

COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Pre-K–Grade 12

Designed for distance learning, specifically live-stream video platforms, the following activity aims to build resilient and supportive classroom communities. This activity can be used independently, or in relation to other lessons in your virtual classroom, as a way for students to reflect or create personal connections.

OBJECTIVE

Council is a dynamic practice adopted by many cultures and communities. In the virtual classroom, it is a powerful social-emotional learning strategy that builds equity, trust, and respect. By participating in council, students will strengthen skills in active listening, self-awareness, and making connections while developing an appreciation for differences among their peers.

SET-UP AND MATERIALS

- Select a **council prompt** to guide the practice. Create your own or use one of the sample prompts inspired by Noah's Ark at the Skirball™ below:

Sample Prompts:

- Talk about a time you were brave.
 - Share a story of a time you made a new friend.
 - Talk about a time you celebrated something.
 - Share a story of a time you overcame a challenge.
 - Talk about a community you are proud to be a part of.
 - Share a story of a time you celebrated someone.
 - Talk about a time you helped someone.
 - Share a story of a time someone helped you.
 - Talk about a time someone taught you something new.
 - Share a story of a time you taught someone something new.
- Establish a respectful space, encouraging students to be active listeners. To help with this, and to minimize background noise, we recommend muting all but the current speaker.
 - Establish nonverbal cues to respond with during council, such as the thumbs up emoji in Zoom or a physical gesture for "I agree."
 - (Optional) The day before, ask each student to choose a small **talking piece**—a meaningful object used to signal they are ready to speak when it is their turn. It could be anything from a favorite toy or family photo to a special pencil, a piece of art, or a refrigerator magnet. The teacher/facilitator should have a talking piece of their own so they can actively participate in council with their students.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Review the concept of council and council vocabulary with students.

Council: A powerful learning strategy that promotes an environment of trust and respect in the classroom. It invites us all to share our experiences, memories, and feelings with each other by actively listening and speaking honestly.

Council Agreements: Guidelines that all participants promise to keep during the exercise, such as speaking from the heart, listening with the heart, being respectful and open-minded, and keeping answers as short as possible. Listening is an important aspect of council—only one person will speak at a time, and all participants should agree to listen without offering comments or opinions on each other's contributions.

Talking Piece: A meaningful object typically passed around between participants to identify whose turn it is to speak. For virtual councils, students can hold up their own talking piece when ready to participate. The teacher/facilitator will guide the order of speakers.

Council Prompt: A simple instruction to encourage participants to reflect on the past, express themselves in the present, and view the future. Prompts often begin with phrases like, “Talk about a time...” or, “Share a story of a time...”

Witness Round: A final, brief share-out for participants to reflect on their experience and make connections with one another.

2. Give a council prompt that invites all students to make personal connections to a theme or lesson. For example, “Share a story of a time you made a new friend.” Students will have a moment to think of a story, and then they will be asked to share when it is their turn to speak. (Note: It helps to define an appropriate response length; students can share one sentence, a short phrase, or briefly retell a story.) We also strongly encourage the teacher/facilitator to share! Make sure everyone has had a chance to respond to the prompt before moving on.
3. In the **witness round**, each participant shares one word that either describes their experience in council or is a resonant word, phrase, or sentence they heard in another person’s response.
4. After speaking and listening, connect students’ experiences to course content or point out commonalities between student responses. For example, “I heard many different ways of making friends in your stories: over a meal, on the playground, by helping one another, etc.” These connections allow students to get to know their classmates better and can be used to further understand course content and/or resolve conflict.
5. End council with a closing gesture (e.g., a group thank you, a cheer, an emoji, a smile from everyone, or a moment of stillness).

LESSON ADAPTATIONS/DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING

Council can be paired with an art project or physical activity to further explore the stories and experiences students have shared. Drawing, painting, and movement activities give students the opportunity to express their thoughts in experiential ways.

Student Facilitators: After the class is familiar with council, invite students to take turns as the facilitator.

RESOURCES

Center for Council
Contemplative Pedagogy at the University of Arizona

CONNECT WITH US

Our educators are here to help! If you would like to talk with us about how best to facilitate this activity with your students, please email teacherprograms@skirball.org.