



JENNIFER GONZALEZ, OCTOBER 15, 2015

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When I worked with student teachers on developing effective lesson plans, one thing I always asked them to revise was the phrase “We will discuss.”

We will discuss the video.

We will discuss the story.

We will discuss our results.

Every time I saw it in a lesson plan, I would add a note: “What format will you use? What questions will you ask? How will you ensure that all students participate?” I was pretty sure that *We will discuss* actually meant the teacher would do most of the talking; He would throw out a couple of questions like

“So what did you think about the video?” or “What was the theme of the story?” and a few students would respond, resulting in something that *looked* like a discussion, but was ultimately just a conversation between the teacher and a handful of extroverted students; a classic case of [Fisheye Teaching](#).

The problem wasn't them; in most of the classrooms where they'd sat as students, that's exactly what a class discussion looked like. They didn't know any other “formats.” I have only ever been familiar with a few myself. But when teachers began contacting me recently asking for a more comprehensive list, I knew it was time to do some serious research.

So here they are: **15 formats for structuring a class discussion** to make it more engaging, more organized, more equitable, and more academically challenging. If you've struggled to find effective ways to develop students' speaking and listening skills, this is your lucky day.

I've separated the strategies into three groups. The first batch contains the **higher-prep strategies**, formats that require teachers to do some planning or gathering of materials ahead of time. Next come the **low-prep strategies**, which can be used on the fly when you have a few extra minutes or just want your students to get more active. Note that these are not strict categories; it's certainly possible to simplify or add more meat to any of these structures and still make them work. The last group is the **ongoing strategies**. These are smaller techniques that can be integrated with other instructional strategies and don't really stand alone. For each strategy, you'll find a list of other names it sometimes goes by, a description of its basic structure, and an explanation of variations that exist, if any. To watch each strategy in action, click on its name and a new window will open with a video that demonstrates it.

Enjoy!

HIGHER-PREP DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

[GALLERY WALK](#) > *a.k.a. Chat Stations*

Basic Structure: Stations or posters are set up around the classroom, on the walls or on tables. Small groups of students travel from station to station together, performing some kind of task or responding to a prompt, either of which will result in a conversation.

Variations: Some Gallery Walks stay true to the term *gallery*, where groups of students create informative posters, then act as tour guides or docents, giving other students a short presentation about their poster and conducting a Q&A about it. In Starr Sackstein’s high school classroom, her stations consisted of [video tutorials created by the students](#) themselves. Before I knew the term Gallery Walk, I shared a strategy similar to it called [Chat Stations](#), where the teacher prepares discussion prompts or content-related tasks and sets them up around the room for students to visit in small groups.

PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS > *a.k.a. Values Continuum, Forced Debate, Physical Barometer, This or That*

Basic Structure: A statement that has two possible responses—agree or disagree—is read out loud. Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one side of the room or the other. From that spot, students take turns defending their positions.

Variations: Often a Philosophical Chairs debate will be based around a text or group of texts students have read ahead of time; students are required to cite textual evidence to support their claims and usually hold the texts in their hands during the discussion. Some teachers set up one [hot seat](#) to represent each side, and students must take turns in the seat. In less formal variations (which require less prep), a teacher may simply read provocative statements students are likely to disagree on, and a debate can occur spontaneously without a text to refer to (I call this variation This or That in my [classroom icebreakers](#) post). Teachers may also opt to offer a continuum of choices, ranging from “Strongly Agree” on one side of the room, all the way to “Strongly Disagree” on the other, and have students place themselves along that continuum based on the strength of their convictions.

PINWHEEL DISCUSSION >

Basic Structure: Students are divided into 4 groups. Three of these groups are assigned to represent specific points of view. Members of the fourth group are

designated as “provocateurs,” tasked with making sure the discussion keeps going and stays challenging. One person from each group (the “speaker”) sits in a desk facing speakers from the other groups, so they form a square in the center of the room. Behind each speaker, the remaining group members are seated: two right behind the speaker, then three behind them, and so on, forming a kind of triangle. From above, this would look like a pinwheel. The four speakers introduce and discuss questions they prepared ahead of time (this preparation is done with their groups). After some time passes, new students rotate from the seats behind the speaker into the center seats and continue the conversation.

