The Definitive Guide to CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

1st Edition
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WHY THIS GUIDE?

Since Socrates walked the Agora in Ancient Athens, we have rightfully championed the power of dialogue.

Conversation is a tool for intellectual and personal growth. Meaningful discourse nurtures and sustains democracies. Peer feedback and the truthful exchange of ideas fuel scientific progress. Diplomacy is how people work together to solve complex problems without violence.

At Parlay, our aim is to help teachers leverage the tools and techniques of the modern classroom to bring discussions to the forefront of the 21st century educational experience.

On behalf of the whole team at Parlay, I want thank you for taking the time to read through this Definitive Guide to Class Discussions. We hope you find it informative, insightful and ultimately useful as you continue to explore new ways to transform your practice and help your students grow.

In short, discussion is a foundational element of peaceful and prosperous civilizations.

Bobby McDonald
Founder & CEO
Parlay Ideas
Part 1

WHAT IS A CLASS DISCUSSION?
CLASS DIS·CUSSION

A sustained exchange of ideas among students with the purpose of developing students' skills and/or expanding students' understanding—both shared and individual—of a specific concept.

Origin → Late Latin → “discutere” → to investigate
Part 1 - What is a class discussion?

CLASS DIS·CUS·SION

An Important Distinction

During lectures, teachers often pose questions to the class. One student usually responds to the question and sometimes a small dialogue ensues. While this practice is integral to a great lecture, it is not the kind of “discussion” that we will be exploring in this guide.

The kind of discussions we will be talking about in this guide are educational experiences unto themselves. They are “student-driven,” where most of the talk-time is student participation. The teacher often plays a secondary role, asking thought-provoking questions, providing feedback and redirecting the conversation where necessary.
Part 2

WHY SHOULD WE HAVE CLASS DISCUSSIONS?
Part 2 - Why should we have class discussions?

TOP THREE REASONS

The world is changing quickly and so are our expectations of students, teachers and our education system at large. In this section we will cover the top three reasons why discussion supports the trends and challenges we must consider when preparing students for an uncertain future.

Future Skills

Thoughtful Citizenship

Student Achievement
There’s a lot of fear that artificial intelligence (AI) will replace people. In many ways this is already happening. Computers can do specific tasks much faster than humans and with less error.

Computer scientists have a name for this kind of artificial intelligence. It’s called “narrow AI”. It’s called “narrow” because it doesn’t yet (and probably will not in the near future) have the same “general intelligence” as the human mind.

This graph shows how we have adapted to the introduction of computers and automation in the workforce. Notice the dramatic increase in “non-routine cognitive” work. What does this mean?

This means that more and more people are being employed in jobs whose primary activities are not easily repeatable and require higher-order thinking. This trend is going to continue and we need to prepare students for this future.
Part 2 - Why should we have class discussions?

**FUTURE SKILLS**

The Future Requires **Human Skills**

We must help students develop and master the kinds of skills that make them uniquely human. We need to teach them what it means to have a powerful mind, to communicate effectively and to work with others to find creative solutions to complex problems. In the age of automation, these abilities are not “nice-to-haves”. They are necessary.

**World Economic Forum**

**Skills of the Future**

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordinating with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility

**Google**

**Skills for Success**

1. Being a good coach
2. Communicating and listening well
3. Possessing insights into others
4. Empathy for coworkers
5. Critical thinking and problem solving
6. Making connections across complex ideas.

Reference 1. Skills of the Future
Part 2 - Why should we have class discussions?

**FUTURE SKILLS**

- **Analytical Reasoning**
- **Formulating Arguments**
- **Listening Skills**
- **Communication Skills**

Reference 2. Discussion and Future Skills
Part 2 - Why should we have class discussions?

THOUGHTFUL CITIZENSHIP

Polarization Is Getting Worse

Login to Twitter, or turn on any 24-hour cable news network and this becomes self-evident. The farther apart we are as a society, the less likely we are to compromise on important issues. The result is hostile politics and stagnation. For the sake of continued progress this gridlock needs to end.

Reference 3. Social Polarization Over Time
Part 2 - Why should we have class discussions?

THOUGHTFUL CITIZENSHIP

Discussions Teach Citizenship

Discussions that are rooted in a common commitment to the truth help stem the tide of “certainty.” They teach young people the meaning of intellectual humility and open the door for compassion and compromise.

“Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds; enthusiasm of the free and buoyant. Education and free discussion are the antidotes to both.”

