

Parliament of Victoria

A guide to challenging conversations



A teacher resource for
classroom conversations

Introduction

This document provides some guiding strategies around facilitating issues-based discussions in the classroom, especially issues which may be considered challenging. These strategies also acknowledge that any topic has the potential to raise questions and concerns for students and teachers, especially when the topic encourages different perspectives.

- Benefits + Considerations
- Creating safe spaces
- Supporting conversation
- Facilitating conversation
- Having the conversation
- Reflecting on the conversation

Benefits and considerations

There are several benefits to having issues-based conversations with students. These include:

- developing students' perspectives, views and values
- developing an understanding of and skills in democratic debate
- demonstrating how issues connect from the personal to the local, national and international levels, and across sectors
- opportunities to connect conversations to the work and processes of parliament
- developing critical and creative thinking skills and empathy
- providing opportunities to amplify student voice
- developing research and information literacy skills, including how to use evidence to support arguments and perspectives

The strategies in this resource are flexible and adaptable, taking into account:

- teaching context
- age of the students
- appropriateness of topic and depth of discussion
- school and community expectations

These strategies emphasise beginning from students' personal perspectives moving to an appreciation of multiple perspectives, rather than arriving at a 'correct' perspective or position.

Students' prior knowledge

It's important to establish students' prior knowledge on any topic.

Students knowledge may be informed by lived experience, values and views informed by their family or community, cultural background, religious beliefs, and/or by their learning within schools.

It is also worth considering that some students may not have much or any understanding or background on the topics.

Responding to student behaviour and comments

It's worth noting some topics may be confronting for students and/or yourself, and the issue that is confronting and/or the response may be unexpected.

Student responses to challenging conversations may result in withdrawal from the conversation, humour or inappropriate humour, anger or a range of other emotions as a result of discomfort.

Some students may become distressed especially if their feelings are heightened by perspectives expressed that are or could be considered discriminatory, prejudiced or biased. Using consistent discussion strategies and frameworks can be useful in helping to minimise any potential distress.

Biases

Biases that inform particular viewpoints may often be unconscious.

Some biases may be widely accepted by or reinforced through family, community, culture or experiences, and this may be the first opportunity some students have had to reflect upon and challenge some of these assumptions.

Creating safe spaces

To help create safe spaces, you might like to consider:

- checking with appropriate colleagues about the topic or any particular students of concern
- checking in with students before and after the class discussion
- providing opt-out options for students
- providing the topic to the whole class in advance and have students prepare arguments and evidence for different, potentially assigned, perspectives
- developing discussion guidelines that are used across all classroom conversations so the guidelines are familiar.

Working with colleagues and school leadership to create safe spaces for challenging conversations can help provide everyone with strategies to deal with any discomfort that might be experienced.



**Scan for additional resources
on Challenging conversations**

or visit vicparl.news/chalconv

Establishing guidelines

Establishing guidelines upfront can help provide students with appropriate strategies for having challenging conversations.

Students may sometimes find considering alternative perspectives confronting to their identity, sense of self and understanding of the world.

Making these visible to the students and referring students to these guidelines as the conversation goes along can help to reinforce what is appropriate.

Co-design guidelines

- What are the non-negotiables for safe conversations?
 - What language and behaviour might be considered appropriate or inappropriate, and why?
 - There may be general guidelines, but additional rules added for specific conversations
- Does everyone have to speak? How are speaking turns determined?
- Are students taking notes? And if so, what are they focusing on?

Observable behaviours

- Using a Y chart to think through what does respectful discussion and/or debate look, sound and feel like.
 - Thinking routines such as those from Harvard Zero Project Zero may be useful (visit vicparl.news/supporting-resources)

Respectful language

Discussing with students examples of respectful language can help build students' capacity to have more challenging conversations. It can provide an opportunity to discuss the diversity within groups, and that not everyone may like to be identified using the same labels or described using particular terminology or phrases.

- Use of person-first language. For instance, “a person with a disability” rather than “a disabled person”.
- Use of I statements
 - I think, I believe, I wonder, I'm curious about, I feel ...

- Use of various modal verbs (type of auxiliary verbs)
 - Modal verbs indicate different levels of certainty or strength of attitude. For example the difference between ‘may’, ‘might’ and ‘must’ in contrast to the more definitive modal verbs such as ‘should’, ‘will’ or ‘does’.
- Positive language that they can use to respectfully challenge perspectives. For instance, can you:
 - explain some more about how ...
 - tell me more about that?
 - provide some evidence to support your point?
 - explain a little more about the connections between ...
- recognising ideas and contributions by non-evaluative, or less evaluative, responses from
- using strategies for dealing with potentially negative or harmful responses, such as:
 - asking students to clarify how their response fits within the guidelines
 - providing opportunities for rephrasing
 - using comments as opportunities to explore assumptions, biases, alternative perspectives and/or stereotypes
 - asking students to clarify statements and provide evidence
- explaining topic specific terminology including why some terminology may be considered outdated or offensive.

