Complicated Conversations in the Classroom

Youth don't have to encounter overt hate speech to be exposed to hate online. In fact, much more common are *cultures of hatred*: communities in which racism, misogyny and other forms of prejudice are normalized. Not only do these communities and platforms become unfriendly and sometimes unsafe environments for members of targeted groups but hatemongers will often 'troll' mainstream sites, making hateful comments to provoke a reaction from some people and/or elicit sympathetic comments from others. Exposure to online prejudice and hate can have much more serious effects than simply making people uncomfortable or unwelcome: studies have shown that experiencing discrimination online can cause stress, anxiety and depression. Additionally, the connected, networked nature of online communities – and the potentially limitless pools of potential recruits and targets this provides – permits both formal and decentralized hate movements to make hate speech appear to be more acceptable in online spaces.

Teenagers and young adults are prime targets for hate groups because many are looking for groups or causes that will give them a sense of identity. Identity seeking is a natural part of adolescence but, taken to its extreme, this can provide a toehold for hate mongers and hate groups of all kinds who are skilled at identifying those youth most likely to be vulnerable to their message.

Preparing for complicated conversations

While every effort has been made to make these lessons a safe and emotionally secure experience, talking about hate and prejudice can nevertheless be a sensitive experience – for both students and teachers.

Teachers are often reluctant to address these issues for a variety of reasons: because they are worried about being seen as preaching to students, because they see the topic as overly controversial or polarizing, or because they are concerned about what students might say in classroom discussions.

It's important to remember, though, that we also take a position when we *don't* discuss hate and prejudice, and that these topics are only "optional" for people who don't experience them.

> School is the ideal place to start because if we don't support young people and talk to them and give them spaces to talk about these events, they're going to seek answers where we don't want them to. They'll be caught up in all kinds of fears, anxieties and false ideas. *Ghayda Hassan, researcher and practitioner, Université du Québec à Montréal*

The following section provides teachers and other school staff with guidelines about creating a respectful classroom, fostering and managing complicated conversations, and how to manage problematic student responses over the course of these lessons.

Fostering classroom discussion

MediaSmarts' research has found that adults have a key role to play in helping young people recognize and respond to prejudice and hate online. They often turn to trusted adults when they need help or advice in dealing with online hate, and look to adults as a model of healthy debate and ethical digital citizenship – while also being aware that adults often do not set a good example in those areas.

> "I wish we learned more about casual prejudice in school… I don't think most teenagers know they are being prejudiced with the things they say online." *Respondent,* Young Canadians Pushing Back Against Hate Online

Here are some guidelines for fostering a safe and positive classroom discussion.

Don't rush it

It's important to make sure that you have enough time to properly explore the issues that come up in these lessons. Make sure that you're familiar with the lesson plans so that you can keep discussions on track. As well, research shows that interventions to reduce prejudice and discrimination work best when they are spread out over time rather than done in a single session.

Encourage open discussion

Remember that difficult discussions are needed for deep learning. Be prepared for students to say things you weren't expecting or share things you didn't know about, and remember that you don't necessarily know what experiences or aspects of their identities they're bringing to the discussion.

Help students understand that no position is "neutral." Different people and groups are advantaged and disadvantaged by the way things are, and taking the "neutral" position just means supporting the status quo.

Draw the line between *classroom discussion* and *political discourse*. Just like you don't want to be seen as pressuring students to share your opinions, students shouldn't just be repeating political arguments they've heard at home or seen in social media either. Make sure that they're listening to other students and are open to other people's perspectives.

Encourage students to ask questions as well as offering opinions. Remind them that the point of discussion is not to convince other people but to learn from them. Focusing on questions can lead us to examine assumptions we didn't even know we had.

Make sure students know that you struggle with these questions as well. Be honest about what you do and don't know and position yourself as a co-learner.

While you do want to give up some of your *authority* as an expert, you still have a *responsibility* to make sure the discussion stays on track and that everyone is treated with respect.

Set clear and consistent rules

Key to having an open conversation is to have the class agree on ground rules before you start. Knowing that everyone has agreed on what is "off limits" will make students feel freer to speak because they won't worry about crossing a line without meaning to.

Getting the class involved in developing rules for discussion is a good way to signal how important it is that each person in the class takes their responsibility seriously to create and maintain an open and respectful classroom.

Here are some suggested rules to set for your discussion:

- Treat others with respect. Slurs, stereotypes and personal attacks should all be off-limits.

