

# JOIN THE DEBATES

LISTEN. SHARE. THEN DECIDE.

**EXPLO**  
LEARNING THROUGH EXPLORATION

 **Education**

A GUIDE TO DEBATES IN THE CLASSROOM

COMMISSION ON  
PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

 **Washington**  
University in St. Louis

2016  
U.S. VICE PRESIDENTIAL  
DEBATE 2016  
OCTOBER 4, 2016  
 LOYOLA  
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DEBATE 2016  
HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY  
SEPTEMBER 24, 2016

2016  
PRESIDENTIAL  
DEBATE  
OCTOBER 3, 2016  
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

 NATIONAL  
GOVERNORS  
ASSOCIATION

LETTERS  
TO THE NEXT  
PRESIDENT  
2016

# JOIN THE DEBATES

Join the Debates highlights the importance of listening, participation, and respect as critical values for responsible citizens. Becoming proficient in engaging in substantive discussion with those who think differently is a skill that needs to be learned and then practiced. Without these skills, our ability as a nation to solve complex and entrenched problems is severely compromised. During the 2016 Election season, **Explo** and **PBS Education**, in cooperation with the **Commission on Presidential Debates**, encourages young people to engage in civil conversation on issues important to the U.S. presidential debates and election.



## COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION METHOD: A MODEL OF TEACHING THROUGH DISCUSSION

*Developed from models of Harkness Method & Spider Web Discussion*

# PURPOSE

This discussion method was developed to promote greater student engagement with content, intellectual interaction with peers, and increased confidence and skills for leading, managing and participating in substantive discussions.

## STUDENTS WILL

1

Engage in controversy in a respectful, constructive manner

2

Analyze an argument and follow-up with thoughtful questions

3

Articulate their opinions clearly, confidently, and with evidence

4

Improve teamwork skills, leadership skills, negotiation skills, and observation skills

5

Recognize/appreciate inclusivity and develop skills around encouraging others to speak

6

Provide feedback and be reflective about both the conversation topic and format

7

Point out connections between concepts/opinions expressed within the discussion and the world at large

## SUMMARY

In this method of discussion, students, not teachers, promote, drive and guide the discussion while fully participating in it. Students are asked to lead and assess while teachers observe and coach. The discussion is framed as a collaborative group effort and students reflect as a group on the quality of the discussion, equity of participation, and broader connections made outside of the topic content.

In order to meet the anticipated outcomes, students must practice this discussion method over time. Join the Debates (JTD) recommends one class period per week be devoted to holding JTD discussions for a minimum of six weeks. The more often students engage in these collaborative discussions, the better they become at them.

Each week a different topic may be discussed. On pages 14-20 there are suggested discussion topics, though teachers should feel free to use their own topics. Students should be alerted to the discussion in advance (preferably two or more days ahead of time) and students should come to the discussion with three questions regarding the designated topic. These questions will be given to the teacher the day before the discussion. The teacher will then pass them onto the facilitator who will review the questions and use some or many of them in facilitating the discussion.



# STUDENT ROLES

Students who are assigned a role have additional responsibilities within a single discussion that reach beyond simple participation. Roles rotate with each discussion so that as many students as possible are able to experience each one.

## THESE ROLES INCLUDE

### B MAPPER

This student is mapping discussion participation using a web technique. On a piece of paper -- the larger the better -- the mapper notes where each student is sitting. As each student speaks, the mapper draws a line from one speaker to the next creating a visual representation of how the discussion moves around the room.

### A FACILITATOR

This student gets the discussion moving and keeps it moving, often by asking the other group members questions, either building upon what has just been said or drawing from a previously created list of questions.

### C TIME KEEPER

This student ensures the group stays on track and gets through a reasonable amount of material in the given time period. If the group gets stuck for too long on a particular point or question and it's clear that the discussion is not progressing, then the timekeeper should point out that it is time to move on.

## OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL ROLES

### D SUMMARIZER

Every so often (perhaps once per question for a list of questions, or at the end for one question), this student provides a summary of the discussion for other students to approve or amend. This student records key points on large paper to be posted in the classroom for future reference.

### E CONNECTOR

This person seeks connections between the current discussion and past topics or overall course themes. The instructor should do this role for the first few discussions; gradually pass it off to students during the session once they have seen in modeled a few times.

# CREATING GOOD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Students will need practice to create questions that stimulate discussion.

## QUALITIES OF GOOD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Open-ended questions that require students to construct/defend an opinion
- Ask why something might happen
- Require students to assimilate a variety of information to construct/defend an opinion
- Questions that can be interpreted in a multitude of ways without being confusing
- Thought-provoking
- Provocative
- Accessible to students
- Invoke passion

## EXAMPLES

1. When should the right to privacy supersede the well being of society?
2. Why might someone choose to give up his or her freedom?
3. How might your life be different without technology?
4. Can equality exist in society?
5. Is art a necessary part of a full life?

