

Debate and Discussion Formats

For both the experienced and inexperienced facilitator, finding an appropriate format for the discussion or debate activity that you wish to run is invaluable. Below are a number of suggestions, collated from a wide variety of sources, on how discussion/debate activities could be structured.

Pair talk

Pupils work together in pairs – possibly friendship, possibly boy-girl, etc. Each pair then joins up with another pair to explain and compare ideas.

Listening Triad

Pupils work in groups of three. Each pupil takes on the role of talker, questioner, recorder. The talker explains something, or comments on an issue, or expresses an opinion. The questioner prompts and seeks clarification. The recorder makes notes and gives a report at the end of the conversation. Next time, roles are changed.

Envoys

Once groups have carried out a task, one person from each group is selected as an 'envoy' and moves to a new group to explain and summarise, and to find out what the new group thought, decided or achieved. The envoy then returns to the original group and feeds back. This is an effective way of avoiding tedious and repetitive 'reporting back' sessions. It also puts a 'press' on the envoy's use of language and creates groups of active listeners.

Jigsawing

The advantage of a 'jigsaw' is that it offers a structure for group work, and promotes a range of speaking and listening.

- The teacher divides the whole class into small groups (commonly four pupils per group). These are teacher-initiated in order to make each group reflect the balance of the whole class – gender, ability, attitude.
- Each *Home Group* is given a common task. Handouts are employed in order to set the task. Reading material is kept to a manageable length and complexity. If the home groups are of four, then there are four questions or tasks within the main task – one for each member of the group. Questions or tasks are allocated within each group, through negotiation between the pupils.
- All the pupils who have selected a particular question or task regroup into *Expert groups* and work together on what is now a common problem and outcome. By the time this stage of the session is completed, each has become an expert on this matter, through discussion and collaboration with the other 'experts'.
- Original groups reform. Dissemination begins. The home groups are set a final task. This could be a group outcome, or an individual task. The crucial element is to ensure that pupils have to draw on the combined 'wisdom' of the home group in order to complete it successfully.

Snowballing

Pairs discuss an issue, or brainstorm some initial ideas, then double up to fours and continue the process, then into groups of eight in order to compare ideas and sort out the best or to agree on a course of action. Finally, the whole class is drawn together and spokespersons for each group of eight feed back ideas. A useful strategy to promote more public discussion and debate.

Rainbow Groups

A way of ensuring that pupils are regrouped and learn to work with a range of others. After small groups have discussed together, pupils are given a number or colour. Pupils with the same number or colour join up, making groups comprising representatives of each original group. In their new group pupils take turns to report back on their group's work.

Value Continuum

In this format students or groups of students have to respond to a thought provoking statement by saying to what degree they agree with it. There are a number of ways this can be used: the students could be asked to come and stand at the point on a line that represents their individual opinion, alternatively, first they could be asked to discuss a statement in groups and then for one of the group to come up to the front and place their groups card/token somewhere along the line, explaining the position their group have taken as they do so. This is an excellent format for comparing responses to different questions and finding out contradictions in their thinking.

Circle or Rounds Approach

If possible get all the students sitting in a circle, then going round the circle they are asked to respond with how they feel on a particular topic. This might be a good way of starting off or concluding a topic.

Hot Seat

Where one student is placed at the front and can express their opinion and respond to questioning on a topic. If this seems a bit intrusive you could ask the students to take on particular viewpoints or personas to make this less personal.

Goldfish bowl

Similar to hot seating, but where a whole group comes to the front to express their position and be questioned by the class.

Freeze frame

A drama strategy, where students select a key moment, and create a tableau to illustrate it. The tableau can be activated to encourage children to 'come to life' briefly, or individuals in the picture can be encouraged to speak their thoughts. This could be a way of encouraging students to see situations from different perspectives.

Six Thinking Hats

In order to structure groups, and provide a role for all you could use this decision-making method. Each person adopts a certain 'thinking approach', which is symbolised by a coloured hat (real or imaginary). This is a good way of exploring tricky ethical questions. The approaches commonly given for each hat are shown below.

White Hat: With this thinking hat you focus on the data available. Look at the information you have, and see what you can learn from it, including parallels and past experience. Look for gaps in your knowledge.

Red Hat: 'Wearing' the red hat, you look at problems using intuition, gut reaction, and emotion. Also try to think how other people will react emotionally. Try to understand the responses of people who do not fully know your reasoning.

Black Hat: Using black hat thinking, look at all the bad points of the decision. Look at it cautiously and defensively. Try to see why it might not work.

Yellow Hat: The yellow hat helps you to think positively. It is the optimistic viewpoint that helps you to see all the benefits of the decision.

Green Hat: The Green Hat stands for creativity. Try to come at the central question in an imaginative way, are there any alternatives – different ways of doing things.

Blue Hat: The Blue Hat stands for process control. This is the hat worn by people chairing meetings. They can act as a facilitator pulling together the groups thinking.

This system can be used in a number of fashions with the hats standing for different members of society, or people with a vested interest in the debate.

PNI system

Another decision making system that could stimulate discussion. Students are asked to think of positive, negative and interesting points for a particular course of action. They are then asked to assign a value (e.g. +3 or -1), these may be very subjective, to each point they come up with and see if their assessment is positive or negative overall.

Deliberative Mapping

Deliberative mapping is an example of criterion-based decision making. In this technique the students decide what their criteria will be for choosing between a number of actions. They score each action on the criteria they have selected and the one that comes out with the highest score is the 'winner'. This activity can be performed this way round, or, the groups could, first be asked to discuss the various options and chose from them, and then afterwards asked to reflect on the criteria they used to make their decision. Alternatively the class could be separated into groups using deliberative mapping to make their decision and groups coming to a decision after an informal discussion, with a comparison being made with between the two techniques. This format could be a good opportunity to compare rights based and consequence based approaches to decision making. If you want to consider this aspect of decision-making in detail see the CitizenScience resource, 'Ethics, Medicine and Me' at:

<http://www.at-bristol.org.uk/cz/teachers/Default.htm>

Free Discussion

This can be done with smaller groups or the whole class. As it is not structured this sort of discussion may require some more facilitation. This can be the teacher or session leader for the whole group but if there are a number of groups staffing may not allow a facilitator for each group. In this case one option may be to ask one of the students to act as a facilitator, this is probably a technique to use once the students have experienced positive models of how a facilitator should act and discussed key aspects of behaviour in this role.

TV Chat Show

Formats such as a TV chat show may be a good way of engaging the students, as they feel very different from a normal class. Within in this style there are a number of formats that you might like to use.

- Panel show
A good topic for this format is one where there are a number of parties interested in the outcome of your central question.
For example: Should we invest in nuclear technologies?
The class is split up into groups who will represent different interested parties, they have to assess the information given to them on the topic and decide what position the party they represent would take on this issue. One member of each group is nominated to act as a representative. At the beginning of the 'show' each representative comes to sit at the front with the host and introduces his or her groups position. Questions are then invited from the audience. A good tip is to make it clear that the audience members are free to answer or question each other as well.
- Family Fueds