Responsible Debate
Learning Resources

Worksheet **5**

RSE **YOUNG
ACADEMY**
OF SCOTLAND

**The Centre
for Responsible
Debate** DISCUSSING
CONTENTIOUS
ISSUES WITH
COMMON PURPOSE
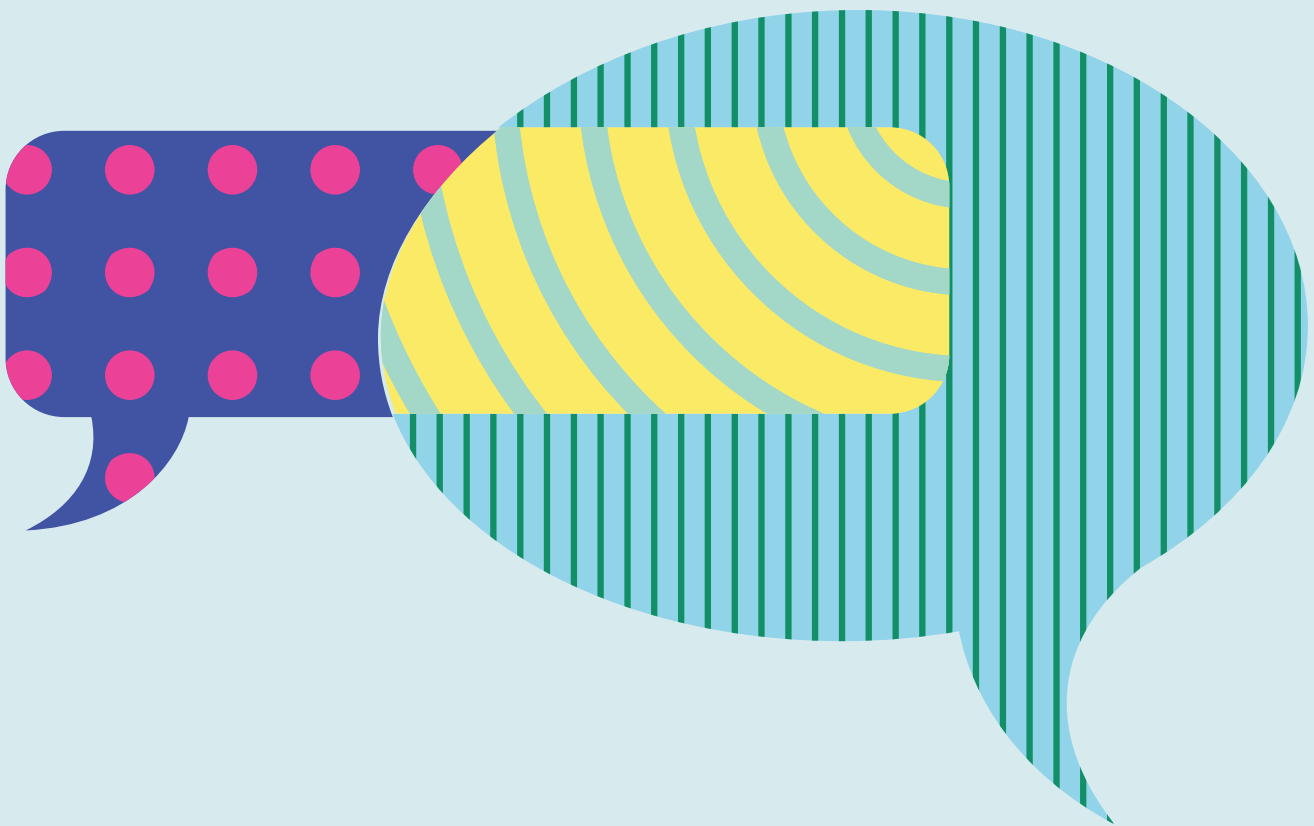
Principles 7 and 8
How inclusivity affects debate

In this worksheet, you are going to continue learning about the principles of the Young Academy of Scotland Charter for Responsible Debate. Principles 7 and 8 are about **inclusive debate**. You will learn about:

1 communicating in ways that **unite** rather than divide,

2 **imbalances in power, knowledge and accessibility** that pose **challenges** for inclusive debate,

3 addressing the **imbalances**.