Variations: When high school English teacher [Sarah Brown Wessling](#) introduced this strategy in the featured video (click Pinwheel Discussion above), she used it as a device for talking about literature, where each group represented a different author, plus one provocateur group. But in the comments that follow the video, Wessling adds that she also uses the strategy with non-fiction, where students represent authors of different non-fiction texts or are assigned to take on different perspectives about an issue.

SOCRATIC SEMINAR > *a.k.a. Socratic Circles*

Basic Structure: Students prepare by reading a text or group of texts and writing some higher-order discussion questions about the text. On seminar day, students sit in a circle and an introductory, open-ended question is posed by the teacher or student discussion leader. From there, students continue the conversation, prompting one another to support their claims with textual evidence. There is no particular order to how students speak, but they are encouraged to respectfully share the floor with others. Discussion is meant to happen naturally and students do not need to raise their hands to speak.

This [overview of Socratic Seminar](#) from the website *Facing History and Ourselves* provides a list of appropriate questions, plus more information about how to prepare for a seminar.

Variations: If students are beginners, the teacher may write the discussion questions, or the question creation can be a joint effort. For larger classes, teachers may need to set up seminars in more of a fishbowl-like arrangement, dividing students into one inner circle that will participate in the discussion, and one outer circle that silently observes, takes notes, and may eventually trade places with those in the inner circle, sometimes all at once, and sometimes by “tapping in” as the urge strikes them.

LOW-PREP DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

AFFINITY MAPPING > *a.k.a. Affinity Diagramming*

Basic Structure: Give students a broad question or problem that is likely to result in lots of different ideas, such as “What were the impacts of the Great Depression?” or “What literary works should every person read?” Have students generate responses by writing ideas on post-it notes (one idea per note) and placing them in no particular arrangement on a wall, whiteboard, or chart paper. Once lots of ideas have been generated, have students begin grouping them into similar categories, then label the categories and discuss why the ideas fit within them, how the categories relate to one another, and so on.

Variations: Some teachers have students do much of this exercise—recording their ideas and arranging them into categories—*without* talking at first. In other variations, participants are asked to re-combine the ideas into new, different categories after the first round of organization occurs. Often, this activity serves as a good pre-writing exercise, after which students will write some kind of analysis or position paper.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES > *a.k.a. Speed Dating*

Basic Structure: Students form two circles, one inside circle and one outside circle. Each student on the inside is paired with a student on the outside; they face each other. The teacher poses a question to the whole group and pairs discuss their responses with each other. Then the teacher signals students to rotate: Students on the outside circle move one space to the right so they are standing in front of a new person (or sitting, as they are in the video). Now the teacher poses a new question, and the process is repeated.

Variations: Instead of two circles, students could also form two straight lines facing one another. Instead of “rotating” to switch partners, one line just slides over one spot, and the leftover person on the end comes around to the beginning of the line. Some teachers use this strategy to have students teach one piece of content to their fellow students, making it less of a discussion strategy and more

of a peer teaching format. In fact, many of these protocols could be used for peer teaching as well.

CONVER-STATIONS >

Basic Structure: Another great idea from [Sarah Brown Wessling](#), this is a small-group discussion strategy that gives students exposure to more of their peers' ideas and prevents the stagnation that can happen when a group doesn't happen to have the right chemistry. Students are placed into a few groups of 4-6 students each and are given a discussion question to talk about. After sufficient time has passed for the discussion to develop, one or two students from each group rotate to a different group, while the other group members remain where they are. Once in their new group, they will discuss a different, but related question, and they may also share some of the key points from their last group's conversation. For the next rotation, students who have not rotated before may be chosen to move, resulting in groups that are continually evolving.

FISHBOWL >

Basic Structure: Two students sit facing each other in the center of the room; the remaining students sit in a circle around them. The two central students have a conversation based on a pre-determined topic and often using specific skills the class is practicing (such as asking follow-up questions, paraphrasing, or elaborating on another person's point). Students on the outside observe, take notes, or perform some other discussion-related task assigned by the teacher.

Variations: One variation of this strategy allows students in the outer circle to trade places with those in the fishbowl, doing kind of a relay-style discussion, or they may periodically "coach" the fishbowl talkers from the sidelines. Teachers may also opt to have students in the outside circle grade the participants' conversation with a rubric, then give feedback on what they saw in a debriefing afterward, as mentioned in the featured video.

HOT SEAT >

Basic Structure: One student assumes the role of a book character, significant figure in history, or concept (such as a tornado, an animal, or the *Titanic*). Sitting in front of the rest of the class, the student responds to classmates' questions while staying in character in that role.