Thomas Jefferson
Part 2 - Why should we have class discussions?

**STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

Discussions Drive Achievement

John Hattie’s seminal research “Visible Learning” identified discussion as one of the top 5 (of over 250) strategies teachers can implement in the classroom to improve student achievement.

Here’s how it compares to other strategies:

What does this research show? It shows that discussion has a “Cohen’s d score” of 0.82. That means there is a 72% chance that a student picked at random from the “Discussion Group” will be doing better in school than one picked at random from the “Control Group.”

Reference 4. Discussion and Learning Outcomes
Part 2 - Why should we have class discussions?

Q & A - THOUGHT LEADER

Dr. Timothy Patrick McCarthy

Dr. McCarthy has dedicated most of his 20+ year career as an educator to discussion-based-learning. He is a professor of history and literature, public policy, and education at Harvard University, a high-school humanities curriculum designer and leads seminars at local community centers and prisons. He is a historian of politics and social movements and has authored or edited five books.

1. In your view, what do students gain from discussions?

They gain the ability to have productive discussions with different groups of people. That's ultimately one of the goals of discussion-based-learning - figuring out how to contribute, how to talk, how to frame, how to analyze, how to question. Students learn how to ask questions and not just take things at face value. But they're also learning how to listen to other people. They learn how to take up space, but also to relinquish and share it.

Discussion-based-learning democratizes the educational experience, so students can engage directly with the material without some kind of external authority shaping, influencing, mediating, or imposing their view or interpretation on the class. This critical thinking and democratic engagement - both in terms of speaking and listening - are skills that will serve them well in any other setting, whether it's in an educational context, the workplace, or in families and friendships.
Q & A - THOUGHT LEADER

2. Why are discussions good for society today?

In this particular political climate that we're living in right now, anything that we can be doing in classrooms to foster "civil discourse" -- that's the current buzz phrase -- and mutual respect across lines of difference and disagreement, that's a good thing. This is something that we have to take very seriously right now and this is where I think we cross over from simply being teachers and scholars to being brave citizens and bold catalysts, dreamers for a different future.

3. We're obsessed with leaders who are “Strong Men” right now. What about vulnerability?

Vulnerability produces two things that are essential to leadership. One is strength and confidence and the other is authenticity and connection. Strength and confidence comes from being willing to go to a place that gives you discomfort or produces anxiety. These moments also allow us to become more authentic in the world, more fully ourselves. When we reveal something that is anxiety producing, or vulnerable for us, we are more likely to receive admiration and affection from audiences who can see this for what it is: an act of bravery.

Once that happens, you become a better leader. You're a more inclusive leader. You're a more democratic leader. You're a more humble leader. You're a more engaging leader. You're a more likeable leader. All the things that people crave and respect in leaders are produced through this process, but you have to go through the process.
WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF DISCUSSIONS?
Part 3 - What are the different types of discussions?

TWO MAIN CATEGORIES

Face to Face + Online
Part 3 - What are the different types of discussions?

1. FACE-TO-FACE (SYNCHRONOUS)

Listen. Think. Speak.

Face-to-face class discussions take many different shapes and forms (see next page).

The basic underlying principles however, remain the same. In a live classroom environment, students are actively engaged in exploring a topic or idea verbally. The main activities or skills practiced in a face-to-face discussion are:

**Listening** to classmates’ ideas and perspectives.

**Thinking** about and questioning ideas being discussed in real time.

**Speaking** or communicating ideas verbally.

**PROS**

- **Lifelong Skills:** Develop verbal communication skills in an academic environment.
- **Engagement:** Makes class more engaging.
- **Depth:** Provides opportunities to explore important ideas in more depth.

**CONS**

- **Measurement:** Difficult to track or assess student engagement in discussions.
- **Inclusivity:** Quiet and less confident students don’t always participate.
- **Time & Space:** Confined to the classroom.

Reference 5. Benefits of Face-to-Face Discussions
Reference 6. Non-Inclusive Face-to-Face Discussions
Part 3 - What are the different types of discussions?

TYPES OF FACE-TO-FACE

Socratic Circles
Learn more

Pinwheel Discussions
Learn more

Think. Pair. Share.
Learn more

Fishbowl Discussions
Learn more

Philosophical Chairs
Learn more

So Many More...
Learn more

Reference 7. Big List of Class Discussions
Part 3 - What are the different types of discussions?

2. ONLINE (ASYNCHRONOUS)

Read. Think. Write.

