

09 Active learning strategy

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGY 09

Town Hall

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THE STRATEGY:

TOWN HALL MEETING

The purpose of this strategy is to have students become familiar with procedural decision making through democratic processes in the context of their course topics and themes. For most students, their previous experiences in making decisions have most likely been personal, individual, and short-term in nature; however, major societal decisions typically tend to be public, collective, and with a more long-term focus. Depending on their age, the majority of students in post-secondary institutions have not yet had the opportunity to participate in a formal democratic voting process and, as a result, this limits their experience in relation to the decision-making process in both public institutions and private enterprises. A key objective in many town hall meetings (or shareholder meetings for private enterprises), particularly at the local level, is to elicit feedback or suggestions to specific problems or proposals that impact stakeholders. 'Experts' in the field will often be present to provide their opinion and insight.

However, others in attendance may not share the same level of knowledge; rather, they are 'experts' in other fields, from their chosen professions to their personal experiences. Public or shareholder consultation is required as part of the decision-making process and to endorse final outcomes. This aspect of the process requires a consensus agreement and will likely be one in which most stakeholders will have to make concessions to accommodate others.

This activity creates a scenario in the classroom similar to that of the town hall meeting whereby students are required to assume roles with which they may not be familiar or may not agree. By the end of the activity, students should recognise that the most effective way to make large-scale decisions is not to convince others of your own point of view, but to use all perspectives to arrive at a reasonable consensus upon which most can agree.

RESOURCES

- Roll playing cards/sheets
- Pen and paper (for student/group notes)
- Town Hall meeting case study (optional)
- Decision-making exemplars

WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

While this exercise can be delivered tomorrow, it does require some preparation beforehand to be effective. Keeping up with current trends in the industry or field is important, so that context can be appropriately discussed during the decision-making process of the town hall. Researching some examples of

well-known modern case studies, even if unrelated to the topic, is useful as it helps to stress the decision-making steps with topics familiar to the students. It can be beneficial to have outcomes from both successful and unsuccessful decisions on hand which can be used as exemplars when appropriate.



Image 1: Group brainstorming on how they will present their case

STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

STEP 01

RESEARCH THE TOPIC IN THE FIELD

Depending on the subject matter, it is good to provide a true case study (contemporary or from the past) that can be modified to suit a relevant topic for the class. This can include controversies, future project proposals or adapting to new government regulations, etc.

STEP 03

GROUP FORMATION

Depending on the size of the class, organise students into groups based on the number of stakeholders (Table 1 below). Every member of the group should receive a stakeholder sheet allowing participants an opportunity to interpret the stakeholder's position from individually reading the task.

STEP 05

FEEDBACK

The instructor should make rounds to each group during the brainstorming step to check on progress while providing support and guidance on how to approach their stakeholder's arguments.



STEP 02

STAKEHOLDERS & THEIR POSITIONS

From the chosen topic, consider the project from the viewpoint of each of the different stakeholders and the potential impact of each decision. The stakeholder's identity may be taken directly from the case study or imagined based on the context of the town hall. The number of stakeholders required for the activity is dependent on the class size with a higher number of stakeholders when accommodating larger class sizes.

STEP 04

BRAINSTORMING

In groups, students should spend 5–10 minutes brainstorming how they will present their case in the Town Hall meeting, including any facts or arguments that they might come up with, which should be jotted down on the stakeholder page.

STEP 07

SOLUTIONS

Based on the key points recorded, the class group is provided with an opportunity to argue in support of or against elements of a proposed solution that should be discounted or those that should be salvaged. It is key for students to recognise that few, if any, stakeholders will be completely satisfied, with some being completely dissatisfied, thus highlighting the difficulty of getting policies implemented.



STEP 06

TOWN HALL

At this point, a speaker is nominated from each group to present each stakeholder's argument based on notes they have taken during the previous brainstorming discussion. The instructor should record the most significant points outlined by each speaker on the board to identify the key points that might be agreed upon, as well as highlighting the dissenting views.

STEP 08

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH

From the ideas identified during the Town Hall activity, students may be asked to research a project or controversy in their field and identify the potential stakeholders and how they may be impacted by their proposals.

OVERCOMING PUSHBACKS

Group work is a common source of pushback in a higher education setting which may be alleviated somewhat by issuing clear instructions and utilising smaller group sizes. Facilitating this task as a formative exercise and as a collaborative strategy encourages learner involvement and allows students the freedom to express ideas openly without fear of formal assessment grading.

The content of the activity can be a source of pushback as the topics may not be entirely familiar to students, particularly if it is a current event or a specific case study that

is not well known. This highlights the fact that although experts are involved in discussion at high level decision-making processes, many of the participants involved are not experts and rely on their own judgment, collaboration and the testimony of others. Introductory discussions related to the election process, for example, can be used to highlight how few voters truly know all the details of the platforms or, in the case of industry, how shareholders generally know little of the actual company and how decisions are made based on the bottom line.

