

The Discussion Toolkit



20+ discussion strategies you can use to get your learners talking.

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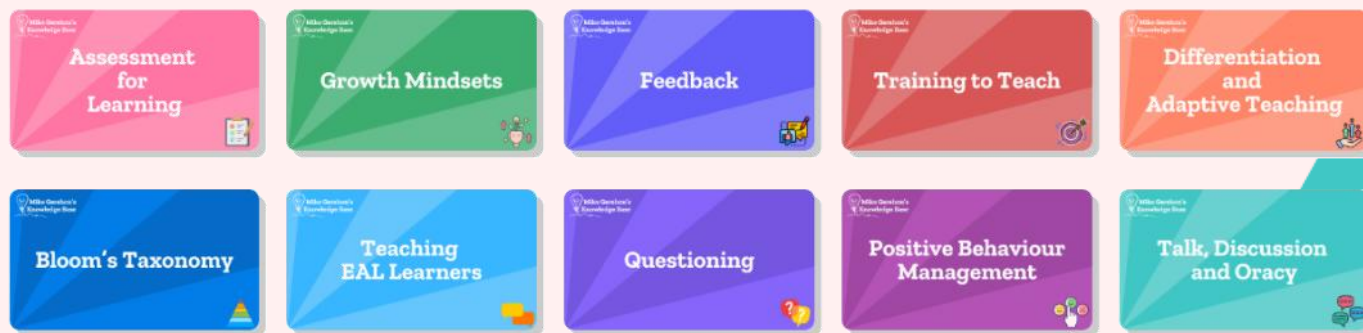


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Circle Time

How does it work?

Learners sit in a circle, either on chairs or on the floor.

The teacher provides an item like a beanbag or a ball. Learners may only speak when holding this item.

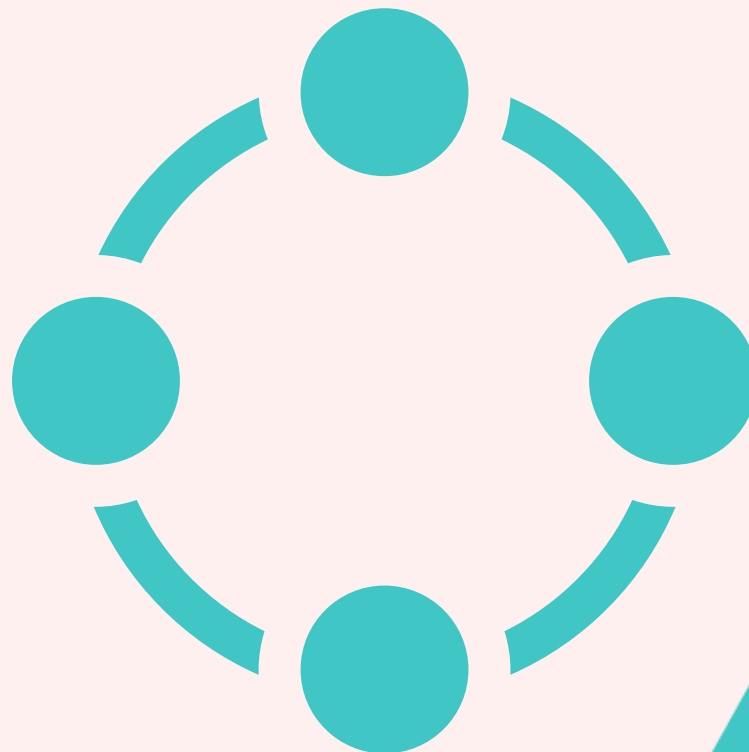
Learners should agree their rules for circle time as a group. These should cover how discussions will work, how people should treat each other, and how turn-taking will be ensured.

The teacher starts off the discussion by posing a question. Learners discuss with their partner. The teacher then selects someone to speak first. They receive the beanbag/ball.

When they have finished, someone else signals that they would like to speak.

The discussion develops from here. The teacher encourages learners to reference and build on what previous speakers have said.

