

Classroom Norms for Productive Discourse and Discussion

Classroom discourse and discussion are crucial sites for student development: they can help students develop the ability to be critical thinkers, and to feel more confidence in their own abilities to construct arguments and to understand the arguments of others.

Nevertheless, classroom talk and discussion can be challenging. Teachers who tend to have success with classroom discourse and discussion usually have worked out dependable ways to make sure that the discourse is *respectful*, *equitable*, and *focused on reasoning*. They make sure that they set up norms of productive discussion within the first week or so of school. This usually includes more than posting norms on the wall. It usually includes a discussion about what is involved, to get student understanding and buy-in.

What is included in setting up norms for discussion?

In setting up norms, you will be letting your students know about how talk and discussion will play a role in their learning during the coming year. You are setting up *expectations*, and so your students need to understand those expectations. Depending on the ages and stages of your students, it is most helpful if you can enlist their participation in co-constructing those expectations. Consider having a discussion about these three different kinds of discussion norms and goals:

Norm 1) Talk that is focused on reasoning For many students, talking about their reasoning is not a familiar and comfortable activity. Every day, you will be asking them *why* they made a particular claim, or *how* they came up with a particular answer. For many students, such questions may be a signal that they have given a wrong answer. So it takes intentional work to set up a classroom culture where talk is about *reasoning* and wrong answers are a welcome opportunity for exploration.

Have a discussion with your students in which you explain your expectations for talk about reasoning, and invite their questions. Prepare them by telling them the kinds of talk moves you may use (e.g. "I might ask you *Why do you think that?* If I don't understand you I might say "*Can you say more about that?*"). Explain that they are welcome to use these same questions in asking for clarification or deeper understanding from you, or from their classmates.

Norm 2) Talk that is respectful As students are learning about and discussing new ideas and material, they will use everyday, informal language. That is fine. But they may also slip into joking or aggressive or disrespectful language as they talk informally. This is not okay: if other students fear that their contributions will be mocked, even in subtle ways, they will not participate. So how do you get all of your students to be aware of this complex issue?

Have a discussion with your students in which you ask them about what might keep a student from participating in a discussion. Explore with them the ways that people can feel put down or negatively challenged when they express an idea. Explore with them