CASE STUDY

The Town Hall strategy has been used on many occasions during Ethics in Science classes at Durham College in Oshawa, Ontario, while this case study focuses on biotechnology and the issues that surround its implementation. The topical case study relates to using pig cell transplants as a potential cure for type 1 diabetes, which has been modified from an existing activity from the Science Learning Hub based in New Zealand. Although the details of the technology are not important to the activity, I provide a summary of recent developments at a very basic level. Most students are not familiar with this emerging technology and I used this as an opportunity to explain that

knowledge in the field does not present any additional advantage in conducting the exercise.

After a brief overview of the topic, I present the Town Hall activity and justify its place in society as described earlier. As we are in Canada, I situate the Town Hall meeting into a Canadian context and use examples of how this process works at the local level. For this specific activity, I suggest that the Town Hall meeting is to come together to decide if this technology should be accepted into Canada. I then have students form into 8 stakeholder groups based on the identities outlined below and distribute stakeholder sheets to all participants.

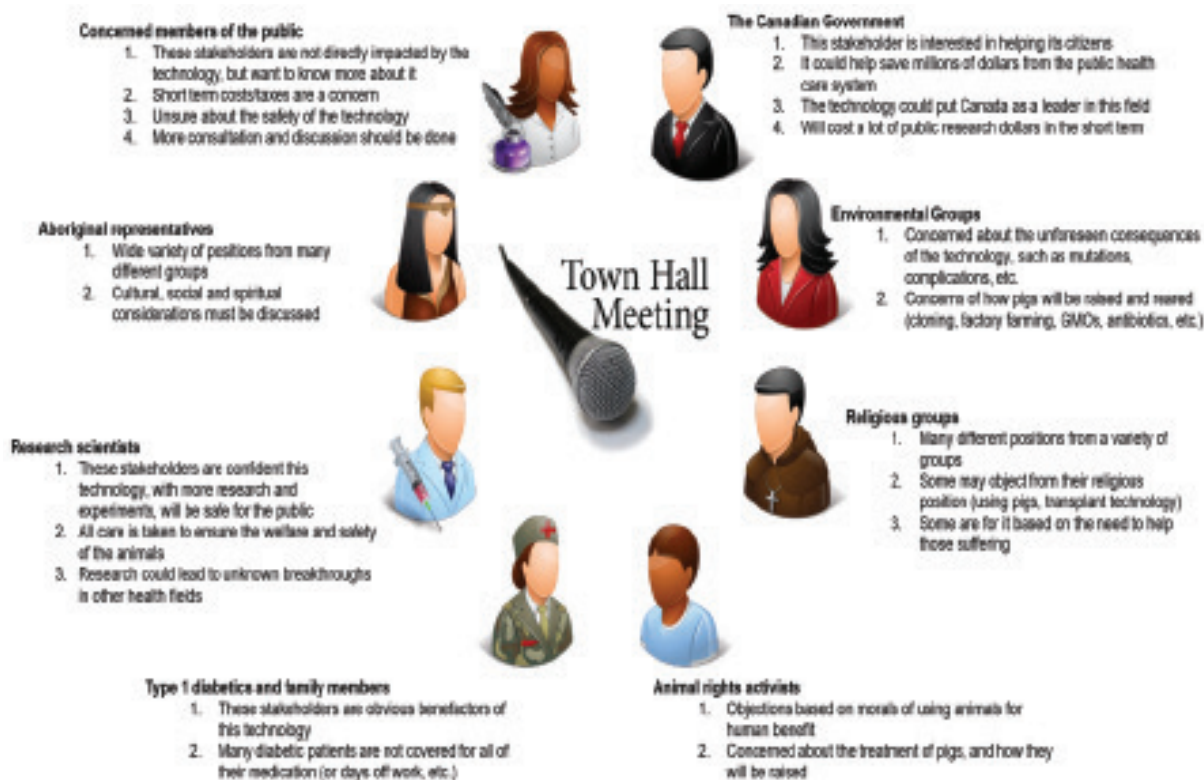


Figure 1: Stakeholder identities

As each group discusses the topic from the perspective of their allocated stakeholder, I walk around to clarify their stakeholder, see what ideas are being generated, and suggest alternative ideas that might be considered. The timing of this aspect depends entirely on how the discussion is evolving; normally 10–15 minutes is suitable.

Once the group discussions are complete, ideas from each group are presented by a nominated speaker with the outcomes recorded and collated in table format. Student responses are categorised by those in favour of the technology and those against the technology which helps to identify areas of

commonality and areas of concern between stakeholders.