The teacher should also ensure they have the beanbag/ball when they want to speak.



Philosophy for Children

How does it work?

Philosophy for Children, also known as P4C, encourages learner to think critically, caringly, creatively and collaboratively.

The teacher builds a community of enquiry with their learners, in which everyone works together to develop their thinking about a key question.

Discussion takes place in a circle. The teacher introduces some stimulus material.

Learners have time to view and inspect the stimulus material. They then develop individually and in pairs 1/2 questions they would like to discuss, inspired by the stimulus material.

All questions are shared and a vote is taken.

The question that receives the most votes forms the basis of the discussion, facilitated by the teacher.

For more details and resources, see <https://www.sapere.org.uk/>



Rainbow Groups

How does it work?

The class is divided into groups.

Each group is given a question to discuss. This could be the same question for every group, or a different question for each.

After sufficient time has passed, the teacher moves round the groups and gives each learner a different colour. For example, if groups are made up of five learners, the teacher might assign red, orange, yellow, green, and blue to members of each group.

The teacher asks learners to form new groups, based on the colours they have been given.

Learners now have a second discussion, in their new 'colour' groups.

This involves learners sharing what they discussed and then building a new discussion with their teammates.

Finish by having learners return to their original groups and share what they discussed in their 'colour' groups.



Snowballing

How does it work?

The teacher divides the class in half.

They pose a question and ask learners to think about their answers for 30/60 seconds.

When the time is up, learners share answers with a partner. Pairs must discuss their answers and then come to an agreed position in response to the question.

Pairs then pair up, creating groups of four, and the process repeats.

Next, each half of the class comes together. For example, in a class of 24 learners, you will end up with three groups of four on each side who come together into a group of twelve.

The by now large groups must agree a common position in response to the question and nominate a spokesperson.

Spokespersons come to the front of the class and share their group's position. Further discussion then ensues, facilitated by the teacher.



Pair Talk

How does it work?

Share a piece of stimulus material with your learners. This could be an image, a video, a story or an object.

Invite learners to think of a question they want answered that relates to the stimulus material. You might want to direct learners in terms of the types of questions you want them to develop here.

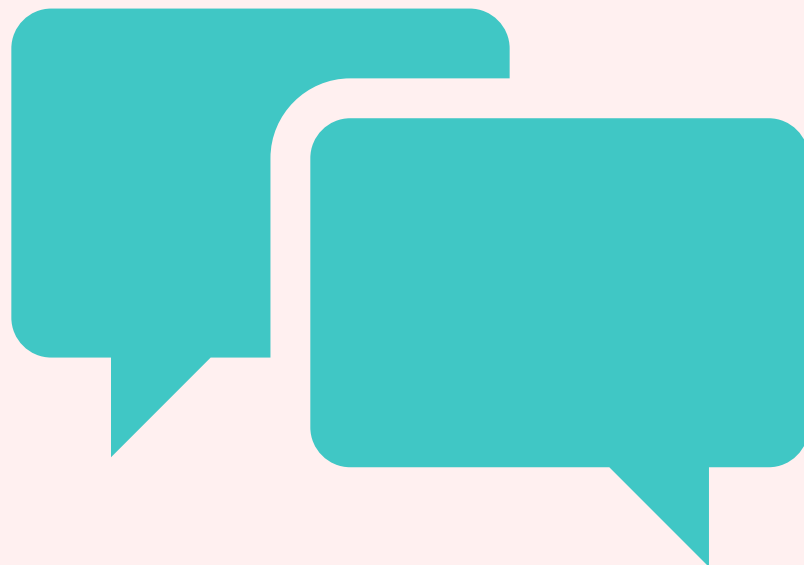
Ask learners to stand up and find a partner who is not sat near them and who they have not yet spoken to during the lesson.

When learners are in their pairings, they should take it in turns to share their questions with each other and then discuss these.

Next, the teacher asks a selection of pairs to share their questions with the whole class. This gives an opportunity for pairs to hear and then discuss a wide range of questions.

