

# Deliberation and Democracy

## How Historical Simulations Equip Students for Civic Participation

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“You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

—Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*<sup>1</sup>

As elementary teachers of social studies, we frequently wrestle with how to help our students make connections to remote events in time and space and to complex issues in government and democracy. At first glance, current issues in the news can seem distant and even frightening to young children, while historical events and figures can feel irrelevant to their daily lives. In our teaching, however, we have found that using historical simulation and deliberation in the classroom bridges these gaps and enables students to make connections to people across history and across the globe. Deliberation is a way of discussing issues that encourages participants to listen to and seek to understand other people’s perspectives, avoiding either polarizing debate or unanimous agreement. Deliberation helps students develop empathy, introduces them to the complexity of public decision-making, and awakens them to the critical work of people in achieving and sustaining democracy.

### Deliberation in the Classroom: Context and Practice

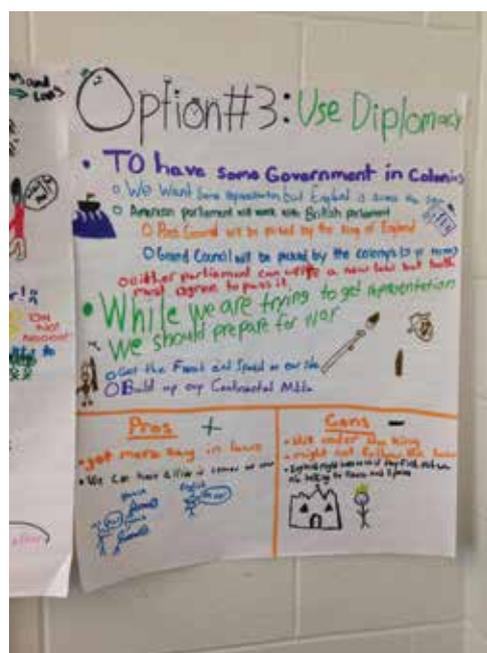
At Park Forest Elementary School, a K-5 school in State College, Pennsylvania, we are constantly working to “engage students in the process of living, not the preparation for future living.”<sup>2</sup> To that end, we have spent years building a culture of community, inquiry, and citizenship, in which students of all ages have frequent opportunities to practice the challenging work of democratic decision-making. This approach improves our school environment, enriches the students’ educational experience, and helps prepare them for the duties of citizenship. Within this established culture, we recently began introducing our fifth-graders to deliberation

as a structured framework for taking on different perspectives and addressing complex community issues.

Democratic problem solving is “rooted in the simple notion that people need to come together to reason and talk—to deliberate about common problems,” according to the National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI).<sup>3</sup> Using deliberation in the classroom, whether to teach historical decision points or to introduce current social issues, gives students a productive structure for considering difficult social problems. Through deliberation, students: (1) explore the underlying *perspectives* of multiple stakeholders, (2) identify people’s *values*, such as security, liberty, fairness, order, and care for the vulnerable, (3) analyze the *trade-offs* associated with different options for addressing a problem, and (4) seek *common ground* among stakeholders before deciding on an action plan.<sup>4</sup>

### Deliberating Historic Decisions

Each year, in our fifth-grade classroom, students engage in three formal, deliberative forums, two on historical decision points and one on a current social issue. In order to prepare for participation in deliberative forums on historical issues, students engage in a three-week historical simulation that helps them imagine how it would be to “climb into [the] skin” of 18th-century Americans and experience the day-to-day concerns that led up to the convening of the Continental Congress (1776) at the dawn of the Revolution and then at the time of the Constitutional Convention (1787) as citizens struggled to invent a new structure for governing themselves. This simulation provides each student not only with the background information necessary to participate in the deliberative forums but also with a personal stake in their outcomes.



At two key points in our simulation, representing 1776 and 1787, we invite students to town hall meetings (forums) to name the issues facing the community, as if they were present at the momentous decision points that helped shape our country. Using video materials and historical issue guides to frame the issues,<sup>5</sup> students break into small groups to analyze three possible courses of action, or options, for the community to follow. According to the Kettering Foundation, naming is described as “naming the issues in [participants’] own terms; that is, in terms of what is most valuable to them,” and framing is described as “framing issues so that a range of actions is considered and the trade-offs required are evident.”<sup>6</sup> For example, in our first deliberative forum<sup>7</sup> of the year—“1776: Defining Ourselves: What Should We Do?”—the issue before the Second Continental Congress is framed to include the following options: (1) Remain loyal to Britain; (2) Declare independence and be ready for violent conflict; or (3) use diplomacy to address grievances.