## STUDENTS WILL

- Address comments, questions, and responses to the group, a particular speaker or the facilitator rather than to the course instructor
- Collaborate, not compete
- Make their contributions to the discussion meaningful and thought-provoking
- Add on to other students' comments/opinions to further the discussion
- Take ownership of their comments and opinions while allowing others to do the same
- Take ownership of the progression of the discussion, quality of responses, interaction between students and inclusion of everyone
- Challenge other's opinions with questions, such as how they came to that decision or what the short/long term impact of it might be
- Make connections to other content areas, events, people, pop culture, fiction
- Ask for clarification to a response if not fully understood
- Ensure that peers feel valued and respected throughout the discussion
- Recognize and clarify misunderstandings

## STUDENT RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

- Everyone participates
- Step up or step down -- notice if you are taking up too much or not enough talking space
- Disagreement is expected, but it should be done respectfully
- All students have a shared responsibility for the success of the conversation



# TEACHER ROLE

The teacher’s role in the Collaborative Discussion Method is that of an adult guide rather than the facilitator or a participant. If an adult leads the discussion, the students will not have the opportunity to reach many of the goals set out for them.

It can be challenging to any teacher to empower students to take charge of the discussion, so an important step is understanding when and how to interrupt a discussion and when to allow it to play out.


## INTERRUPT A DISCUSSION WHEN

**1**  
**THE OPINION EXPRESSED MIGHT BE MISUNDERSTOOD OR IS OFFENSIVE**  
Ask a follow-up question for clarification.

**3**  
**INDIVIDUALS, INSTEAD OF OPINIONS, ARE BEING CHALLENGED (A THREAT TO PHYSICAL, INTELLECTUAL OR EMOTIONAL SAFETY)**  
Name what has happened and how it could have been better expressed for example, “You are wrong” versus “I disagree.”

**2**  
**MISINFORMATION HAS BEEN EXPRESSED AND NO STUDENT CHALLENGES IT**  
Ask the group if they think it is correct.

**4**  
**ENOUGH TIME HAS PASSED AND NO STUDENT HAS CHALLENGED AN OPINION THAT SHOULD BE CHALLENGED IN ORDER TO MOVE THE DISCUSSION FORWARD.**  
Ask the group what they think about it or if they understood something different to be true.



### COMMON TEACHER MISCONCEPTIONS

- Student-led discussions should never be interrupted by the teacher and everything should be allowed to be contributed.
- Teachers are not doing their jobs if they are not leading the class at all times.
- Teachers should always contribute their opinions as a member of the group.
- Teachers give up complete classroom control during student-led discussions since students are in charge.
- It will not work because teachers can do a better job at leading discussions.

# TEACHER GUIDELINES

Preparing for student-led discussions using the Collaborative Discussion Method will take thought, creativity and planning. Discussion topics must be rich, multi-faceted, inspire thoughtful opinions and be broad-based.

*For example: A discussion on education may be so broad that it is hard to get the discussion going. But if the topic is something like, "Should two years of college or career training be made available for free to all high school graduates?", then students will need to think through the repercussions of where this schooling would take place, how it might be paid for, the societal benefits, and whether this is a better investment than other choices the government could make.*

## CONSIDER

- Structuring the discussion around a need to reach a consensus.
- Using creative controversy techniques where students are assigned a position to argue and then switch positions to argue the other side.
- Using discussion content within other activities so the goal is not solely to have a discussion but rather to further understand integral parts of the curriculum

## SET THE STAGE

for the topic and expectations for the discussion before each session. Look at these discussions as a natural extension of the class and a valuable tool to empower and engage students.

## ALLOW THERE TO BE SILENCE

until the silence gets uncomfortable (wait-time), which will force the students to get, and keep, the discussion going. The facilitator's role is to move the discussion forward so the instructor must stay quiet and wait.

## ALLOW STUDENTS TO TAKE NOTES

(but do not require) since that will help the more tactile student to stay focused on the discussion.

The first few discussions in class using the Collaborative Discussion Method will likely be a bit clunky since everyone, including the teacher, is just starting to practice new skills. Like riding a bike, you will all need to practice in order to get better. Stay positive and project enthusiasm. The students will catch on quickly, enjoy the class more and develop lifelong skills.

# PREPARING STUDENTS

This discussion method will be new to students, so it is important to take time at the beginning to explain thoroughly what it entails and what is expected of them as participants. This method is not simply having a discussion with roles and mapping the results. If this were the case, we would be making discussions more cumbersome rather than enriching them.