Online discussions have been used in higher education since the late 90’s, but are a relatively new addition to the K-12 classroom.

Unlike face-to-face discussions, online discussions are slower paced - often taking place over a week or more. They require access to a device and encourage a more reflective approach to conversation. The main activities or skills practiced in an online discussion are:

**Reading** classmates' ideas and perspectives.

**Thinking** about and questioning ideas being discussed in a slower-paced, reflective manner.

**Writing** or communicating ideas through writing.

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**PROS**

Blended Learning: Online discussions can start and end beyond the classroom walls.

Every Voice: All students have the opportunity to contribute ideas to the conversation.

Digital Citizenship: Teach students to have meaningful, respectful online interactions.

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**CONS**

Less Engaging: Not as exciting as face-to-face discussion.

Time Consuming: It takes a lot of time to read and respond to all the ideas.

Fragmented: Main ideas often fragmented across many comments and submissions.

Reference 8. Benefits of Online Discussions
“I write to discover what I know.”

Flannery O’Connor
Part 3 - What are the different types of discussions?

**TYPICAL ONLINE DISCUSSION**

1. **Prompt**
   Teacher provides source material and guiding question(s) for students to review.

2. **Responses**
   Students submit unique responses to the prompt (as individuals or in a group).

3. **Replies**
   Students read through, build on, critique and challenge each other’s ideas.

4. **Feedback**
   Teacher provides feedback to students based on their overall engagement.

An online discussion can take place over:
- One class.
- One day.
- One week.
- One month.
Part 3 - What are the different types of discussions?

WHY FEEDBACK?

Increased Cognitive Engagement

Online discussions provide a unique opportunity for students to become co-creators of knowledge and to engage in deep and active learning. Research shows that the cognitive levels of student responses (step 2) and replies (step 3) are directly affected by the consistency of teacher and peer feedback over time. Consistent feedback leads to increased cognitive engagement over time. On the contrary, no feedback can actually diminish willingness to engage and ultimately decrease the quality of posts over time.

In short, peer and teacher feedback is an essential component of successful online learning experiences.

Reference 9. The Importance of Feedback
Part 4

THE ART OF CRAFTING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Part 4 - The art of crafting discussion questions

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Setting The Right Context

Before we craft question(s) for students to explore in the discussion, we need to establish the right context. We need to build a foundation for a conversation that is informed, constructive and engaging. Here are some important things to explore with students before starting the discussion:

Making Connections
How does this discussion connect to the events and ideas shaping our world? What about the curriculum?

Setting Expectations
What skills and techniques are we working on during the discussion? How, if at all, are they being assessed?

Content & Multimedia
Provide content and multimedia for students to review before the conversation. i.e. class readings, articles, videos, pictures, etc.
Part 4 - The art of crafting discussion questions

CONTENT SOURCES WE LIKE

- PROCON
- TED Ed
- The Conversation
- National Geographic
- The New York Times
- 1000 Writing Prompts
- DOGONEWS
- SingularityHub
- Newsela
- nprEd
- Facing History and Ourselves
- Brain Pickings
- Parlay
### GOOD TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Here are some great examples of types of discussion questions. This is not a complete list, but it's a great starting place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Description / Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral/Ethical Dilemmas:</td>
<td>Provide students with a problem or situation, and ask them to explore one or more of the moral and ethical concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess → Diagnose → Act:</td>
<td>Assessment: What is the issue or problem at hand? Diagnosis: What is the root cause of this issue or problem? Action: How can we solve the issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare and Contrast:</td>
<td>Ask your students to make connections and identify differences between ideas that can be found in class texts, articles, images, videos, and more etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive → Evaluative:</td>
<td>First, ask the students to interpret the information: “What is the author trying to say?” Next, ask them to evaluate their interpretation: “Do you think he/she is correct?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Exploration:</td>
<td>Let students explore a new idea on their own terms and explore what it means to them as individuals. This creative freedom helps them find their authentic voice. “What does ______ mean to you?” or “Find an example of ______ in your own life”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflections:</td>
<td>Ask students to reflect on an experience such as a field trip, film, or reading. We like these questions: “What struck you at the time?” “What stuck with you afterwards?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**QUESTIONS TO AVOID**