When all groups have finished presenting their arguments, each stakeholder is discussed in turn to consider alternative opinions to that recorded. During this part of the discussion, students are given an opportunity to present their own points of view, outside that of their nominated stakeholder. Having been presented with the views from all the stakeholders, the class group must vote on whether to proceed with the technology right away, wait for more consultation, or vote against the proposal.



Image 2: Students taking part in a town hall meeting

After the exercise, class discussion is focused especially on the merits of process and how it might be improved rather than on the topic or outcome. This part of the discussion is often the most interesting as there are so many different opinions of how it could be improved. Key to this aspect of the exercise is students being able to recognise the variety, veracity and relevance of opinion, particularly when it is different to their own. The final element of this Town Hall meeting is for students to individually research a case

study related to the topics from the class (in this case, applications of biotechnology), and write a brief 1–2-page paper on the summary of the research, and the potential stakeholders involved. Students are able to choose any case study they want, but it is important to come up with at least six stakeholders that might be affected by the real-life situation and create a few points to consider for each (as demonstrated from the example from the Town Hall meeting).

Course	General Arts and Science		
Module	Issues and Ethics in Science		
Topic	Socioeconomic Justice		
Lesson	Town Hall Meeting: The Ethics of Pig Cell Transplants		
Directions	Research the topic and guess stakeholder positions. Brainstorm your ideas, including any factors or arguments.		
Stakeholder 1 Canadian government <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could increase international investment in the technology • Long-term benefits to health care system, saving the cost of current treatment options • Economic benefits as patients are more productive • Could put Canada on the map with cutting-edge research (political prestige) • Initial government investments may be high 	Stakeholder 2 Type 1 diabetics and family members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved quality of life and life expectancy • More productive economically, more animals • Improved family relationships, etc. • Reduced costs of medication (particularly those without insurance) and their side effects • Reduced time lost with doctor visits • Small risk of complications • Need to be monitored over lifetime for unspecified issues 	Stakeholder 3 Research scientists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can help solve the organ deficit problems in Canada • Pigs are already used for food, so this can save lives • Increased research grants and career opportunities for new scientists in the field • Improved facilities at hospitals and universities • Improved research decreases risks 	Stakeholder 4 Animal rights activists <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oppose testing and researching on animals on moral grounds • Concern about the treatment of the pigs and how they are treated • Increased chance of animal to human diseases (lethal contamination) • Increased healthcare costs in the long run • Expense of the pig cell transplants
Stakeholder 5 Concerned members of the public <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not directly affected by the technology, but want to know more about it • Short-term costs are a concern • Unsure about the safety of new technology • Keen to see more consultation and education on the technology • Privacy concerns 	Stakeholder 6 Religious organisations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many different positions from varied religious groups • Some feel that it should be done to save lives • Some are concerned about the moral implications of cross-speciesation as a way of "playing God" • Some groups monitor the consumption of pork as a taboo with religious significance 	Stakeholder 7 Aboriginal representatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide variety of positions • Cultural, social and spiritual considerations • Safety and wellbeing are key to discussion • Input and consultation from Indigenous are important when discussing important federal decisions 	Stakeholder 8 Environmental Groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerned about the unforeseen consequences of the technology, such as mutations, complications, etc. • Concern of how pigs will be raised and raised to eating, factory farming, GMOs, antibiotics, etc. • Environmental implications from farms and the pig waste into local water bodies

Image 3: Town Hall Stakeholder template

SUMMARY

In the end, this exercise has proven to be successful for encouraging students to think deeply about a topic. The choice of topic is suited towards the theme of the class, and the wider learning of the decision-making process is valuable, particularly for students who are mostly in their late teens (and who may never even have had the chance to vote up to that point). The activity is versatile enough to put it into different course contexts, as every programme of study will eventually lead to fields in which effective, collaborative decision making can be of vital importance.

FURTHER READING

Glazier, R. A. (2011). Running Simulations without Ruining Your Life: Simple Ways to Incorporate Active Learning into Your Teaching. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 7(4), 375-393. DOI: 10.1080/15512169.2011.615188

Science Learning Hub. (n.d.). Ethics and Pig Cell Transplants. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/912-ethics-and-pig-cell-transplants>

TEMPLATES

The worksheet templates I have used have been modified from the Science Learning Hub (<https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/912-ethics-and-pig-cell-transplants>).

Course				
Module				
Topic	Town Hall Meeting -			
Lesson				
Directions	Based on the topic and given stakeholder persona brainstorm your ideas including any facts or arguments			
Stakeholder 1 Persona	Stakeholder 2 Persona	Stakeholder 3 Persona	Stakeholder 4 Persona	
Stakeholder 5 Persona	Stakeholder 6 Persona	Stakeholder 7 Persona	Stakeholder 8 Persona	