



The Burkean Parlor

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Overview

In this lesson, students will engage in a thought experiment from philosopher Kenneth Burke called “The Burkean Parlor.” Engaging in this activity will help students think more deeply about how we persuade others and ourselves. Imagine walking into a heated discussion at a party; at that moment, you need to figure out what everyone is talking about and how to enter the conversation. This is exactly what Burke’s “parlor metaphor” explores. Through this lesson, students will have the opportunity to use what they have learned from previous lessons while gaining practical tools for entering and exiting challenging conversations.



Essential Questions

- What is the purpose of rhetoric?
- What's the value of rhetoric for civil discourse?
- How can rhetoric be a bridge that connects people with diverse viewpoints?

Materials

- Blank, white paper
- Discussion topics and late arrival stances
- Visual timer

Learning Objectives

- Examine Kenneth Burke's "parlor metaphor" and apply it to real-world situations
- Utilize rhetorical tools to engage in civil conversations with diverse viewpoints
- Evaluate the use of kairos in a small group discussion about a difficult topic

Warm-Up

Give students a sheet of blank white paper. Tell them they are going to draw what you are going to describe. Then, read Kenneth Burke's parlor metaphor.

"Imagine you enter a parlor. You arrive late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress."

Be sure to stop reading every so often to give students a chance to add important details to their drawing.

DEBRIEF

When you have finished reading and students have finished drawing, discuss the metaphor with students. Some questions to prompt discussion are:

- What is this metaphor telling us about the nature of conversation?
- What role does listening play in this metaphor? What role does speaking play?
- How does kairos show up in the metaphor?
- How does this metaphor mirror modern conversations?

Guide students to think about rhetoric like joining a party that has already begun. Help them understand that you wouldn't burst into a conversation that was already going on without pausing, listening, and learning about the topic being discussed. This is similar to larger conversations in society and academia—or what may be called “the marketplace of ideas.”

The Burkean Parlor Simulation

PREPARE

STEP 1

Set up your classroom so there are 5–7 conversation circles. Each circle should have 4–5 chairs.

STEP 2

Group students into small groups and assign role cards. Roles include:

- Host: Chooses the topic of conversation and begins the discussion
- Guests: Engage in the conversation as if they were at a social gathering
- Late arrival: Enters the conversation after 2 minutes have passed

It would work well to give the late arrivals a particular stance to take on assigned topics. This would ensure a lively discussion and could be a way to challenge students to figure out how to enter and exit a civil conversation with a distinct point of view. Some potential topics and potential stances for late arrivals to take are outlined in the table below.

DISCUSSION TOPICS AND LATE ARRIVAL STANCES

Discussion Topic 1

- **Host topic:** Should social media have a minimum age requirement?
- **Late arrival stance:** Social media should be available for all ages with parental guidance.

Discussion Topic 2

- **Host topic:** Should homework be optional?
- **Late arrival stance:** Homework should not be optional, but it should be a reasonable amount.

Discussion Topic 3

- **Host topic:** Should community service be a graduation requirement?
- **Late arrival stance:** Community service is an important part of a high school education and should be required.

Discussion Topic 4

- **Host topic:** Should final exams be required for every class?
- **Late arrival stance:** Students should have the option to take a final exam or complete a project portfolio in every class.

Discussion Topic 5

- **Host topic:** Are dress codes fair and/or necessary?
- **Late arrival stance:** Uniforms are fair and would solve unnecessary debates about dress codes.

Discussion Topic 6

- **Host topic:** Should school start later?
- **Late arrival stance:** School should not start later because students need to be ready for the real world.

Discussion Topic 7

- **Host topic:** Should PE be a required class every year?
- **Late arrival stance:** PE should be required every year so that students can be healthy.

ENGAGE

STEP 1

Set up or project a class timer onto the board.

STEP 2

Have all late arrivals stand at the edge of the classroom and wait to join a group discussion for 2 minutes.

STEP 3

After 2 minutes, prompt the late arrivals to join a conversation and find their way into it.

STEP 4

Allow students to talk for 8–10 minutes longer.

STEP 5

Tell the late arrivals that they must exit the conversation in the next 3 minutes because “the hour grows late.”

DISCUSS

When all students have exited the group conversation, bring back the late arrivals and have the student reflect on the following questions.

- What did you notice about the ways that you and your classmates engaged in the conversation?
- What were the most challenging moments? What parts of the conversation ran most smoothly? Why?
- How well did the conversation flow when the late arrival joined? How well did it flow when the late arrival left?
- What strategies helped find the most opportune time to speak?
- What strategies helped keep the conversation going when diverse viewpoints were expressed and/or not everyone agreed with one another?
- What role did listening play in this exercise?

Closing the Lesson

- To wrap up the lesson, ask the following questions of students individually (as an exit ticket) or as a whole class.
- What are 3 guidelines you give a person who asks: “What is the best way to enter an ongoing conversation?”
- How can you connect today’s experience to engaging in challenging or sensitive conversations with others? What is similar and/or different?
- How does engaging in Kenneth Burke’s “parlor metaphor” add to your knowledge of what it means to use rhetorical tools to be better able to compete in the “marketplace of ideas?”

Common Core State Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D:** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3:** Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.