Finish the activity by having learners make a note of their own questions and any questions they heard and really liked.

Return to these in the plenary and see if learners can now answer them, based on what they've done in the lesson.



Listening Triads

How does it work?

Divide the class into groups of three. These are the listening triads.

Explain that learners will need to take on roles in their groups. Two learners will need to be speakers, and one learner will need to be a listener.

Display a question on the board.

Explain that the speakers should discuss the question while the listener listens to the discussion.

You can instruct the listener to do one of three things. Make notes of what they believe are the most important points raised in the discussion. Peer-assess the conversation. Or develop questions they want answered, based on what they hear.

Whichever option you choose, the listener gets to feed back to their peers at the end of the discussion.

If you have enough time, repeat twice more with new questions so everyone gets a turn playing each role.



Envoys

How does it work?

Divide the class into groups of 3-5.

Give each group a different task to complete, area to research, or question to answer. These should all be tied to the theme of the lesson.

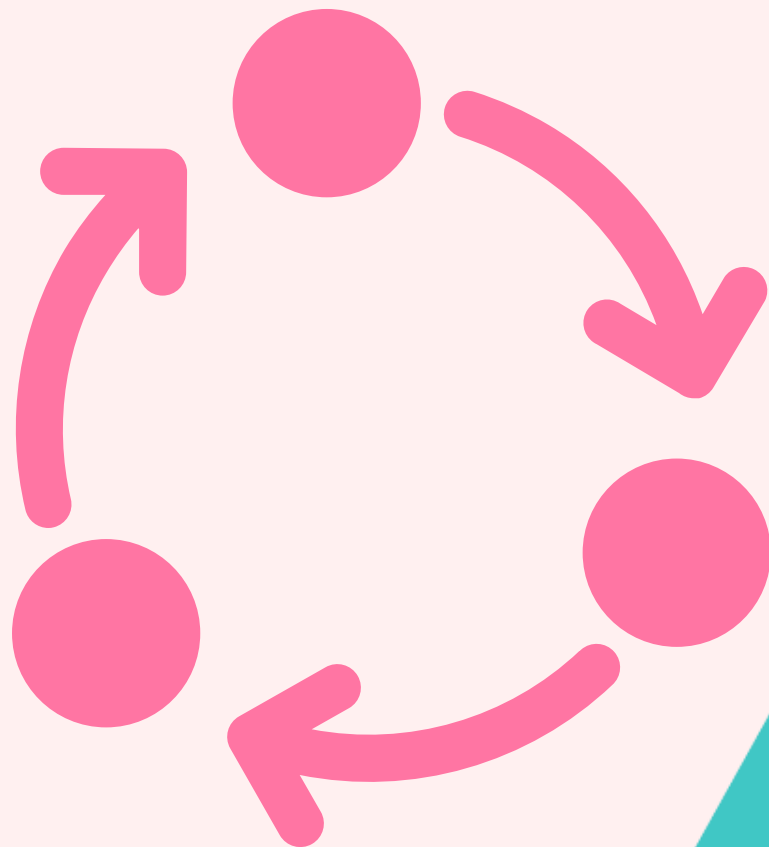
You will need to decide how long to give groups, based on the age you are working with and the tasks you have set them.

When the time is up, ask each group to appoint an envoy. This person's job is to visit each of the other groups in turn and to teach them about what they have learned.

Ask envoys to stand up and to move around the room in a clockwise direction.

They should visit the next group along and teach them what they've learned. Give 2-3 minutes for this, then ask envoys to stand up and move on again.

Continue until the activity runs out of steam or until envoys get back to their home groups, whichever comes first.



Jigsawing

How does it work?

Divide the class into groups of four.

Present each group with a set of four numbered tasks or questions.

Ask learners to look through these and to decide who will research/answer/complete each task or question.

When every learner has something for which they are responsible, ask them to leave their 'home' groups and to create a new group with the peers who have chosen the same question/task as them.

Learners stay in these 'away' groups to do their research, answer the question or complete the task, discussing all the while.

