

Learning About Conversation Behaviors

One of the keys to any successful classroom conversation is encouraging students to practice working through a set of scenarios demonstrating common conversation behaviors. By doing so, teachers provide students with opportunities to develop strategies for facilitating ongoing dialogue regardless of the circumstances of a particular conversation.

The scenario cards on the following pages are designed to serve as role-play models. Assign each scenario to a student group. Then, allow groups to practice and deliver performances based on their scenario cards to their classmates. As each group performs, have students fill out the “Targeting Conversation Behaviors” handout (pages 145–146).

Follow each performance with a conversation spotlighting successful and unsuccessful interactions between participants.

Scenario 1: Don't Forget About Silent Suki

In many classroom conversations, you will find students who sit silently and watch the conversation go by. On the outside, they may seem lazy and uninterested, but on the inside, they're often the most active participants. They really are listening—and if you can draw them into the conversation, you might just learn something remarkable that you hadn't considered. Silent Sukis aren't unintelligent. They're just not the kind of people who are going to elbow their way into an active conversation.

Your job is to craft a short (three- to five-minute) role-play that warns our class not to forget about Silent Sukis in conversations.

Potential Characters

Teacher—The teacher's job is to start a conversation on the topic of school uniforms. Consider asking a question like, "If our school considered a school uniform policy, how would you feel?"

Rashad—Rashad is a confident character who feels strongly that school uniforms are a bad idea because they take away a student's right to express his or her personality. He speaks often, asks tons of great questions, and makes good points that other students agree with.

Rebecca—Rebecca agrees with Rashad that school uniforms are a bad idea. She often extends on something that Rashad says or answers one of Rashad's questions, giving more details that he hadn't considered. Together, she and Rashad make a convincing case that school uniforms are a bad idea.

Suki—Suki sits silent for most of the conversation, but if you watch her body language, you can tell that she is interested in the conversation. She follows speakers with her eyes, sits forward, looks thoughtful, and may even try to speak every now and then, only to be cut off by Rashad and Rebecca's excitement.

Ira and Diego—Ira and Diego represent the average students in this conversation. You can tell by their body language that they're engaged, and both make solid contributions whenever they have the chance to speak. Rashad and Rebecca seem to know this about Ira and Diego. As a result, they seem really interested in what both have to say. They ask Ira and Diego more questions than they ask Suki, and they build off of their contributions.

Key Point

Remember that you're trying to remind your peers that silent students often have information that is worth sharing in a conversation. That means Suki has to do something unexpected and remarkable in your presentation.

Perhaps at the end of your role-play, Suki finally gets a chance to speak, making an incredibly thoughtful statement about why school uniforms make sense—something like "but wouldn't school uniforms make everyone—especially poor students—feel a little less threatened by school because they know they wouldn't have to compete over clothes?"

The other students—including Rashad and Rebecca—become animated, obviously wanting the conversation to continue, but the teacher steps in, moving the group on to a new activity.

Your ideas:

Remember that the ideas on this scenario card are just suggestions. Your role-play can take an entirely different direction as long as it emphasizes the importance of engaging quiet group members in conversations.

Scenario 2: When Ridiculous Rashad Just Can't Keep His Mouth Closed

In many classroom conversations, you will find students who end up completely dominating the course of a discussion. They make rambling comments, ignore the contributions of others, and jump in any time there is a moment of free space. When you watch one of these conversations from the outside, it seems like these Ridiculous Rashads are talking to themselves!

Your job is to craft a short (three- to five-minute) role-play that warns our class about the dangers of Ridiculous Rashads in conversations.

Potential Characters

Teacher—The teacher's job is to start a conversation on the topic of school uniforms. Consider asking a question like, "If our school were to consider a school uniform policy, how would you feel?"

Rashad—Rashad is a loud and borderline obnoxious character who is the first to jump into the classroom conversation about school uniforms. His comments are longwinded and filled with twelve-dollar words that may or may not be used appropriately. As soon as other students finish a comment, Rashad jumps right in—even if it means talking over his peers. Often, Rashad completely ignores what other students have said, starting new strands of conversation on his own.

Rebecca—Rebecca is a really bright young lady who really wants to listen and learn from Rashad at the beginning of the conversation. She concentrates on what he's saying, no matter how long his comment rambles on. Then, she tries to respond—only to have Rashad jump back into the conversation and talk over her. Eventually, she gets frustrated by his refusal to listen and his tendency to talk all the time.

Ira and Suki—Ira and Suki represent the average participants in this conversation. Neither says very much, but both seem to be interested and listening as the conversation begins. When they do make contributions, their thoughts are appropriate and focused on the topic. Over time, though, Rashad's speeches bore Ira and Suki. As the conversation progresses, you can tell by their body language that both have completely lost interest.

