Classroom talk and democratic decision-making

Exploration of contemporary issues in Civics and Citizenship involves supporting students to have high-quality dialogues. Democratic decision-making processes, from voting to consensus-building and beyond, can help students to have agency, to be safe and to develop a nuanced understanding of the issue at hand. This discussion examines pedagogies and research related to classroom conversations and democratic decision-making.

An important skill in Civics and Citizenship is to be able to use democratic decision-making processes that consider multiple perspectives to reach consensus on a civic issue. To do this, students must be aware of decision-making processes, understand the issue, identify the different perspectives on the issue and reasons for those perspectives, and be able to understand, interpret and communicate evidence and arguments relating to that issue. Decision-making processes can involve voting, building consensus, and ranking or reframing issues to analyse and explore competing perspectives within a democratic classroom.

The characteristics of a democratic classroom include the intentional sharing of diverse and sometimes competing perspectives, use of dialogue and group decision-making, and a high degree of student voice and agency (Conklin et al. 2021; Schulz et al. 2016; Seigel-Stechler 2020). Learning democratic decision-making processes within the school and classroom setting is also a powerful way to embed knowledge about democratic learning, student voice, agency and leadership (DET 2019; Subba 2014).

There are extensive resources available on conversation-based learning both in Victoria, through resources such as DET’s literacy teaching toolkit [Effective speaking and listening instruction](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/speakinglistening/Pages/instruction.aspx), and overseas. Supporting students to develop civic dialogue involves thinking about the dispositions and skills students need to manage complex emotions and political ideas within a public discourse that is polarised.

Civic discussion – dialogue about politics and society – is both an activity that supports learning in this area and also a necessary practice for citizens. The ability to engage in civic conversations is a prerequisite for an active and informed citizen.

Debates are an activity that illustrates the complexity of teaching civic discourse. Lilly (2012) found that many students are actually convinced of a particular side of a debate by being assigned the role of arguing for it. A group of environmental science students were surveyed as they participated in debate about issues as a learning activity. At the beginning of the activity, 41 per cent agreed with the side of the debate they were assigned; after the debate, 77 per cent agreed with the side of the issue that they argued during the debate. The process of researching, preparing and arguing a particular perspective can convince students of its validity. Therefore, it is important to use debates alongside other activities like those modelled in this module that build civic discourse, as debates may entrench issues rather than create an open and democratic classroom.

Critiques of more argumentative approaches to classroom discussion activities, such as Lilly’s research above, support the explicit teaching of debates alongside other activities for civic discourse that might be more focused on understanding, analysing and consensus-building. The activities in this module explore a number of these protocols.

Note: If you and your team developed a shared statement on contemporary issues in professional learning activity 1.3, you have already participated in one consensus-building protocol.