Reaching Group Consensus

This modelling the tools is incorporated into critical challenges at grade 11, however, it can be adapted for use at all grade levels.

Overview

These activities help students learn to reach consensus in a large group setting by engaging in a mock summit conference on a controversial issue. Students first learn about the theme of the summit, are assigned a region or interest group to represent and introduced to the idea of consensus and strategies for bringing about consensus. Students learn about the proposed agenda for the summit and develop a profile of their delegation's interests and concerns. Next, students engage in two rounds of drafting proposals, debate and negotiation aimed at reaching consensus on a set of resolutions. Finally, students debrief what they have learned about the issues raised at the summit and about the challenges of consensus building.

Session One

Introduce the idea of a summit

- Ask students what they know about a summit. Where have summits been held? Who attended? What are the topics? To enhance their general understanding of summitry, mention and discuss well-known summits. Summaries of past summits, such as those held by the UN, the G-8 or between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War, might be particularly informative, whether they have been successful or not at attaining consensus.

Explain the theme of the summit

- Explain to students the purpose for holding summits: to bring together delegates who represent differing interests to discuss, negotiate and reach agreement on an issue of mutual concern. Introduce the theme for the summit. Explain that students will represent an assigned perspective in proposing solutions and negotiating two rounds of talks aimed at reaching consensus on the issue.

Identify the delegations

- Divide the class into groups according to the appropriate areas or interest groups, either by assigning students a role or allowing them to choose one after they have had time to think about the topic. Depending on the topic and/or the regions or interest groups, consider establishing differing group sizes according to the population or perceived "power" of the group. For example, at a G-8 summit, the wealthier countries, such as the U.S.A. or Japan, might have a larger group size than Canada since they wield more power. Similarly, in a Canadian summit, differences in population may mean that the

group representing Atlantic Canada might have half the number of members as the group representing Ontario.

Introduce the requirement of consensus

- Explain to students that the summit represents an ideal opportunity to learn about and develop their ability to reach consensus on contested issues. Distribute the sheet **Consensus Decision Making** (Background Information), discuss the meaning of the concept and review the strategies for trying to bring about consensus. Introduce the criteria and procedures for involving students in peer- and self-assessment outlined in **Assessing Consensus**. Discuss the form that student will use to record their assessments (**Assessing Consensus: Peer- and Self-assessment**) and the rubric that you will use to asses how fairly and conscientiously students have completed their peer- and self-assessments (**Assessing Consensus: Assessing Student Assessments**). Conclude with a discussion of the following questions:
    - What is the value of trying to reach consensus?
    - When is consensus necessary? When might consensus not be needed?

Session Two

Distribute registration package

- To simulate registration at an actual summit, arrange for students to collect a Conference Kit containing a set of documents for each delegate as they enter the classroom. These documents might include a summit agenda, briefing sheets, lists of resources or Web sites for research, and activity sheets to collect information and organize their thoughts. You may also wish to provide identification tags with a place for students to indicate their names and the delegation they represent.

Review agenda for the summit

- Using the sample **Conference Agenda** as a template, create an outline of the sequence of events for the summit. In the suggested example, students:
    - prepare profile of group's interests and concerns
    - develop proposed resolutions for consideration
    - share proposals and negotiate with other delegations
    - revise proposed resolutions in light of first round of negotiations
    - hold second round of negotiation with other delegations
    - hold final vote on all resolutions submitted
    - debrief the experience.

Gather information about the delegation

- Provide each delegation with appropriate resource lists or pre-developed briefings on their region or interest group. Distribute **Delegation Profile** to student groups as a tool for recording key information about features, history and concerns of the region or group

they are representing. Distribute several copies of **Briefing on Issue** to each student group as a tool for summarizing information about each issue the delegation wishes the summit to consider. Provide ample time for students to read or investigate the information and to record their findings.

Reinforce consensus building

- Make it clear that, throughout the summit simulation, students are adopting a role—the views they represent may not be those that they hold personally. It is also important that all group members agree on the proposal. In keeping with the concept of consensus, the delegation itself needs to have consensus before it can begin to aim for it in the larger summit. The art of compromise is important at every stage of the summit process.

Session Three

Develop criteria for effective proposals

- In preparation for developing their delegation's proposal, ask students to consider how they might go about asking their parents or guardians if they can go away on a trip for the weekend. What are some ways of getting their point across knowing that their parents or guardians may take a different view on the idea? Suggestions might include: don't ask for too much, offer something in return, provide tangible evidence of the benefits, anticipate possible objections. Use their response to identify criteria for an effective proposal:
  - o thoughtfully articulated
  - o benefits are evidentially supported
  - o shows willingness to accommodate.