When the time is up, the teacher asks learners to recreate their 'home' groups. These groups now have four experts in them. Like a jigsaw of four pieces that create a whole.

Learners take it turns to teach each other what they have learned.



Continuum

How does it work?

Create a continuum by displaying a double-ended arrow on the board, by designating two opposing walls as the two ends, or by laying a rope on the floor. One end of the continuum should be 'Agree' and one end should be 'Disagree'.

Display a statement on the board and give learners sixty seconds silent thinking to gather their thoughts.

You then have two options. Either learners can draw a continuum in their books and mark the position that represents their view, or they can come to the front of the class and stand in a position that represents their view.

From here, you can facilitate a debate, asking different learners to share where they have placed themselves and why. As the discussion progresses, give learners the option of changing their positions, if they wish, based on what they've heard.

Repeat the process with multiple statements if you have time.



Hot Seating

How does it work?

This activity is best used towards the end of a unit of work, when learners have plenty of knowledge and understanding on which they can call.

One learner comes to the front of the room. Ideally, they should volunteer for this.

A chair is set up for them (which could be the teacher's chair). This is the hot seat.

The learner must field questions from the rest of the class about the topic they have been studying.

Their goal is to answer each question – and to answer them correctly. If they get stuck, or can't give an answer, they leave the hot seat and someone else has a turn.

You can make this more of a drama activity by having the learner in the hot seat playing a role. For example, in a history lesson they could be Henry VIII, answering questions from their peers while trying to stay in character.



Distancing

How does it work?

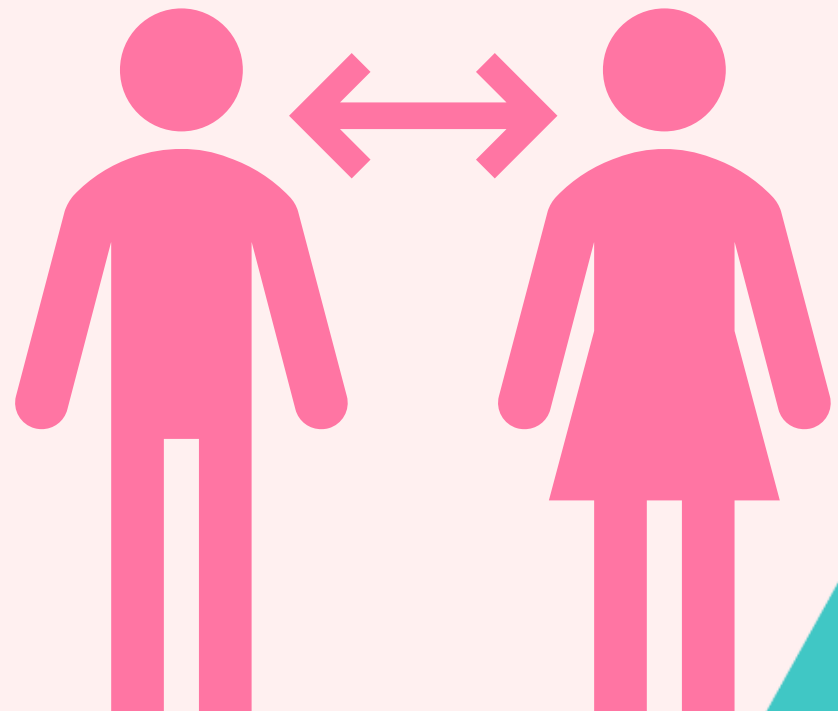
This technique is all about distancing learners from the question.

It is a good way to elicit responses from learners who may lack confidence, to get learners thinking from a different perspective, and to help learners discuss sensitive issues.

Instead of asking learners what they think, we distance them from the question by asking them what someone else might think.

For example:

- What might someone else think about this question?
- How might someone from a different year group try to answer this question?
- What might Franklin Roosevelt have thought about this question?
- How might Goldilocks have felt if she'd been able to tell us?
- What might someone think who had a personal experience of this issue?



