



Tips for Teachers to Create and Assess a Political Classroom

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Tips for Creating a Political Classroom

Create a Classroom that is Student-Centered

Before developing and implementing a discussion-based activity, teachers should set up the classroom environment so it is conducive for student-centered political talk:

- **Create a “we” dynamic in the classroom.** Teachers start the semester or school year with a “social day” focused on having students talk to classmates they do not know. The teacher should also meet with students one-on-one to build a relationship of trust.
- **Arrange desks to promote student-driven dialogue.** The desks should be arranged in a circle or U-shape, or in an arrangement that is most conducive to the discussion-based activity. Teachers sit outside of the circle or off to the side of the student seating arrangement.
- **Have students develop the norms and guidelines that govern discussions.** The guidelines should be publicly posted, referenced periodically, and represent the groups' will. Heterodox Academy's norms and values — [the “HxA Way”](#) — are a model for teachers to consider when developing the guidelines for their political classroom.
- **Center classroom time around student-led large or small group discussions.** Every student should be expected to participate, but this does not mean that every student must speak during every discussion.
- **Assign seats or groups, mixing perspectives and discussion abilities.** Most case study teachers mixed perspectives and discussion abilities when arranging large and small group discussions, but one teacher placed students in heterogeneous groups based on verbal prowess and comfort level in discussion so they would feel comfortable participating. In this arrangement, there was one group comprised of students who were quiet in class, another group with students who did participate but without a lot of confidence or frequency, and a third group with students who were quite vocal. The quiet students talked, and vocal students had to learn to yield the floor. Groups do not need to be permanent—they can change throughout the semester or school year.

Develop a Discussion-Based Activity

Here are some options for student-centered discussion-based activities. These activities are drawn from the six case studies described in the two books.

- **Town Hall Meeting.** A Town Hall Meeting is a public forum where participants air their views on important controversial issues to either affect public policy, educate others, or persuade others to come around to their viewpoint.
- **Seminar.** Seminars are text-based, large group discussions designed to help students develop a deeper understanding of the issues, ideas, and values embedded in a text. Doing the work of a seminar is trying on new ideas and includes referring to the text, listening and responding to ideas presented, and making the agenda of the seminar your own.

- **Public Issues Discussion.** Public Issues Discussions cover three specific types of questions: factual, definitional, and value-oriented. The policy questions presented are significant, contemporary, and unresolved political, social, and moral issues in society.
- **Moot Court Case.** A Moot Court Case has students embody the various actors involved in a Supreme Court case, such as the justices and the journalists that cover the cases. To prepare for the court case, the teacher provides the readings, which present competing points of view, including newspaper articles, internet resources, and the Supreme Court case. Students are assigned to their role.
- **Legislative Simulation.** A Legislative Simulation requires students of a class to participate in every aspect of the decision-making of the legislature. Students spend the semester learning about the legislative branch of government and towards the end of the semester, students come together for a “full session.” While in full session, students pretend to be legislators, but they express their own political views. They debate and vote on bills they have spent the semester authoring, deliberating, and shepherding through legislative committees.

Note: The legislative simulation blurs the line between public and private life and focuses on an aggregate (partisan) view of democratic decision-making rather than a deliberative view, which is absent of political affiliation. However, the researchers noted that students learned lessons about deliberative democracy, including reason-giving, evaluation of arguments, and solutions for the common good.

Focus on a Controversial Issue

No matter the discussion-based activity, teachers should center the discussion around a controversial issue to be as authentic to the real-world political environment as possible.

- **The issue up for discussion should be a current matter of public debate.** The issue can be of national or local concern. The more local the issue, the more relatable the issue will be to the lives of the students.
- **Students can either choose the issues of focus for the semester year or teachers can choose the issues of focus.** In either scenario, if students have time to prepare for a discussion and their voices are heard during the discussion, they can fully engage in discussion about a variety of topics, whether they choose them or the teacher chooses them. The pro of students choosing the topics: They learn how to deliberate with their classmates, and they have more buy-in to the discussion. The pro of the teacher choosing the topics: Students may not agree on which issues are important to discuss, and many students change their minds about whether they are interested in the issue as a consequence of the discussion, often because they knew little about the issue beforehand.

Prepare Students for Discussion

Teachers of effective political classrooms generally spend one to two weeks preparing students for whichever discussion-based activity they plan to implement.

