

Reflective Discussion Circles: A Method for Promoting Civic Engagement

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The abilities to listen reflectively and speak respectfully concerning another person’s opinion, as well as to think critically about that opinion and one’s own, are essential to a functioning democracy. The teaching and learning of these abilities is well incorporated into the social studies and English language arts standards that are used to inform state and local curricular guidelines throughout most of the United States.¹ The urgency and complexity of current domestic and global problems are the fundamental reasons why these ideals should be taught, striven toward, and assessed from students’ early elementary years onward.² These problems can only be solved collaboratively. As the *College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards* reminds us, thoughtful and evaluative discussion requires teaching “virtues—such as honesty, mutual respect, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives—that citizens should use when they interact with each other on public matters.”³

Civic engagement has never been more complex, and in our global society, children—not just adults—encounter polarizing news coverage and social media posts that often garner more attention than balanced reportage and well-reasoned discourse and debate. Classrooms, therefore, can serve as sites where students can learn about and take part in the practice of civic engagement and the ideals that ground it.⁴ Those who study democracies around the world remind us that

What we need in a democratic society are participative, active, free and autonomous citizens who can reevaluate from a critical perspective the information, skills, values and attitudes of him/herself, and reach to a decision and act accordingly after recalculating the given information from a critical point of view upon reasoning. (p. 25)⁵

Classroom communities have long been recognized as spaces

where civic engagement can be cultivated.⁶ While students may have opportunities to evaluate information and share their viewpoints—perhaps about community needs or well-publicized current events—they often do not have the opportunity to explicitly analyze their own perspectives relative to those of classmates. They may not have scaffolded opportunities to reevaluate their own perspectives and to develop an awareness of the factors that inform or broaden these perspectives. Teaching methods that encourage students to practice specific skills can help them develop a balanced awareness of the sources and factors that may support or refute their viewpoints. Learning how evaluation, re-evaluation, and critical reasoning can guide decisions and actions will help students effectively contribute to a global, multicultural society.

This article describes a method of teaching civic discussion and offers a step-by-step guide for classroom implementation. It then provides an illustration of how this method is used in a 5th grade classroom.

Reflective Discussion Circle and Civic Engagement

Developed for students in grades 4 through 6, Reflective Discussion Circles is a method for generating classroom discussions that can be used as a stand-alone lesson (e.g., using a news article or historical document), or as part of a larger unit of study. This method incorporates the use of a graphic organizer, sentence frames, and an assessment guide. Reflective Discussion Circles, which usually last from 20 to 30 minutes, bring together best-practice research related to oral discourse in reading,⁷ assessment,⁸ and civic engagement⁹ to provide a process for analytic, self-reflective student dialogue.

A graphic organizer (**Handout**, p. 5) for the Reflective Discussion Circle can be used to help elementary students evaluate the viewpoints of others in relation to their own. At the top of the organizer is space for a question to discuss and reflect upon (e.g., “Should motorized bikes be allowed on the side-



Discussion circles with news articles and graphic organizers.

walk?”). The student records a response in the top left square. In three remaining squares, the student records responses given by each of three different classmates. The **compelling question** of this lesson (“How has listening to your classmates’ points of view affected your own?”) appears in the center of the page. It asks students to reflect on *the process* of how we form our opinions, and how our opinions can evolve as we listen and talk with others. The answers to a compelling question will vary, as explained in the C3 Framework. Answers during this lesson will depend on the participants, the topic, and all the elements of the social environment that support this activity.

Rather than asking a student to agree or disagree with a classmate’s opinion, this **compelling question** guides students in analyzing their peers’ text-supported viewpoints, and in thinking about how these other viewpoints expand their own understanding of the topic. The most important outcome of this civil and constructive exchange of perspectives is for students to recognize and articulate how their understanding develops through a conversation.