Using the guidelines

Consistently referring to the guidelines helps to hold everyone accountable, create safe spaces, and scaffold students’ ability to have respectful conversations

Providing opportunities to reflect on, evaluate and revise protocols at the end of a discussion or the following lesson. A SWOT analysis may be useful to help capture the class’s ideas.

Supporting the conversation

Starting the conversation

Questions that might be useful in the initial discussion include:

- why is it important to discuss challenging topics?
- how do perceptions of challenging issues change over time?
- how do challenging topics reflect society's views and values at the time?
- how is discussing challenging issues a feature of democratic values

Researching the issue

Providing students with some time to research a topic, develop their arguments and to find examples and evidence can help to them to consider different perspectives and develop more informed arguments. As part of this research, you might like to discuss or develop with students:

- an understanding of credible sources of information
- questions to guide the research
- a list of perspectives that might be relevant to the particular topic
- some key words that might be useful as search terms when using the internet
- a list of different search engines that might be useful to find different sources of information
- advanced search conventions to reduce the number of results
- different guidelines on their research, such as find 3 different newspaper articles that provide 3 different arguments on the issue
- how to take notes and keep records of the information that they find

Understanding the issue

- Why are we discussing this particular topic?
- Why might this topic be considered challenging?
- What do you know about this topic?
- Why is something an issue right now?
 - Has it always been an issue, but is getting more attention at the moment? Or is it a relatively new issue?
 - What has happened that this issue is being discussed in parliament, by journalists, on social media, and across different communities?
- Who are the groups/demographics of people that are contributing their voices to this topic?
- What are the different arguments or concerns?
 - Are the arguments or concerns, for example, informed by different social, political, environmental, historical, emotional, religious, moral lenses?
 - A multi circle Venn diagram maybe useful to help students think about the overlap of the different arguments or concerns.
- What different perspectives might there be on this topic?
- What might be informing this perspective? For instance, what are the different fears, hopes, views and values of the different people?



**Supporting resources for Note taking and
Harvard Project Zero Thinking Routines**

or visit vicparl.news/supporting-resources

Facilitating the conversation

Using practice topics

Using a variety of practice topics and shorter conversations can help students to practice the conversation strategies and inclusive language separate to the topic. You can:

- ask students to suggest topics
- gradually increase the amount of time spent on each of the conversations to scaffold students' ability to sustain conversation

Practice topics could include:

- whether people prefer cats or dogs (or other types of pets)
- school-based topics such as uniform, assessments or structure of the school day
- human rights and whether they should be reviewed

Increasing the complexity of the topics over time can also help scaffold student skills in drawing on research and moving to a range of perspectives.

Structuring the conversation

- Beginning with shorter conversations or writing tasks that ask students to reflect on their personal experiences or stances, building to longer more complex discussions.
- Breaking up the discussion to provide opportunities for students to reflect on the conversation and capture the main points, or any additional questions they may have. This time can also be used to 'reset' the conversation, or if time is short, wrapping up the conversation.
- Using inclusive practices that provide the space for students to decide what they share about themselves, how much and when.

Breaking binaries

You may want to encourage and discuss with students to think about avoiding for/against binaries. It can be useful to ask students to think of the exceptions to the rule, the ‘yes, but’ or ‘no, but’ responses and helps to develop complex and critical thinking.

The perspective quadrant encourages students to think about the grey areas inbetween the yes/no binaries and consider exceptions to rules and, where appropriate, other solutions.



Multiple perspectives

Asking students to consider a range of alternative perspectives is useful because students can consider topics from viewpoints or experiences other than their own and therefore still participate in the conversation.

The *Engaging perspectives cards* can be used in different ways to explore a range of perspectives on a given topic. The cards consist of three different categories: stakeholders, priorities, and emotional motivations. Each card has a series of questions for students to work through, and the categories when used in conjunction with each other, can encourage students to identify new or different arguments about a given topic.



Access the **Engaging perspective cards**

or visit vicparl.news/eng-persp

Sentence and question stems

Asking and answering questions helps to develop their critical, creative and higher order thinking. The following questions encourage students to think of additional explanations and evidence, and help support developing a reasoned argument.

Reasoning

- What are your reasons for saying that?
- How do you know?
- Do you have any evidence?

Clarifying

- Can you explain what you mean?
- Can you give me an example?
- Can you explain more about your thinking?

Wondering

- What if...?
- Does... imply...?
- Is it possible that...?

