

CONVERSATION COMEBACK

A Teacher's Guide to Class Discussion
in a Distracted, Divided World

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Why?

Understanding the *Conversation Crisis*

IN THIS SECTION, YOU'LL FIND...

- Chapter 1** A Crisis Bigger than My Classroom
- Chapter 2** Why Discussion Is *Really* Hard for Today's Kids
- Chapter 3** Why Discussion Is *Really* Important for Today's Teachers



“Alright, are we ready for the discussion? You have twenty minutes. Stay on topic, make space for everyone. I am here listening, but not participating. Talk to each other, not to me.

Any questions?

OK, go!”

CHAPTER ONE

A Crisis Bigger than My Classroom

And so began another “student-led” discussion in my classroom. I could predict the dynamics even before it started. I knew who would dominate, lean back, argue for the sake of it, facilitate awkwardly, freeze with anxiety, quote-drop endlessly, sneak a phone under a desk, or derail everything with an admittedly funny one-liner.

I could also predict my own behavior. I would multitask like a maniac: Scramble to record every comment using my note-taking method du jour, stand ready to referee, and keep a running inventory of all the points I wanted the conversation to cover. When the bell rang, we would all breathe a collective sigh of relief. Then, I’d gear up to repeat the same exhausting process in the next class.

By the time I sat down to grade the discussions, the whole experience felt ephemeral. Was I sure that kid really said that? Was the discussion balanced, or did the extroverts dominate? Did students learn what I wanted them to? (Wait, was I even clear on my instructional goals?)

I'd often get so overwhelmed by trying to find a fair and accurate way to grade individually that I would just settle for a "group grade" (almost always a B+ or A-), justifying that choice with the expert opinion that doing so promoted collaboration.¹ But, deep down, it felt like a cop-out. Students were not getting the individualized feedback I knew they needed to grow as communicators.

If I'm honest, it wasn't just the grading that made me queasy. It was the whole system. Discussion wasn't *really* working for me or my students. Sure, we survived each day, but what was the point of this high-anxiety, low-authenticity approach to discussion?

Of course, I kept going for reasons that now feel so trite they are hard to say out loud. Part of it was that I loved knowing that in discussion, students were doing the work live. The other part was pride and investment in years of professional development. I had poured so much time into my own unique blend of discussion techniques like Harkness, Socratic, Spider Web, Deliberative, Paideia, and more. I was sentimentally attached and professionally committed. My teacher-emotions made change feel hard, even threatening.

Eventually, I began discussing these nagging ideas with other teachers. Many quietly admitted feeling similarly. Discussion wasn't really working for them either! Some called it a "waste of a day." Others said it no longer built classroom community the way it used to, describing a series of solo performances or "share-and-stares." Even the seasoned Socratic-wizards acknowledged their tricks were falling flat. Now and then, I'd find teachers who felt triumphant, believing they had "solved the problem" with an edtech tool that allowed students to type instead of talk, so everyone was finally "heard!" That last one haunted me.

Isn't the point of live discussion to practice face-to-face communication? If students don't learn to talk and listen to each other in school, where will they learn to do it?

Across all perspectives, one truth emerged. We were facing a giant skill gap in our classrooms. Students were just not bringing the conversation skills they once did into school. Sure, the kids with foundational discussion skills could participate, but the vast majority withdrew, feeling anxious, awkward, disengaged, distracted, and too often, unable to truly listen. As teachers, we recognized the pattern but felt powerless in the face of it.

That's when I realized: This skill gap is about *so much more* than class discussion. It's not just our classrooms; it's our world!

Since starting this journey around 2013, I have seen society plunge deeper and deeper into a full-blown *Conversation Crisis*. The act of talking and listening to each other has become inconvenient, difficult, and at times even scary. The suspected causes are myriad and debatable: Phones, politics, the pandemic, parents, mental health, social media, AI. The list goes on and on (and on).

But here's what's not up for debate: **Our students are growing up in a world that rarely requires them to engage in real, live discussion. Today's kids can always text instead of talk, ask a bot instead of a friend, post opinions into an algorithm-fueled echo chamber, choose self-checkouts to avoid cashiers, or tune it all out with a giant pair of humanity-cancelling headphones.**

In this new reality, class discussion suddenly takes on a different weight. Yes, it is still about students digging into short stories or dissecting primary sources (tasks that will always make my humanities heart flutter), but now it is also about something much bigger than our classrooms. It's time for a *Conversation Comeback!*

Why It Matters

Amidst the *Conversation Crisis*, I came to see that teachers (including myself) have an opportunity (and, I would argue, an obligation) to use class discussion to teach today's kids the discussion skills they *really* need—academically, socially, and societally. The world our students will inherit will require them to connect across differences and deploy

uniquely human skills—such as curiosity, listening, empathy, and critical thinking—in an age of AI.

That insight prompted a tectonic shift in my own teaching. I began to see discussion not just as an instructional strategy, but as a rare opportunity for students to feel and celebrate our humanity.

And, I realized that, beyond the school day, our shared future depends on teaching today's students the discussion skills they need to transcend the *Conversation Crisis*.

The question of *how we can do that* has become my life's work, and it's probably why you picked up this book. As is often the case with any question worth in-depth investigation, it turns out that the first step in arriving at an answer is actually to slow down, recheck assumptions, and get more curious about the problem.

So, why, *exactly*, does real, live discussion feel so hard for kids today? The student perspective is a fitting place for us to begin.

CHAPTER 1 TAKEAWAYS FOR TEACHERS

- **Class discussion reveals a skill gap.**
Many students lack the foundational communication skills to participate fully, leaving teachers frustrated and students disengaged.
- **The *Conversation Crisis* is real.**
In a screen-saturated world, students rarely get authentic opportunities to practice live, human-to-human conversation.
- **Class discussion is bigger than academics.**
It is one of the few spaces where students can build essential human skills—listening, empathy, curiosity, and critical thinking—that matter for learning, life, and society.

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