Goldfish Bowl

How does it work?

Divide the class into groups of five.

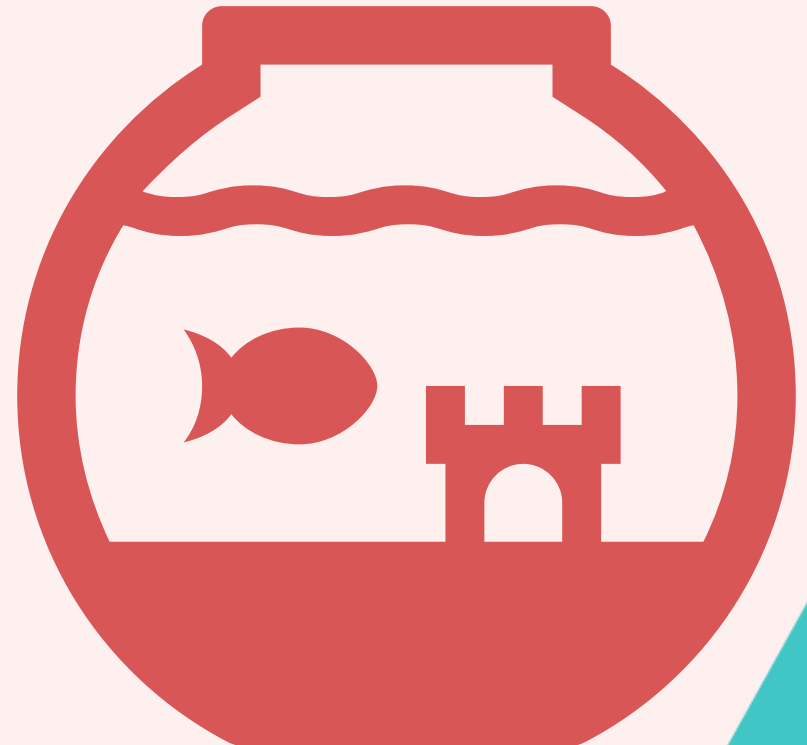
Explain that each group needs to appoint two speakers. Ideally, these should be confident learners who have good knowledge of the topic.

Groups arrange themselves so that the two speakers are sat facing each other, while the other three learners sit around them.

The 'speakers' are in the goldfish bowl, and their peers are observing. Looking in, as it were.

The teacher displays a question and gives the speakers two minutes in which to discuss it. The other learners observe the discussion, make notes and identify any questions they want to ask.

When the two minutes are up, either display a second question, also related to the topic, or invite the observers to give feedback on what they saw and heard, and to ask their questions.



Freeze Frame

How does it work?

Arrange the classroom so that learners are sat in a circle. Share a stimulus with the learners. This could be a story, a statement, an image or a question.

Discuss the stimulus as a group, encouraging learners to think about it in depth.

Divide the class into groups of 3-5. Explain that each group now needs to create a freeze frame connected to the stimulus material.

A freeze frame is a dramatic moment in time. Like when you press pause while watching a movie.

Learners have 5-10 minutes (you'll need to decide how long) to develop, practice and finalise their freeze frames.

When the time is up, invite groups to showcase their freeze frames in turn, and lead a whole-class discussion about each one.

If time is short, choose 1-2 freeze frames and use these to stimulate discussion.



Stimulus Discussion

How does it work?

Identify an interesting piece of stimulus material connected to the topic you are teaching.

Share the stimulus material with your learners. How much you decide to tell them about it is up to you. Depending on what the stimulus is, there is benefit to not sharing any information but also to giving learners relevant context.

