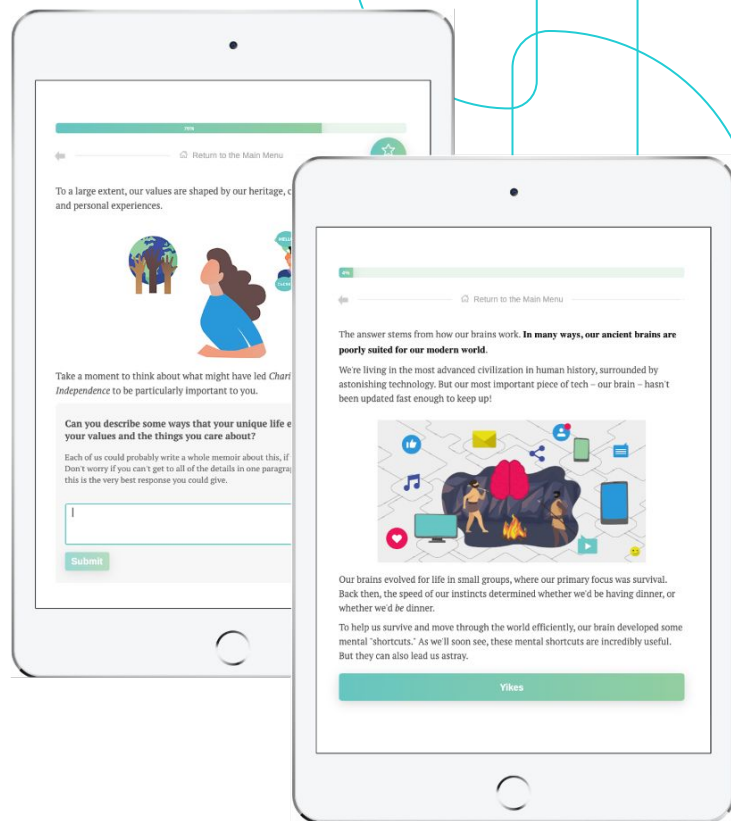


Perspectives

Perspectives

Our online learning program is an interactive experience that weaves together psychological concepts with practice scenarios. It includes:

- 6 asynchronous online lessons (30 min each)
- 3 peer-to-peer conversation guides
- Customizable settings that allow users to "build their own" experience by selecting learning tracks
- A dashboard to track learners' progress and quiz scores



How do I Implement *Perspectives* in My Classroom?

1

Perspectives Lessons as Homework

- Assign *Perspectives* as homework.
- Each module is 30 minutes long.
- 6 lessons in total.

2

Peer-to-Peer Conversation Guides

- After every 2 lessons, students engage in structured conversations to practice their new skills and mindsets in real ways.
- Use the principles of constructive dialogue to guide your discussion.

3

Culture-Building Practices

- Build classroom structures and routines designed to foster trust and cohesion.
- Encourage students to share from personal experiences.

Reflect



Q&A

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