- Be articulate and clear with students about the purpose and goals of this discussion method.
- Show excitement about implementing this method. Students take their cues from you. If you are apathetic or hesitant, they will be too.
- Consider showing the following video (starting at 3:48) as an example of a good discussion using this type of method:  
<http://www.edutopia.org/stw-collaborative-learning-math-english-video>
- Define student roles, one at a time, and allow students to practice the role in a brief small group discussion, using course content, followed by a whole class debrief. Even though each student will not have a chance to practice each role, they will have seen it done. The teacher should rotate between groups and observe the actions of the role being practiced, taking notes for the debrief.
- Lead a debrief on each role before introducing the next role so as to help students compartmentalize what is required in each role.
- Give students the topic at least two class periods prior to the discussion so they can prepare good questions for homework. The teacher collects the questions and looks them over before giving them to the facilitator to use. In order to manage student expectations, tell them beforehand that all questions will not be included.

- Make clear the amount of time the discussion will last (times can vary for each discussion) so the facilitator knows when to move the discussion along to a new question, and so as to include the material the teacher intended.
- Share example reflection questions that they will be expected to answer about the group’s performance, as well as their individual skill development, after each discussion session.

## DISCUSSION FOLLOW-UP AND REFLECTION

- Allow time for the student in the role of Mapper to report out to the class.
- Mapper will show the participation web they created that illustrates who was talking and how much. All students are then asked why they think it shows the patterns it does and how they might have helped the discussion be more equitable - each of them taking responsibility for the pattern and the participation of each individual in the class. These webs should be dated and posted in class to mark improvement over time.
- Each student with a role should receive specific feedback from the group on their performance in that role. For example, how the Facilitator was able to keep the discussion moving, what techniques they used, and what was most effective.



# POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

## CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

- Should all campaign contributions be made public?
- Should Super PACs be allowed to raise unlimited funds for campaigns?
- Should campaign donations from corporations be capped at a certain amount?
- Are campaign donations a free speech issue?

## CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

- Should citizens be allowed to vote on what offenses result in capital punishment?
- Are capital punishment opponents correct in pressuring the companies that produce drugs for lethal injections, even if it means that states turn to other, sometimes untested, methods for execution?
- Does executing people constitute cruel and unusual punishment?

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- Should there be gas mileage standards for auto manufacturers?
- Does the United States have a right to impose carbon emissions laws on developing countries?
- Would a carbon tax help or hurt the country?
- Should private companies have to disclose when they dump pollutants into the water?
- Should businesses pay a tax for polluting?
- Should individual citizens have to pay for their pollution output?

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

- Should juveniles be removed from the sex offender registry?
- Should mandatory minimum drug sentencing laws be repealed?
- Should people have to pay court fees when they are charged with a minor crime?
- Is a life sentence of solitary confinement cruel and unusual punishment?

# POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

## EDUCATION

- Should the federal government provide families vouchers that can be used for private school tuition?
- Should public schools be funded by property taxes, or by other means?
- Should two years of college or career training be made available for free to all high school graduates?
- Are teachers responsible for the grades and scores their students achieve?
- Should the United States adopt Europe’s model of high school students specializing at 16 years old?
- Should for-profit schools or universities receive federal financial support directly or through student loans?

## ELECTORAL COLLEGE

- Does the Electoral College system as it exists today solve the problems it was drafted to solve?
- Is the Electoral College democratic?

## ENERGY

- Should the government allow drilling in ANWR in Alaska?
- Should the United States invest more in nuclear energy?
- Should fracking be legal?
- Should there be tax deductions for business or individuals who want to install solar, wind, or other renewables?

## FAMILY (cont. next page)

- Should there be subsidized preschool for all young children in the United States?
- Should all parents receive longer periods of parental leave, regardless of their gender?
- Should parents be able to veto what subjects their children are taught in school?

# POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

## FAMILY (cont.)

- Should minors be required to receive parental consent for abortion?

## FOREIGN TRADE, FOREIGN RELATIONS, INTERNATIONAL AID

- In general, do free trade agreements help or hurt Americans?
- Should the United States put large tariffs on goods coming from countries with which the U.S. runs large trade deficits?
- Should the United States continue its relations with countries with poor human rights records?
- Should the United State continue to support Israel?
- Should the United States continue to participate in NATO?
- Would the dollars spent on foreign aid be better spent on domestic projects?
- Should the United States give funds directly to countries or to US-based NGO's?

## FREE SPEECH

- Does government surveillance via technology affect our right to free speech?
- Should the United States somehow penalize countries where the government censors citizens' access to particular websites?
- Should free speech laws differ for students when they are either on or off school grounds?
- Should posting negative comments anonymously online count as the same offense as in-person bullying?
- Should students be punished at school for writing inappropriate comments online while not at school?

