

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Effective Classroom Discussions

I grew up in a household where the great events of the day were regularly discussed at our kitchen table. I learned the art of conversation and the back and forth of debate at the family meal each evening with my parents. I learned a lot from those kitchen table conversations, and so I've tried to make discussion a regular part of my classroom.

In his book, [Academic Conversations](#), Jeff Zwier explains three essential ingredients for effective classroom discussions. First, academic conversations should be structured. Second, they should include small groups where each student has an opportunity to speak. Third, in whole class debriefing teachers should use a random system for calling on students.

I want to get my students talking early and often. The first week in my Economics class students do an activity I designed called [Island Choices](#). The set-up is the following, "Imagine you were stranded on an island after a shipwreck. You are not sure what raw materials are available on the island, but you can only take 10 of the 20 items from the ship onto land to help you survive. Work with your partners and decide which 10 to take." Not only does this activity help students learn basic economic concepts of scarcity, land, labor, and capital, it is also to get kids talking, grappling with economic decision making.

One way to get students talking is to put them into teams and give them a history mystery to solve. That's the idea behind the lesson I designed called, [What happened to the buffalo?](#) I posed the mystery in the student handout, "In 1800 more than 60 million buffalo roamed the plains of the American West. In 1894, there was believed to be only 25 remaining buffalo. What happened to the buffalo?"

I stressed the rules for good discussion in the first few slides of the [Return of the American Buffalo](#) slideshow. They are dubbed the 4 L's: 1) Look at your teammate's eyes 2) Lean toward your teammates 3) Lower your voice 4) Listen attentively. Once I've established the groundwork for productive team discussion, I handout [8 sources related to the near extinction of the buffalo in the 19th century](#). Students must work as a team, discussing and finding evidence in the visual and text sources.

I am guessing like me you've had good class debates or discussions with a handful of students leading the charge. However, in my experience ensuring equitable participation, with lots of students engaged in academic conversations is the real challenge. One useful cooperative learning strategy is [Numbered Heads Together](#). Students are put into groups of four with each student receiving a number one through four. The teacher poses a question for discussion. After the team grapples with the issue, the teacher randomly calls a number. Students with that number from each group are responsible for sharing the group's ideas with the class.

I used Numbered Heads Together when we were learning about Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in my economics class. Students discussed whether GDP really captures the well-being of a nation. In the [Happiness and GDP activity](#) I posed several questions for discussion: Are people living in high per capita GDP countries happier than those in poor countries? How important is economic

growth and income to the well-being of a nation, or are other non-economic factors such as family, community, religion, and the environment more important in human happiness. To randomly pick students in a group I created a [random number picker](#), with the [random name picker tool](#) developed by classtools.net.

I think it is important for social studies teachers to get kids talking about the big, overarching, questions at the heart of our courses. In my US History class, for example, I designed an activity called, [When should the US go to war?](#) I introduced the discussion activity in the following manner, "We have studied World War 1, World 2, and now the Korea and Vietnam Wars. Most recently the US sent troops to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq. Each generation of Americans has to answer a difficult question: When should the US go to war?"

Facilitating whole class discussion is an art. First and foremost, we must listen carefully to our students, asking for further clarification or following up with a probing question. Where there is disagreement, we should organize the debate without entering it ourselves. And we should ask our students to provide evidence and reasoning for their positions, helping them to develop their thinking. At least that is how my parents did it at our kitchen table with their passionate and opinionated sixteen-year-old son. I am in their debt.