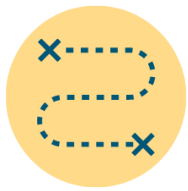


## FREQUENT, VARIED ASSESSMENTS TOOL



## Leveraging Verbal Processing through 'Speed Dating'

by Lindsey Combs

### TOOL DESCRIPTION

A “speed dating” activity to use at the beginning of a unit, to leverage students’ oral and social skills as they create thesis statements to clarify their main arguments (theses).

### CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION

This activity was developed for a Sociology of Gender class of about 20-25 juniors and seniors at a small charter school in Cambridge. The course follows a project-based learning model in which students are asked to apply gender and sociology concepts to social issues in their own communities.

### TOOL & LINKS

- [Speed Dating Protocol](#) (slide deck)—Additional guidance below

## About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

### Process & Materials

This “speed-dating” activity requires the following materials:

- a graphic organizer of prompts so students can prepare for the discussion,
- a set of question sentence-stems as a resource for the listening student,
- a timer, and
- a real or [virtual bell](#) (optional).

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PREPARE FOR YOUR THESIS SPEED-DATES!

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

**Prompt: To what extent does PHA contribute to the school-to-confinement pathway, and what should leaders of the school change to further disrupt it?**

Write down your thesis:

If you don't have your thesis yet, answer the below questions:

1. What does our school do that perpetuates racism and sexism? That harms Black girls?
2. What does our school do to work against racism and sexism? To put students affected by racism and sexism on a good path?
3. What should change about our school to further disrupt racism and sexism?

**Optional: What is a dilemma you have or something you are unsure about for this assignment?**

To begin, students are given [a prompt or series of prompts that are relevant to the current project \(mine is linked\)](#). They spend a few minutes jotting down the key points they want to share in the speed dating activity. Then, they stand in two lines facing each other for "speed-dating." Each student faces one other student, and they take turns presenting their answers to each other.




### THESIS SPEED-DATING!!!

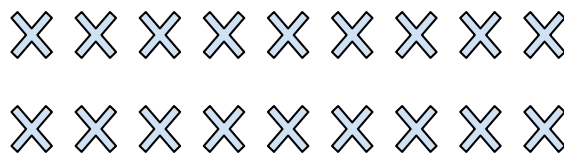
**GOALS:** Refine our thinking about our theses  
Push each other to think deeper  
Learn about other students' arguments.

We will stand in two lines, with each student facing another.

1. Student A will share their thesis/what they have so far.
2. Student B will respond with a question, comment, or feedback (see the back of your speed-dating prep sheet for ideas)
3. Start over and switch roles

When you hear the bell, rotate down one person!  
REFINE YOUR IDEAS EACH TIME YOU SHARE!  
→ more concise, more convincing





Students stand in 2 lines facing each other, and "speed-date" with the person across from them.

The *listening* student actively listens and has in front of them a set of question sentence frames that prompt them to seek clarification, to get their partner to answer all parts of the prompt, to share feedback, and to ask probing questions (see linked tool). The goal is to create a conversation, rather than to simply present one's work. After around 3-5 minutes, I ring a bell, and students shift over to their next partner to repeat the

process but to share further-refined ideas. They repeat this process around 3-5 times, and end the activity by writing down their final argument(s), which they submit for my feedback.

### Additional Guidance

The success of this activity hinges upon:

- Students' understanding of its purpose (e.g. refining and solidifying your thesis and helping each other to develop your ideas).
- Having differentiated prompts so that every student can have something to say. If the prompt is simply, "what is your thesis?" students who do not have one may disengage with the activity and become agents of distraction. Include scaffolded prompts so that every student can access the activity.
- Having sentence frames for the listening student so that they share feedback and questions that align with the project and rubric. Otherwise, the extent of their discussion may be, "Cool. I agree with what you said," or worse—an awkward silence.

To modify this activity for younger students, you might consider rebranding it to be more age-appropriate; for example, calling it "partner processing," "discussion chain," "share and shift," "speed share," or another nifty name.

**Adaptation:** This activity can be adapted for other subjects. It is best suited to activities in which students can share unique or original thinking, or there are a variety of approaches they can take; it is not well-suited to an activity where there is one correct answer that you are hoping all students will arrive at. Below are several ideas.

- Math: When posed with a complex, real-world math question or project, students can discuss the approach they want to take to solve the problem.
- Science: Students can share their plans for an original experiment they are designing.
- History: Students can share and debate their opinions on a historical question before writing an argumentative essay.
- Art, music, or theater: Students share an artistic technique that they plan to apply in an upcoming project to receive feedback and refine their ideas.

