

BUILDING SKILLS

LESSON 6: FACILITATION

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

 *Develop skills for facilitating groups with an emphasis on applying an equity lens to solving wicked problems.*

 *Learn how to consider the facilitator's power, positionality, and roles in shaping the outcomes of a dialogue.*

LESSON OVERVIEW

Learning to facilitate groups is an essential public skill for addressing wicked problems. This lesson helps participants determine their own values and roles in facilitation, along with practical cases for which facilitative leadership might be applied. It asks facilitators to consider their obligation to use the power and positionality of their roles to advance inclusion, equity, and justice. It also asks students to consider how they will frame, organize, and manage dialogues in their work as civic professionals.

The lesson draws upon a framework and materials developed by Martin Carcasson, Timothy Shaffer, and Nancy Thomas on approaches to facilitation in an activity they term "The Neutrality Challenge." With this activity, they ask how leaders of deliberative practice "balance the commitment to a politically neutral process with the desire to achieve more equitable outcomes."¹⁸

18. This lesson draws upon two resources: Nancy Thomas and Mark Brimhall-Vargas, "Facilitating Political Discussions: A Facilitator Training Workshop Guide," Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, Tufts University, <https://tufts.app.box.com/v/idhe-facilit-polit-discuss/>; and Martin Carcasson, Timothy Shaffer, and Nancy Thomas, "The Neutrality Challenge," *Frontiers of Democracy*, Tufts University, 2011. https://www.academia.edu/31355498/Framing_the_Neutrality_Challenge_Frontiers_of_Democracy_Tufts_University_July_21-23_2011

SUGGESTED PLAN [🕒 75 minutes]

LESSON PREPARATION

1. Review Nancy Thomas's report, "Readiness for Discussing Democracy in Super-Charged Political Times," Institute for the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, Tufts University, 2019, at <https://tufts.app.box.com/v/idhe-discussing-democracy>.
2. Make copies of the "Neutrality Challenge" handout (provided at the end of this lesson), or prepare to share it electronically with all participants.
3. Review the "Case-in-Point" scenarios (also at the end of this lesson) and adapt or add to the options, as desired.

GETTING READY FOR DIALOGUE [🕒 5 minutes]

Facilitators should invite students to consider how all aspects of facilitation is an opportunity for leadership, and how change making can be done with an equity lens. Ask students to examine and critically reflect upon the many aspects of being "ready" to lead a dialogue or deliberation on contentious issues, including:

- How is the topic named?
- Where is the dialogue located?
- What materials are selected for discussion?
- Who is invited to participate?
- How are various viewpoints framed? and
- Whose voices and viewpoints get the most consideration or critique during a discussion?

REVIEW OF NEUTRALITY CHALLENGE FACILITATION CHOICES [🕒 10 minutes]

Distribute the "Neutrality Challenge" handout to the class. Explain the importance of facilitative leadership and reflection as it relates to civic professionalism and addressing wicked problems.

Give participants time to read the four approaches to facilitation and problem solving: Social Justice Is the Work, Intentional Examination of Power, Impartial and Principled Impartiality, and Trust a Neutral Process. Review the approaches with their descriptions and ensure that participants have a good understanding of them.

Ask for volunteers among the group to summarize each approach. Be sure to have them use their own words, as opposed to simply reading the provided descriptions.

FOUR-CORNERS ACTIVITY [• 45 minutes]

Set up the room so that each corner of the room is the quadrant for one of the four approaches (while considering accessibility and physical needs of the participants). Explain to participants that you will be presenting four case scenarios. After hearing each scenario, participants will self-select into the quadrant of the room representing the perspective they would take in the given case.

Use the "Case-in-Point Scenarios," for cases to use in this activity, or create your own. Other topics you may consider include decisions about school closings, climate change, or other timely local topics. Cases are designed for four rounds of approximately 10 minutes each. Provide activity framing and instructions to participants, such as:

You will be asked to respond to several case-in-point scenarios that ask you to describe which approach you would take for facilitating a dialogue or deliberation. There are no right or wrong answers, as this is an exercise to help you think about how your own values, civic identity, and approach to change might influence a dialogue process and outcome. The first baseline case asks you to select the approach that most aligns with your perspective, values and identity; the next three cases offer specific scenarios that invite you to think about whether and how you might adjust your approach in different contexts.

