

## Deliberative Democracy Activity

Dr. Paul R. Carr

*(NOTE: There are a number of organizations advocating deliberative democracy, some of which have a presence on the internet. Some scholars, such as Walter Parker and Diana Hess, have also made important contributions in this area. This activity is inspired by some of the initiatives advanced by others mentioned above.)*

### *Premise*

One part of democracy involves conversing with others, often those who may not share the same world-view, opinion and/or experience. Expressing one's view need not translate into insulting the other party. Yet, it is not always easy to engage in constructive, fruitful, meaningful dialog with others. It is questionable if electoral campaigns, political parties and the mainstream media are ideally situated to help us understand others. If we do not seek to mediate our problems, what is the solution? Violence, war, destruction? To discuss or debate ideas, concepts, proposals and/ issues with others, we also need to be good listeners. Conveying our thoughts must be balanced with a receptive and open mind toward hearing what others think, and why. In some cases, we may shift our thinking, accommodating others without necessarily deluding our values and beliefs. Education is clearly at the center of this process of deliberative democracy, and the quest for political literacy and social justice needs to be framed within a continuous interplay between theory, dialog and practice, what Paulo Freire would call praxis.

This activity involves students being engaged in contentious and controversial subjects, debating diverse sides of the equation (there is always multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon), listening to the other, and then determining if, wherever possible, there might be some room for consensus, mediation, rapprochement and/or constructive engagement. The objective of this activity is not to render the other party uncomfortable, to denigrate or humiliate the other, nor to make it impossible to have a constructive dialog. Rather, the objective is to make compelling arguments, listen to the other, then re-appraise the original arguments and determine how the discussion can be further advanced in light of all of the arguments made. Be reflective, respectful, open-minded, critical and engaged. Do not shy away from stating forceful arguments but be aware of the objective of advancing a dialog, regardless of how intractable the subject may be.

### *Process*

1. Students will be divided into groups of two or four, depending on the size of the class. Assuming that there will be groups of two for the purpose of this activity, they will be labelled A and B.
2. The pair of students—A and B—will be given a topic, and will then have ten minutes to prepare arguments for and against accordingly.

3. Student A will then be given five minutes to present arguments in favour of the topic or proposition. Student B must listen attentively without intervening. Student B may take a few notes but must remain focused on Student A during her/his presentation.
4. After Student A has completed her/his five-minute presentation, there will be a two-minute break.
5. Student B will then have five minutes to make her/his presentation, as outlined in 3 above. Students A, accordingly, must listen attentively to Student B, and may take some notes if necessary.
6. After this segment, there will be a two-minute break.
7. Students A and B will then have five minutes to discuss together if there are any points on which they agree, how one may have influenced the other, and if there are some angles which could be further explored. They should also acknowledge why or how a consensus might be difficult.
8. There will then be a two-minute break.
9. Then Students A and B will discuss for five minutes how their own experiences, identities, ideologies, perspectives and ideologies may have informed their opinions, and also whether or not deliberative democratic discussions are helpful.
10. There will then be a plenary discussion to examine the utility of this activity and also how people were affected by it.

### *Topics*

#### *Canada*

1. Canada is clearly a better country than the US. There is less crime, less racism, less poverty, and people around the world seem to more fondness toward Canada than the US.
2. Aboriginal peoples have been cheated by the Canadian state and people. Their land was taken, and the rights trivialized.
3. There is little evidence of violence against women in Canada because there are few complaints. This does not seem to be a problem any longer.
4. Quebec is an integral part of Canada, and without it Canada would become de facto a part of the United States.
5. Canada boasts of its commitment to the international community, especially development countries, yet the amount it allocates for official development assistance is among the lowest of all developed countries.
6. Multiculturalism is a fundamental feature of Canadian identity, and without it the country would be weakened at the political, economic and cultural levels.
7. Welfare in Canada is a problem because it rewards people for not working.
8. Canada is a pacifist nation, and is not interesting in militarization. Our reputation in the world hinges on our commitment to peace-keeping.
9. Our legal system is broken because most people cannot afford to access it. Therefore, we could consider that there are only rights for the rich.
10. Violence in hockey is necessary because it is part of the game and our national heritage. To prohibit fighting would ruin the game.

## *United States*

11. The United States has some 750 military bases in a hundred countries. This is a good and necessary allocation of resources.
12. There are, effectively, only two political parties in the United States. The democratic system works well within this framework, and should not be altered.
13. Same-sex marriage is a human right, and should not be diminished for religious reasons. What difference does it make what two consenting adults decide to do within the privacy of their homes?
14. Racism is not about name-calling but about power. Racism will never be stopped until White people become fully part of the equation.
15. The average person has a wealth of knowledge on sports but little knowledge about why the US government is spending hundreds of billions on war. Some might argue that the manufacturers of bombs are quite pleased that there is little critical discussion of the prison-industrial complex.
16. The best way to improve education is through rigorous standards, including standardized curriculum and tests. If we do not move in this direction, how will we know if we have accountability?
17. It is a right of all parents to have a good educational experience available for their children. Therefore, no one has the right to oppose charter schools, which are an effective way of improving the public good.
18. Healthcare is a personal responsibility, and the government should not be involved in the individual choices of individuals. People who spend needlessly should not be rewarded with free healthcare, nor should the poor, who have made undesirable choices.
19. The only way to improve society is through education. For this reason, all charter, private, independent and parochial schools should be made illegal, and all students should be forced to live, study and prosper together, not divided based on social class, income, race and religion.
20. The US is the most violent country in the Western world, with some 25,000 murders per year. Therefore, all guns should be made illegal, and stiff penalties should be imposed on anyone carrying a firearm.