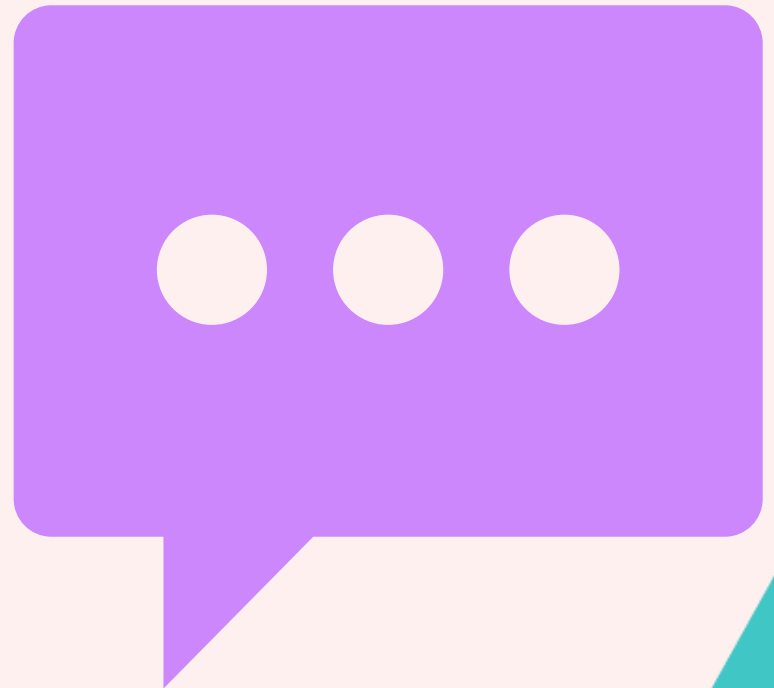
Divide the class into pairs or threes.

Give each pair/group two slips of paper.

Ask learners to discuss the stimulus material with their peers and to come up with two questions they would like to discuss. These can be directly connected to the stimulus material or inspired by it.

Collect in the slips of paper. Place them in a bag, give it a shake, and then invite a learner to select a question at random.

Learners discuss this in pairs/threes and you can then build it into a whole-class discussion.



Free Discussion

How does it work?

Throw things over to your learners and invite them to choose a topic or question they want to discuss.

You can do this with the whole class or with a smaller group.

The idea is to give learners ownership and the freedom to discuss those things that interest them or which they view as important.

The teacher can facilitate the discussion or, if learners are sufficiently experienced, they can run it themselves, perhaps with one learner acting as the discussion leader.

Another option is to have a free discussion but with learners taking on several different roles.

For example, timekeeper, scribe, discussion leader, questioner, creative thinker, devil's advocate and clarifier.



Radio Phone-In

How does it work?

Divide the class into six groups.

Give each group a different perspective to research, connected to the topic of the lesson, and provide relevant research materials.

Explain that each group needs to select a member who will speak about their perspective. This person needs to collate all the information their group researches.

Indicate also that each group should come up with questions they want to ask the other groups.

When the research phase is over, call the six speakers to the front. Arrange three desks so you and they can sit around them.

Now it's time for the radio phone-in. The teacher is the host. They should facilitate a debate as if they are in a radio studio, with six representatives of the different perspectives on the topic.

The rest of the class are the audience. They can 'phone-in' their questions by putting their hand up and being selected by the teacher.



TV Chat Show

How does it work?

This is best used towards the end of a topic.

Identify 4/5 learners who are confident and knowledgeable.

Give these learners roles or characters to play, connected to the topic. For example, a history teacher might do a TV chat show discussion about The Battle of Hastings and have various relevant characters who are coming on the chat show to 'reflect' on what happened.

Explain to the rest of the class that they need to develop questions they can ask the different characters who are going to appear on the chat show.

When everyone is ready, set up the room so there are chairs at the front for you and the learners who are playing characters. Arrange the rest of the room so the other learners can form an audience.

You should now act as the host, facilitating a discussion between the different characters and taking questions from the floor.



Circle of Voices

How does it work?

Divide the class into groups of five.

Each group arranges themselves, so they are sat in a circle.

The teacher introduces a topic, question or statement.

Learners have 3/4 minutes to reflect on this, to write down their thoughts and ideas, and to develop any questions they have in response.

When the time is up, the teacher asks learners to number themselves 1-5 in their groups.

