

A TEACHING TOLERANCE GUIDE

# LET'S TALK!

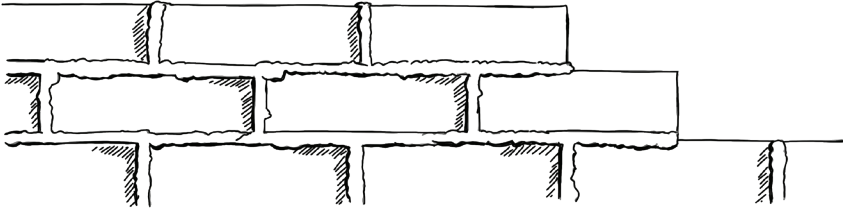
FACILITATING CRITICAL  
CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS



TEACHING TOLERANCE  
A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER  
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# LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

In this section of the guide,  
you'll find



two sets of recommendations you can follow to create the kind of classroom where critical conversations succeed.

“On Your Own” activities will prepare you to bring your best self to these conversations, whether you’ve planned them in advance or they’re spontaneous responses to student comments or interest. These activities should help ensure your classroom culture is built on a strong foundation. “With Your Students” activities will further establish an open and trusting foundation by engaging your classroom community in discussions that require students to think, talk and learn about identity, diversity, justice and action.

*All of the recommended practices align with Teaching Tolerance’s **Social Justice Standards**. You can learn more about using the standards to build a strong classroom community in our **Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education**.*

## 1. CLARIFY TERMS

### SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: IDENTITY, DIVERSITY, JUSTICE

Every critical conversation has its own context and content, but almost all touch on identity and injustice. Pinning down a few key terms can help you and your students think and talk about critical topics more clearly.

Read through these terms on your own, and look for opportunities to share them with your students.

### IDENTITY

**IDENTITY.** The set of visible and invisible characteristics we use to categorize and define ourselves and those around us (e.g., gender, race, age, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, marital/family status, ability, sexual orientation, etc.). Identity shapes our experience by influencing the ways we see ourselves and the ways others see us.

**IDENTITY GROUP.** A group of people who share one or more identity characteristics (e.g., women, Latinx people, teenagers, etc.). Members of an identity group can share a wide range of experiences, positive and negative.

**DOMINANT IDENTITY GROUP.** An identity group whose members share a common privilege. An individual may simultaneously belong to dominant identity groups (e.g., straight, white) and non-dominant identity groups (e.g., undocumented, experiencing poverty).

**INTERSECTIONALITY.** A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how each person belongs to multiple, overlapping identity groups, and the ways our identities overlap can result in multiplied oppressions or privileges.

### INJUSTICE

**BIAS.** Conscious or unconscious prejudice against an individual or a group, based on their identity. In the Social Justice Standards, Teaching Tolerance uses this term to designate the prejudice held by individuals.

**DISCRIMINATION.** Prejudice in action. Unfair treatment of a person or group based on their identity. In the Social Justice Standards, Teaching Tolerance distinguishes between *discrimination*, often executed by individuals (e.g., one bigoted person denying someone a loan based on their ethnicity) and *systemic discrimination*, which exists on a larger, institutional level (e.g., the longstanding policy of neighborhood redlining).

## 2. CONSIDER YOUR OWN IDENTITY

### SOCIAL JUSTICE ANCHOR STANDARDS: IDENTITY, DIVERSITY, JUSTICE

Most people belong to at least one dominant identity group. When your identity is dominant, it's easy to think of your experience as universal and to overlook or downplay the experiences of others. These kinds of biases are often unconscious. Thinking carefully about your own identity and the ways it has shaped your experience and influences your assumptions—including assumptions about your students—can help you recognize unconscious biases before you engage with critical topics in your classroom.

Start by considering your relationship to some common identity categories. After listing your identity group memberships, use the sample questions to consider how your various identities may shape your experience.

#### LIST A FEW OF YOUR IDENTITIES

- Ability
- Age
- Body type
- Ethnicity
- Gender identity
- Home language
- Immigration status
- Race
- Religion
- Sexual orientation
- Socioeconomic status

**Think about how your membership in different identity groups affects your daily life. Use these questions to get started, adapting them as necessary.**

- *What messages did I learn about ability growing up?*
- *How does being a person with/without a disability affect my day-to-day life?*
- *How often am I asked to adapt to other people's abilities/disabilities?*
- *What messages—both implicit and explicit—do I convey to my students about ability?*

**Continue your self-reflection by completing these statements:**

- *Talking about ability is challenging because ...*
- *Talking about ability is necessary because ...*
- *Talking about ability is beneficial because ...*

**Repeat this exercise, substituting other identity group memberships as necessary.**