Begin by reading the baseline case scenario and asking participants to move to the corner of the room that best represents their core values. Ask participants to select one of the four options, even if they are not sure about their answer or feel that they would use aspects of different approaches.

Direct participants who self-select to one of the four corners of the room to talk with other members of the group in their chosen corner about why they selected the approach. Then move to a large-group conversation to enable students to discuss their choices with members of the other groups.

As this large-group conversation progresses and more perspectives are shared, advise participants that they can move to another of the four quadrants if they are compelled to change their mind based on the responses from other groups.

Repeat this process with each of the case scenarios.

LARGE-GROUP REFLECTION [[🕒 15 MINUTES]

After discussing each of the cases in small and then large groups, reflect on the activity with the entire class. Ask participants to reflect on how the situations presented affected their perceived values and how they might facilitate change in the future. Have them reflect on how learning about different approaches to specific issues has further developed their understanding of civic professionalism, and on how they might cultivate facilitation as a public skill.

Finally, share your approach to facilitating this activity, as well as your core values as a facilitator and the approach you took for this activity—are they the same? Ask for feedback on your approach to facilitation during this activity, including students' perspectives on which of the four options most closely aligns with the approach reflected in the facilitation of this activity.

CASE-IN-POINT SCENARIOS

Present these scenarios orally to the group. For each scenario, ask participants to take a stand for one of the four approaches to facilitation, even if they see aspects of several of them in their approach to making change.

BASELINE: YOUR CORE VALUES

Which of the four approaches to facilitation— Social Justice Is the Work, Intentional Examination of Power, Impartial and Principled Impartiality, and Trust a Neutral Process—most aligns with your values, in that it best describes how you see yourself and your work as a civic professional making community change? Explain why the one you selected feels most aligned with your values and approach to facilitation.

CASE-IN-POINT 1: PUBLIC HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

Whether and how to require Covid-19 vaccines and boosters in schools is a wicked problem, given the health risks associated with Covid-19 on one hand and skepticism among some segments of the public about vaccines and public health expertise more generally on the other.

Should a school district require a vaccine and/or boosters for students and/or teachers? What alternatives are offered for people who do not wish to get a vaccine? What resources and information are needed to bring about this decision?

In this case, you are being asked to facilitate a community conversation on the issue of vaccines in schools with a diverse group of stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, health professionals, and policymakers.

- As a facilitator of this deliberative dialogue, how would you approach your role? Given the high stakes, degree of uncertainty, and divergent perspectives, which of the four approaches (Social Justice, Intentionality, Passionate Impartiality, or Trust the Process) is most called for in this situation?
- How would you bring this approach to your facilitation of this dialogue on public health in schools?
- Is this the same approach you identified as aligned with your core values in the baseline case? If it shifted, explain why.

CASE-IN-POINT 2: POLICE REFORM AND FUNDING

Widespread protests after the murder of George Floyd and other Black Americans by the police have put a national spotlight on policing practices, funding for police departments, representation in our communities, and the overall issue of systemic racism. Racism is woven into the fabric of our communities. While difficult, conversations about racial justice and anti-racism are happening in many areas of public life. At the same time, an increase in violent crime has led to a backlash against efforts to decrease funding for the police in many communities.

In this case, you are being asked to facilitate a community conversation on police reform and funding for the police in your local community with diverse stakeholders, including Black Lives Matter activists, representatives from the police department, ordinary citizens from diverse racial backgrounds, and policymakers.

- Given the challenges in facilitating conversations about police reform and funding levels for law enforcement, which of the four facilitative approaches (Social Justice, Intentionality, Passionate Impartiality, or Trust the Process) is most called for in this situation in your role as a facilitator?
- How would you bring this framework to your facilitation of this dialogue on police reform and funding?
- Is this the same approach you identified as aligned with your core values, or as the approach you would use in Case 1? If it shifted, explain why.

CASE-IN-POINT 3: PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Participatory budgeting, a process developed in Brazil, is now used in communities across the globe as a means of empowering ordinary citizens to decide together how to spend public money as described by the Participatory Budgeting Project (<https://participatorybudgeting.org/>). In New York City, for instance, many high schools have an allotted budget determined through a participatory budgeting process led by students.

