

How do you adjust talk energy in the classroom?

Some discussions are like lighting a fire with damp wood. Nobody wants to speak. You have to keep breathing life into the dying embers. In others, people talk over each other. You have to stop the argument blazing out of control.

Fire needs fuel, heat and oxygen to sustain itself. And three factors set the energy level in a discussion: **Voices, Movement and Passion**

Let's look at how you can adjust these up or down to get the energy you want.

#1 - Voices

The more voices, the more energy. The fastest way to increase energy is to split into pairs or small groups. But if the discussion has stalled, don't stick to the same question and say "think about that in pairs". Give a focus for their talk that requires a choice. Then they have to reach a decision. You can carry the energy back into single voice talk by seeing what decisions they made and why.

To take energy out, ensure there's one voice at a time. Small pauses between speakers help too. But if you keep reminding them, "one voice only", your voice adds to the energy. Instead, get each speaker to pass a "conch" to the next. I use a reel of tape, as I have one to hand to create areas for Thinkers' Games.

Passing the conch slows the pace more than throwing it. Each speaker acquires a special status as holder of the conch. That improves everyone's listening. As a result, contributions connect to each other better.

#2 - Movement

To add energy, get children moving. It can be simply, "point this way if you think x, that way if you think y". Or, "stand here if you think x, there if you think y". Bigger movements, more energy.

To take energy out, go for stillness. If using a Thinkers' Game that involves movement, have the group stay in their positions but sit down, facing toward the centre. Or take a minute for everyone to write their thoughts on the point in question.

#3 - Passion

The more children care about a question, the more energy they have. You can start with questions that are controversial, or important to the group. But you can also reframe a subject during a discussion to increase the passion they have for it.

One tactic is to focus on a specific human example. People care more about people than about principles, so introduce a real or imagined scenario. Another is to wind them up. Feign misunderstanding, or adopt a contrary position and push them to justify theirs. Keep restating your confusion or opposition until more hands go up to challenge you, then resume the discussion.

If there's too much passion, get away from the particular issue for some distance and cool rationality. When discussing an emotive topic such as abortion you could shift on to the more abstract question of what counts as a person. Or get technical, and look at the structure of the argument. Is the point being made true in all cases, most or some? Are there any counterexamples to the point being made. You can "spend" the passion a subject has created by tackling more nitty-gritty aspects of the thinking.

There are many other techniques that fall under these three headings. To an extent, they're common-sense teaching practice, the sorts of things we pick up with experience. But I've found it helpful to my own facilitation to think of them in this way:

energy = voices x (movement + passion)