Before Launching the Activity, Model It

When introducing this method, plan to model the procedure regularly. Some students may come to this process already having experienced reaching decisions or expressing agreement and disagreement in small groups, while others probably have not had a similar experience. Since the goals of a Reflective

Discussion Circle involve specific skills and behaviors (for students to share viewpoints, to identify new interpretations from listening to classmates, and to explicitly re-evaluate their positions after critically listening to others), a clear demonstration of these processes will be beneficial.

Modeling can be done with a few student volunteers in a “fishbowl” demonstration, while the rest of the class actively observes the discussion and notices how sentence frames and the text are used to share and clarify individual viewpoints.

While most of the students observe the fishbowl discussion, and later as they participate in their own discussion groups, the key elements should remain on a poster or whiteboard for quick visual reference. At the end of the fish-bowl discussion, lead the class in a debriefing in which each student is invited to talk about what has just occurred.

Conducting the Reflective Discussion Circle

1. Select a text. The Reflective Discussion Circle may be used with articles from current events magazines such as *Time for Kids*. Articles involving topics to which students can draw connections or apply background knowledge make the best options. News articles are also available in a range of reading levels through free websites (**Sidebar**, p. 6). Additionally, passages from textbooks, primary source documents, and trade books (such as NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People) provide historical and contemporary text

Reflective Discussion Circle

TOPIC: _____

YOUR NAME: _____

I say:

Another classmate says:

How has listening to your classmates' points of view affected your own?

A classmate says:

A third classmate says:

sources that can serve as the foundation for reflective discussions.

2. Develop a question for discussion. Choose one that is based on a specific piece of text, and perhaps with graphics to interpret as well. Begin with a statement that orients students to the specific passage or pages under consideration such as: “In the article about small motorized scooters being used more and more on city sidewalks, we learned that...” Then pose a question that will require students to evaluate the positions or actions described in that passage, and to develop their own response using evidence provided in the article, textbook, or another source. Such text-dependent questions may be generated for a variety of purposes such as evaluating the decisions of a historical or contemporary figure, applying conditions present in a historical context to contemporary life, or evaluating the impact of a past or current event. Sentence frames (**Sidebar**, p. 7) offer guides for how such questions can be constructed.

3. Read and Respond. Depending on the complexity of the text, you may choose to have students read independently, with a partner, or following a whole-class reading. Most students will require instructional support when learning how to generate responses that include evidence from text. An effective way to guide students in this process is to explicitly think aloud while demonstrating how to locate relevant textual passages.¹⁰ By actually verbalizing this thinking process, you make your own internal reasoning outwardly apparent to students and enable students to apply this process in their own work. Specific steps to explicitly model include

- Using features such as subtitles and section headings to locate a relevant passage;
- Underlining key words or phrases in the passage;

- Reading and re-reading the passage to confirm its appropriateness as evidence for a response; and
- Annotating the text with notes about the passage’s relevance.

Once students have had time to generate a response that includes evidence from the text, they should record their responses in the top left square of the organizer (**Handout**, p. 5).

4. Share and Clarify. Working in groups of four, students take turns sharing their individual responses to the question, and recording these in the remaining three squares on the organizer. After each student shares, classmates may ask clarifying questions to help them fully understand the speaker’s viewpoint and how information from the text is used to support it. Sentence frames will help students keep their discussion focused on fully understanding one another’s responses.

5. Discuss. After all viewpoints have been shared and clarified, students discuss new information or interpretations they learned from listening to one another. Sentence frames such as “*Some new information I learned from our discussion is ...*” will support this process.

As students grow more accustomed to describing new perspectives as opposed to expressing agreement or disagreement, the need to rely on sentence frames should diminish.

6. Acknowledge and thank. Whenever students engage in a reflective discussion, they should conclude by thanking one another. As opposed to a mere courtesy, this is a vital step in promoting civic engagement, and it should be adhered to consistently. Thanking classmates validates each person’s involvement in the discussion, and it promotes an environment in which students comfortably engage in well-reasoned conversations that allow them to critically weigh the substance of their own perspectives.