Here are some examples of types of discussion questions that you will want to try and avoid. Again, this is not an exhaustive list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Description / Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes/No Questions:</td>
<td>Any question that can be answered with a simple yes or no tends to limit the depth and complexity of the discussion that ensues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliptical Questions:</td>
<td>This is the opposite of the yes/no error. If you start with “What do you think about...” it often means the question is vague and won't provide enough structure for your students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading Questions:</td>
<td>These questions have a bias built right in, and discourage students from taking risks with their ideas. An example might be: “Don’t you think that...” or “Wouldn't you agree that...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slanted Questions:</td>
<td>These questions are subtle. They indirectly “close down” a student that may not agree with the implied assumption. An example might be: “Why was this person so corrupt?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part 4 - The art of crafting discussion questions

**HIGHER ORDER THINKING**

Incorporating Bloom’s Taxonomy

Here are some of our favourite verbs to use when creating discussion questions and how those verbs relate back to the levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify</td>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Compare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine</td>
<td>Relate</td>
<td>Contrast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe</td>
<td>Extend</td>
<td>Interpret</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyze</th>
<th>Evaluate</th>
<th>Create</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analyze</td>
<td>Assess</td>
<td>Propose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritize</td>
<td>Defend</td>
<td>Develop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect</td>
<td>Critique</td>
<td>Adapt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference 11. Bloom’s Taxonomy Verbs
Part 5

MEANINGFUL DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HARD TOPICS
Part 5 - Meaningful discussions about hard topics

SETTING THE STAGE

Lead With Culture

Some topics are difficult. In the digital age, students are increasingly aware of and interested in exploring big and challenging ideas. This is why it is essential to establish a culture of openness and tolerance in the classroom. We have to be deliberate about making space for the honest exploration of all perspectives. We must address our differences of opinion head on - with courage, humility and mutual respect.

“\text{It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.}”

Aristotle

\textbf{Class Tip:} Scaffold a discussion with your students where you explore these questions:

- Why do we have discussions?
- Why should we care about a diversity of ideas?
- How should we react if someone challenges our idea?
ESTABLISHING GROUND RULES

The 6 Pillars of Discussion

When you’re engaging students in discussions on a regular basis, it’s important to set some ground rules. We do this to ensure that all students feel included, respected and engaged even when discussing challenging topics. At Parlay, we created our own 6 Pillars of Discussions.

Class Tip: work with your students at the beginning of the year to create your own!

Download 6 Pillars Posters
MODEL PARTICIPATION: 1

Practicing Contributions

Most students are still learning how to make meaningful contributions to a discussion. This is an important discussion-skill that requires practice in order to improve.

In this section we have outlined 5 different types of meaningful discussion contributions. These come with explanations of why this type of contribution is important and “fill-in-the-blank” sentences for students to use to practice during conversations.

Again, this is not a complete list, but a great starting place.

1. Building on Ideas

The best discussions are all about collaboration, because a dozen minds are better than one! When we build on ideas that our peers have made, we advance everyone’s understanding of the subject.

“I would like to build on ________’s idea about ________.”
Part 5 - Meaningful discussions about hard topics

MODEL PARTICIPATION: 2

2. Disagreeing With Ideas

It's okay to disagree! In fact, it's encouraged. What's important is that we do it with respect and that we support our disagreements with reason and evidence.

“I disagree with __________ because __________.”

3. Taking a Different Perspective

One of the best parts of discussions is being able to look at ideas, problems and solutions from multiple perspectives. This is a great way to encourage students to see things in a new light.

“If we consider __________ from the perspective of __________.”
Part 5 - Meaningful discussions about hard topics

MODEL PARTICIPATION: 3

4. Asking Clarifying Questions

When discussing new material, it's normal for students to reference ideas that not everyone is familiar with, or fully understands. Encourage students to ask clarifying questions because chances are, they're not alone.

“I would like to ask a clarifying question about ____________ .”

5. Connecting Ideas

Discussions often take many different twists and turns, covering lots of ground in a very short period of time. Ask students to consider how two or more ideas from the discussion are connected.

“I see a connection between ____________ and ____________ .”
Part 6

THE TOP THREE CHALLENGES OF CLASS DISCUSSIONS
Part 6 - The top three challenges of class discussions

1. NON-INCLUSIVE

What About the Other 75%?

In a typical class discussion about 25% of students will dominate the conversation, while others contribute very little (if at all). There are many reasons for this discrepancy. Here are a few that we’ve uncovered:

1. Students are introverts.
2. Students are not confident in their ideas.
3. Students are not motivated to participate.
4. Students are still learning the language.
5. Students rely on those who will dominate.
6. Students didn’t read or review the material.
2. DIFFICULT TO MEASURE

Is It “For Marks”? 

