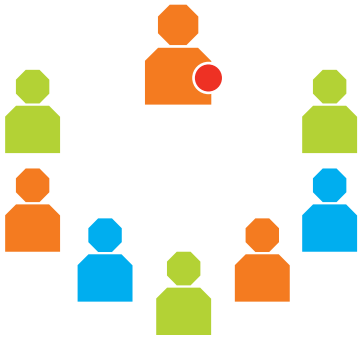
Get everyone involved

Promoting an environment where everyone feels confident and has an opportunity to participate is essential for a good discussion. Here are some useful tips to help get everyone involved...

Ground rules

Ground rules create a safe and constructive environment for a group discussion. Keep to between three and five rules to make it easier for the group to remember. Consider using rules that are used in other curriculum areas in your school. Some suggestions include:

- Respect everyone's opinion, even if it is not the same as yours.
- Views can be expressed without interruption; only one person at a time may speak.
- Be conscious of body language and non-verbal responses – these can be as disrespectful as words.
- Challenge the idea, not the individual.



Talk object

Use a **talk object** to enforce the ground rule that only one person at a time may speak. Students may only speak when holding the talk object. A generic object such as a microphone or a ball can be used, or the object could be themed to the discussion.

Talk tokens

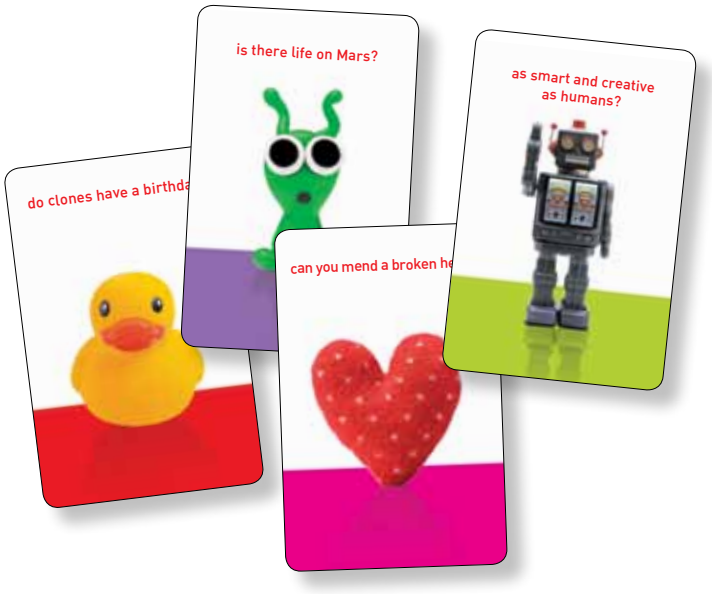
Give everyone a number of **talk tokens** which they 'spend' when they make a contribution to the discussion. Give tokens a time limit, or a limit of one comment per token. Encourage students to spend a minimum number of tokens.

Talk tokens are a useful tool to limit dominant voices or to encourage participation from the quieter students in the group. They are also a useful indicator to see who has participated in the discussion.

Plastic counters, playing cards, small toys or coloured pieces of paper are all ideal talk tokens.

Car park

If an off-topic issue arises during a discussion, or if an individual has a lot to contribute to one area of the discussion, the point can be 'parked' by writing the comment on a sheet of paper at the front of the room. If there is time, come back to it at the end of the session. This acknowledges a student's contribution without letting the discussion go off-topic.



Group sorters

Group size and group dynamics can have a significant impact on a discussion. Groups can be pre-selected or they can be picked at random. Random sorting can remove feelings of unfairness and, over time, establish a culture in which everyone has to work with everyone else in the class.

Group sorting methods include: 1) Writing students' names on blank cards, then shuffling and dealing the cards to create groups; 2) Assigning students numbers and assembling everyone with the same number as a group; 3) Choosing an object to represent each group and picking an object from a hat for each student in turn; 4) Simply picking names from a hat. There are also electronic random name generators that can be used on the interactive whiteboard. One method using Microsoft PowerPoint is:

Random name generator

- Put the names of your students into a PowerPoint presentation (one name per slide).
- The last slide should be looped to the first to make the presentation continuous. To set this up, click on the **Slide Show** drop-down, select **Set Up Show**..., then check the box **Loop continuously until 'Esc'** and click **OK**.
- To select a name at random, hold down the down arrow key (↓) to run through all the names. When you let go, the slides will stop and a name will be selected.

Peer observation

Peer observation is an empowering tool for students and gives them an active role to play in the discussion. Divide the class in two so that one half of the group can observe and record the discussion while the other half explore the issues; then swap roles. Suggested observations to make:

- Did anyone say anything you had not considered? Explain.
- With which person did you most agree/ disagree with? Explain.
- Was there anyone who appeared to dominate the discussion? Explain. Was this positive or negative?
- Was there anyone who did not appear to be listening?

With only half the class talking, the discussion is easier to manage.

Keeping on task

Allocate individual roles within a group to support the quieter students and help focus dominant participants. Suggested roles include:

Chairperson/Facilitator – to run the discussion in a small group or whole class.

Group Observer/Reporter – to observe and record who has contributed in a group discussion.

Speaker – to report back to the whole class what has been discussed.

Record the discussion

Use mini tape recorders or video cameras to capture group discussion. Actively involve the students in recording the discussion or conceal a recorder in a sealed box on the desk to ensure that the discussion stays on task and on topic. The recordings can also be used for follow-up lessons or for student assessment.