

Cafe Conversations – Teaching Strategy

Quick Overview

Students practice perspective-taking in structured, small-group conversations modeled after a café setting. Students surface multiple perspectives, practice inquiry and listening, and build shared understanding around a central question or set of related prompts. Rather than debating fixed positions, students use these perspectives to explore how different experiences and evidence shape how people understand the same issue. This helps students test, refine, and deepen their own thinking.

Skill Objective

Students will...

- build awareness of different perspectives
- practice active listening and respectful dialogue
- ask open-ended, curiosity-driven questions

Content Objective

Students will...

- explore complex civic, historical, or ethical questions
- understand how perspectives are shaped by experience, evidence, and values

Civics Skills Connection

Reasoning Skills:

- **Perspective taking:** Students consider how others interpret the same issue
- **Inquiry:** Students generate and pursue questions rather than fixed positions
- **Civic discourse:** Students practice norms of respectful, inclusive dialogue

Prep ahead

- Select a **central question** and 3–5 related sub-questions or prompts students to engage with.
- Select 5-10 perspectives that represent different ways people might understand the issue. The selected perspectives can be real people or composites of real people. It helps to create short bios to support students.
 - Teacher Note: Not all perspectives are appropriate for your students. Remember that students should choose. Never ask students to take the perspective of someone who is harmful or to take on a role that others in the class might find offensive.
- Prepare materials for each “table” (short texts, images, data, quotations, or scenarios).

- Arrange the room into small table groupings to signal an informal, conversational tone.
- Establish and review discussion norms (listen to understand, invite quieter voices, disagree respectfully).

Strategy Steps

1. Introduce the purpose of Café Conversations and review discussion norms.
2. Assign students to tables; each table begins with a prompt or resource. Students should start by introducing the perspective they are using. Throughout the discussion, students are discussing the prompt from the perspectives that have been assigned to them.
3. A table host or the teacher starts the activity with a conversation starter or with one of the prepared questions.
4. Students discuss the prompt from their point of view, using it as a lens to explore the issue, recording key ideas, questions, or agreements and disagreements.
5. Conclude with a whole-group synthesis discussion focused on patterns, insights, and lingering questions. Here are some sample debrief questions.
 - “What’s one idea you heard that helped you see the issue differently?”
 - “Did anyone change or refine their thinking as the conversations went on?”
 - “What did you notice about how people entered the conversation?”
 - “Did any question grow or evolve as you heard new ideas?”
 - “How is this kind of conversation different from a debate?”
 - “Why is it important to practice listening—especially when we don’t yet agree?”
 - How did using a perspective change or stretch your thinking about the issue?

Customizations

- **Option 1: Assess It**
 - Students complete and submit a reflection capturing:
 - one idea that challenged their thinking
 - one idea that resonated
 - one question they are still exploring
- **Option 2: Scaffold It**

- Provide sentence starters or role cards (connector, questioner, summarizer) to support emerging speakers.
- **Option 4: Extend It**
 - Use Café Conversations as a pre-writing or pre-debate activity, helping students explore ideas before taking a position or constructing an argument.