

Classroom Discussion Routines

Routines to Encourage Risk-Taking: These teacher moves are deployed at various points in the URC curriculum. No need to memorize them all, but if a lesson mentions a particular technique, you can come back here to learn more about it.

For many students, growth in this area requires honesty, and honesty feels like a risk. It is good for students to be intentional with their words, but “playing it safe” can keep this unit from going where it needs to go. This section contains several routines that can be used throughout the URC, regardless of topic, to help students be honest without feeling too exposed.

Table of Contents

[Use evidence to support your claims](#)

[Write, Pair, Share](#)

[Anonymous Polls](#)

[Silence Breakers](#)

[Instructor Leaves the Room](#)

[What Hasn't been Said?](#)

[Stand Up Slips](#)

[Manual Thermometer](#)

[Jigsaw](#)

[Spectrum Activity](#)

[Routines to Encourage Lasting Change: Emotional Check-Ins](#)



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Use evidence to support your claims

The Discussion Norm of “use evidence to support your claims” is related to the norm of “speak from the I perspective”. Students have a wealth of experience related to the topics that arise in the URC, and beginning by **asking them to reflect on their experience** helps get conversation started. (For example, rather than diving immediately into trying to define racism, I first ask them to journal about a time when their race impacted their educational experience.)



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Write, Pair, Share

Give students a chance to:

- **Write** their responses to discussion prompts before sharing,
- **Pair** up and share with a partner (or trio)
- **Share** partner/small group ideas with the larger, whole-class group.

This helps give students a chance to process their thoughts, ensures that everyone participates, and can feel less intimidating than discussing as a class.



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Anonymous Polls

Using an anonymous live voting platform (like **Clickers**, [PollEverywhere](#), or [Plickers](#)) can similarly allow students to share honestly without being quite as vulnerable. The ultimate goal is for students to be able to talk to one another honestly and without anonymity, but sometimes these formats can help conversations achieve a new level of depth.



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Silence Breakers

These [Silence Breakers](#) are a set of “starter” phrases students might use to engage difficult conversations, borrowed from an article by [Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy](#). I laminate them and leave them on students’ desks.

Conversations that involve race make many people uncomfortable, and some people stay quiet to avoid saying something incorrect or hurtful. Unfortunately that can give the impression of not caring or being invested, even when it isn’t accurate.

In an effort to help us deepen our conversation, here’s are some things you can say to break the silence:

- I’m really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but ...
- From my experience/perspective as [identity] ...
- I’m afraid I may offend someone, and please let know if I do, but ...
- It feels risky to say this and/but ...
- I’m not sure if this will make any sense, and/but ...
- I just felt something shift in the room. I’m wondering if anyone else did.
- It seems like some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?
- Can you help me understand whether what I’m thinking right now might be problematic?
- This is what I understand you to be saying: ... Is that accurate?
- I've been wondering about something since we started this discussion: ...
- I am thinking “yeah, but...” Can you help me work through it?
- This perspective is new to me, but I’m wondering if it is accurate to say that ... ?

From *Calling In: Strategies for Cultivating Humility and Critical Thinking in Antiracism Education* (DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014)



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Instructor Leaves the Room

Sometimes what a conversation needs is for the instructor (the person in power) to **leave the room**. This isn't appropriate for all instructors, but we add it here as another way to move a conversation towards more risk-taking.



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What Hasn't been Said?

What Hasn't Been Said? Prompts like this can make sure that students are going deep and saying what's on their mind, as well as to counter the concern that the instructor is telling students what to think.



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Stand Up Slips

Purpose: Instructors use **Stand Up Slips** (example below) to help students to see what their peers think about a topic that they might be reluctant to speak openly about.

Tasks:

- Students anonymously mark their beliefs individually
- The instructor collects the slips, shuffles them, and redistributes slips so that each student receives a slip but doesn't know whose it was.
- The instructor reads aloud each statement and students stand if there is a check on the slip they were given.
- Students are asked to summarize what they saw, whether anything surprised them, and how this exercise felt to them (either on paper, sharing ideas with the class, or both).

The Result: The process of visually seeing how many students stand for each response gives students a chance to see what beliefs are more or less common in the room without risking too much and reflect on their own ideas as compared to the group.

Stand Up Slips Example:

Please check each statement that applies. Please be honest.

- a. ☐ Before starting this project, I had noticed a proportional lack of Black scientists.
- b. ☐ I believe that this lack of Black scientists is a problem.
- c. ☐ I believe that the reason(s) for this lack is/are a problem.
- d. ☐ I think I could realistically do *something* that narrows the lack of Black scientists



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Manual Thermometer

In the **Manual Thermometer**, the instructor asks students to imagine the room as a spectrum with one wall representing one extreme, the opposite wall representing the other, and the point right over their head representing halfway between the two. By pointing their arm somewhere along the spectrum, students can indicate their belief along a spectrum.

