

# HANDS-ON



**LEVEL:** high school  
**SUBJECT:** social studies  
**TIME:** one class period

## BUILDING BETTER CLASS DISCUSSIONS



It's not an accident that we talk about "building" common ground, not tearing it down. In this exercise, students will discuss a controversial topic using new ground rules.

Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Discuss the normal rules of debate. How do we normally advance our position? How do we persuade people? By making bold, even exaggerated statements about our position? By aligning our position with important and powerful people? By attacking our opponents or people with opposing views? By associating our opponents with evil or ignorance?

For a quick lesson in how different rules of discourse can change our ability to see and move toward common ground, have a class discussion with a new set of rules.

Announce a proposition. (See the list at the end of this exercise for some suggestions.) Each member of the group must provide at least one statement in support of the proposition. No matter how they think or feel, students must devise an argument in support of the proposition. Group members may speak more than once in support of the proposition, but they must wait until everyone has spoken once. At this point, no one may comment on others' statements; they must listen without passing judgment.

Here are some rules that you can circulate to students:

- Don't hurry the discussion. Don't try to cut through to an answer or conclusion. This isn't a game to win or lose; it's an exploration.
- Stay on track. Keep the debate focused on the issue at hand, not on the people taking part in the debate.
- Be prepared to change your mind.
- Try as hard as possible to believe in the proposal.
- State possible strengths.
- Listen without passing judgment.
- Offer positive elaborations of others' comments.
- Resist the impulse to criticize.

Let the groups discuss their topics for about 30 minutes, then reconvene the whole class to share observations on how the discussion proceeded. How does this kind of discussion compare to other political discussions they've had? Did they find common ground—a place where they could agree, even if they merely agreed to disagree and discuss their disagreement?

### HERE ARE SOME POSSIBLE TOPICS:

1. Affirmative action programs are not accomplishing what they should and should be ended.
2. Because of the danger of gang violence, this school should establish a strict dress code.
3. We have too many environmental regulations, and it's hurting business and the economy.
4. The welfare system is too costly and must be curbed.
5. For certain crimes, the death penalty is justified and expedient.

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## PRACTICING DEMOCRACY



Students not only learn about democracy in the classroom, they can also learn to practice it there.

In cooperative learning situations, students are able to practice democracy by asking questions, explaining their ideas, making suggestions and criticisms (and accepting them), listening, and making joint decisions. The first stage of building a democratic classroom is to forge a common ground. You might consider the *acequia* or the circus as models of working democratic communities.

These exercises or games give students practice in working together as equals. Students will discover something about leading and following, and about listening and learning, in a nonteacher-centered activity.

### Waggin' dragon

Have the class stand in a single, long line. Ask students to hold onto the waist of the person in front of them. Tell them that the first person in the line should come around and grab the waist of the last person in line—without anyone else losing their grip. If the “dragon” breaks, the activity must start over.

### Go to pieces

Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Give each group a set of puzzle pieces (20-40) in an envelope and tell them that they must assemble the puzzle in a set time without talking. (If you don't have several jigsaw puzzles to distribute, you can cut several geometric shapes into pieces or mount a photo and cut that up.)

### Everyone wins relay race

Divide the class into two groups. Put a starting line across one side of the class and a finish line on the other side. Line the first group up at the starting line and tell them the rules: The object of the race is to have everyone on the team cross the finish line at exactly the same time. If they don't, they have to go to the starting line and begin again. Don't let the second group hear the instructions; they must learn by observation. Line up the second group and have them play without receiving any instructions.

### Silent chronology

Tell students to line up according to their date of birth. The catch: no talking!

### Class mural

Have each student bring in something that represents his or her family tradition. Use the objects as the inspiration for a class mural. Group the objects by place of origin and have each place of origin represented on the mural. When the mural is finished, ask students to explain how these traditions contribute to America.