Class participation is notoriously hard to track and assess. Discussions move quickly and often unfold organically. Tracking discussions by hand or memory is slow and error-prone.

The reality is that school is competitive and students are busy. If great class discussions require substantive preparation and effort, but they “aren’t for marks,” then they are unlikely to make it to the top of the priority list for students.

Furthermore, the average teacher already spends over one third of their time on administrative tasks. These increased reporting demands are disincentivizing them from focusing on high-value activities (like discussions) where the output is difficult to measure and assess.
3. LACK OF EXPERIENCE

Is Discussion For Me?

One of the biggest inhibitors to discussion in the classroom is a lack of comfort and familiarity for both teachers and students.

**Teachers.** Facilitating engaging, student-driven discussions on a regular basis is no easy feat. Many teachers are new to the profession. Others are simply more comfortable with lectures and other traditional forms of classroom engagement.

**Students.** Learning to be an active and confident participant in these kinds of conversations is also challenging. It is a skill that requires the right mindset, support and confidence to develop. Different students are at different stages.
Part 6 - The top three challenges of class discussions

FACING THESE CHALLENGES

Every Problem Has a Solution

At Parlay we’ve spent the past three years working with teachers and students from around the world crafting a philosophy and a software tool to help transform discussions in the modern classroom.

The next (and final) part of this guide is a brief overview of Parlay’s approach to helping teachers inspire meaningful, measurable and inclusive discussions in their classrooms.

Thanks for sticking with us this far!
Part 7

THE PARLAY APPROACH
Part 7 - The Parlay approach

PRODUCT VISION

Everything we build at Parlay must move us closer toward meaningful, measurable and inclusive discussions.

(defined below)
Part 7 - The Parlay approach

PRODUCT VISION

- Develop critical thinking and communication skills.
- Connect class to the events and ideas shaping our world.
- Use proven strategies to drive student achievement.
PRODUCT VISION

- Provide unique and actionable student engagement metrics.
- Help students understand how to improve engagement.
- Save teachers time planning and assessing discussions.
PRODUCT VISION

Inclusive

Every student has an opportunity to contribute unique ideas.

Students are comfortable and eager to engage each other.

Students are positive and compassionate in discussion.
Part 7 - The Parlay approach

HOW IT WORKS

Introducing Flipped Discussions

There are three main components or “modules” that make up Parlay’s discussion-based learning solution. They are the Parlay Universe, Online RoundTables and Live RoundTables.

In an effort to maximize engagement and the subsequent pedagogical benefits, these modules are designed to be used in a continuum that starts with great content and ends with a face-to-face discussion.

With that said, Parlay is very flexible. These components can be (and often are) used independent of one another. Teachers are always finding creative ways to leverage Parlay’s platform to support the unique needs of their classroom. We love this!

1. The Parlay Universe

A library of discussion provocations, multi-media content and higher-order thinking questions.

2. Online RoundTables

A collaborative online discussion module that encourages students to develop unique ideas and provide constructive peer feedback.

3. Live RoundTables

An interactive face-to-face discussion activity that gives all students a chance to contribute and measures participation in real time.
Part 7 - The Parlay approach

HOW IT WORKS

Step 1  
Explore Content  
The Universe

Step 2  
Discuss Online  
Online RoundTables

Step 3  
Engage In-Class  
Live RoundTables
Want to learn more?

www.parlayideas.com
Conclusion

THE ROAD AHEAD

First, thank you for investing your time and energy into reading this guide. Your willingness to engage matters so much to our team.

Second, I’d like to briefly talk about the road ahead. Class discussion is one of many pedagogies that teachers are using to usher in a new era of educational practices. These strategies are helping educators increase student engagement, break down silos, drive learning outcomes and prepare students for success in the 4th Industrial Revolution. The classroom of the future will leverage technology to assist in this transformation. It will help level the playing field and will provide teachers with unique insights into their individual students, empowering them to do what they do best: help their students grow.

At Parlay, we are excited for the future of education. We are inspired and encouraged by thoughtful and curious students we meet from all over the world. We are reassured by the willingness of teachers to experiment and challenge the status quo. We are amazed by the growing number of instructional coaches who are dedicated to helping teachers improve their craft.

The future of class discussion and society at large looks bright in all of your capable hands. We’re here to help.

Bobby McDonald
Founder & CEO
Parlay Ideas
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