**Town Meeting**

The intent of this town meeting is to stimulate dialogue and help students realize the complexities of decisions that individuals, families, local governments, and national governments have to make. Major decisions rarely are cut and dried; more often there are many points of view about the best way to proceed, and decision makers are faced with the challenge of gathering information, becoming as informed as possible and then choosing among options that may represent conflicting values or worldviews. The point of the exercise is not the vote that takes place at the conclusion of the meeting, but the critical thinking and communication that happen along the way. Town meetings at one time occurred regularly in towns and villages within the United States, and it was at meetings such as these that eighteenth-century colonists moved toward revolution against British rule. At these meetings some of the best aspects of democracy were practiced. The town meeting format helps students better understand the complexity of constitutional questions that require balancing freedom, security, and the

many and varied rights and interests of those who make up this country.

Today’s town meeting has been called in response to a proposal made by members of the U.S. Senate. The proposal to be discussed is:

**Should the United States set a policy that raises the minimum wage to a livable wage, linked to the standard of living? We have identified fifteen dollars an hour as an acceptable starting wage, and would apply to all workers, in all fields of employment.**

This town meeting, like others around the nation, is being held at the request of one of our state’s U.S. senators, who is on the Senate committee examining this proposal. The results of the town meeting will be reported to the senator, who is being guided by public response about this crucial constitutional question, and (s)he will bring the results of our town meeting back to colleagues on the Senate committee investigating the issue.

**Teacher Role during the Town Meeting Simulation**

You play the moderator. By way of introduction, you identify yourself as a staff member for the

Senator. The group will discuss and debate the proposal above. Students will then vote from the

perspective of their assigned role, on whether to support or reject the proposal.

Remind students they will represent the point of view they have been assigned, even though it might not be their own. Tell them their ability to faithfully represent their assigned roles will allow the group to understand the many sides to the issue. This activity can become heated, as it focuses on a real issue and can engender strong feelings. It is important to remind students that they can make strong, emotional statements if they feel so moved, but the statements must be based on evidence, and they may not attack the people who disagree with them. They may disagree with the views of others, and should have reasons/evidence for why they disagree.

As moderator, notice if some groups are talking a great deal, and shift the focus to groups who have said relatively little. Also, if some groups are being ganged up on, you may well shift focus to other relevant avenues for discussion to take the heat off the students representing that point of view. It is important to hear from every group to ensure that the class is considering all relevant information as they make a difficult decision. You should support those who have not entered the conversation and encourage them to do so. It’s okay to ask those who have spoken a great deal to let others into the conversation.

It is also within your role as moderator to bring your own questions or additions to the conversation if they have not been raised. Remember, the goal of this exercise is to help students think in complex and comprehensive ways about the topic, so fill in whatever gaps you deem appropriate during the meeting. You might, for example, notice that one group has said little, or has missed a crucial point that you would want to consider, so you might ask them, or all groups a question that brings out that issue.

Having said that, take care not to overwhelm the conversation; you don’t have to cover everything in this one brief play. You may decide that some major points that have not been addressed during the play should become the focus of another lesson on another day. You don’t have to do it all at once, and paying good attention to your students will help you to decide when they’ve had enough.

Also note before, during, and after the role play that some students will be representing unpopular points of view and the success of your study of the issues depends on them representing these views effectively. It is not easy to stand up to your classmates when you are defending policies you really don’t believe (or that you do believe, but that are unpopular), so we need to recognize and support the students taking on those roles. The teacher should take care to choose students who are able to take on difficult roles without suffering for it.

**In the Classroom**

1. Begin the town meeting by reminding the group why you have been called together. Go over

the ground rules of the meeting. Each group will make opening statements of one minute,

without comment from other groups. All groups will be heard before there is any discussion.

2. Open Discussion

After all of the opening statements are made, hold an open discussion during which anyone at

the meeting can speak. Remind the speaker to identify the role he or she is playing (“I represent

a small business owner…”). Limit their speaking to under two minutes to

hear from as many people as possible. Statements or questions may be addressed to particular

individuals in the class in response to either their opening statements or comments made during

discussion (“You said that you are in favor of eliminating the minimum wage, but what about…”). It is absolutely acceptable to disagree with ideas expressed, or to challenge or question assertions made by meeting participants. It is absolutely not acceptable to attack the person who makes the statement or expresses the idea, or to simply say an idea is stupid. That’s not an argument, it’s an unsupported opinion.

When the discussion seems to be winding down, ask for last thoughts that just have to be

expressed, and then move to the voting stage of the meeting. You have the option, as

moderator, of raising crucial questions or aspects of the question that have not been addressed

within the meeting, though do so with caution. It is the students’ meeting, and you want to be

careful about intruding or opening significant additional dialogue.

Give students thirty seconds to decide how to vote and then take the vote and tabulate the

results. Remind the students that they are voting from the point of view of the person they are

“playing,” but there may be room within that role to change a vote based on what has happened

in the meeting. Each person votes, so members within a group can disagree on the issue, though

they must vote as the person they are playing, such as (in this play) a Walmart executive or a consumer). Students will have the chance to present their own points of view in the days ahead.

**Reflection**

Reflection following the meeting is a key aspect of this lesson. Once the vote is taken I have students take a few minutes on their own to write down their thoughts about what has just happened, guided by questions such as:

What were your thoughts on the issue going into the town meeting?

What arguments did you hear that were most persuasive, and why?

What did you learn as you participated?

What are your thoughts at this point about the issue?

What questions do you have at this time and how might you pursue those questions?

After a few minutes then I call the group together and we talk about this together. I want to hear from all the group, if possible, and I pay attention to those who were representing unpopular views, or who seemed especially emotionally charged during the meeting. Emotions can run high during these meetings, and I want to monitor how the students are doing, to make sure they are returning to themselves and ok. In rare cases I might make a point to check in with a student a bit later in the day, but that is very rare……

There is a follow up reflective assessment that they take home and bring back the next day, that focuses both on the role play/topic, and on the ways in which they worked with their group. I will point you to that information on line as I haven’t figured out how to capture it in a handout…..