Examining

- Can you give an example/ counter example?
- Is that always the case or only sometimes?
- If you say that, does it follow that...?

Evaluating

- Has anyone changed their mind?
- Do we all understand the difference of opinion on this?

Having the conversation

Conversation continuum

In this activity students form a line from strongly agree to strongly disagree in response to a statement or a series of statements, students then move along the continuum in response. Students can then provide the reasons for standing at a particular spot and may also opt to move if they change their mind.

Think, pair, share

Think, pair, share is a common discussion strategy that allows students to have thinking and reflection time before responding to a question. It can be used to slow down the conversation and provide students' an opportunity to reflect. Each pair can then share their thoughts with another pair or the larger group to restart or summarise the discussion.

Talk tokens

Talk tokens are a way of distributing the contributions across the class and making sure that everybody has an opportunity to speak. Students are given tokens and each time they contribute they must hand a token in. The conditions of using talk tokens can be negotiated with students, for example:

- different coloured tokens to represent questions and contributions
- students receive different number of tokens to differentiate contributions
- opportunities to earn tokens back

Note-taking

You may like to encourage students to take notes either during or after the conversation. There are a variety of note-taking processes that can support students to determine the most important aspects of the conversation.



**Supporting resources for Note taking and
Harvard Project Zero Thinking Routines**

or visit vicparl.news/supporting-resources

Line debates

Unlike normal debating where students might research one particular side of a topic, a Line debate requires students to think about and speak on an issue from multiple perspectives.

The debate should last up to 10 to 15 minutes to make sure a range of views have been covered and everyone has had an opportunity to speak.

1. Divide the class into two teams and form single lines opposite each other
2. Assign one team as the affirmative (arguing for) and the other team as the negative (arguing against)
3. Each side needs to come up with appropriate arguments, regardless of their personal opinions
4. The class need to negotiate the criteria for what constitutes a ‘quality’ argument for the response and any other conditions for the debate. For example, students:
 - must respond to the last point made and respond within 10 sec of the last point
 - must refrain from using certain words or phrases
 - may only change lines or sides up to three times (although this can be negotiated as part of the criteria)
 - must all speak at least once before the students can begin presenting multiple arguments
5. Each contribution must be original and support the side they are currently standing on (affirmative or negative)
6. The debate moderator – a teacher, student, another person – will decide if an argument presented meets the criteria
 - If the criteria are meet, the person who spoke may choose someone from the other line to move to their line
 - If the criteria are not meet, then the person must cross to the other line themselves
7. The debate ends when either all arguments have been exhausted or one side ends up with all the class members.

Some other things you might like to take into consideration are:

- that students understand that they are not presenting their point of view, but rather are able to argue from a range of points of view
- whether it's appropriate for students to have some time to research prior to the debate in order to think through the different perspectives and issues. However, depending on the topic, this is not essential to the process
- whether students take notes to capture the different ideas that have been presented

The Line debate can also be run as a fishbowl conversation with some students observing.

The Line debate strategy has been adapted from *And Gladly Teach A classroom Handbook*, Glen Pearsall (2011), TLN.

The fishbowl

Fishbowl discussions (sometimes referred to as Socratic circles) allows for a more reflective approach to discussion.

- Half or a small number of students participate in the discussion in the middle or front of the classroom
- The other members of the class watch the discussion, recording their observations and the arguments that are presented
- The discussion is student driven, with the aim to elaborate and explore an issue in detail, rather than win an argument
- The fishbowl concludes with a reflection, students sharing:
 - what they noticed, such as the topics discussed, good questions that were asked, points that contributed to the building of an argument
 - opportunities in the discussion that could be improved, using observational data and trends

At the halfway mark of the discussion the students can switch between being observers and being part of the discussion.

Reflecting on the conversation

Providing students an opportunity to reflect on the conversation can be useful as an opportunity to debrief, to also consolidate their learning, and reflect on the strategies used throughout the conversation. These reflection strategies might include:

- exit cards on students' key learning or response to a discussion question. For instance, how does this discussion connect to ...?
- Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis on the issue and/or the conversation
- Project Zero Visible thinking strategies such as *Bridge-1-2-3* or *I used to think ... but now I think*

Questions you might like to ask students include:

- What were the points, examples or perspectives that:
 - surprised you
 - you found most interesting
 - you are still unsure about? Why?
- What other information do you need and what other questions do you have?
- How have your ideas changed?
 - Why do you think that might be?
 - What different examples or language or perspectives would you now include?

If you are wanting students to share their reflections, online applications such as Padlet or Google docs can be useful. These, or similar applications are also useful for online discussion, and the 'in-class guidelines' can be adapted for online use.