



Deliberation: Developing Understanding Through Classroom Discourse

In a democratic society we solve our problems through talk or civil discourse. We use talk to practice participation and deliberation, to make hard choices, to find common ground. Practicing discussion skills in the classroom gives not just an education about citizenship, but in citizenship. There is no better place for vibrant classroom discourse than the social studies classroom, where students grapple with history's and society's enduring dilemmas and

where they study — and practice — the arts of citizenship.

Margit McGuire, *The American Promise* advisor and former president of the National Council for the Social Studies outlines some basics for using democratic discourse in the classroom.

Keys to Classroom Discourse

Talking with students rather than to students is the key to using classroom discourse well. Challenging students to

interpret, analyze, and manipulate information, to reach for deeper understanding or see new connections can enliven the instructional process and make learning personally meaningful.

The first step in leading effective democratic discourse is establishing the ground rules:

1. Keep on task. Have clear goals in mind for the discussion.
2. Democratic discourse takes more time than a more lecture-oriented discourse. Select a few topics to examine in depth. Ask open-ended questions.
3. With students establish ground rules that promote respect for each other's ideas, active listening, and encourage a range of ideas — even unpopular ones. Establishing a classroom climate where students feel free to state their ideas without fear of ridicule is essential for fostering learning.

Once you've launched a democratic classroom discussion, there are a number of simple ways to help students participate more effectively, to develop their democratic citizenship skills:

1. Allow students time to think before responding to questions.
2. Listen to students, asking them to clarify ideas, justify assertions, or consider another viewpoint.
3. Model problem-solving processes rather than just giving answers.
4. Show genuine interest in students' ideas and suggestions for solving problems and acknowledge students' original and unconventional ideas.

According to Brophy and Alleman, fostering this kind of democratic discourse in the classroom is one of the characteristics of effective teachers. There's a bonus for teachers and students in democratic discourse: Students frequently respond to this kind of learning environment with surprising creativity and an impressive reservoir of knowledge.

Source: Brophy, Jere, and Janet Alleman (1996), *Powerful Social Studies for Elementary Students*. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, p. 71.