## GUN SAFETY

- Should a gun manufacturer be held responsible if their product is used illegally?
- Should the federal government ban assault weapons?

# POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

## GENETICS

- Should companies be allowed to patent genes they discover?
- Should genetically modified food have a label that says it has been genetically modified?
- Should scientists clone endangered or extinct species in order to preserve them?
- Should prospective parents be allowed to pick certain genes/traits for their child?

## HEALTH CARE

- Should the government have the right to regulate citizens' diets with bills such as a soda tax?
- Should healthcare be provided free for all citizens, regardless of employment?
- What is the government's role in regulating policies around contraception?
- Should the government provide more spaces in drug treatment facilities for those with drug addictions?

## IMMIGRATION

- Should anyone who enters the United States be allowed a path to citizenship?
- Do the current policies around immigration coincide with or contradict our nation's founding principles?
- Should there exist exceptions for a path to citizenship for immigrants who are in the United States illegally but who contribute immensely to society, however that is defined?

## INCOME INEQUALITY

- Should the estate tax be abolished?
- Should we have a flat tax, no matter how much you earn?
- Should having children increase or decrease your taxes?
- Should investment income be taxed at the same rate as earned income?

# POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

## INTERNATIONAL AID

- Would the dollars spent on foreign aid be better spent on domestic projects?
- Should the United States give funds directly to countries or to US-based NGO's?
- Should countries have to share proof (data) of successful efforts in order to receive funds?

## LGBT/GENDER ISSUES

- Is the presence of single-gender groups in schools considered gender discrimination?
- Does a school have a right not to allow boys on girls' sports teams, and vice versa?
- Should all people be allowed to enter the bathroom of their choice or expressed gender?
- Should religiously affiliated organizations and companies be allowed to deny benefits to LGBT people based on their organization's beliefs?

## MINIMUM WAGE

- Should restaurants be exempt from minimum wage laws?
- Should the national minimum wage vary by industry?
- Should the state or the federal government set the minimum wage in a state?
- Would raising the minimum wage help or hurt the economy?

## NASA/SPACE

- Should taxpayers pay for space exploration and research?
- Should resources be committed to finding extraterrestrial life?
- Does the U.S. benefit enough from the space program?

# POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

## STANDARDIZED TESTING

- Should standardized tests be required for high school graduation?
- Should students be required to take a standardized test each year in order to advance to the next grade?
- Should student standardized test scores be used to determine if a teacher is effective or not?

## TECHNOLOGY/PRIVACY

- Should the government be allowed to obtain wiretaps on anyone whom they deem suspicious without court oversight?
- Should the government be allowed access to any citizens' information if they have just cause?
- What rights should individuals have to see their data created on apps such as Snapchat?
- Should apps be able to sell your location data to other businesses?
- Should you have the right to erase yourself from the internet?
- Should posting negative comments anonymously online count as the same offense as in-person bullying?

## MEDIA ROLE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

- Should each candidate receive the same amount of coverage on major media outlets?
- Should the pledged delegate count affect media coverage?

## MINORS' RIGHTS

- Should the law be amended so that minors can own their own business?
- Should minors who commit serious crimes be treated less severely than adults?
- Should minors be allowed to vote in national elections?



# POSSIBLE DISCUSSION TOPICS

## NATIONAL SECURITY

- Should the United States reinstitute the draft?
- Is it sometimes acceptable to suspend constitutional rights in order to keep people safe?

## SOCIAL SECURITY

- Should workers contribute to Social Security despite its possibly bankruptcy before they are eligible for it?
- Should the very wealthy be eligible to collect Social Security benefits?

## VOTER ELIGIBILITY

- Should having a criminal record negate your right as a citizen to vote?
- Should everyone be allowed to vote by mail or by computer?

# APPENDIX AND RESOURCES

Sample Video:  
<http://www.edutopia.org/stw-collaborative-learning-math-english-video>

Mullgardt, Brian (2008). Introducing and Using the Discussion (AKA, Harkness) Table. National Association of Independent Schools: Independent Teacher.

[http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ITMagazine/Pages/Introducing-and-Using-the-Discussion-\(AKA-Harkness\)-Table.aspx](http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ITMagazine/Pages/Introducing-and-Using-the-Discussion-(AKA-Harkness)-Table.aspx)

<http://modelsbydesign.wordpress.com/2012/09/16/goodbye-harkness-hello-spider-web/>

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Join the Debates ([www.jointhedeates.org](http://www.jointhedeates.org)) was designed and is led by Explo ([www.explo.org](http://www.explo.org)).

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For more information on how to receive free, grade level appropriate resources around elections, visit **PBSEDUElectionCentral.com**