In our second deliberative forum<sup>8</sup> —“A New Land: What Kind of Government should We Have? (1787)” —the issue before the Constitutional Convention is framed to include the following options: (1) Strengthen the Articles of Confederation; (2) Create a strong central government; or (3) Let the states govern themselves entirely. Considering three diverse options allows students to escape entrenched debates between oppositional binaries and, rather, to weigh the advantages and trade-offs of various courses of action.

Prior to each forum, students work in small groups to examine one option in depth and prepare to present its components and trade-offs to their classmates in the forum. When ready for the forum, students return to the large group, sit in a circle, and deliberate one option at a time. We ask students to act as “representatives” for the option they have studied, but not to advocate for the class to choose that option. In deliberation, unlike in traditional historical role-playing exercises, students

are not assigned to argue for particular perspectives; instead, they are encouraged to articulate and voice their own opinions. This encourages historical imagination, creative problem-solving, and the civic skills of carefully considering potential actions, communicating opinions to peers, and listening respectfully and attentively to others’ ideas.

While each group presents its option, other students take notes and prepare clarifying and probing questions to ask. During the presentations and questioning about each option, we are able to assess not only students’ understanding of historical content and perspectives, but also students’ ability to remain open-minded, look at all possible options, and engage in civil discourse around an issue. For example, during the 1787 deliberation, one class chose to spend over an hour considering the currency and banking issues facing the fledgling nation. By providing time for collective deliberation, the forum framework allowed students to develop creative solutions to a difficult problem, with one student astutely suggesting that we “back paper money with a gold standard to give people confidence in it.” As students spent time talking about the advantages and disadvantages of each option and the trade-offs involved, they began to understand the complexity of the issues and to recognize the work, sacrifice, and ingenuity necessary to create and sustain a democratic government.

Toward the end of each forum, we asked the group to identify areas of common ground shared by all stakeholders, regardless of the course of action they may favor. Although our question often meets with initial silence, it takes only one student to find a starting point, such as “we all don’t want to die!” or “we want a strong economy,” before the group is able to generate a list of areas of common ground among all stakeholders. To bring closure, we “take the pulse” of the group to see which option students are inclined to favor, without asking them to engage in a formal vote. This enables us to see whether students have

thought deeply about the complexity of the historical decision, or whether they were constrained by their present-day knowledge of historical outcomes. We are always surprised and pleased at the depth of student understanding of the issues and their willingness to consider (and sometimes choose) a different course of action than the founders, such as remaining loyal to Britain in 1776. When students discover that “before it was history, it was a decision,”<sup>9</sup> they realize that their own choices today are decision points that may affect people’s lives in the future.

### **Connecting the Deliberative Process to Current Issues**

Engaging in historical deliberation awakens our students to connections with present-day global and local issues. For example, in 2013–14, while studying current events, several of our students began to empathize with citizens of Egypt, who were recovering from the aftermath of revolt and struggling to form a new government, much like the struggle of 18th-century Americans. After her own experience in the colonial simulation,

one student made a personal connection to the young people of Egypt, remarking, “I can’t imagine having to decide whether I would risk dying to oppose the government.” The same year, students identified how a local debate that had been dividing our town over a school construction project might have been resolved through the use of a deliberative forum. During our closing circle reflection on deliberation, one student burst out, “State College should have used deliberation to solve the high school problem in the beginning! They could have avoided a lot of trouble!” Deliberative experiences connect students to others from the past and to those who hold different perspectives by helping students identify common features of difficult social problems, recognize multiple perspectives and trade-offs, and develop a disposition toward collaborative problem solving.

We see students begin to apply deliberative skills to their own social issues, and we encourage them to write their own issue guide about a school issue or community problem. Using a guidebook published by the Kettering Foundation, “Developing Materials for Deliberative Forums,”<sup>10</sup> students work to identify

## **Steps for Implementation: From Historical Decisions to Current Issues**

*(See note 11 for relevant standards from the C3 Framework)*

### **Historical Decisions (Using Issue Guides from NIFI/Kettering):**

- Obtain videos and issue guides for “1776: What Should We Do?” and/or “A New Land: What Kind of Government Should We Have?” (1787).
- Engage students in historical simulation(s) for the time period leading up to the decision point(s) to be deliberated (approximately 2 weeks of social studies class periods).
- Introduce the deliberative process (20-30 minutes): What makes an issue “difficult”? How do groups /communities / nations deal with difficult issues? (Dialogue vs. Debate vs. Deliberation) Introduce common language and purpose for forum(s), including deliberation, naming & framing an issue, options, and trade-offs.
- Watch video that introduces the issue (8–10 minutes).
- Break into three small groups to read Option 1, Option 2, and Option 3 in depth; prepare presentation on assigned option for forum (approximately 60–90 minutes, which may span multiple class periods).
- Return to large group and establish ground rules for deliberation /expectations (5-10 minutes).
- Small groups present Options 1–3 while others take notes; give listeners time to ask clarifying questions and share comments (approximately 90–120 minutes, which may span multiple class periods).

