

# **Practical Strategies for Engaging and Assessing Students**

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## Activity: Opinion Continuum

This activity can be found in any number of “values clarification” books. It is intended to have students physically move to a specific part of the room to show their position on controversial topics.

1. Identify issues of controversy in your curriculum and/or lesson. These might be questions of science and ethics, actions of characters in literature, or questions of civic or historical controversy. Frame each as a clear, one sentence statement with which students will be asked to agree or disagree.
2. In advance, post one sign stating “STRONGLY AGREE” and one sign stating “STRONGLY DISAGREE” on opposite walls or corners of the room.
3. Explain to the class that you will read a controversial statement. They are to think about their position on that statement and then locate themselves along a continuum from one side or corner of the room to the other; from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Explain that relative location is important; i.e. that being either farther to the extreme or closer to the midpoint is a physical way of stating the degree to which they think/feel about the issue.
4. Once located, direct students to begin explaining to those standing near them why they placed themselves as they did. Students should explain their reasoning and evidence for their location AND they should be “re-calibrating” with each other. This is the process of listening to other students near them and determining whether they really are more or less extreme in their thoughts/feelings on the topic. Encourage students to move as necessary to accurately represent the continuum of opinion in the classroom.
5. Move to a large group discussion where students explain to the class the reasons for their position. This can take the form of a sharing of reasons that are posted on the board or more of a debate where students are encouraged to try and compel their classmates to move toward their location. In either case, moderate in such a way that students are required to back up opinions with information and students listen carefully to each other.
6. Conclude the discussion by asking students on both sides of the issue to identify what they believe to be the strongest arguments/reasons they heard from the OPPOSING side. Either direct students to return to their seats or provide a new controversial statement and continue the process.

This is a good activity to use at the beginning of a unit where you want to sample student opinions and knowledge on topics you will be covering. It also can be a good get acquainted activity at the start of the term. In that situation, statements can be a mix of general opinion questions and statements drawn from future course content.

**"Speed Dating"**

**Purpose:** To generate ideas on focused topics; to practice effective dialogue; to ensure every one in a group participates/talks in a "low stakes" way.

**Instructional Process:**

1. Decide what your aims are and develop appropriate questions/prompts.
2. Count off by twos...form two concentric circles in middle of room. If you have an odd number of participants, the leader/facilitator may join one of the circles, or designate one rotation place as "roving listener/note taker."
3. Face and identify a partner...individual in inner circle facing another in outer circle.
4. Explain: You will have a chance to have a conversation on a given topic. Remind them of conversation norms, e.g., good conversationalists do the following:
  - introductions (if participants don't know one another)
  - talking AND listening
  - querying each other
  - you can't finish the conversation in the amount of time given!
  - look for new insights and ideas.
5. Question will be given...I'll say "start" and you talk until I say "stop."
  - First question. Let conversation go 3-5 minutes.
6. Rotate circles, e.g., inner goes clockwise or outer goes counter-clockwise. Can mix up rotations so inner and outer have turns moving, but each rotation should result in a new partner.
7. Debrief, as needed, e.g., re: content generated, re: dialogue processes, etc

## **Flow Charts as Conceptual Organizers**

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### **Overview:**

Two primary goals of all instruction should be providing regular opportunities for students to engage in “critical thinking” and promoting student “voice” in the classroom. Both of these goals are accomplished when students are asked to manipulate course concepts and/or content using flow charts and similar graphic organizers. Unlike more common “conceptual webs,” flow charts demand that students have a narrative that informs their organizational scheme and that all students in the group or class can share that same narrative when asked to do so.

### **Flow Charts**

1. Extract key concepts and events from course content. Write each in large print on separate sheets of printer paper. The number can range from 6-7 to far more. When selecting concepts and/or terms, it is important that you not create a selection of them that can be arranged in only one way. The intent of this activity is for students to have to make meaning through the arrangement of terms as it makes sense to them. Examples will be provided during the workshop session.

2. Create “one way” and “two way” arrows on similar sheets of paper. Make sure that there is a sufficient number for the number of concept/term sheets.

(Note: if you are having the entire class do one flowchart, you only need one set of concept/term sheets. If you are having smaller groups attempt the same task so that they can compare their thinking, make an appropriate number of sets of concept/term sheets.)

3. Randomly lay sheets on the floor and leave piles of arrows. I find it best to move all of the desks to the sides of the room and have the class (or groups) gather in the empty space. The flowcharts are then arranged on the floor. Give these instructions:

- Your job is to organize these concepts/terms so that they tell a coherent story. Use the arrows to identify relationships between the sheets. One way arrows imply causation or chronology, while two way arrows imply some sort of reciprocal relationship.
- You aren't done until every member of the class or group agrees on the narrative and can be called upon to share it aloud.