How to use this worksheet:

This icon indicates where someone **reads the text aloud** and the others follow along.

This icon indicates a **group exercise** where you **discuss** and **write something down**.

This icon indicates a **solo exercise** where you do some **thinking** and **writing** alone.

Remember:

✔ Keep connecting what you read with experiences from **your own life.**

✔ **Share your thoughts** with your group. This is *not* **passive, individual**, or **silent!**

Principle 7: **Communicate in ways that unite rather than divide**

READ ALOUD: In worksheet 4, we looked at the importance of avoiding inflammatory language in debates, among other things. One benefit of using more neutral language is that it helps us to communicate in ways that unite rather than divide. That is the focus of this worksheet.

GROUP EXERCISE: Which of the following are examples of language that unites, and which of them are examples of language that divides? (✔ for uniting language, ✘ for divisive language).

☐ "Conservatives hate queer people."

☐ "No one deserves to feel powerless."

☐ "We care about the environment and our future."

☐ "Rich people are selfish, and they will never understand what poor people are going through."

☐ "How can some women be pro-life and still call themselves feminists?"

☐ "What could countries do to address climate injustice collectively?"

What have you noticed about the language that divides? Write down one feature that the examples of divisive language seem to share.

READ ALOUD: Divisive language has **two common features**.

First, divisive language often reflects a "them vs. us" mentality. We have learned in Worksheet 2 how our social identities can pose challenges for responsible debate. Recognising and addressing these challenges can also help us to avoid divisive language.

Second, divisive language often involves ***ad hominem*** (i.e. personal) attacks. To understand what *ad hominem* attacks are, let's do an exercise.

GROUP EXERCISE: Consider the following arguments.
On the scale of 0–5, rate how good the arguments are (0 for **very bad**; 5 for **very good**).

1 "The author of this book is insane. So, the book is not worth reading."

Rating of argument: _ _ _ _ _

2 "Disadvantaged groups are impacted by climate change more severely than other groups. Hence, climate change worsens inequality."

Rating of argument: _ _ _ _ _

3 "Boris Johnson is a hypocrite who broke his government's lockdown regulations. So why should we listen to his public advice about the pandemic?"

Rating of argument: _ _ _ _ _

Now, underline the phrases in these arguments that draw attention to some **negative aspects** of a person or group (e.g. a negative character trait, unacceptable behaviour, or undesirable characteristic), used to challenge a view that they hold.

If you have given high ratings to the arguments that you have also underlined, you might want to re-examine the arguments. This is because those arguments might be subject to the *ad hominem* fallacy.

The *ad hominem* fallacy

The *ad hominem* fallacy involves appealing to **negative aspects** of a person or group, in order to **reject a view that they hold**. It is a fallacy because the negative aspects do not necessarily undermine their view.

⋯⋗ E.g. Consider this argument again: "Boris Johnson is a hypocrite who broke his government's lockdown regulations. So why should we listen to his public advice about the pandemic?"

Boris Johnson was frowned upon for breaking the lockdown regulations. His behaviour, however, need not tell us much about the evidence base for his advice about the pandemic. The quality of one's advice does not entirely depend on one's own behaviour. (It might turn out that Boris Johnson's advice was poorly evidenced, but that would be for some reasons other than that he himself broke the regulations!)

READ ALOUD: Identifying features of divisive language helps us to avoid using it. This is a big step towards communicating in ways that unite rather than divide. Another important step is to recognise the **conditions** that help us to communicate in ways that **unite**.

In Worksheet 4, we learned how to avoid disrespectful or inflammatory language, and one tip is to **prioritise the truth**. As it turns out, prioritising the truth not only helps us to adopt more neutral language; it can also help to unite us by enabling participants to make progres together in their learning and discussions. This observation looks ahead to Worksheet 6, where we will think about finding common goals and a sense of shared purpose.

What is key for constructive debates that unite?

