



TEACHING RESOURCE

Tips for Facilitating Group Discussions About Difficult History



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Use this guide to help you and your students analyze and process difficult history together.

What is Difficult History?

Difficult history includes sensitive events that are complex and emotional, such as trauma, conflict, or injustice. These topics need careful and empathetic discussion to help students understand their importance while being mindful of students' feelings. Despite the challenges, these histories also show resilience, significance, and human connection.

Tips for Facilitating Conversations About Difficult History

Before the Group Conversation

- **Prepare yourself for sensitive material:** Take a moment to review these [*Tips for Teaching Difficult History*](#).
- **Normalize and validate reactions and emotions:** Understand that hearing and watching sensitive stories might be uncomfortable but isn't necessarily harmful. Emphasize that each clip represents just one part of a person's broader life story.
- **Share context and background:** Before showing the clips, ensure students understand key historical facts and introduce any unfamiliar terms or concepts they may encounter.
- **Prioritize emotional safety:** Avoid stories involving harm to children to keep students' psychological safety in mind. (Check for content warnings in the "About Clip" sections.)
- **Watch and reflect:** Let students watch the interview clip and take time for reflection. Allow them to listen as many times as needed and respect their choice to stay silent if they prefer.

During the Activity

Students Write

- Before they share ideas, give students the opportunity to write down some of their thoughts.
- Give students adequate time to write (If using the activity sheet [*Analyze Oral History Interviews*](#), at least 15 minutes is recommended).
- Ask students to underline or highlight the ideas they want to discuss.

Students Share and Listen in Small Groups

- Divide the class into small groups of four or five students.
- Appoint a student to facilitate the discussion and stay on task.
- Provide the following guidelines to ensure that each student has a chance to express their own perspectives and connect more deeply with the material:
 - Each student will share a part of their completed activity sheet with the group.
 - Ensure that students understand that when a student is sharing, it's important not to interrupt them.
 - Students should focus on their own thoughts, feelings, and observations rather than on responding to what others have said. (If they have a question to help them understand what was said, they can start by saying "I have a question for clarity? ..." This approach reduces the anxiety of the student being questioned and helps keep group dynamics balanced.)
 - Let students know that they can come to you to ask to change groups if they aren't comfortable with a topic being discussed.

Students Share with the Class

- Once your students have discussed in small groups, facilitate a class discussion to help students synthesize what they have learned.

Tips for Effective Group Discussion Facilitation

Ensure Safety and Respect: Guide the discussion to maintain a safe and respectful environment.

1. **Ask the question:** What ideas did you find most interesting?
2. **Respond to comments:** Paraphrase what students say and then ask, What did you hear (or read) that makes you say that?
3. **Encourage more sharing.** Frequently ask open ended questions like:
 - a. What more did you find?
 - b. What new ideas did you learn from listening to the members of your group?
 - c. What questions do you have?
4. **Listen carefully:** Make sure you understand what students are saying, ensuring that you hear all of what they say and that you understand it accurately.
5. **Paraphrase comments:** Acknowledge and affirm participation by restating their comments.
6. **Accept comments neutrally:** Respond to all comments without judgement.
7. **Pause Personal Comparisons:** If personal comparisons come up about a student's life, acknowledge them but set them aside for now. This keeps the focus on the oral histories being discussed and prevents delving into a student's personal history. Make sure to circle back with that student later, privately, to ensure they're okay.
8. **Link Related Answers:** Connect comments that relate, whether they agree or disagree.
9. **Frame Context and Details:** Provide context and specifics for the discussion.

It's important to recognize that some statements shouldn't be open for debate. As the teacher, you need to be confident in addressing incorrect information (kindly and clearly), particularly when it compromises student safety or perpetuates harmful historical inaccuracies.

Concluding the Group Conversation

- **Maintain a Supportive Environment:** Provide guidance to ensure emotional safety, appreciation for the group discussion and acknowledgement of different perspectives.
- **Process and Apply Learning:** Provide methods for students to process and use what they've learned, such as reflection journals, thematic projects, visual art or musical expression.
- **End on a Positive Note:** Share a hopeful message if possible.
- **Allow for Reflection:** Give students time to decompress and reflect on the discussion.

The information shared on this teaching tool is adapted from the following sources:

- A Dialogue Toolkit for Educators (si.edu)
- Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn Teaching Strategy (facinghistory.org)
- Resources - Holocaust (holocaustlifestories.ca)
- Teaching-Difficult-History (historymuseum.ca)
- What's Going on in This Painting (warmuseum.ca)