4. Watch and take notes on the process. It is difficult to avoid intervening, but well worth it in most situations. It is common for both expected and unexpected leadership to emerge. Periodic prompts that ALL must agree on the arrangement of the sheets and the narrative/story that they tell can be very useful. Encourage wide participation as necessary, but avoid indicating “rightness” or “wrongness” of the emerging flowchart. There will be plenty of time in the debrief to evaluate and critique the arrangement of concepts/terms.

5. When the work is completed, ask a student to begin telling the narrative of the flowchart. Have others continue the story. Now is the time for you to ask questions about the reasoning behind the arrangement and to push students to articulate their understanding of the story the flowchart tries to tell. IF you have more than one group doing the flowchart, then this is a time to focus first on one and then on the other before comparing the flowcharts. Why did one group arrange the sheets as they did vs. how it was done by the other group(s)?

6. Follow-up can take the form of revisiting areas of confusion, a writing assignment, or some other form of closure.

**Sample Flowchart terms:**

Bigotry

Hatred

Genocide

Racism

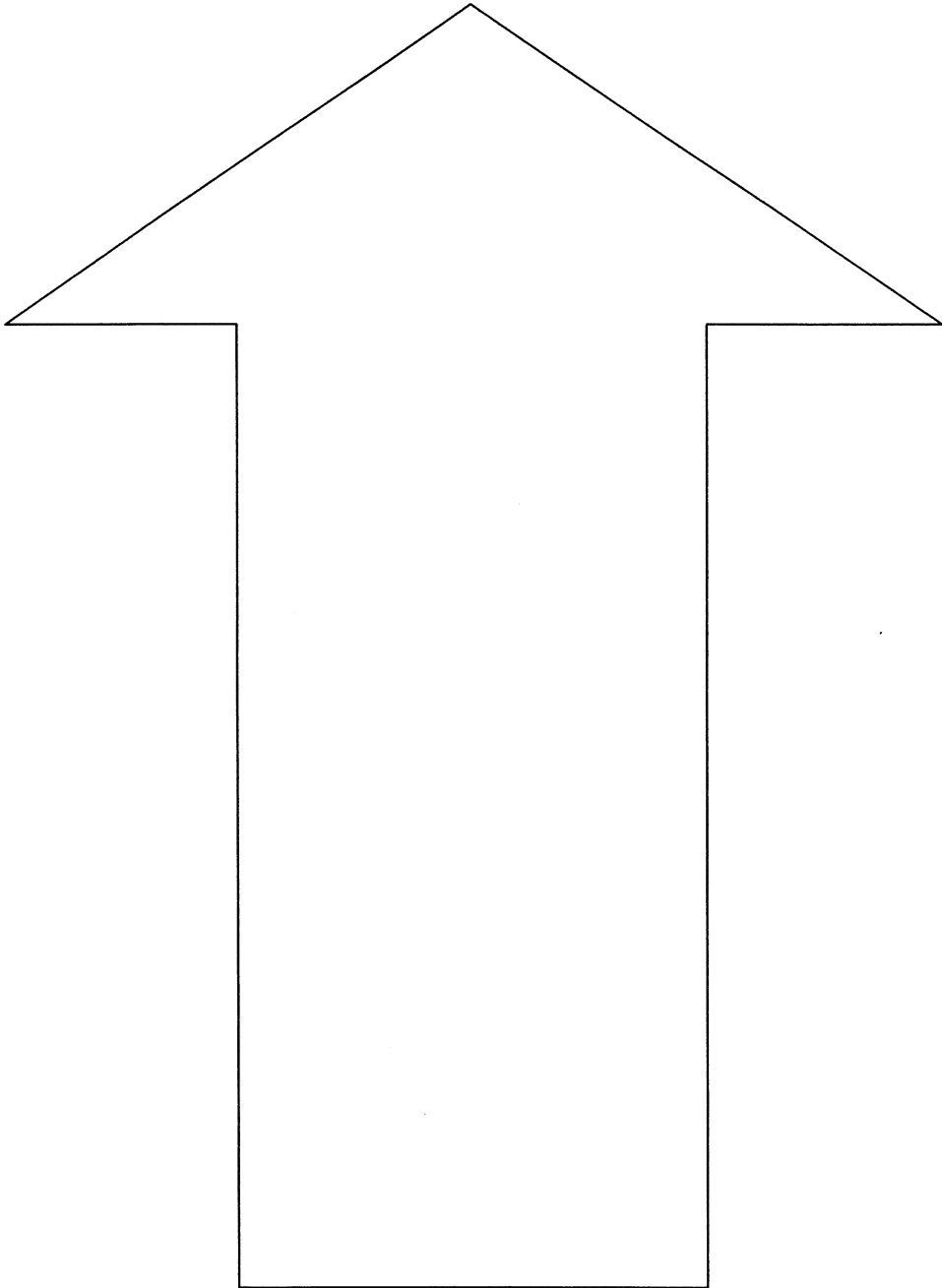
Prejudice

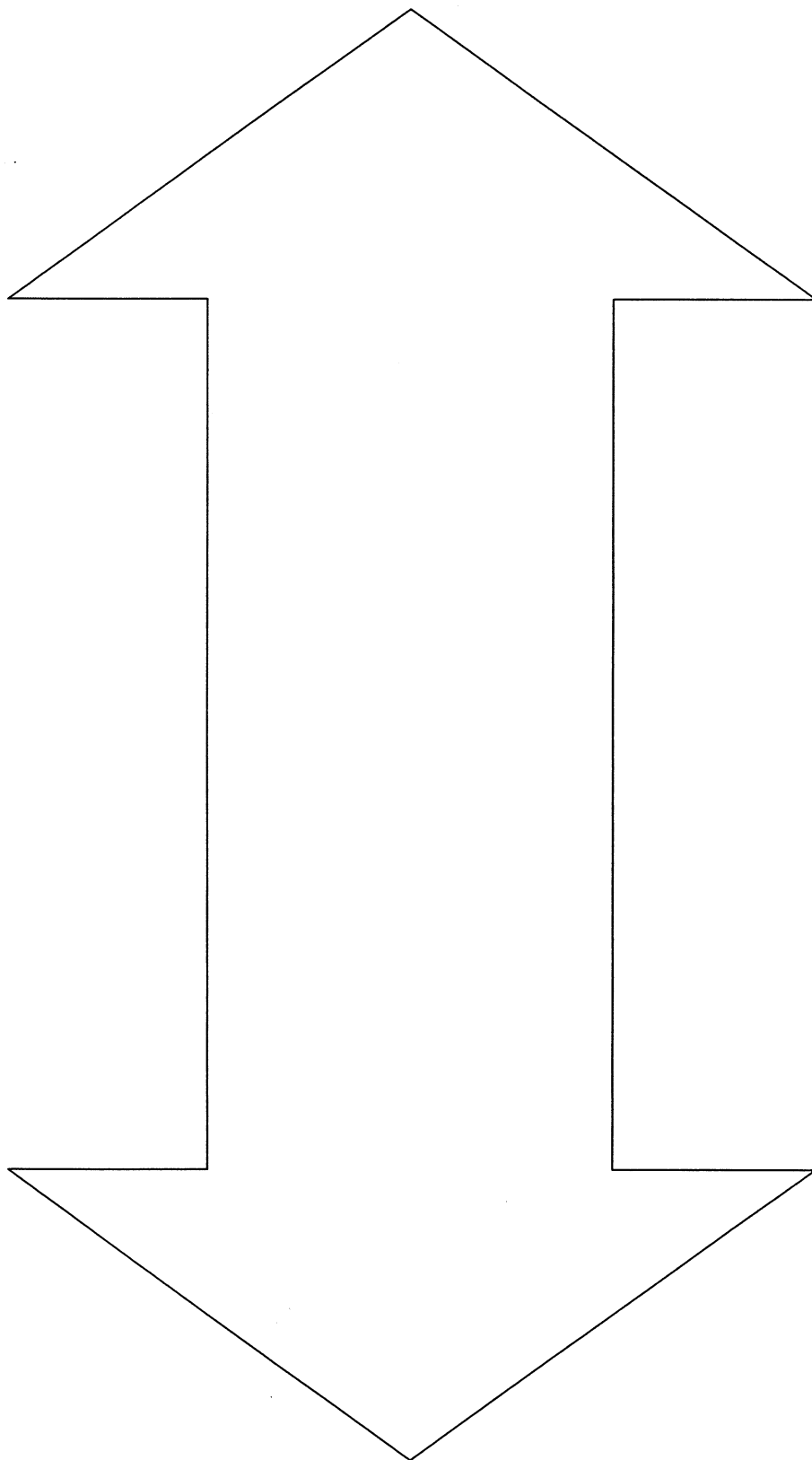
Intolerance

Discrimination

Bias

**FLOW CHART ARROWS**





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## Card Sort Activity: Protest and Reform

1. Turn the following list into larger "cards" and create sets of them for each small group (3-5) of students.
2. The task is for students to order them from least to most effective in terms of protest tactics and strategies. Groups must be prepared to explain their rankings.
3. Once groups have made their arrangements, explore reasons and explanations. Where are there major points of agreement? Disagreement?

whine

picket

strikes

sit-ins

boycotts

letters to the editor

lobby politicians

letters to politicians

sabotage

terrorism

revolution

marches

rallies

editorials

run for office

petitions

write/perform music

block traffic

hang banners from buildings

email actions

create a web page

wear armbands

create propaganda

going to court

posters

hunger strikes

publish 'zine

break the law

civil disobedience

pamphlets

newspaper ads

"Troubleshooter" on T.V.

direct mailings

bumper stickers

assassination

vigilante tactics

referendums/  
voter initiatives