

# Giving Students Stepping Stones For Participation To Lift Up Their Voices

Mar 1



High school students engage in a socratic circle during history class. (Courtesy [Edutopia](#))

Getting students to engage in academic dialogue can be challenging. Many students are shy, lack confidence, don't know how to begin, or are content to let the same few students dominate a conversation. But when every student is participating and sharing their perspectives it's a beautiful thing.

"Everything about activating a child's cognitive skills begins with activating their social connectedness," said Dr. Pamela Cantor, Founder and Senior Science Advisor for Turnaround for Children in an [Edutopia video series](#) on applying the science of learning. "Verbalizing and using language, and working with peers creates that kind of social stimulus that drives the development of the brain."

["Talk moves,"](#) or sentence starters, can serve as a reminder for how to

challenge a classmate's thinking politely or invite them into a conversation. Language arts teacher Catherine Paul tapes the talk moves to the tables in her classroom and encourages students to keep track of when they use them with little check marks on a Post-it.

"They help enormously with language learners," said Paul. "They give everybody a platform to jump into a conversation, because half the sentence is there for them already. But they also challenge other types of learners who may be accustomed to doing independent work, and they need a bridge to collaborate more with a group. It pushes kids out of their comfort zone of social conversations, and it moves them more towards a professional and an academic kind of register."

For older students, socratic circles can offer a way to practice making reasoned arguments using evidence in a calm way. Allison Beattie, a tenth grade history teacher in Springfield, Massachusetts, realized that after a six-

week unit on the Civil War students needed a space to talk about their feelings. She planned a socratic circle, finding 15 different leveled texts for students, so everyone had evidence they could access and use in a discussion.

"One thing we know from the science of learning is that complex instruction needs to be scaffolded, that students need to be enabled to take each step along the path," said Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, President and CEO of Learning Policy Institute in an [Edutopia video](#). "And in this classroom, we see a very sophisticated conversation being scaffolded to help them learn how to talk to each other about this very difficult concept in a very respectful and thoughtful way."

Beattie even thought carefully about how more introverted students could participate in the discussion, introducing a "note tracking" role to help students stay engaged, and reflect on the discussion.

# Want to stay in touch?

Subscribe to receive weekly updates of MindShift stories every Sunday. You'll also receive a carefully curated list of content from teacher-trusted sources.