

Democs for schools

Democs (deliberative meeting of citizens) is part card game, part policy-making tool

Department for
**Innovation,
Universities &
Skills**

Context and Aim

Democs – which stands for “deliberative meeting of citizens” – is part card game, part policy-making tool that enables small groups of people to engage with complex public policy issues. It helps people find out about a topic, express their views, seek common ground with the other participants, and state their preferred policy position from a given choice of four, they can also add their own policy positions.

The game enables players to identify and absorb the basic information they need to discuss an issue that may be complex and that they may not have discussed before. Ideally it is played by groups of six, but any amount of players between five and nine will work equally well. The game may be facilitated by an outsider or the group can be self-facilitating



Sciencewise funded a pilot study of Democs. The aims of the project were to:

- Develop an existing adult version of the Democs board game into one that could be specifically used by schools
- Develop and refine training in facilitating Democs for professionals who work with young people
- Enhance the ability of students to understand and discuss sensitive and complex scientific issues.

The process

The project focused on engaging young people with a number of topics covered in Key Stage 3 (vaccinations policy animal experimentation and climate change) and Key Stage 4 (neuroscience, genetically modified food, and stem cell research).

A range of kits was produced to cover the different key stages and age ranges and to offer a choice of topics for both

schools and youth groups. These kits were trialled with young people at the BA Festival of Science in Belfast, then edited and revised to ensure they were appropriate for the two Key Stage audiences.

A second set of trialling was carried out in three schools and six final versions of the game were produced. At the same time a training programme and support materials were developed for teachers to help them facilitate the games.

“ The world I look forward to living in is one where people can learn and talk to each other in a local setting about issues of policy new to them, enabling them to make more informed choices about things which affect them. Ideally their captured views would feed into policy. ”

Perry Walker, nef

Vital Statistics

Project delivery organisations:
nef (the new economics foundation), and the Centre for Science Education at Sheffield Hallam University

Duration of process: 12 months
(Apr 05 to Mar 06)

Number of participants: 1,189

Number of schools involved: 30

Cost of project: £166,000
(Sciencewise contribution £81,000)

Key Impacts:

- Students responded well to complex science
- Teachers acquired group facilitation skills
- Hard to reach groups were engaged.

This project was funded through open competition, not commissioned to provide input into a live policy area.

Benefits and Impact

Impact on pupils

Young people who took part in the Democs card game gave very positive feedback with 74% saying they had enjoyed the experience. The vast majority of teachers (more than 70%) felt that as a result of playing the game, their students:

- Knew more about the scientific facts, concepts and terminology of the topic under discussion
- Were able to evaluate the impact of scientific development or processes on people, communities and the environment
- Had been able to present information, develop an argument and draw conclusions
- Had interpreted and questioned scientific ideas
- Were encouraged to think more about developments in science and technology and the associated benefits and risks.

Benefits for teachers

Teachers felt that the information packs developed for Year 9 and 10 students were accessible and suitable and that the structure of the activity encouraged discussion.

The content and format also fitted in well with the new GCSE science curriculum, Science for the 21st Century, and active learner curriculum emphasis.

More than three-quarters of the teachers who took part felt the training they had received had allowed them to facilitate the game effectively so that their students got the most out of it.

Overall teachers felt the project:

- Provided a way of holding a discussion and consultation on what were complex and technical topics
- Allowed flexibility and informality in the discussions so that everyone was encouraged to take part and air their views
- Helped to involve hard to reach groups and those who didn't readily take to science as a subject
- Was inexpensive and therefore accessible to anyone who wanted to join in.

Dissemination and next steps

Democs kits are available for download from the project website, including cards on new topics, and some printed versions are still available from the project manager (see contacts below).

In addition, nef is in discussion with a science education organisation to develop the Democs game as a curriculum resource which can be purchased by teachers and others.

The Democs card game has also been used to develop a similar game, funded by the European Union, which builds on the results of the Democs project.

“ We touched on issues that we personally as a group wouldn't otherwise have discussed. I heard and expressed opinions that wouldn't have been shared. ”

Quote from a student

Contacts and Links

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The project evaluation report “Bed of Roses” is available on:
www.neweconomics.org/gen/democs.aspx

Further details of the EU-funded playdecide project can be found at:
www.playdecide.org

Learning from the Process

Feedback from teachers and students showed that the Democs process was largely successful in giving teachers a tool to get students to learn and discuss sensitive scientific issues. However, this depended on the time available, which was crucial.

By using concept maps as part of the evaluation at the beginning and end of a session, it was possible to track how the students' appreciation of the issues grew, from lists of biological words learnt in the classroom, to more ideas linked to real life.

Whilst there are many similarities between the roles of teacher and facilitator, teachers reported how difficult it was to let go and hand over to the pupils to run their own discussion. A key finding was that teachers would like more training in discussion-based techniques to support their delivery of the Science in the 21st Century curriculum.

What would be done differently?

If running this project again, nef would:

- Identify policy markers as key stakeholders at the beginning and ensure that results are written in a way that easily feeds into the policy making process
- Create materials with easily available downloads, showing opinions before and after and where the school is
- Simplify the process to fit into less time or, preferably, arrange to have more time so that students have a deeper level of understanding and discussion
- Spend more time training teachers in facilitation techniques.