  > "It's OK if participants challenge each others' ideas, but it's no OK to insult one another's identities." Let's Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students

- Avoid generalizations by using "I" statements. Encourage students to talk in terms of their own experiences: "I think that…", "When I go into a store…", "When I post a picture…", etc. Make sure students respect the truth of each others' experiences.
- No interrupting when someone is talking. If a student says something that violates the previous rules, "pause" them to point that out and then ask them if they can make their point in a way that will contribute positively to the conversation.
- Everyone who wants to speak will get a chance to, but not everyone has to speak. Neither you nor other students should put anyone "on the spot" because of some aspect of their identity.

Identify which issues you consider "settled" before the discussion

While you want to encourage an open conversation, spending class time on topics that are not open to debate, or that marginalize or dehumanize people, has the potential to close down the discussion and leave students hurt or more entrenched in their positions. Hate movements and extremist figures often try to conceal their positions as "debating" or "just asking questions" about issues such as whether women deserve equal rights or whether the Holocaust happened, and students who have been influenced by these may bring these arguments into the classroom.

> "A much more likely, and more pernicious risk to young people from hate speech online than either mobilizing or recruiting them into extremist white supremacist groups, is… its ability to change how we know what we say we know about issues that have been politically hard won."
>
> Jesse Daniels, *Race, Civil Rights and Hate Speech in the Digital Era*

A key to avoiding this – and to avoiding the impression that you're telling your students what to think – is to distinguish between *fact* and *opinion* questions and between *active* and *settled* questions.

- Fact questions are those that can be conclusively answered, proven or disproven: What nutrients does a bag of potato chips contain? Does fluoride reduce cavities?
- Opinion questions are ones that cannot be conclusively answered but can be *supported* by argument or evidence: Should food companies be allowed to advertise potato chips to children? Should fluoride be added to the water supply to reduce cavities?
- Settled questions are those that either have been conclusively proven or are accepted by society as settled. A settled fact question would be "Why are objects drawn towards the Earth?" A settled opinion question would be "Should all people receive equal rights under the law?"

- Active questions are those that are still being discussed. An active fact question would be "Does gravity act through particles in the way other forces do?" An active opinion question would be "How should we resolve the conflicts between the rights of different groups and people?"

Complicated conversations focus on *active opinion* questions, and they work best when you are clear beforehand that class time won't be used to discuss questions that have already been settled.

> "When I have talked to other schools [they say], "You let them talk about what?! You let them write a bill about what?! You let them express what opinion?!" Well, if you don't do it in a safe, structured environment here, they are still doing it at the lunch table. They are still doing it. And if people are still talking about it . . . this at least gives them an appropriate context and a structure with which to sort of deal with some of those charged issues and maybe get an understanding of both sides of the issue." 'Ms. Heller,' high school teacher quoted in *Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization*

Dealing with issues that arise

As noted above, during complicated conversations students will often say surprising and unexpected things. If you've established clear rules for discussion this usually will not be a problem, but there will be times when you have to pause the conversation and deal with something a student has said.

Respond right away to problematic comments

If students use a slur, express a stereotype, or want to debate a question you've identified as being settled, it's important to respond right away. However, it's not helpful to punish or criticize students unless they are clearly being intentionally disruptive or disrespectful towards you or others. Instead, use this as a learning opportunity.

> "When an offense occurs, a teacher may be tempted to punish students for violating the discussion norms — and in extreme cases that is appropriate. But, in my experience, these are most often the comments of emerging political thinkers. High school students are at the very beginning of a long journey toward figuring out how society works. As a result, responding to them as novices, and not experts, is often the best approach." Paula McAvoy, *Political Discussion in the Classroom: What Should Educators be Trying to Do?*

Press pause. Don't let a problematic word or statement derail the conversation. Tell the student who said it to pause, address it as quickly as possible, and then either use it as a springboard to more discussion or return to the previous conversation. This helps you model for students the idea that it's important to always address prejudiced speech or actions, but we don't have to let people use them to hijack a discussion.

Try saying:

- I know a lot of people think that, but it isn't true.
- I hear that word a lot in song lyrics, but it's not okay to use it in class.
- It's not fair to talk about a whole group of people like that.

If a student's responses make you think they may be falling under the influence of an extremist ideology such as racism, homophobia or radical misogyny, meet with the student's counselor afterward to discuss it. You should also make your principal or vice-principal aware and direct them to extremist sources that the student has cited or referred to (see the MediaSmarts article *Deconstructing Online Hate* to help you recognize the different forms that online hate can take.)