- **Model political talk.** Show students effective and ineffective discussion using authentic, real-world examples, such as a town hall meeting, legislative session, and so forth. When showing ineffective discussion, teachers should point out when adults are monopolizing the conversation, not using evidence to support their opinions, and talking over one another. Teachers should point out the opposite when providing examples of effective discussion.
- **Allow students opportunities to practice civil discourse.** Teachers should scaffold the curriculum so students develop the skills necessary to talk with one another about controversial issues. Teachers should start the semester or school year actively participating in deliberations and modeling civil discourse. As the semester goes on, students gradually take charge of discussions until the teacher becomes a facilitator, observer, and or political coach—one that answers procedural questions. Students can practice civil discourse in-person and online. Utilizing an online discussion board allows students an opportunity to practice and feel more confident using civil language to prepare for in-person discussion.
- **Provide background material on the issue of focus well before the activity.** For example, provide written, audio, and visual materials; provide students background information on a particular policy position, if a role has been assigned; and provide Supreme Court case documents and the opinions of the justices. Students can study the background material individually or in small groups.
- **Teach students the procedures of the activity.** For example, if students are expected to recreate a legislative session, students must understand and practice the procedures of the legislature, such as how to create a policy resolution, how committee meetings are run, and how to address Members of Congress. Depending on the activity, they must also understand governing documents, such as the Bill of Rights; the responsibilities of political figures, such as the Supreme Court justices; and the ideological commitments of political figures, such as the differences between political parties.
- **Give students time to prepare for their roles.** Students can prepare for their roles by working individually or in pairs, reading articles, watching videos, hearing speakers, searching the Internet for information, and calling relevant organizations.
- **Teach students about the rubrics or assessments that determine their grade.** Practice the elements of the rubric or assessment so students understand how they can earn and lose points.

Require Students Take on a Perspective

Discussion-based activities of a political classroom should require students to embody a perspective or take on a particular role in the discussion.

- **Each student assumes the role of a person with a particular perspective.** All students should choose or be assigned to a role. Depending on the activity, students may advance their own perspective, pick a role that represents a perspective or position they do not currently hold, or be assigned to a perspective or position by the teacher. If the activity requires students to represent a perspective or position they do not hold, the teacher may equally distribute the roles for each of the various points of view on the issue. In like-minded schools—for example, one with a student body that leans politically left—assigning positions or perspectives or requiring students take on a position or perspective opposite of their own helps to insert viewpoint diversity into the discussion.
- **Students engage in discussion by embodying their role.** Teachers encourage students to appeal to logos, ethos, and pathos (reason, ideals, and emotion) when constructing their arguments to defend their position.

Engage the Community in Discussion-Based Activities

The political classroom should be as authentic to the real-world as possible. One way to achieve this goal is to include parents and the community in the discussion.

- **Invite parents and community members to either observe or participate in a discussion.** Involving parents and community members in the process will generate support among adults to include controversial issues in schools. One case study teacher invited parents and community members to observe the end-of-semester mock legislative session, and one teacher invited parents and adults to participate in the same discussion the students had during the day in the evening. The researchers noted that the latter approach does not work in all schools but is worth exploring because discussing issues across generational divides further expand the diversity of perspectives and provides an opportunity for different political generations to hear one another's views.
- **Invite speakers from the community to add a human element to controversial issues.** Guest speakers expose students to different views. The goal is not to change their mind but to give students an authentic political experience of engaging in discussion with someone who advocates a different view and to practice listening and responding so it promotes goodwill and respect.

Tips for How to Assess Activities of a Political Classroom

Teachers of effective political classrooms utilize authentic assessments. The assessments are classroom-based, tightly aligned to the curriculum and instruction, and assess students' progress toward goals valued in the world beyond school. A formal assessment of student participation in discussion is a way to communicate to students that discussion is valued, and they provide students with the specific feedback they need to improve their discussion skills.

Note: One case study teacher did not formally assess student participation in discussions because he was adamantly opposed to the grading of seminar participation—"paying kids to talk" is inauthentic. The teacher thought that incentivizing discussion did not represent the way public discourse operates outside of school. The researchers noted that difference in discussion techniques is expected in political classrooms (e.g., students can ask questions, use statistical data, tell personal stories, etc.) and that discussion rubrics specific enough to be helpful to students rarely allow for these types of difference because they explicitly identify common ways that people should behave in a discussion. One student of the study noted that "free speech should mean that we have the freedom not to speak."

Examples of Assessments by Case Study

- **Elaborate worksheet to prepare for and score each discussion.** The teacher also administered a traditional written test at the end of each unit, and the students had to independently give advocacy speeches on a controversial public issue, orally defending a position.
- **Rubric to assess preparation and participation.** The rubric included knowledge of subject, portrayal of role, and effectiveness as a participant. The teacher also held a debrief about the discussion the following day to talk about what went well and what did not.
- **Data retrieval chart, called a "ticket" assignment, that identified the basic arguments made by each Supreme Court Justice.** The assessment was to be completed before the discussion, and it required students to read and interact with Supreme Court case text. If a student failed to complete their ticket, they had to observe the discussion from outside of the circle and take notes on participation patterns, which were shared by the student during the debriefing. The discussion was not graded; it was designed to help students understand the text.
- **Discussion criteria that informed discussion grades.** The discussion grade was a part of the end-of-unit exam. The end-of-unit exam included basic questions, for example, about parts of the Constitution, and a written analysis of focus. Students also wrote oral arguments before a discussion as homework.

Political Classrooms in Religious Schools

The Political Classroom describes a case of a political classroom in a Christian private school. Rather than student-centered discussion, the pedagogical method of this teacher was an interactive lecture. The aim of this political classroom was "bounded autonomy," and the teacher tried to have students reflect critically on the political values they hold while maintaining their religious beliefs. For more guidance on how to create a political classroom in a religious school, read the case of "Mr. Walters."