Evidence suggests that when people with different views share the same concern of **getting things right**, debate helps to bring people together. Argumentation under these conditions can make people change their mind for the best.[1]

⋯⋗ E.g. A group of individuals in Omagh (Northern Ireland), including both Catholics and Protestants, were asked to deliberate about education policy. The debates were constructive even when the topics were politically loaded due to the longstanding Catholic-Protestant divide in the region.[2] Participants changed their minds about several issues and were more informed about education policy after the discussions. It seems that in group settings, under the right conditions, people are inclined to adopt more informed positions; and this can help bring participants together in a shared journey, even if they continue to disagree on some issues.[3]

GROUP EXERCISE: Using the list of conditions below as a guide, let's practice communicating in ways that unite.

Some of the conditions that promote debates that unite participants are...

- ☐ Prioritising truth
- ☐ Exchanging knowledge
- ☐ Working collaboratively
- ☐ Engaging with others in good faith
- ☐ Citing external evidence
- ☐ Being polite in communication
- ☐ Engaging in back-and-forth discussions that build on each other

1 Together with your groupmates, pick a topic in which you are interested.

For example, the topic could be: "Should the legal drinking age be 18?", "Is it ok for parents to post pictures or videos of their children online, without the children's consent?", "Should people eat meat?", etc.

The topic that we have chosen is:

----

2 Without discussing with your groupmates, **summarise your view** on the topic in one or two sentences.

For example, your view can be: "I think that it is ok for parents to post content of their children online, as long as parents make sure that their children's wellbeing is prioritised".

My view on the topic is:

----

3 **Share your view** with your groupmates. Discuss what you think about each other's view for at least 10 minutes. Refer to the list of conditions that promote uniting language, while you engage in discussion.

4 After discussion, tick the conditions in the list above that you think you have fulfilled. How did you do? Write down one thing that you have learned from this practice.

For example, your reflection can be: "I realised that prioritising truth was not as easy as it seemed. It was especially difficult when I just wanted to convince others of my view."

One thing that I have learned is:

Ask yourselves: which aspects of your discussion divided you from each other, and which aspects of your discussion brought you together?

READ ALOUD: The aim of this exercise is not to agree with everyone in your group on every point! Disagreement can be healthy, encouraging us to review our own positions and weigh up different points of view. But it is possible to disagree in ways that do not create bigger divisions between individuals or groups; and discussions are more productive when participants pay attention to things that unite them, alongside different perspectives.

PrInciple 8: Try to address imbalances in power, knowledge and accessibility

READ ALOUD: As well as reflecting on how we debate with each other, it is important to pay attention to who is involved and how they are included. An inclusive debate aims to consider the rights, circumstances and needs of different groups and individuals. In this section, we will talk about how to promote inclusive debate by addressing imbalances in power, knowledge and accessibility.

GROUP EXERCISE: First, let's do an exercise. In each of the following examples, answer the associated questions and explain in your own words the imbalance(s) in power, knowledge, or accessibility.

1 A teenager goes to the doctor to discuss a pain in her stomach. She actually wants to discuss the fact that she has recently discovered that she is pregnant, but she is nervous about revealing this to an adult she does not know.

- Who is more powerful in this interaction?

- Who is more knowledgeable in this interaction?

- What difference might imbalances in power or knowledge make to how the conversation goes?

- Explanation: --

----

2 An important workplace meeting is held every Friday from 4 – 5.30pm, with company supplied drinks afterwards.

- Who has the power to set the meeting time, and why might they benefit from when it is?

- What types of employees might not be able to access this meeting?

- What difference could this make to any decisions made at the meeting?

- Explanation: --

  ----

3 A teacher at the primary school proudly teaches without any computer technology in the classroom because she thinks it is bad for children's attention levels.

- Who has the power in the classroom about how material is taught?

- What types of students might have their accessibility to education hindered by this teacher?

- What difference might limited accessibility make not only to individual students but to everyone in the classroom?

- Explanation: --

  ----

4 A government ministry invites emailed feedback from the general public about proposals to consolidate several small public nursing homes into a large centralised nursing home which will be run by a private company.

- Who has the power in this interaction?

- What kinds of knowledge rest with different people in this interaction?

- Why might some people find it difficult to contribute to this consultation process?

