

Creating Space for Challenging Conversations with Testimony

Overview

Educators should always strive to create safe and affirming spaces where students are supported to engage in challenging conversation and investigate issues that impact their lives. However, when teaching about challenging topics like bias, hate, justice, ethnicity, race, genocide, and others, it becomes even more important to stop and reflect on the types of support that are in place for students to meaningfully engage in this dialogue. Exploring these topics with students using first-hand accounts, or testimonies, and a social-emotional lens can help amplify and connect—for students—the power that stories have on our identity and actions.

Creating the type of learning space where students can have open conversations about challenging topics requires a cognizant approach. One framework is from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Based on practices that support the five Social Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies, this guide provides support before, during, and after the lesson by asking educators to reflect on their current practices and the type of environment they create for learners

Understanding Social-Emotional Learning

The CASEL competencies, viewed through the lens of equity and justice, can play an important part in engaging students in understanding how their social, emotional, and academic learning connect with the social and historical contexts in their communities and the larger society. This lens of SEL, sometimes labeled “transformative” SEL, positions students as co-creators in their own learning and encourages students to use their own lived experiences to connect with themes of resilience, empathy, injustice, and identity.

CASEL Competencies

- **Self-Awareness** concentrates on understanding your emotions and thoughts and how they influence your behavior. Skills include self-perception, self-confidence, and self-efficacy.
- **Self-Management** emphasizes your ability to regulate your emotions and behaviors in different situations, as well as how to set and work toward goals. Skills include impulse control, executive function, stress management, and self-discipline.
- **Responsible Decision-Making** is the ability to make positive choices and take responsibility for positive and negative outcomes. Skills include identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, and reflecting.
- **Social Awareness** focuses on your ability to empathize with others. Skills include empathy, appreciating differences, and respect.

- **Relationship Skills** revolve around your ability to relate well to others. Skills include communicating clearly, listening, cooperating, resisting negative pressure, resolving conflicts, and supporting one another.

Understanding Testimony

Testimony can be an effective primary source that contextualizes historical events for students and allows them to consider the human experience in a different form. Testimony provides the following:

- a human face sharing emotions and giving voice to historic events
- authentic stories that promote themes within civic engagement and critical thinking
- a reminder of our responsibility to remember, react, and understand injustice that targets one's identity
- empathy, understanding, and respect while deepening learning across the curriculum

Through the transformative power of story and through engagement with different points of view, students have access to worlds and experiences outside of their frame of reference. Yet, recognizing familiar emotions connects them via the human experience and cultivates empathy.

Intrinsic in all testimony are the emotional reactions—some are subtle and contained and while others are more easily detectable. Viewers can detect them in the words, facial expressions, body language, and voice intonation. These expressions are framed by the details of the stories survivors and witnesses share and the historical context of their experiences. Testimony-based resources explicitly and implicitly fosters students' emotional literacy through observational guidelines, interpretive questions and reflective projects.

SEL, Testimony, and Challenging Conversations

Integrating testimony across the curriculum is also a compelling way to engage students of all ages with important social-emotional learning skills that can help support challenging conversations. Leaning into the SEL skills structure also helps amplify a strengths-based approach by empowering students to do the following when learning and discussing challenging topics

- self-reflect on their own experiences
- encourage empathy and understanding
- better understand the perspectives of others
- gain skills that help them navigate an often-challenging pathway between their school, home, community, and the wider world around them

One visual testimony that highlights these important themes and skills is from [Roman Kent \(2:00\)](#). In this short clip, Roman shares his belief in the power of each of us to do the right thing in the face of injustice. As you share this testimony with students, consider asking each student how their unique identity, skills, or talents empowers them to act for a positive good.

For more resources on using testimony in your classroom, please visit: www.teachingwithtestimony.com

Reflecting on Your Practice

Before engaging in potentially challenging conversations in the classroom, students must feel safe, affirmed, and empowered. Using the social-emotional learning reflection questions below, consider how they might apply to your instructional practices and environment.

Before the Lesson

- How might my own perspective, experience, or bias impact how I choose to teach this topic?
- Do I have a good understanding of who my students are? Background, culture, interests...etc.
- What kind of relationships have I built with and between students in my class?
- Do my students feel safe and empowered? How do I know?

During the Lesson

- What structures or protocols are in place for students to effectively listen, speak, and collaborate?
- Are students encouraged to reflect on their own thinking during the lesson?
- What types of materials am I using to teach the topic? Are they responsive and appropriate?

After the Lesson

- What action will students take after this lesson?
- Is there an opportunity for students to reflect or share with others about their new learning?
- How can I help students better understand how their actions and new learning can have a powerful effect on those around them?