Variations: Give more students the opportunity to be in the hot seat while increasing everyone’s participation by having students do hot seat discussions in small groups, where one person per group acts as the “character” and three or four others ask them questions. In another variation, several students could form a panel of different characters, taking questions from the class all together and interacting with one another like guests on a TV talk show.

SNOWBALL DISCUSSION > *a.k.a. Pyramid Discussion*

Basic Structure: Students begin in pairs, responding to a discussion question only with a single partner. After each person has had a chance to share their ideas, the pair joins another pair, creating a group of four. Pairs share their ideas with the pair they just joined. Next, groups of four join together to form groups of eight, and so on, until the whole class is joined up in one large discussion.

Variations: This structure could simply be used to share ideas on a topic, or students could be required to reach consensus every time they join up with a new group.

ONGOING DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

Whereas the other formats in this list have a distinct shape—specific *activities* you do with students—the strategies in this section are more like plug-ins, working discussion into other instructional activities and improving the quality and reach of existing conversations.

ASYNCHRONOUS VOICE >

One of the limitations of discussion is that rich, face-to-face conversations can only happen when all parties are available, so we’re limited to the time we have in class. With a tool like Voxer, those limitations disappear. Like a private voice mailbox that you set up with just one person or a group (but SOOOO much easier), Voxer allows users to have conversations at whatever time is most convenient for each participant. So a group of four students can “discuss” a topic from 3pm until bedtime—asynchronously—each member contributing whenever they have a moment, and if the teacher makes herself part of the

group, she can listen in, offer feedback, or contribute her own discussion points. Voxer is also invaluable for collaborating on projects and for having one-on-one discussions with students, parents, and your own colleagues. Like many other educators, Peter DeWitt took a while to really understand the potential of Voxer, but in [this EdWeek piece](#), he explains what turned him around.

BACKCHANNEL DISCUSSIONS >

A *backchannel* is a conversation that happens right alongside another activity. The first time I saw a backchannel in action was at my first [unconference](#): While those of us in the audience listened to presenters and watched a few short video clips, a separate screen was up beside the main screen, projecting something called [TodaysMeet](#). It looked a lot like those chat rooms from back in the day, basically a blank screen where people would contribute a few lines of text, the lines stacking up one after the other, no other bells or whistles. Anyone in the room could participate in this conversation on their phone, laptop, or tablet, asking questions, offering commentary, and sharing links to related resources without ever interrupting the flow of the presentations. This kind of tool allows for a completely silent discussion, one that doesn't have to move at a super-fast pace, and it gives students who may be reluctant to speak up or who process their thoughts more slowly a chance to fully contribute. For a deeper discussion of how this kind of tool can be used, read this thoughtful [overview of using backchannel discussions in the classroom](#) by *Edutopia's* Beth Holland.

TALK MOVES >

Talk moves are sentence frames we supply to our students that help them express ideas and interact with one another in respectful, academically appropriate ways. From kindergarten all the way through college, students can benefit from explicit instruction in the skills of summarizing another person's argument before presenting an alternate view, asking clarifying questions, and expressing agreement or partial agreement with the stance of another participant. Talk moves can be incorporated into any of the other discussion formats listed here.

TEACH-OK >

[Whole Brain Teaching](#) is a set of teaching and classroom management methods that has grown in popularity over the past 10 years. One of WBT's foundational

techniques is *Teach-OK*, a peer teaching strategy that begins with the teacher spending a few minutes introducing a concept to the class. Next, the teacher says *Teach!*, the class responds with *Okay!*, and pairs of students take turns re-teaching the concept to each other. It's a bit like think-pair-share, but it's faster-paced, it focuses more on re-teaching than general sharing, and students are encouraged to use gestures to animate their discussion. Although WBT is most popular in elementary schools, this featured video shows the creator of WBT, Chris Biffle, using it quite successfully with college students. I have also used Teach-OK with college students, and most of my students said they were happy for a change from the sit-and-listen they were used to in college classrooms.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE >

An oldie but a goodie, think-pair-share can be used any time you want to plug interactivity into a lesson: Simply have students *think* about their response to a question, form a *pair* with another person, discuss their response, then *share* it with the larger group. Because I feel this strategy has so many uses and can be way more powerful than we give it credit for, I devoted a whole post to [think-pair-share](#); everything you need to know about it is right there.