Three Recommended News Outlets for Students

Dogonews.com—Daily news articles in English are indexed by grade level. Meera Dolasia is the CEO, publisher, and editor of DOGO Media, an “online network empowering kids to engage with digital media in a fun, safe and social environment.”

TeachingKidsNews.com—Toronto-based educators offer an impressive variety of global current events articles, appropriate for grades 3–8, that provide helpful background.

TweenTribune.com—The Smithsonian offers daily AP news articles in English and Spanish, indexed by grade range, that may be made more or less complex by adjusting readability levels.

Assessing Student Involvement and Learning

Each time Reflective Discussion Circles are used, select a different small group to observe. By assessing a different small group during each planned discussion, you will be able to document individual progress toward student learning outcomes and to assess the effectiveness of small group combinations.

Use an assessment guide to closely assess student interactions in each small group. As students discuss their responses, take notes on *how* each student engages in the following aspects of the conversation. These are the items on our assessment guide:

- Remains on task;
- Uses textual evidence to support his or her viewpoint;
- Actively listens and asks clarifying questions;
- Identifies new information learned through the discussion; and
- Thanks classmates for their participation.

We also allow space for taking notes on points to raise during a “student-teacher conference,” such as skills for the student to work on and goals that they might set for themselves.

Reflective Discussion Circles: An Example

The following Reflective Discussion Circle scenario illustrates how the graphic organizer (**Handout**), sentence frames (**sidebar**), and assessment guide (described below) come together to support a conversation in which students share their view-

points, identify what they learned based on these viewpoints, and re-evaluate their own perspectives in response to the discussion.

For this lesson, fifth grade teacher and co-author Shalise chose a *New York Daily News* article, “Muhammad Ali Wins Supreme Court Decision in 1971,” which describes the financial and professional losses Ali incurred as a result of his 1967 conviction for draft evasion – a conviction that was overturned by the U. S. Supreme Court in 1971. The article describes Ali’s decision not to sue to recover these losses.¹¹ Based on Ali’s experience, Shalise determined that her students should consider whether Ali’s example can be applied in life today. She offered the following discussion question to her students:

The article describes how much Muhammad Ali lost during his ban from boxing, and it also explains Ali’s decision not to sue to recover these losses. Think about whether this is an example that can be applied in life today. *Is it better to forget negative events that happened in the past, or is it better to seek payment for wrongs done against you?* Remember to explain your viewpoint using evidence from the article.

After students read the article and wrote their initial responses to the question, they arranged their seats in preas-

Sentence Frames and Their Uses

For Generating Text-Dependent Questions

- Based on information provided in the article, can you understand why _____ chose to _____? Please explain your response.
- Using evidence from this section of the chapter, was it better to _____ or to _____? Please explain your response.
- Would the event described in the passage have the same impact if it occurred in _____? Please explain your response.

For Clarifying Understanding

- Could you please clarify the part about...?
- I don’t understand what you meant by...
- To be sure I understand, what you are saying is...
- I am confused by...Could you please explain that?
- I hear you saying that...

For Analyzing Perspectives

- At first, I thought...but now I think...because...
- I never considered...
- _____ helped me to understand the question in a different way by sharing...
- What I said is similar to _____’s response, but it is also different because...
- Some new information I learned from our discussion is...

signed groups. Using the assessment guide, the teacher joined Gabriel, Molly, Isaiah and Mariah (pseudonyms) to assess their discussion. During the following portion of their conversation, the teacher noted students' use of sentence frames to ask for clarification:

- Isaiah: It's best to forget the negative things 'cause looking for payment is like getting revenge on them. And then you will be bad, and you will feel terrible about yourself later in life. Ali said he didn't want to feel bitter about the past. That's right because when you try to get revenge, it's like having things taken to a different level.
- Gabriel: I know that he did not want to feel bitter, but can you please clarify what trying to get your lost money back has to do with revenge? I don't get that part.
- Mariah: Yeah, Isaiah. Could you please clarify that part?
- Isaiah: It's like needing to get back. Ali said he had too much on his mind to worry about the past. It says here [indicating a spot in the article] that he was thinking about getting his title back, and that makes better sense. So today, I would say to just let it go.
- Molly: I said that it is better to sue. I said that if he [Ali] had to go to jail he would not have been able to spend that time with his family, and he would have missed holidays with them. You would still miss those things today, so you should try to get paid for that lost time.
- Isaiah: Yeah, Molly. I didn't think about that. If you're in jail your kids are ten years old...next thing you know, they're twenty.

While observing this exchange, Shalise used her Small Group Assessment Guide to note that Gabriel clarified his understanding of Isaiah's use of the word "revenge," but that Gabriel did not discuss new perspectives learned in the discussion. Later, Shalise reviewed Gabriel's graphic organizer and noted that his viewpoint, in fact, had been tempered by a classmate's perspective. Gabriel wrote: "I see Molly's point. I still have the same point of view, but not as strong." With these words, Gabriel acknowledged the influence of Molly's viewpoint on his own. However, Shalise also noted that Gabriel's statement included very few specifics about either Molly's position or about how his own position, softened after listening to Molly. As a result, Shalise considered inviting Gabriel to use a sentence frame ("I hear you saying that...") during discussions, as that might help him to articulate others' statements and confirm his understanding of their perspectives. Shalise and Gabriel discussed this strategy at their next student-teacher conference, and she gave

him a copy of this particular sentence frame to keep in his social studies folder for future use.

Closing Thoughts

Overall, this discussion offered opportunities for students to voice, clarify, and reflect upon whether and how differing perspectives influenced their own understanding of Muhammad Ali's decision not to sue for financial losses. The discussion also provided Shalise with individual assessment data that she could use to support each student's continued growth.

Structured, text-based conversations can go a long way in cultivating critical, self-reflective, and engaged citizens—absolute requirements in productive, democratic societies. The Reflective Discussion Circle framework offers an approach to fostering elementary students' development of these essential civic skills and practices. ●

Notes

1. Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (2010), <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>; NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), see Theme 10 discussion, "Questions faced by students studying this theme might be ..." para. 3, www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands.
2. NCSS, Task Force on Early Childhood/Elementary Studies, and Early Childhood and Elementary Community Revision Committee, *Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary School Social Studies* (Position Statement) (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2017), <https://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerfulandpurposeful>.
3. NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), 33.
4. NCSS (2010).
5. A. Doganay, "A Curriculum Framework for Active Democratic Citizenship Education," in *Schools, Curriculum and Civic Education for Building Democratic Citizens*, M. Print and D. Lange, eds. (Boston, MA: Sense Publishers, 2012), 19–39; <https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/1470-schools-curriculum-and-civic-education-for-building.pdf>.
6. J. Lewis-Spector and M. McGriff, "Addressing Adolescents' Need for Voice and Interaction," in *Language-Based Approaches to Support Reading Comprehension*, F. Falk-Ross, ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 181–208.
7. J. F. Lawrence and C. E. Snow, "Oral Discourse and Reading," in *Handbook of Reading Research Vol. 4*, M. L. Kamil et al., eds., (New York: Routledge, 2010), 320–335.
8. S. W. Valencia, "Using Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning," in *What Research has to Say about Reading Instruction*, 4th ed., S. J. Samuels and E. Farstrup, eds. (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2011), 379–405.
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10. D. Fisher and N. Frey, "Teacher modeling using complex informational texts," *Reading Teacher* 69, no. 1 (2015), 63–69, <https://draweb.njcu.edu:2106/10.1002/trtr.1372>.
11. P. Pepe, "Muhammad Ali Wins Supreme Court Decision in 1971," *New York Daily News* (June 3, 2016), <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/ali-conviction-draft-evasion-overturned-1971-article-1.2660503>.

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