- Identify common ground; share closing thoughts on the issue and take “pulse” of the class on their preferred approach(es) to the problem (approximately 15 minutes).

### **Current Issues (Writing an Issue Guide):**

- Obtain guidebook from NIFI/Kettering: “Developing Materials for Deliberative Forums” by Brad Rourke.
- Identify and name a current classroom, school, or community issue of concern to students (i.e., a school rule, such as recess, lunchroom, etc.).
- Research background information / gather data on the issue to identify multiple stakeholders, concerns, and constraints (time will vary, may span multiple class periods in language arts and/or social studies).
- Frame the issue by identifying three possible options for addressing the problem (approximately 30 minutes).
- Prepare an issue guide that contains background information on the issue and descriptions of Option 1, Option 2, and Option 3; each Option should contain a summary of the possible action and several advantages/disadvantages (time will vary, may span multiple class periods in language arts and/or social studies).
- Conduct and/or host a deliberative forum; student writers can act as participants in their own forum and/or facilitators for another group of students (approximately 90–120 minutes).
- Create /enact action plan for addressing current issue (optional based on results of forum, time will vary).

and name a current classroom, school, or community issue of concern, such as a policy preventing recess on physical education day or a rule governing seating in the lunchroom. Students then research background information on the issue and gather data to identify multiple stakeholders, concerns, and constraints. They frame the issue by identifying three possible options for addressing the problem and the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Finally, students write text for an issue guide, following the model of an NIFI issue guide, with background information and descriptions of the options. As a culmination of their work, students choose whether to conduct a deliberative forum in which they act as participants, or to host a deliberative forum for other students and stakeholders, in which they act as facilitators. Depending on the outcome of the forum, students can also engage in creating and enacting an action plan to address the issue.

Following their deliberative experiences, as an additional form of assessment, we administer a year-end survey to students. The survey responses suggest that students have internalized a deliberative approach to problem solving in their own homes, school, and community. For example, when asked to identify what they have learned from deliberation, students have responded:

- “I learned how to be cooperative and look at a problem from multiple perspectives. I also learned to really think about a problem before I make a choice.”
- I learned “how to solve problems as a group and that when you solve problems you don’t always get your own way.”
- “I like listening and then speaking how I feel and then I sometimes change my opinion over time.”
- “How I might use these skills in life is if I ever become a person in Congress it would be very good to be able to think of solutions that appeal to everybody.”

## Conclusion

Teaching students how to deliberate and recognize multiple perspectives, both for historical decisions and for current social issues, equips our classrooms to become places of inquiry, reflection, and collaboration. Students are empowered to apply what they learn in historical deliberation to resolve current social problems in the classroom, on the playground, and in the lunchroom. As facilitators, we work to help them name and frame the issues and understand the perspectives of other stakeholders, even those who are absent or who may have been excluded from the decision-making process. This often results in shared decision-making among stakeholders in our school (both adults and children) as we learn to find common ground and listen to

one another before taking action to address problems. Students also apply these skills to social issues beyond our school, such as supporting community animal welfare organizations, homeless shelters, and environmental initiatives. These school and community issues become platforms to engage students in using deliberative skills, including gathering information, determining needs, thinking critically, educating others, and creating and enacting action plans. Regular practice with deliberative problem solving helps our students recognize that democracy requires both the personal commitments and the sustained effort of people who are dedicated to making democracy work. ●

## Notes

1. Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird* (New York: Grand Central, 1960).
2. John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” *School Journal* 54, no. 3 (January 1897), 77-80.
3. National Issues Forums Institute, “National Issues Forums in the Classroom” (Dayton, OH, 2001).
4. Ibid.
5. National Issues Forums Institute, “1776: What Should We Do?” (video, Dayton, OH, 2014); “A New Land: What Kind of Government Should We Have?” (video, Dayton, OH, 2015).
6. NIFI, 2001.
7. NIFI, 2014.
8. NIFI, 2015.
9. NIFI, “1776: What Should We Do?” (See note 5).
10. Brad Rourke, *Developing Materials for Deliberative Forums*, (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2015).
11. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), “The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History,” (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).

## Relevant Standards:

Suggested K-12 Pathway for College, Career, and Civic Readiness Dimension 2, Participation and Deliberation. By the End of Grade 5 Individually and with other students...

D2.Civ.7.3-5. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school settings.

D2.Civ.8.3-5. Identify core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide government, society, and communities.

D2.Civ.9.3-5. Use deliberative processes when making decisions or reaching judgments as a group.

D2.Civ.10.3-5. Identify the beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and values that underlie their own and others’ points of view about civic issues.

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