Ask for clarification. Sometimes young people may not realize that their language is inappropriate. It is important to give them a chance to explain what they meant. Avoid calling out specific students – nobody should get 'in trouble,' but rather everyone should be educated.

Try saying:

- I don't understand. What do you mean?
- What 'people' are you talking about?
- What point are you trying to make?
- Can you give me an example?

Don't shame or label.

Focus on what the student said, rather than what the student may think or believe. Keep in mind that students may be repeating things they have heard at home, from peers, or online, or may be consciously playing "devil's advocate".

It's also useful to distinguish between *intent* and *impact:* while hurting someone's feelings on purpose is undoubtedly worse than doing it accidentally, the person's feelings are hurt either way. Make sure your students know that prejudiced comments against *anyone* hurt your feelings – and that almost three-quarters of Canadian youth feel the same way.

Try saying:

- I find it offensive to hear anyone being put down like that.
- You've probably seen that word in old books or movies, but people prefer [correct name].
- I know you didn't mean that to be offensive, but it was over the line.
- I'm not sure you realize how that sounded. I'm sure you didn't mean to insult anybody.
- I don't want to put you on the spot, but words like that can really hurt people's feelings.

Challenge mistaken attitudes

A few ideas and attitudes are common enough that you should be ready to address them specifically:

- "Prejudice is bad, but it can't be helped." While human beings will undoubtedly never be perfect, it's a mistake to believe that we can't change things for the better. As noted elsewhere, the social norms of a group or community are actually very sensitive to what its most vocal members say. You should also help students understand that concepts like race are arbitrary and change over time: the idea of "White" and "Black" as races only appeared in the last few hundred years, and have changed significantly; for example, people from Ireland and from southern and eastern Europe were once not considered White. Prejudices, too, can appear and disappear: most of the violence in Canada in the 19th Century was between Catholics and Protestants, a distinction which is barely seen as being significant in Canada today.
- "Only racists are racist." It's tempting to let ourselves off the hook by placing the blame for prejudice only on people who can be identified as "racists" or "bigots." But prejudice is something you *do,* not something you *are*, and all of us are capable of acts of prejudice – and capable of pushing back against it. In the same way, we may try to distinguish between "real" and "harmless" acts of prejudice, which is why these lessons focus on casual prejudice.
- "Prejudice isn't a problem here." This attitude may be particularly common in Canada, where we often see ourselves as being more tolerant and pluralist than other countries. While this may be true in a relative sense, it does not mean that prejudice and discrimination aren't an issue here, and it is never a reason to dismiss students' own experiences. As well, since these lessons focus on online spaces, students often interact with people from around the world and are influenced by mass and social media from other countries.
- "Aren't we supposed to be colour-blind?" Many people believe that the goal of anti-prejudice efforts is to have students not "see" colour (or other differences, such as gender, sexual orientation, ability, etc.) While in an ideal world these things would be irrelevant to government and the law, however, in our world they remain very relevant, and refusing to see their importance means denying the impact they have on other people's lives.

  > "I have never heard a teacher of color say 'I don't see color.' ... The core of 'I don't see color,' is 'I don't see my own color, I don't see difference because my race and culture is the center of the universe.'" Randy Ross, senior equity specialist at the New England Equity Assistance Center

  A similar attitude is the idea that talking about race is itself racist. As noted above, it's certainly important to prepare for conversations about race and other complicated topics, but avoiding these subjects means dismissing the experiences of marginalized and disadvantaged people.
- "People are too sensitive. They see prejudice everywhere." This is a very common attitude (40% of young Canadians agree that people are sometimes looking for an excuse to be offended.) But we can't tell other people how they should respond to what we've said or done: if you've hurt someone's feelings by mistake the right thing to do is to apologize, not tell them they were wrong to be hurt. As well, students need to know that what is clearly a joke in one context might not be so clear somewhere else, something that's especially true when students are moving between online and offline spaces. Even within a close group, you should never assume that everyone thinks something is funny or acceptable: many people who are marginalized in one way or another say they feel pressure not to speak out when they hear prejudiced comments in order to be accepted or to not become targets.

- "Everyone gets picked on equally online." One in four young Canadians agree that all people are victims of prejudice online. While it's true that it is not just marginalized groups who suffer from prejudice or harassment online, there is a lot of evidence that women, visible minorities, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups suffer more and more severe harassment.

  Students also need to understand that there is a key difference between *individual* and *structural* discrimination. Of course, it is possible for anyone to be a target of individual prejudice for any reason, including being White or male, these prejudices do not happen in the context of the historical, social and systemic prejudice that disadvantage other groups. While you should not dismiss the effect that prejudice can have on anyone, it's also important for students to understand the difference between experiencing it briefly and experiencing it in the context of structural discrimination.