- Explanation: --
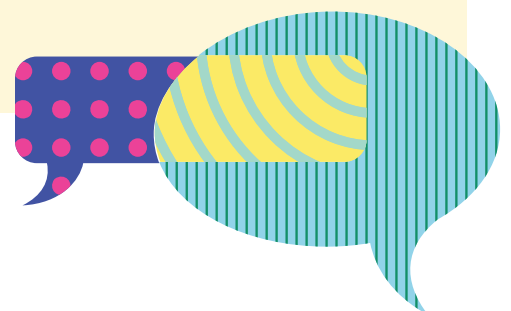
READ ALOUD: We know that there are often imbalances in power, knowledge and accessibility that affect how we interact with each other in society. A crucial step in addressing this is to cultivate the habit of educating ourselves. Imbalances in society (such as the lack of minority voices in our media) influence what we get to know, so there are likely missing gaps in our knowledge and understanding. It is important to seek information from a wide range of sources, and raise awareness of different people's experiences and circumstances.

GROUP EXERCISE: Agree with your group, and write down at least one positive step that could be taken to address imbalances in power, knowledge, and accessibility in the four examples on pages 6 and 7.

1 ---
----

2 ---
----

3 ---
----

4 ---

READ ALOUD: Power imbalances can affect debate in other ways. To understand the relation between power and inclusive debate, let's try to understand better what power is. Here we are mainly concerned with **social power**.

Social power exists because we have **a capacity to influence how things go in the social world**.[4] For example, casting a vote influences which candidate gets elected; volunteering at a shelter helps homeless people; telling others about the principles of inclusive debate increases awareness of responsible debate.

Social power is at play when this capacity is exercised to **influence other people's actions**.[5] For example, passing strict immigration policies restricts potential immigrants' movement. In this case, a state exercises social power to control the actions of potential immigrants. On the other hand, campaigning for gender equality can change how men and women are treated in the workplace. In this case, activists and campaign groups use their social influence to persuade employers to improve their workplace policies, or to encourage individuals to improve their interpersonal interactions.

Social power may be exercised by **individuals or organisations** (e.g. political parties, corporations, schools, social clubs, and so on). It may also be manifested **structurally**, where there is no specific individual or organisation using the power but it still structures the way people act in the social world. Our reliance on literacy is an example of this. British society is structured in a way that assumes that everyone can read to a reasonably high level, even though some people struggle with this. People with strong literacy skills can thrive, but those without high levels of literacy can end up being excluded in lots of different ways.

SOLO EXERCISE: Take a moment to reflect on your personal experience. Recall a time when **social power** was exercised.

For example, the sports team of which you are member in your school is electing a new captain. Several candidates are eligible for the role. Each of them tries to convince you that they are the most suitable candidate. The action being influenced here is who you vote for (which affects who gets elected). The candidates influence your vote through campaigning for themselves.

In the case you have recalled, who (if anyone) is exercising social power?
(Tick the relevant box, and fill in the blank where appropriate.)

☐ An individual, who is

☐ An organisation, which is

☐ No particular individual or organisation because it is structurally manifested

Whose actions are being influenced? How are their actions being influenced?

READ ALOUD: Social power is **not good or bad in itself**. It can work in favour of those subjected to the power, or it can work against them.

For example, social power is exercised to enforce traffic rules, which constrain what drivers, cyclists and pedestrians may do. This is generally in the interests of those who are subjected to the power.

Social power is also exercised to enforce racial segregation, e.g. when Jim Crow laws were in place in the United States, or during apartheid in South Africa. In the case of racial segregation, social power operates against the interests of discriminated and marginalised communities, such as African Americans or Black South Africans.

GROUP EXERCISE: Revisit the examples of social power that you have drawn from personal experience earlier.

(i) Share those examples with your groupmates.

(ii) Discuss whether, in those cases, social powers are exercised in **the interests of those whose actions are being controlled** or they are exercised **against their interests**?

In my example of social power, the power is exercised

☐ **in the interests of**

☐ **against the interests of**

☐ **neither in nor against the interests of**

those who are subjected to the power.

