



# Creating Connection to Enable Deep Discussion: High School Edition

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Steven Covey's cult classic *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* advises: "seek first to understand, then to be understood." To know and to be known are core to who we are as teachers, learners, and colleagues. These processes of understanding and being understood rely on a foundation of interpersonal connection.

While interpersonal connection comes easily to some and is facilitated in some situations more than others, it can be difficult for students to cultivate interpersonal connection—or closeness—in classroom settings that can feel both anonymous and transitory. In such cases, it can be near impossible to convince students to take the interpersonal risks of sharing diverse viewpoints, admitting the limits of their own knowledge, or expressing genuine curiosity about the experiences and perspectives of others.

Fear not. Social psychology can help. To ready students for the interpersonal tasks of knowing and being known, professors can dedicate an hour of class time to the goal of facilitating interpersonal connection among their students. The activity below, based on Arthur Aron and colleagues' experimental study, offers an effective approach. Have students complete the activity at the start of the school year or semester. This way, students will develop close (or at least, closer) relationships before engaging in difficult or controversial topics.

## Step 1.

Prepare copies of the attached handout for your class.

## Step 2.

Assign students into pairs. Pair students based on your knowledge of their social network, community, family background, social and political beliefs, etc. The goal is to pair students who are not close friends and who may hold divergent views. If you are unsure to what extent your students hold divergent views, provide students the opportunity to share via a questionnaire their attitudes and beliefs about social and political issues before the activity. Then, pair students together who hold divergent views on potentially controversial topics.

## Step 3.

Give all students the reciprocal self-disclosure activity handout. Either have students complete the questionnaire in one sitting or break the activity into chunks, based on time constraints. For example, you can have students complete one question set per day over the span of three days—there are three question sets and each question set takes about 15 - 20 minutes to complete. Set a timer, then alert students when 15 - 20 minutes (whichever is most appropriate for your students) is up. This will either be the close of the activity for the day or the close of one question set. If you are having students complete the activity in one day, set the timer for each question set.

## Step 4.

If your students completed the activity in one sitting, reconvene the students for a short discussion about their experience after they are finished. If you spanned the activity over three days, reconvene the students at the end of the week, or after they have completed the third question set.

Suggested discussion questions include:

- What did you notice about the types of questions included? How were the question sets organized? *Key insights: progressively riskier, ask about core aspects of the self*
- What types of things did you and/or your interaction partner say or do that made you feel connected? *Key insights: eye contact, asked follow-up questions, nodded when I shared, shared about themselves, expressed concern*
- Did you learn something about your partners that you don't know about your best friend? A close family member? *Fun fact: Aron et al (1997) found this short, experimental task resulted in participants feeling closer to their interaction partner—a total stranger—than the typical closest relationship of 30% of similar students.*
- What do you think the picture question at the beginning and end of the handout intends to measure? *[Answer: This is the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale. It is a single item pictorial measure of closeness. Although simple, it correlates with much more complex scales of feeling and behaving close and also predicts behaviors associated with closeness, such as sharing resources and taking the other person's perspective.]*
- What aspects of this activity promote interpersonal (or person-to-person) connection? *Key insights: reciprocal, escalating, self-revealing*
- Would you do this activity with someone outside of this classroom? If yes, who? Why?

## Extension Activities

To create connections among all students in your class—who are not already close friends—repeat this activity multiple times throughout the semester or school year.

This activity is a good primer for more difficult conversations about controversial topics. Next, have students complete the activity, ["Have Students Interview Someone They Disagree With"](#).

## Citations

Aron, A., Aron, E. N., & Smollan, D. (1992). Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale and the structure of interpersonal closeness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63, 596-612.

Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R. D., & Bator, R. J. (1997). The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(4), 363-377.

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