

# 5. Creating a Classroom Culture for Debate

Debates happen safely when people trust each other. Before holding a debate in the classroom, you will need to ensure that you have developed a classroom culture that is conducive to debate. Creating a classroom culture for debate takes time and effort, but it is essential that your students feel comfortable expressing their views and that they can do this in a way that is respectful to others.

Successful debates are built on well-constructed arguments and careful listening. Your students need to be able to listen to and respect the views of others, even if they disagree with them. They also need to feel confident in speaking in front of other people and expressing their own views.

To build a safe space for debate in which students are comfortable listening, respecting and responding to the views of others, you may find it useful to incorporate some of the following activities into your teaching.

## Activities to encourage active listening

### Fish bowl

Divide students into groups of three. Two students are in the 'fish bowl', discussing an idea for up to two minutes. One student is the 'listener' outside the fishbowl. They must feed back what they've heard to the rest of the class. This activity can encourage students who don't often participate in class discussions to speak, and it can also encourage students who often dominate discussions to listen more.

### Report back

Divide the class into pairs. Ask one student from each pair to talk to their partner about their views on a given topic for one minute. The other student must listen carefully and report back to the class, summarising their partner's views. This activity encourages students who may feel reticent expressing their own views to participate. It also offers useful practice in expressing a view that is not their own.



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## Activities to encourage speaking up

### Think, pair, share

Rather than asking the whole class a question and relying on those more confident students to answer, build in time for thinking alone and sharing with a partner. This activity provides an opportunity for students to build their confidence by developing and sharing their thinking on a one-to-one basis before sharing it more widely.

### Post your views

Ask students to write down their thoughts or ideas on a given topic on a post-it note and stick it on the wall. Select a post-it note from the wall and read it out. Invite the author to explain further, showing a clear positive response to them. This encourages those students who might not feel confident to voice their opinion the opportunity to share and develop their thoughts.

## Activity to encourage reasoning

### Agree/disagree continuum

Give your students a statement about the topic you wish to discuss (e.g. air travel should be banned, Charles I was to blame for the outbreak of civil war in 1642, Shakespeare's plays are still relevant today). Ask them to imagine that there is an invisible line across the classroom with 'agree' on one side and 'disagree' on the other side. Ask your students to decide how far they agree with the statement and to stand on the most appropriate place on the invisible line/continuum. Ask for volunteers to explain or justify their position. As they get more comfortable with this activity, and you do it more often, more students should be willing volunteer. If you have students who are very reluctant to speak in front of the whole class, you could have them explain their reasons to the student standing next to them, rather than to everyone.