This is because

READ ALOUD: Power imbalances affect whose voice gets heard and believed. We might notice that those with more social power tend to get more attention and representation in media, public discourse, and debates in general. They also have more power to influence what is taken to be true. This means that **imbalances** in power come hand in hand with imbalances in **knowledge and accessibility**.[6]

When imbalances in social power influence who speaks up or what they say in a discussion of contentious issues, this can undermine the quality of the debate. It means that potential solutions to shared problems might not be voiced. And it can cause participants to feel like their side of the debate hasn't been heard and so they may view any "solution" to the challenges as illegitimate.

Example: **Propaganda against transgender youths' experiences**

A transgender person is someone whose gender identity is different from the gender that was assigned to them at birth. A variety of online communities, popular press, partisan groups, and academic literature casts doubt on what transgender youths report about their experiences. They often claim that transgender youths have been brainwashed (e.g., by social media).[7]

Articles and statements that question what transgender youths say about their gender **risk dismissing and misinterpreting transgender youths' experiences**. This is an example of social power imbalance because those who cast doubt on transgender youths' reports might often have more power in society to influence what people believe. For example, they might insist that someone's gender identity cannot be different from the gender assigned at birth, so (they would claim) a transgender youth is mistaken about their gender identity. And because of their social position (e.g., adult, professional, celebrity, etc.) they may be taken more seriously than transgender youths.

It won't always avoid the perils of imbalances of power, but one thing we can do to tackle them is to cultivate **reflexive critical openness**.

What is reflexive critical openness?

Reflexive critical openness is the virtue of being aware of how **prejudices may distort our responses** to what others say, and reliably succeeding in **correcting those distortions**.[8] When this virtue is cultivated and exercised, we may gain knowledge from the words of others, even when power imbalances create prejudices against the speaker.

→ E.g. Writers from oppressed races and nationalities have said that all writing is political, but their claim has been dismissed or ignored. When established European writers make the same claim, it is taken seriously and considered to be a new truth.

→ Reflexive critical openness is exercised when we are aware that we may have certain prejudices that cloud our judgements of the writers' claims, and we take measures to counteract the prejudices. Upon correcting our judgements successfully, we may take what the oppressed writers say to be true.

How to cultivate reflexive critical openness?

▪ Remember the three bias tests (the conformity test, the double standard test, and the selective sceptic test) that we learned about in Worksheet 2? **Applying the bias tests** helps us to identify any potential prejudices we have against those speaking to us.

▪ After identifying the potential prejudices we have, we need to **correct our responses** to the speakers accordingly. We may give the speakers more credibility – that is, to give more credit to what the speakers say. Alternatively, we may give the speakers less credibility – that is, to be more critical of the speakers' claims.

It takes time to develop reflexive critical openness because: **(1)** it takes time to discover what prejudices we have; **(2)** it takes time to build the habit of checking for prejudices and correcting our responses that have been tainted by prejudices. But these are things that are worth doing, if we want to have inclusive debates!

READ ALOUD: At the heart of it all is **humility, openness, and action**. We need to accept that we may be wrong and be open to other perspectives. We need to put in the work to know better, and debate in a way that recognises different groups' and individuals' rights, circumstances, and needs. This might involve re-structuring our methods of debate to ensure that marginalised groups can access the discussion and take part on an equal footing. It might also involve questioning our assumptions about who is expert and who is not.

Conclusion: Wrap up Principles 7 and 8

GROUP EXERCISE: Time to draw these themes together. Choose the appropriate phrase to fill in each blank in the summary paragraph below.

Phrases: **imbalances in power, working collaboratively, structurally, ad hominem attacks**

Summary

Identifying features of divisive language helps us to avoid using it. Divisive language has two common features: it often reflects a "them vs. us" mentality, and it often involves _. Some conditions that promote uniting language include prioritising truth, _, being polite in communication, and engaging in back-and-forth discussions.

Social power is exercised by individuals or organisations, or it is manifested _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _, in the way that it influences others' actions. Social power is not good or bad in itself, but _ may lead to problems, including problems in discussions of contentious issues.

This is because power imbalances affect who we hear and believe. They shape what know about ourselves, others, and the society in general, and influence who gets access to opportunities and resources. All of this affects what we bring to a debate and how we debate.