For example, if you asked students whether they believed in “nature” or “nurture”, a student pointing directly at the “nature” wall would be telling everyone they believed “Nature Is Everything”. A student pointing straight overhead would be saying “I think it’s Evenly Balanced”, and a student pointing diagonally between straight-up and towards the “nurture” wall would be “Mostly Nurture but Some Influence of Nature”.



You can use the Manual Thermometer as a way to build on the Stand Up exercise, in which students’ ideas are shared anonymously. It’s a step up in terms of risk-taking, because students aren’t anonymous, though the prompts are less charged.



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Jigsaw

Tasks:

Students are counted off into groups that each receive a different piece of information (for example, if you have four excerpts from an article you want students to understand, label them A-D).

Part 1: (5-10 min)

Students move to a group with all of the same letters together (i.e., all of the A's are together, all of the B's, etc.). The group then reads and works to identify the important information that they will then share out with others who did not read that excerpt. They prepare to present that information to a new group of students.

Part 2: (10 min - ~2 min. Presentations each)

Students move to find a new group with (ideally) one of every letter represented (i.e., a group will consist of one A, one B, one C, one D). Students take turns presenting their excerpt to the rest of the group.

Part 3: Synthesis (5-10 min)

Students synthesize the overall message and create a summary of the information. Optional: Students can share out a few thoughts with the class about their takeaways.

External links:

- a. [Jigsaw](#)
- b. [Jigsaw on Wikipedia](#)



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Spectrum Activity

Purpose: This activity gives students a chance to visually compare their ideas to others in the classroom, and then discuss their ideas with someone with whom they do not share the same view.

Tasks:

- Explain to students that the physical location in the classroom corresponds to a spectrum of views about a given topic. For example, one side of the room could be 100% agreement with an idea, and the other side of the room could be 100% disagreement.

One side of the room:

100% Agreement

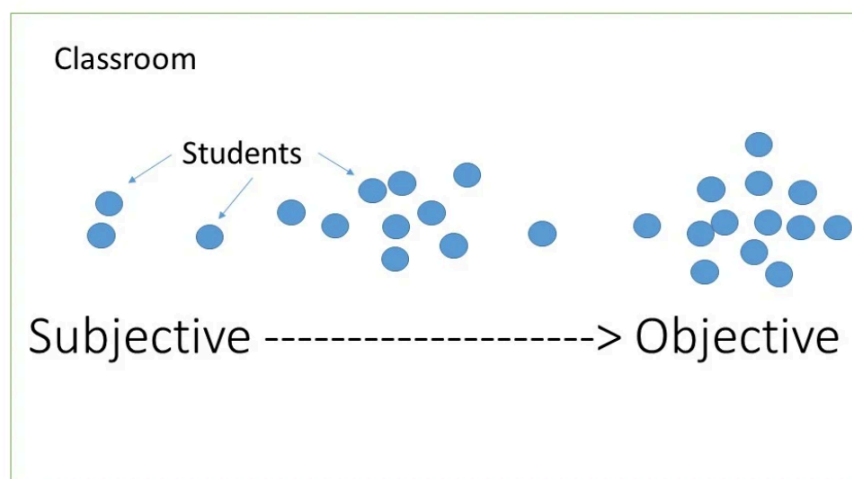
The other side of the room:

100% Disagreement

- Give students one minute to think about where in the room to stand based on their particular view of something. Usually students are asked not to stand directly in the middle of the classroom.
- Ask students to move to their chosen location along the spectrum.
- Pair Up: Once students have lined up, ask them to find a partner to discuss their ideas with who is located far away from them. Ask them to “listen to really understand” as opposed to arguing their point or listening to be convinced.

Student responses in Spectrum Activity Example:

Below is an example of students standing in a classroom, positioning themselves in response to a question about whether physics is subjective or objective:



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Routines to Encourage Lasting Change: Emotional Check-Ins

Cognitive science tells us that people resist challenging new ideas, and that growth in this area only happens when the learning process involves not only intellectualizing but attends to emotions. (My mom would describe this as “woo-woo”, but think about a time that someone has changed your mind on a difficult topic. Did they just barrage you with facts?)

This lists several routines that can be used throughout the URC, regardless of topic, to help students be honest without feeling too exposed.

- A. One specific way to attend to emotions is to acknowledge to students that **many people feel guilt, shame or anger** when discussing systemic oppression...but that those are neither the goal of the URC lessons nor a productive place to finish. Nobody should be held responsible for things that happened before their birth or the identity they have been born into...
- B. ...but neither are they allowed to ignore the discomfort they feel. We encourage students to **let that discomfort be a guide** to areas where they can grow - as we say in our Discussion Norms, “discomfort is cool” - and to see if they can’t use it to help them move authentically into a more productive mindset.
- C. Since the URC emphasizes students wading into sensitive topics about which they may disagree, we **use the [Emotional Check-In](#) writing prompts** to help students paraphrase what they’re hearing, reflect on how it makes them feel, and consider whether there might be an opportunity to learn from it. The instructor typically prints a stack of these half-sheets so they’re ready to deploy when a charged moment of potential learning arises. (Influenced by the work of [Shakil Choudary](#).)



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