Diego—Like Rebecca, Diego shows great patience with—and interest in—Rashad at the beginning of the scenario. He, too, gets frustrated with Rashad's willingness to talk over his peers, though. The difference between Diego and the other participants, though, is that by the end of the conversation, he is working actively against Rashad. He interrupts Rashad's ramblings abruptly, asking other group mates questions that are completely unrelated to the points that Rashad is trying to make. Rashad eventually grows to believe that Diego is rude.

Key Point

Remember that you're trying to remind your peers that students who talk too much and don't take time to listen end up turning off their peers. That means Rashad's group mates have to show that they eventually grow tired of him. Perhaps they start rolling their eyes whenever he starts to speak. Perhaps they start talking between themselves quietly, ignoring him completely. Perhaps they sigh or groan each time that he talks over them.

Either way, they look incredibly happy when the teacher steps in and moves their group to a new activity!

Your ideas:

Remember that the ideas on this scenario card are just suggestions. Your role-play can take an entirely different direction as long as it emphasizes the damage that can be done by talking too much in conversations.

Scenario 3: The Power of Remarkable Rebecca's Good Questions

Good conversations depend on one key ingredient: good questions! Good questions hook participants and encourage them to share. Good questions challenge participants to think differently about topics. Good questions lead conversations in new directions and leave room for other people to participate. Sometimes good questions are asked of the entire group. Sometimes they are asked of individual members. Regardless, good conversations cannot happen without someone who is willing to ask the kinds of questions that make other people think.

Your job is to craft a short (three- to five-minute) role-play that shows our class how good questions can improve the quality of conversations.

Potential Characters

Teacher—The teacher's job is to start a conversation on the topic of school uniforms. Consider asking a question like, "If our school were to consider a school uniform policy, how would you feel?"

Ira and Rashad—Ira and Rashad represent the average participants in this conversation. From their body language, you can tell that both are interested in the topic and engaged by the thinking of their peers. However, neither ask very many questions. Instead, their comments tend to be statements. They're all connected to the topic, they may share interesting facts or different points of view, but they don't automatically encourage other students to respond.

Rebecca—Rebecca is the star of this conversation. Her body language sends the message that she's motivated and involved, but it is the quality of her questions that really makes her stand out from her peers. She asks questions of the group that force them to look at the topic of school uniforms from a new point of view. She asks questions of her peers that force them to clarify their statements. In fact, almost every contribution that Rebecca makes comes in the form of a question that leads to new conversations: "Diego, I really liked your point about the cost of school uniforms, but don't you think parents would save money by not buying the trendy, brand name clothes we all wear right now?"

Suki—To the audience, Suki and Rebecca seem like best friends. That's because Suki is incredibly motivated by the questions that Rebecca is asking. She works hard to answer Rebecca, proving to be an incredibly intelligent and thoughtful participant in the conversation. Together, Rebecca and Suki make a powerful team: Rebecca asks remarkable questions that Suki answers in a way that forces her peers to think differently about school uniforms.

Diego—Diego is also involved in this conversation from the beginning: listening, building on the thoughts of his peers, sharing concrete details from research. Like Ira and Rashad, though, he doesn't ask many questions—and the questions that he does ask either raise points that have already been made in the conversation or have obvious answers that don't really stimulate conversation: "Do you think school uniforms are good?" "Should we have school uniforms?"

Key Point

Remember that you're trying to remind your peers that questions make for great conversations. To make this point clear, three characters are really important: Diego, whose questions are not very sophisticated and do little to make the conversation move forward, Rebecca, who asks the kinds of questions that get everyone talking, and Suki, who always seems to give thoughtful responses to Rebecca's questions. That means Rebecca is going to have to do a good job listening to the group and asking questions connected to the ideas being shared. Rebecca's group mates are going to have to seem animated and excited to answer the great questions she's asking.

Your ideas:

Remember that the ideas on this scenario card are just suggestions. Your role-play can take an entirely different direction as long as it emphasizes the idea that good questions make for great conversations.

Scenario 4: What if Inaccurate Ira Is Just Plain Wrong?

In many classroom conversations, you will find students who end up sharing information that is inaccurate. They might argue that bullfighting is okay because there are plenty of bulls in the deserts of Spain or that exploring Saturn would be easy because it's right next door to Earth. They're always well-intentioned—they just don't know as much about the topic as they think they do!

Your job is to craft a short (three- to five-minute) role-play that shows our class how to politely correct Inaccurate Iras when they are just plain wrong!

Potential Characters

Teacher—The teacher's job is to start a conversation on the topic of school uniforms. Consider asking a question like, "If our school were to consider a school uniform policy, how would you feel?" The teacher should also remind students to use the notes that they've taken on school uniform policies when making their arguments in the class conversation.

Ira—Ira is a really motivated participant in the conversation. You can tell from his body language that he's interested and involved. He shares a few good ideas with the group and builds on the comments of his peers. At some point in the conversation, though, Ira makes a statement that is wildly inaccurate such as, "You know, parents are going to have to buy more allergy medicine if we go to school uniforms, because so many kids are allergic to clothes."