**For student buy-in,** it may be helpful to preempt the activity with a discussion on the value of active listening and to include some humor. With my juniors and seniors, I play a short clip, "[Dating 101](#)" that shares the importance of active listening on a first date. This creates a light-hearted tone to the activity and always gets some awkward laughs. You can also build in icebreaker questions to the activity, such as introducing yourself and sharing a hobby at the start of the speed-date, and thanking your partner for a good "first date."

**Some practical tips** for the activity are to:

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- Spread out the line of speed-dating students as much as possible in the room so that each partner isn't shoulder to shoulder with the other. It can get quite hard to hear your partner if you are all too close. Even better—you can take the activity into a long hallway outside of the room.
- Have a large timer on the board and a loud bell or [online buzzer](#) to signal when it is time to shift partners.
- If there is an odd number of students, you should join the speed dating line; otherwise you can hover and circulate.
- Try your best to mix students by skill level when setting up the two speed-dating lines.

## Teacher Narrative

I teach a Sociology of Gender class of about 20-25 juniors and seniors at a small charter school in Cambridge. The course follows a project-based learning model in which students are asked to apply gender and sociology concepts to social issues in their own communities. For this unit, we have studied the criminalization of Black girls in K-12 education, and students have been tasked with writing advocacy letters to our school leadership about how our school can better disrupt the school-to-confinement pathway. Because our school is a self-proclaimed anti-racist and restorative school and has predominantly Black and Latinx students, the project is both authentic for students and welcomed by school leadership.

I use this activity near the beginning of projects or essays to help students clarify their own main arguments. I developed it after noticing how challenging it was for many students to narrow down their many ideas into a concise thesis, let alone get over the mental hump to getting started on a daunting major writing project. The idea began percolating when I realized how helpful it was for students to talk out all of their ideas with me in order to solidify a thesis at the start of a major writing assignment. I thought to myself: how can I get students to verbally process their ideas with each other—rather than me—so that everyone receives feedback to quickly refine their ideas? That was when "speed dating" was born.

Here is a sample of a student's work from my class, before and after the speed-dating.

Thesis before the speed-dating	Thesis after the speed-dating
"While PHA is a restorative school so it has no exclusionary policies in order to disrupt the school to confinement pathway, they also contribute by lacking teachers of color in the school"	"While PHA disrupts the school to confinement pathway through its restorative discipline practices, the problem at hand is that it's heavily lacking in teacher diversity, which indirectly contributes to the school to confinement pathway."

As you can see, this student clarified her ideas through the speed-dating activity. Not only is her writing more grammatically correct and easier to read, but it has a more natural flow. I believe that processing her ideas verbally facilitated this improvement.

Having delved into the specifics of this activity, let's zoom out to the big picture of this practice. The purposes of the activity are for students to verbally process and refine their thinking with a partner, to receive rubric-aligned feedback, and to have multiple opportunities to develop and revise their ideas in a low-stakes and interactive setting. It exemplifies the practice of "Frequent and Varied Assessment" because:

1. It can be deployed quickly and used frequently.
2. It is an example of a verbal assessment that subverts traditional, written assessment models by using a different modality. This allows students to process and show their understanding verbally.
3. It gives students multiple opportunities to get feedback and refine their own ideas.
4. It offers teachers a quick way to gather qualitative data and intervene to support students who are stuck or off-base.

Speed-dating benefits students at whatever phase of the learning process they are in, because they share what they have so far and receive questions and feedback to push their thinking further. I've found that perhaps the most valuable aspect of this assignment is that it acts as an accessible stepping stone for students who are stuck and don't know how to begin a project; they not only get multiple chances to process their ideas verbally, but they also get to hear and gather ideas from multiple other students who are further along in their thinking, and who can take on leadership roles through helping their peers.

This practice not only contributes to building a supportive and scholarly classroom community, but it also breaks up the writing process which can sometimes be dreary, challenging, and isolating. This protocol creates a loud, buzzing, and energetic classroom environment to liven up the learning.

This protocol is a useful assessment tool for students to self-assess, revise, and assess each other's learning in a verbal modality. It also produces useful feedback for the teacher: listening in on and/or participating in the speed dating as the teacher can reveal illuminating information about where students are getting it and not getting it, what may need a re-teach, and who would benefit from 1-1 support. It is a powerful tool to keep in your back pocket to help increase the frequency and variety of your formative assessments and feedback cycles.

## MEET THE AUTHOR

Lindsey K. Combs is a high school humanities teacher at Prospect Hill Academy Charter School, where she teaches World History and Sociology of Gender. Her approach to Student-Centered Learning focuses on student buy-in and ownership: through authentic social justice projects and frequent opportunities for reflection and revision, students become drivers of their own learning journeys.