Resources for you to explore further

If you'd like to find out more, here are some links to explore with your team, and you can also look up any of the references in the worksheet – these are listed for you below.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has a good discussion on fallacies of argumentation, including the ad hominem fallacy: **https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fallacies/**

In the Young Academy of Scotland's report on the Charter for Responsible Debate, there is a good case study for how social power has negatively affected who's voices are heard in public policy debate about migration and public health travel bans. See pp. 29-31, "How to Talk about Migrations? Some insights from the perspective of reporting the coronavirus pandemic" by M. Šolić, **https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Debate-Charter-Report-FINAL-Web.pdf**

Also very relevant is an essay by Kevin Guyan, called "Trans Lives in Scotland: imbalances of power and the limits of respectful debate", also in the Young Academy of Scotland's report on the Charter for Responsible Debate: **https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Debate-Charter-Report-FINAL-Web.pdf**

Bibliography

Alcoff, L. (1991). The Problem of Speaking for Others. *Cultural Critique*, 0882-4371 (Winter 1991-92), 5-32.

Fricker, M. (2003). Epistemic Injustice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowing. *Metaphilosophy*, 34(1/2), 154-173.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

George, B. R., & Goguen, S. (2021). Hermeneutical Backlash: Trans Youth Panics as Epistemic Injustice. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 7(4), Article 1.

Hansen, H. (2020, April 2). *Fallacies*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. **https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fallacies/**

Luskin, R. C., O'Flynn, I., Fishkin, J. S., & Russell, D. (2014). Deliberating across Deep Divides. *Political Studies*, 62(1), 116-135.

Mercier, H., & Sperber, D. (2017). *The Enigma of Reason*. Random House.

National Health Service (NHS). (2022, September 7). *What is autism?* **https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/what-is-autism/**

Shakespeare, T. (2017). The Social Model of Disability. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader* (5th ed., pp. 195-203). Routledge.

UK Government. *Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010*. **https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010**

Notes

1   Mercier and Sperber (2017), p. 307.

2   Luskin et al. (2014).

3   Mercier and Sperber (2017), p. 310-314.

4   Fricker (2007), p. 9.

5   Fricker (2007), p. 13.

6   Some of this is loosely based on Foucault's idea that power reproduces knowledge by shaping it in accordance with certain (covert) intentions.
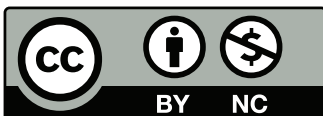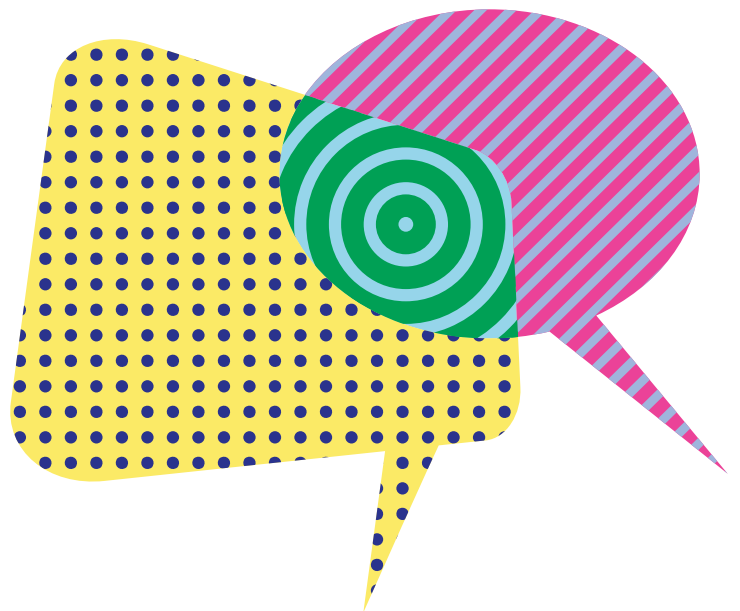
7   George and Goguen (2021).

8   Fricker (2003).

9   Alcoff (1991), p 13.

RSE YOUNG ACADEMY OF SCOTLAND

The Centre for Responsible Debate
DISCUSSING CONTENTIOUS ISSUES WITH COMMON PURPOSE

www **https://responsibledebate.org** | **www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk**

YoungAcademySco

YoungAcademySco