Rashad—Like Ira, Rashad is an active participant in the conversation, making good comments and adding on to the thoughts of his peers. He asks good questions, listens appropriately, and works to get even the quiet members of his group involved. His weakness, though, is that he doesn't want to disagree with anyone—so when Ira makes inaccurate statements, Rashad always agrees: "You're right, Ira, I hadn't thought of that."

Suki—Suki is the star of this conversation. She's involved from the beginning, listening, building on the thoughts of her peers, asking good questions, and getting everyone involved. She seems to know just the right time to speak, and she never talks over anyone. The difference between Suki and Rashad, though, is that Suki is unwilling to let Ira's inaccurate statements go unchallenged. Instead, she *politely* pushes back against Ira's thinking: "Ira, where did you find that information in our research? Can you give us some examples of clothes that students are allergic to?"

Rebecca and Diego—Rebecca and Diego represent the average participants in this conversation. They get involved when the opportunity seems right, adding comments and making statements that are accurate and connected to the ideas being discussed. Their body language also makes it clear that they're surprised by the inaccurate comments being made by Ira. Every time that he says something strange, they send puzzled looks to one another. They may also smile, chuckle, or laugh quietly together. They never bother to correct Ira, though. Instead, they just let the conversation move forward without comment.

Key Point

In many ways, your role-play is the most important for our class to see because peers are rarely willing to challenge the thinking of their classmates even when it is wrong!

To make this point clear, Rashad, Suki, and Ira have to play their parts perfectly: Ira's inaccurate statements have to be obviously wrong—almost to the point of being comical—but he has to appear to genuinely believe that what he is saying is true. Rashad shouldn't bat an eye at Ira's inaccuracies. Instead, he should agree no matter how strange Ira's assertions are. And Suki must challenge Ira without being challenging. She must show that she isn't critical of Ira. Instead, she just wants to help him learn.

Your ideas:

Remember that the ideas on this scenario card are just suggestions. Your role-play can take an entirely different direction as long as it emphasizes the idea that it is okay to challenge classmates who bring inaccurate information to the conversation.

Scenario 5: Disagree Without Being Disagreeable, Diego

Good conversations are bound to have moments where you disagree with the thoughts and ideas of other participants. In fact, if a conversation doesn't have any disagreement, it's probably pretty boring. There are two sides to every story, after all. While it is completely appropriate to express differing points of view in group conversations, it is also important to learn to disagree without being disagreeable.

Your job is to craft a short (three- to five-minute) role-play that shows our class how to act when disagreements arise in conversation.

Potential Characters

Teacher—The teacher's job is to start a conversation on the topic of school uniforms. Consider asking a question like, "If our school were to consider a school uniform policy, how would you feel?" The teacher should also remind students to use the notes that they've taken on school uniform policies when making their arguments in the class conversation.

Diego—Diego is super motivated to participate in this conversation. He's brought the notes that he made while researching, and he has a strong opinion about school uniform policies: he hates them. You can almost hear the scorn in Diego's voice when he talks about school uniforms; he barely listens when Rebecca—who believes that uniforms are a good idea—tries to make a case that doesn't line up with his point of view.

Rebecca—Rebecca is equally motivated to participate in this conversation, but she doesn't think that school uniforms are a bad idea at all. As a result, she's at odds with Diego from the beginning of the conversation. She tries asking him questions and sharing facts from her research, but Diego sees her as an enemy and won't listen to a thing that she says. Eventually, she stops trying to interact with Diego and instead ends up having a really good conversation with Rashad.

Rashad—Rashad and Rebecca end up being the co-stars of this conversation. Like Diego, Rashad tends to think that school uniforms are a bad idea. Unlike Diego, Rashad is willing to consider other points of view. As a result, he and Rebecca have a great conversation. Instead of competing with one another and trying to be right all the time—the mistake that Diego makes—Rashad and Rebecca ask one another great questions, challenge the evidence presented by their partners, and see one another as co-learners who are thinking about a topic together.

Ira and Suki—Ira and Suki represent the average participants in this conversation. Both are engaged and interested, and both make positive contributions whenever they have the opportunity. You can also tell through their body language, though, that they are turned off by Diego's aggressiveness. Neither is willing to correct him, however. Instead, they generally ignore and avoid him, choosing instead to interact with Rebecca and Rashad.

Key Point

Remember that you're trying to remind your peers that everyone involved in a conversation is a partner rather than an adversary. To make this point clear, Diego has to come across as the most difficult guy you've ever worked with in class. To Diego, this conversation isn't about learning—it's about winning. By making Diego super disagreeable, the interactions between Rashad and Rebecca—who disagree with one another about the central issue but enjoy wrestling with ideas together—will look positive.

Your thoughts:

Remember that the ideas on this scenario card are just suggestions. Your role-play can take an entirely different direction as long as it emphasizes the importance of disagreeing without being disagreeable.