Prepare proposals

- Direct student groups to use the research notes taken during session two and the class-developed criteria to develop their group's proposed resolutions regarding each issue they want to consider. Ask students to complete a copy of **Issue Negotiations** for each issue to outline their goals, reasoning, anticipated objections and proposed strategies.

Session Four

Present preliminary proposals

- Assume the role as chair of the summit. Reintroduce the theme. Explain that each delegation will be allowed a few uninterrupted minutes to present their preliminary proposals. Distribute multiple copies of the chart **Reactions to Proposals** for students to take notes on each of the presentations.

Allow for negotiations

- Immediately after the delegation presentations, set aside approximately 15 minutes for delegates to discuss and negotiate with one another.

Revise proposals

- Once the proposals have been heard and the brief negotiations completed, each delegation should discuss each of its proposals and assign one of three designations:
  - unanimously accepted
  - unanimously rejected
  - divided opinion, further discussion needed.

For those proposals where opinion is divided, invite delegates to propose modifications that would make the proposals acceptable to every member of the summit. If a delegation cannot reach consensus on a proposal, it must indicate "reject."

Hold preliminary vote

- After the delegation discussions are finished, reconvene the entire summit and hold an initial vote on each proposal (including those with suggested modifications), one at a time. Allow each delegation to offer brief arguments for the purpose of persuading other groups to adopt their key proposals.

Session Five

Prepare for Round Two

- In preparing for the next round of talks, direct delegation groups to prioritize their proposals and develop negotiating strategies. Each group should discuss potential modifications to their proposed resolutions and again attempt to reach consensus regarding the changes. Prioritizing the proposals may include designating certain proposals as high priority and others as low priority. Some proposals may need to be abandoned. The delegations should seek to secure modifications to other groups' proposals

Negotiate with other delegations

- Ask each group to select representatives to negotiate with other groups. The negotiators should attempt to learn more about the desired proposal modifications from the other groups as well as persuade them to change or to negotiate compromises on their positions.

Develop final proposals

- After the informal negotiations have finished, delegations make final modifications to their proposals given the information gained from the negotiations. Remind students that they are attempting to reach consensus in the summit while still maintaining their

delegation's core goals and values. They should consider what modifications best meet both of these aims.

Present the final proposals

- Each delegation presents its proposals in a brief, uninterrupted statement.

Vote on all resolutions

- Conduct a final vote. Only those proposals that are unanimously accepted will be adopted.

Encourage final reflections

- In a formal group setting or as an individual activity, invite students to reflect on the simulation and on the main conclusions of the summit. You may want to use the questions found in **Reflecting on the Experience** to structure these reflections.

Assessment

Assess issue briefs

- Assess students' ability to identify and explain core issues for their delegation using the rubric **Assessing Knowledge of the Issue**. Students can use this information to gauge their need to investigate the issue further.

Assess issue proposals

- Assess students' ability to develop proposals reflective of their assigned perspective, and to anticipate and plan for objections by using the rubric **Assessing Issue Negotiating Plans**.

Assess consensus building

- The tools found in **Assessing Consensus** can be used to explain how students might use the **Assessing Consensus: Peer- and Self-assessment** to assess their own and other group members' contributions to the summit process.

Assess students' peer- and self-assessments

- Use the rubric **Assessing Consensus: Assessing Student Assessments** to evaluate students' self- and peer-assessments.

Credits

This lesson is adapted from *Critical Challenges in Law and Government:Canada's Constitutional Crisis—A Simulation* by Phyllis Schwartz and Aric Hayes et al. (Richmond, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 1999). Permission granted from The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.

Documents

The following documents are referenced in the above modelling the tools.
They can be adapted for your needs and re-saved.

Graphic Organizers

- **Conference Agenda** W
- **Briefing on Issue** W
- **Issue Negotiations** W
- **Reflecting on the Experience** W
- **Delegation Profile** W
- **Reactions to Proposals** W

Assessment

- **Assessing Consensus** W
- **Assessing Consensus: Peer- and Self-assessment** W
- **Assessing Consensus: Assessing Student Assessments** W
- **Assessing Knowledge of the Issue** W
- **Assessing Issue Negotiating Plans** W

Background Information

- **Consensus Decision Making** PDF