  The same is true for accusations of "reverse racism" or complaints that advantaged groups are being silenced or censored: while we can discuss what steps should be taken to help disadvantaged groups, the question of *whether* certain groups are disadvantaged is a closed one. The mini-lesson *Unpacking Privilege* can be a useful tool for addressing this issue with students if you feel you need to explore it further.

Challenge misleading sources

Many students encounter misinformation and disinformation online, either from social media, from video sites such as YouTube, or from "cloaked" hate sites that masquerade as legitimate sources of information and debate.

Redirect to an active question and keep it on topic.

A lot of the time, when students say something that sounds like it's addressing a settled question they're actually trying to articulate an active question. For instance, a student who says "There's no racism online, everyone is equal" may actually be saying "I am uncomfortable with the ways that people are trying to address racism online." You can affirm the settled question while redirecting them to something more useful by saying something like "There is definitely still racism online, but not everyone agrees about the best ways to address it. What might help us decide that?"

If it's clear that a student is trying to debate a settled question, or is arguing in bad faith, simply tell them that the issue is not open for discussion and move on.

Keeping the focus specifically on *online* prejudice can also help keep the conversation from getting personal or getting off-topic. MediaSmarts' research has found that almost all young Canadians have witnessed prejudice online and 80% agree that it's important to do something about it.

Respond to emotional reactions

Sometimes complicated conversations will lead students to feel emotions like shame or guilt or to feel as though they are being blamed for prejudice or hatred. It's important to keep the conversation from being personal and to help students understand that the purpose of the lessons isn't to lay blame on anyone or to make them feel guilty, but to help them to improve their online spaces by taking action when they witness prejudice.

Student Disclosure

Teachers are important allies in the development of positive well-being for their students and they can play an important role as trusted adults who they can turn to in times of need.

In some cases, youth who have encountered online hate — especially harassment or slurs — will need counselling. Being exposed to bigotry and hate anywhere can have much more serious effects than just making people feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Experiencing discrimination online can cause stress, anxiety and depression.

If a student comes to you with concerns about a personal experience with hate or prejudice, consider the following:

Do:

1. **Select an appropriate location**

   Before meeting with the student, try to arrange to speak with the student in a place where they can discuss confidential information.

2. **Consult**

   If possible, and before meeting with the student, it is a good idea to advise your principal or guidance counsellor of your plan. You may want to share with the administrator when and where you are meeting; the administrator can provide you with information regarding any additional/relevant school policies or resources. Every school district may have different policies regarding 'duty to report' concerns and your principal will know what needs to be reported and what doesn't.

3. **Promote help-seeking**

   Due to the fact that it can be difficult to disclose personal information, it is supportive to praise someone for seeking help. You may ask the student if they have spoken to anyone else, such as their parents or another trusted adult, and promote help-seeking behaviour by encouraging them to think about the support network in their lives. Make sure students are aware of services like Kids Help Phone (https://kidshelpphone.ca/) that provide free, anonymous counseling services for youth.

4. **Emphasize that their safety is the priority**

   Students may begin any disclosure with a plea for you to keep the conversation a secret. In a gentle but firm tone, let them know that their safety is the most important thing and that if at the end of the conversation you believe that it is in their best interests to engage someone with specific skills or knowledge to help, you will do so.

Don't:

1. **Discuss in a public place**

   Sometimes it may seem out of your control where a student decides to talk to you. If the student begins telling you something in a public space, express a genuine interest in what they are saying and suggest talking in a more private location. Remember to respect the student's privacy; if the student decides not to talk it is important to respect this wish.

2. **Minimize what the student is experiencing**

   What may seem not so important or concerning to another, may feel very 'big and real' for a student. Taking the time to listen and connect, and letting the student know that what they are telling you is important, will help them develop a sense of capacity in terms of self-expression and coping skills.

3. **Handle it alone**

   Remember you are not alone. It is important to seek support from school administrators and other support staff in order to ensure you are aware of all pertinent policies and have both professional and personal support.

4. **Avoid the discussion**

   Teachers are important allies in the development of positive well-being for their students and they can play an important role as trusted adults who can be turned to in times of need.

5. **Try to counsel**

   While you do want students to see you as a source of help, you should never feel like you are a counsellor. Instead, encourage students to contact Kids Help Phone (https://kidshelpphone.ca/).