



Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Developing Intellectual, Civic and Moral Values through Dialogue

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Facilitating well-structured dialogues are a significant way of shaping character through developing civic, intellectual, and moral virtues while also moving through a curriculum. What follows is a brief *what, why, and how* guide to helping students to engage and learn through meaningful and productive dialogue.

What?

Dialogue describes an exchange of ideas where the aim is not to win, but to gain a deeper insight and understanding of a topic. In this sense it can be contrasted with debate, which tends to be combative; where those engaged are trying to defeat the opposing side through rhetoric and the power of argument. Dialogue, on the other hand, involves asking questions to elicit a better understanding, and drawing on techniques such as '[active listening](#)'. A dialogue is between two or more people, and can easily engage a class with many different perspectives being drawn in. Within a dialogue everybody involved is both student and teacher as the learning is peer-to-peer, with the centre of gravity being in the discussion, rather than solely with the teacher. When this is done effectively it can be highly stimulating and often facilitates flow-states in students - it is productive for both learning and the development of character.

Why?

A good dialogue is predicated on the presence of certain virtues, and will seek to develop them further. Curiosity, critical thinking, open-mindedness, and empathy can all be developed through a carefully structured classroom dialogue.

Curiosity - students are required to engage with and respond to a stimulus, as well as trying to understand other people's perspectives. Curiosity within students is one of the most powerful learning mechanisms, and results in motivation being intrinsic rather than extrinsic (which is far more powerful, productive, and satisfying).

Critical Thinking - while the aim of a dialogue is not primarily to develop and critique arguments, it nonetheless will require students to critically engage with other perspectives. This will mean learning to question assumptions, make links, and summarise perspectives.

Open-mindedness - dialogue can be particularly challenging as it requires one to be open enough to understand other people's perspectives, rather than just critiquing them. CS Lewis used a metaphor in his essay 'Meditation in a Tool Shed', where he contrasted the experience of looking 'at' a beam of light coming through a window, with the experience of looking 'along' it. It is from within that one can understand a different perspective and understand its internal logic and consistency.

Empathy - with open-mindedness and understanding comes empathy, the ability to relate to the way someone else thinks and feels. This emotional engagement with difference is a key component of civil dialogue.

How?

There are many possible approaches to a structured dialogue, the proposal below follows the Harkness method, widely used at a number of schools in the USA, and at Wellington College among other schools in the UK. A detailed look at the philosophy behind the pedagogy by Dr Guy Williams can be found [here](#). The process is simple and straightforward, but its success is contingent on planning and a classroom culture of high expectations.

Preparation/set-up

The lessons will be based on a stimulus that students will have prepared for in advance. For example, this could be a section of text with a set of questions to accompany it. These questions should push for both comprehension and critical thinking. This preparatory work needs to be done in order for the dialogue to be rich and productive, with all students able to participate. Students should also be aware of the aim of the discussion, not just the knowledge they are acquiring, but the skills that you as a teacher are looking to see them develop (see self-evaluation form below).

The Lesson

The classroom set-up should ideally be one where students can face one another, an oval or circle is ideal, though horseshoes also work well. If a lesson is 50 minutes, one might spend the first ten minutes getting students to silently prepare or doing a starter exercise, 25 minutes focused on the dialogue itself, and the final 15 minutes to evaluate and take notes.

The discussion is the thrust of the lesson, and the set questions provide a structure for the discussion. The role of the teacher is to facilitate discussion, but to largely relinquish control of the actual teaching – misconceptions should be noted and cleared up at the end of the discussion. The teacher may do the following:

- Ask someone to begin the discussion, or direct a question at a particular individual.
- Allow students to take responsibility for the silences, and to try and get themselves out of any obvious cul-de-sacs in the discussion.
- Where certain students are dominating the discussion, put them in ‘the freezer’ for a length of time to give others a chance to speak.
- Take notes on the flow of the conversation, either by mapping this out by hand or using an app like [Equity Maps](#) on the iPad.

The optimum number for a Harkness dialogue is 10-15 students, though most KS3-4 classes will have double this number. When doing a dialogue with larger numbers, a fishbowl dialogue approach can be adopted, whereby there are two concentric circles with the outer circle being observers while the inner circle engages, then the groups swap over.

Peer-to-peer evaluation

Students can be paired up to evaluate their progress alongside the progress of a peer. This should be done using a simple rubric which focuses on the skills being developed, and can be used for comparison in future dialogues. Below is an example of this.

Evaluation	Did I do this?	Did my buddy do this?
Refer directly to the text		
Challenge or develop the views of others		
Any questions to help the dialogue grow and elicit understanding		
Offer an opinion with clear reasoning		
Ask for clarity, elaborate, or paraphrase what's been said		

Links:

[Rubric examples](#)

[Ted talk on Harkness](#)

[Harkness at Wellington College](#)