

Lesson 1.3

MEETING IN A FISHBOWL: CONSENSUS VS. DEMOCRACY

Objective: Students will compare and contrast the democratic and the consensual decision-making processes through simulation.

Materials:

- **Sheet 1.3:** Evaluation Worksheet, one per student

Timing: Three to four class periods

Background Reading: Chapter One, Section Four

Procedure:

1. After reading the chapter, students should have an idea of what consensus is. Make sure their understanding is solid. Discuss the distinctions between decision-making by consensus, when everyone must agree, and decision-making by democracy, when the majority rules. Have students suggest what kinds of advantages there are to both methods of decision-making.
2. Break the class into two groups. Assign one group the task of simulating a town meeting and the other the task of simulating a tribal meeting. Assign students an issue to discuss at their meeting. An example:

Earlier this year, a group of teenagers set fire to an abandoned building in the middle of the night. The fire blazed out of control and burnt down much of the forest surrounding the building. It came close to reaching the house of a town resident before it was finally put out by the fire department. Since the incident, many people have been insisting that if the kids were at home and in bed, the problem never would have happened. Some people have proposed that the town impose a curfew. Other people feel that imposing a curfew infringes on people's freedom, and that parenting should be left to parents. What do you think the town should do?

***Note:** As an alternative, have students discuss a problem that has recently affected their community or school, or have students choose the issue to be discussed themselves.

3. Within each group, assign roles as follows (or similar to this, depending on the issue chosen):
 - a. Two local business leaders
 - b. Two local religious leaders

- c. Two adult representatives of the public school (i.e. a teacher, a school board member, the principal)
- d. Two parents--one is a parent of a child who started the fire, the other is not
- e. Two teenagers
- f. A moderator (town meeting) or a sakom (tribal meeting)
- g. A property owner

4. Have students meet in teams and research the issue from the point of view of their character. They must be prepared to present convincing arguments on the topic from their character's point of view. Students simulating the town meeting must prepare a brief written ordinance in advance to read aloud at the start of the meeting. Students should prepare for their meetings, based on the following models:

- For the town meeting, the room should be set up with a chair at the front for the moderator. The moderator should begin the meeting by proposing to pass a curfew ordinance (or other ordinance, depending on the issue chosen). Speakers should speak from their seats, and only when called on by the moderator. Each speaker (or each team of speakers) should have 2-3 minutes to present their arguments. Then, all members of the town meeting should vote on the ordinance, either by voice (yeas and nays) or by a show of hands. The majority vote should decide the issue.

***Please Note:** This method of conducting a town meeting gives only a basic idea of how one actually works. For more information and resources on local government, visit the Maine Municipal Association's web site at www.memun.org.

- For the tribal meeting, the students should sit in a circle. The student assigned to the role of sakom should lead the discussion by calling on people. Everyone should be given an opportunity to talk. At the end of a given time period (15-20 minutes), the sakom should suggest a solution based on the discussion. The students should then have the opportunity to agree or disagree with the sakom's suggestion. They should try to reach a decision unanimously within the class period.

***Please Note:** Emphasize to students that their simulation of a tribal meeting based on consensus was a method used by ancient tribes. Tribal government today follows a different process, specific to each tribe. For more information, please contact the tribal offices:

Penobscot Nation official website: www.penobscotnation.org

Passamaquoddy at Princeton website: www.passamaquoddy.com

Passamaquoddy tribal government site at Pleasant Point: www.wabanaki.com

Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians: www.maliseets.com

Aroostook Band of Micmacs: www.micmac-nsn.gov

University of Maine Wabanaki and Native Studies program: www.naps.umaine.edu

5. Use the fishbowl method on the day of the presentations. While one group presents, the other group watches and makes notes about the decision-making process of the presenting group. Then the groups switch.

6. After both simulations are complete, ask students to evaluate the processes they observed using Sheet 1.4. Once students have completed their evaluation sheets, come together as a whole group for a debriefing. Ask questions like the following:

- What was similar about the processes? What differed?
- How might the size of a group change the way each process worked?
- What other ways do governments make decisions besides consensus and democracy?
- Does your community's local government work the way the town meeting simulation worked? How does that compare with how the state government works? The federal government?
- Which process did students like better?

Evaluation: Assess students based on their participation and helpfulness in their group meeting, and the quality of their individual preparation. Students should receive both a group grade and an individual grade.

Follow-up activity:

- Have students research contemporary tribal government structure and decision-making processes.
- Have students attend a local public hearing or town meeting and write a paper describing what they observed.

Alignment with the Learning Results:

Grade Level: **SECONDARY GRADES**

Content Area: Social Studies: **CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT**

Standard: **RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND PARTICIPATION.**

Students will understand the rights and responsibilities of civic life and will employ the skills of effective civic participation.

Performance Indicator: Develop and defend a position on a public policy issue within our democracy.

Grade Level: **SECONDARY GRADES**

Content Area: Social Studies: **CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT**

Standard: **PURPOSE AND TYPES OF GOVERNMENT.**

Students will understand the types and purposes of governments, their evolution, and their relationships with the governed. Performance Indicator: Compare and contrast the purpose and the structure of the United States government with other governments (parliamentary, dictatorship, monarchy) with respect to ideology, values, and histories.

Grade Level: **MIDDLE GRADES**

Content Area: Social Studies: **CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT**

Standard: **RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND PARTICIPATION.**

Students will understand the rights and responsibilities of civic life and will employ the skills of effective civic participation.

Performance Indicator: Evaluate and defend positions on current issues regarding individual rights and judicial protection, and identify ways in which citizens in a pluralistic society manage differences of opinion on public policy issues.