The teacher explains that each learner will take it in turns to speak, starting with learner 1 and ending with learner 5.

Each learner has one minute in which to share their thoughts, while the rest of the group listen and don't comment.

When everyone has shared, the groups move into open discussions, building on all the initial ideas that have been shared.



Post-It Dialogues

How does it work?

Take 6/7 large sheets of sugar paper and write a question or statement on each one.

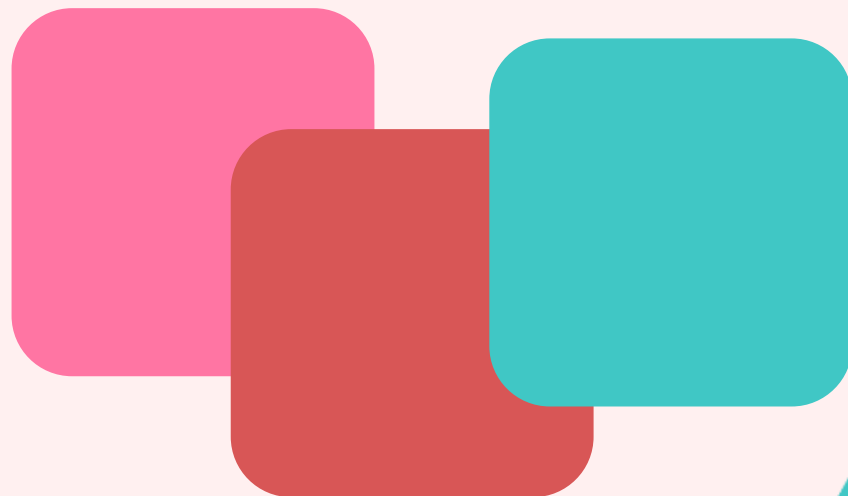
Distribute these around the room and hand each learner a dozen post-it notes.

Explain that learners must move around the room, reviewing each question/statement in turn. They should write their response on a post-it note, with their name, and stick it on the sugar paper.

When they have finished, they should travel round again, this time using their remaining post-it notes to write responses to other people's comments.

When the time is up, get learners sat back down and divide them into the same number of groups as there are pieces of sugar paper.

Give each group one of the pieces of sugar paper and ask them to discuss the post-it notes. They should aim to identify the comment they think is most prescient, and the one about which they have the most follow-up questions.



Rotating Stations

How does it work?

Create a series of different stations around your room. 7/8 is usually a good number.

Each station should have a different piece of stimulus material, connected to the topic, alongside a discussion question.

(You might decide to have 1/2 stations that are just a discussion question).

Divide the class into the same number of groups as there are stations.

Learners must work their way around the stations, investigating the stimulus material and discussing the questions in their teams.

One way to develop this activity is to create a pro-forma on which groups can capture the key points from each discussion they have.



Think-Pair-Share

How does it work?

Pose a question to your learners.

Ask them to think about it and, potentially, to note down some thoughts. 'Sixty seconds silent thinking' usually works well.

When the time is up, ask learners to share their thinking with the person sat next to them.

After this, you have two options.

First, you can invite a few different pairs to share their thoughts with the whole class and use this to build out a whole-class discussion.

Second, you can ask pairs to team up and create groups of four, in which they then share what they have been thinking about and discussing.

Both options have merit, and there is always the third option of having learners stand up and find a new partner, with whom they create a new discussion.



Three-Step Interview

How does it work?

Divide the class into groups of four.

Ask learners to label themselves A, B, C, and D inside their groups.

Display a question on the board. This needs to be something learners will have an opinion on or about which they can talk in detail. For this reason, the activity is best done midway through or towards the end of a unit of work.

Step One: Learner A interviews Learner B, asking them what they think about the question. At the same time, Learner C interviews Learner D.

Step Two: Learners swap roles. B interviews A. D interviews C.

Step Three: The group come back together, and all four learners share their interview findings with each other.

An additional, optional, step involves the teacher asking each group to sum up their interview findings for the rest of the class.

