



HxA High School Classroom Activity Series

Pre-Cursor: Teacher Preparation for Student-Centered Discussion

The purpose of this pre-cursor is to prepare secondary school (high school) teachers to include potentially controversial issues and discussion-based activities in their classroom. By executing the activities in this pre-cursor, teachers will:

1. Understand the value of introducing controversial issues into classroom discussions and activities.
2. Be prepared to handle moral disagreements that may arise because of including discussions of controversial issues in the classroom.
3. Know how to structure (physically and pedagogically) the classroom environment so it is conducive to activities that will encourage open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement.

Read and Discuss *The Case for Contention*

In *The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools*, Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson historically analyze the extent to which controversial issues have been taught or avoided in classrooms. They follow this with a philosophical analysis of the value of contention in discourse to “show that one of the best things American schools can do is face controversial topics head-on” to “prepare students for lives as democratic citizens.”

This book helps administrators and teachers understand the value of including discussion of controversial issues in curriculum. After reading the book, discuss the book’s content with colleagues using [this discussion guide](#), if possible.

Establish an Environment Conducive to the HxA Way

Adopt the [HxA Way](#) as classroom norms. The norms can be posted in classrooms to alert students to what is expected of them and what they can expect from the teacher. By adopting the HxA Way, teachers and students will be expected to do the following when engaging in discussion:

1. Make your case with evidence.
2. Be intellectually charitable.
3. Be intellectually humble.
4. Be constructive.
5. Be yourself.

Create a Political Classroom

Creating a political classroom is one way to embed the HxA Way into classrooms. A political classroom helps students develop their ability to deliberate political issues to answer the question: how should we live together? Political classrooms are student-centered, discussion-based, and focused on a current matter of public debate in which students are required to take on a perspective.

Follow the guide [“How to Create a Political Classroom”](#) for tips on how to: (1) create a student-centered classroom, (2) develop discussion-based activities, (3) focus on controversial topics, (4) prepare students for discussion, (5) require students to take on a perspective, and (6) engage the community in discussion-based activities. The guide also recommends discussion-based activities and tips for how to assess discussion-based activities.

Prepare to Navigate Moral Disagreement

Some controversial issues that will arise in the classroom have moral implications. In *The Case for Contention*, Zimmerman and Robertson describe these issues as maximally controversial. And, according to Musa al-Gharbi, when people feel threatened or cornered by the evidence, rather than conceding, they often kick debates into the moral sphere. As such, teachers should read the tip sheet, [“How to Navigate Moral Disagreements.”](#) before discussing issues that may be construed as controversial.

Write Student Learning Outcomes

As part of envisioning your political classroom and creating a curriculum to achieve the goals of a political classroom, develop student learning outcomes that will clearly articulate what you want your students to learn. The learning outcomes should state your intentions for the curriculum and associated units and lessons in clear and measurable ways that will enable you to evaluate the success of the curriculum against those intentions.

Follow the guide [“Writing Student Learning Outcomes”](#) for tips on creating learning outcomes that encourage open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement.

Introduce Students to the Series

Before teaching the mini-units of this series, spend approximately two weeks on the following activities: “OpenMind,” “This is Water,” and “Create a ‘We’ Dynamic in the Classroom.” Whether you are teaching the entire series or choosing one or two mini-units, these activities will:

- Provide an opportunity for students to become acquainted on a more intimate level, which will help them feel more comfortable engaging in open inquiry and encountering diverse viewpoints.
- Prepare students for the intellectual humility required to engage in open inquiry.
- Equip students with the mindset and skillset to communicate constructively across differences.

Below is a table of a recommended calendar for completing these activities.

OpenMind

Have your class complete the [OpenMind](#) program. OpenMind has students explore the inner workings of their minds and the psychological roots of our differences. It provides students with practical, evidence-based skills to communicate constructively across differences.

OpenMind is most effective when done as a whole class at the start of the semester/school year. But if you don't have two weeks to spend on these activities at the start of the semester/school year, you can cut out OpenMind entirely—as some aspects of the program are covered at other points in the series—or you can spread out the activities across the semester.

This is Water

Have students watch the video version of David Foster Wallace’s commencement speech, [“This is Water.”](#) The video accompanied the commencement speech that Wallace delivered to the 2005 graduating class of Kenyon College.

After watching the video, ask students: What is the central message of Wallace’s commencement speech? Then discuss the central message: A real education teaches you how to think and pay attention. If you are automatically sure you know what reality is or what is true, you might not consider other points of view. Being intellectually humble and aware opens the opportunity to learn from others, not necessarily to change your mind about your views, but to understand the views of others better.

Create a “We” Dynamic in the Classroom

Spend a day having pairs of students complete the activity [“Creating Connection to Generate Deep Discussion.”](#) The activity takes 45 minutes to complete. You can also extend this activity over several days so students complete the activity with as many classroom peers as possible.

Time

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Go over syllabus Watch and discuss “This is Water” Introduce OpenMind Assign Lesson 1 of OpenMind for homework	Pair students and have them complete “Creating Connections” Assign Lesson 2 of OpenMind for homework	Pair students with new partners and have them complete “Peer-to-Peer Discussion 1” of OpenMind Assign Lesson 3 of OpenMind for homework	Pair students with a new partner and have them complete “Creating Connections” Assign Lesson 4 of OpenMind for homework	Pair students with new partners and have them complete “Peer-to-Peer Discussion 2” of OpenMind Assign Lesson 5 of OpenMind for homework
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Pair students with a new partner and have them complete “Creating Connections” Assign Lesson 6 of OpenMind for homework	Pair students with new partners and have them complete “Peer-to-Peer Discussion 3” of OpenMind Assign Lesson 7 of OpenMind for homework	Pair students with a new partner and have them complete “Creating Connections” Assign Lesson 8 of OpenMind for homework	Pair students with new partners and have them complete “Peer-to-Peer Discussion 4” of OpenMind	Recap the first two weeks Introduce the mini-unit(s) of the series you plan to teach; discuss how OpenMind prepares them for the unit(s)