# **Tips and Techniques for Successful Class Conversations**

To use an analogy: car accidents don’t occur every time we drive, yet most of us spend a moment each and every time we drive to adjust our seat, look in our mirrors, and put on a seatbelt. Likewise, we can help prepare for a positive class conversation/discussion by planning our route ahead of time and having some metaphoric seat belts in place. The redlining and community health activity may generate some class discussion and class conversations that touch on sensitive subjects. This table is provided as a starting point to help instructors prepare for the discussion.

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| **Tip/Technique** | **Comments** | **References/Links** |
| Plan ahead, plan ahead, plan ahead | The secret to almost any successful classroom session is to plan carefully for the class session. Specifically, ground rules, on-ramps, and off-ramps may make your class conversations feel safer and more enjoyable. | Recommended references:  <https://web.stanford.edu/group/resed/resed/staffresources/RM/training/facilguide.html>  <https://learninginnovation.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ITF-H1-discussionguide-17h5iob.pdf> |
| Meet students where they are at | Take a moment to consider where your students are in their understanding of the issues you want to discuss | <https://www.luminafoundation.org/talking-equity/> |
| Establish conversation ground rules | Consider completing this task early in your course, well-before any discussion; consider having students help define the policies, perhaps through a small-group activity that also introduces discussion roles (see below). | <https://www.luminafoundation.org/talking-equity/>  <https://learninginnovation.duke.edu/blog/2018/01/guidelines-interaction-better-class-discussions/>  <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/critical-practices-for-antibias-education/classroom-culture>  <https://web.stanford.edu/group/resed/resed/staffresources/RM/training/facilguide.html>  <https://learninginnovation.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ITF-H1-discussionguide-17h5iob.pdf> |
| Prepare the on-ramp. | Setting the tone and explaining the purpose of any structured conversation is important | <https://web.stanford.edu/group/resed/resed/staffresources/RM/training/facilguide.html#start> |
| Prepare the off-ramp. | As instructor, what will you do if the conversation becomes heated, divisive, and/or seems to stray off-track?  How will you end the discussion/conversation?  Some suggestions might be:   * summarize major points of agreement and disagreement. * summarize what questions remain. * emphasize confidentiality if sensitive topics were shared. * remind students of your office hours and/or how to contact you after class if students have questions or concerns after the conversation. * thank everyone for their contributions. | <https://web.stanford.edu/group/resed/resed/staffresources/RM/training/facilguide.html#wrapup> |
| Prepare for possible conflict and/or upset feelings | Allow for “ouch moments”; consider having a class policy that allows students to publicly or privately express discomfort by saying “ouch”; explain ahead of time how the “ouch moments” will be addressed; in some cases, it is enough to simply acknowledge that someone was disturbed by something said, and in other cases, the instructor may need to step in to address the issue. Reach out to students who may have seemed upset by a discussion or conversation topic. | <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/critical-practices-for-antibias-education/classroom-culture>  <https://www.luminafoundation.org/talking-equity/> |
| Modify your physical classroom if possible. | Rearrange seats to allow students to look at each other. | Ezzedeen, 2008 |
| Break large classes into small groups | Students are likely to say more in small groups than large groups. Instructor can rotate around groups (or virtual breakout rooms) to assist as needed. If a group is involved in a positive conversation when the instructor visits, the instructor can move quickly (with the least disruption) to another group. | Ezzedeen, 2008  <https://pogil.org/about-pogil/pogil-faqs> |
| Develop and use student roles | “Soft-skills” are likely just as important for students to learn as content. Many small group teaching approaches (such as those from POGIL, see link to the right) recommend assigning and rotating discussion/conversation roles such as: facilitator, recorder, presenter, reflectors. Facilitators can ask quieter members of their group if they have anything to add (without any pressure), and reflectors can consider how well the team is working and how it could work better in the future. | <http://cspogil.org/Roles+and+Role+Cards>  POGIL = Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning |
| Develop and define your own instructor role in the conversation | Ezzedeen (2008) points out that students can be inhibited by the presence of an expert; instructors can alleviate that situation by explaining that their role is as a facilitator, not an expert. Stick to that role, and allow students to do most of the talking. | Ezzedeen, 2008 |
| Chat off-topic with students whenever possible | Chatting with students when they enter a classroom and/or during breaks can help to create relaxed trust between instructor and students | Ezzedeen, 2008 |
| Practice makes perfect | Scheduling regular conversations within your classes will give you increased confidence and skill with leading conversations; students will also become more comfortable when the conversations are routine. |  |
| Remind students repeatedly of the value of course conversations/discussions, ground rules, and student roles | Reiterating the value of conversations/discussions, the value of ground rules, and the value of learning soft-skills through student roles (presenter, recorder, reflector, and facilitator) may generate buy-in and understanding from students. |  |
| Form your own learning group with your colleagues, be your own leader in learning about how to introduce diversity issues in a healthy way in the classroom. | Qubes is a superb place to find a collegial group to join! | <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1212&context=gse_pubs>  <https://www.luminafoundation.org/talking-equity/> |
| Decolonize your classroom | Re-evaluate all your teaching materials in the context of colonization, poverty, sexism, racism, anti-black racism, homophobia and make sure your classroom materials aren’t perpetuating unhealthy language or silencing historical trauma  Pay attention that your activities do not victimize or further marginalize any group | <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/decolonizing-our-classrooms-starts-with-us>  <https://ncte.org/blog/2019/04/decolonizing-the-classroom/> |
| Familiarize yourself with common microaggressions and avoid them. | Avoid the terms slum, riots, and ghetto, which are laden with unhelpful stereotypes. Emphasize community empowerment and resistance, not paternalistic or colonial solutions to historic problems. | <https://www.messiah.edu/download/downloads/id/921/Microaggressions_in_the_Classroom.pdf> |

Ezzedeen, S. R. (2008). Facilitating class discussions around current and controversial issues: Ten recommendations for teachers. *College Teaching*, *56*(4), 230-236.