In this case, you are being asked to facilitate a participatory budgeting process in your local community.

- Given the challenges of making decisions about the many possible uses of a limited amount of public money, which of the four approaches (Social Justice, Intentionality, Passionate Impartiality, or Trust the Process) is most called for in this situation in your role as a facilitator?
- How would you bring this framework to your facilitation of this participatory budgeting process?
- Is this the same approach you identified as aligned with your core values in Case 1, or as they approach(es) you selected for Case 1 and Case 2? If it shifted, explain why.



THE NEUTRALITY CHALLENGE

Which of these four approaches most aligns with your values and commitments to facilitating social change?

#1: SOCIAL JUSTICE IS THE WORK

"You can't be neutral on a moving train," explains historian Howard Zinn in describing the importance of taking a stand for social justice. Civic professionals need to take this insight into their work by acknowledging that structural inequalities exist in society and that these inequalities are detrimental to our social fabric. As a result, social, political, and economic justice are goals that need to be front and center when facilitating dialogue.

This work requires taking a stand on the side of justice by leaning into questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Participants need to recognize that our economic, political, and social systems have significantly and disproportionately oppressed historically marginalized groups especially based on race, ethnicity, sex, wealth, sexual orientation, ability status, immigrant status. Current levels of exclusion, inequality, and injustice undercut core civic values and threaten the fragile foundation of our democracy.

Less powerful voices are often silenced in the name of "neutrality" or "civility," and neutral and objective processes may actually reinforce the status quo, with its existing disparities in power, access, and opportunity. With this approach, inclusion, equity, and justice are the explicitly stated goals in facilitating social change.

#2: WE NEED INTENTIONALITY

What's missing is a genuine and comprehensive commitment to a purposeful examination of the patterns of power, privilege, and structural inequality underlying any public problem. Civic professionals must always examine "the problems underneath the problems" by using constructive dialogue to unearth patterns of power, privilege, racism, discrimination, and disparity.

It's easy to assume that participants will inevitably examine the underlying systems, structures, and behaviors that contributed to, or even cause, the problem being discussed. Some even think that getting "the right people" (often simply a diverse group) in the room will suffice. This perspective suggests that that approach is not enough: what is required is an intentional and thorough examination of power and privilege.

This entails asking critical questions that raise, examine, and work to resolve power dynamics and equity considerations at every step of the process. Intentionality is the value that undergirds all aspects of problem solving, including naming and framing, process design, facilitation, action planning, reporting, and action.

#3: PASSIONATE & PRINCIPLED IMPARTIALITY

It's possible to be passionate about a topic yet avoid seeking a predetermined end. Civic professionals should strive for this form of "passionate and principled impartiality." Facilitators can make a commitment to learning, growth, and leadership development, which means placing a commitment to the democratic process above the desire for any specific outcome or goal.

Civic professionals need to take advantage of the positive impact of neutrality and objectivity, while working with groups to solve public problems in an inclusive way. This approach serves to highlight the inherent tensions in the work of deliberative democracy. Ideally it will give facilitators the authority to bring people together across differences, emphasizing a commitment to participatory processes that builds the civic capacity of a community to solve problems.

Ultimately, this approach strives for impartiality. This involves facilitating a process with no predetermined or partisan end in which facilitators still bring to bear a passion for the democratic processes involved in exploring their solutions.

#4: TRUST THE PROCESS

Neutral deliberation will ultimately plant the seeds for social justice. In contrast, an explicit focus on equity and social justice will brand the work as partisan and contribute to the polarizing politics of our public life. Civic professionals need to be objective and neutral as facilitators of change and trust people in this process to come up with sound decisions.

This neutral approach enables a broad and diverse coalition of people to come together to work through a problem, which is ultimately the only way it will be solved. In our hyper-partisan political culture, neutral conveners and strong facilitators that emphasize a well-designed process can be critical to moving conversations forward and undoing some of the negative consequences of polarization.

If we define our work as favoring one side of an issue or another, facilitators will rightly lose their legitimacy as neutral and fair conveners. We will also likely be less successful because some people who should be present won't be at the table. This approach seeks to change the nature of the conversation by moving away from partisanship and polarization by providing neutral space for dialogue that (ideally) leads to informed action. This is the best way to restore faith in democracy and make a long-term impact.

