Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal

an open-access, online, annual journal that provides a community for activist students, teachers, and researchers in writing, rhetoric, and literacy studies.

Together We Know A Lot: Consensus Decision Making in the Classroom

**Tool review by
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Student group work is common practice in many courses whether they are focused on writing theory or application. The purpose of this review is to introduce one strategy for teaching cooperative teamwork. It is easy to say to a group of students, "decide as a group…" It is less common, and I am certainly guilty of this, to provide clear directions on *how* to decide as a group.

Consensus decision making (CDM, or sometimes known as CBDM, consensus-based decision making) is a common strategy for making decisions as a group in collective and community organizing. Used in the classroom, CDM can be a useful strategy that enables students to engage in meaningful discourse with one another. Because CDM emphasizes listening, compromise, and cooperation, it foregrounds dialogue rather than competition or adversarial debate. Ultimately, CDM helps students practice cooperation and open sharing of ideas, important skills in an age of increasing polarity.

In the sections below, I first provide a short overview of CDM. Second, I discuss CDM within the context of classroom instruction and why CDM is useful in this particular context. Finally, I share some applications for teaching CDM.

Short overview of CDM

Rather than a uniform strategy, it is important to understand group decision making—whether in a board of directors or at a community organizing meeting—spans a spectrum of engagement ranging from autocratic to unanimity. Decision making in an autocracy is usually quick and easy, but that decision requires enforcement. A majority framework is perhaps the most familiar and can be quite inclusive, though it can also be competitive. Further, the minority group can feel sidelined. In contrast, CDM is a method that works to generate a solution that is agreeable to everyone—i.e., to reach consensus—before proceeding. CDM acknowledges that the process of reaching group consensus is just as valuable as the decision itself.

To be clear, consensus does not mean that each individual gets the exact solution they desire; rather, each individual compromises on an amicable decision. It is also important to place conditions around consensing (the process of reaching consensus) to keep it from being overtaken or held hostage by any one individual's agenda. There are many ways this can be done, including through facilitation techniques and conditions for agreement. For example, two common agreement conditions are "unanimous consensus" and "consensus minus n." In the latter, there can be a designated amount of people (typically one or two) who can hold out, but the vote still passes. Having a "consensus minus n" rule in place can be useful for avoiding a stalemate, which can happen with a "unanimity" condition. While unanimity can be great when it happens in a group, it is generally not a tenable decision-making process as deadlocks or hold-outs can sabotage the process.

Why use CDM for teaching dialogue

There are many reasons to teach students how to engage in dialogue in decision making. Drawing from Paulo Freire (1970), bell hooks (2014), Paula Allman (2010), and other critical pedagogy scholars, I distinguish discussion from dialogue. For Allman (2010), the teacher leading a discussion is a moderator of a series of monologues. In contrast, students are in dialogue with each other when they respond to each other, build off each's contributions, and even challenge one another. In the matter of group work, I seek to create these conditions through CDM. Fostering this dynamic does two important things:

- Students are not only encouraged to share with each other but also to view the class as its own public, rather than a stage before the "real world."
- Students co-create their learning environment, hopefully making the class richer with their experiences and values and leading each other along in discovery and analysis.

Furthermore, CDM processes aim to ensure that everyone's voice is heard. According to Cultivate.coop, rather than only meeting the needs of the majority, CDM is intended to

recognize minority concerns as well, and to bring people together for the good of the group.

> *The consensus process helps groups to develop decisions that all members can live with by focusing on addressing minority concerns. In contrast, "majority rules" voting overrides minority concerns, without regard for the effect on the group's long-term unity. The consensus process assumes every member of the group has a valid perspective and that perspective is crucial to making good decisions. It requires each individual to be committed to common goals that are clearly understood and to be able to differentiate between their personal preferences and the needs of the group. ("Consensus decision making," n.d.).*

By committing to "common goals," CDM recognizes the potential for individual contribution, each individual perspective as valid, and that perspective as absolutely necessary to group unity. To be clear, CDM *does not* require the incorporation of each perspective, only that it should be recognized and understood for the group to be healthy. Further, this commitment to common goals and the recognition of each perspective as necessary for group unity establishes and differentiates between individual preference and group needs, critical for translating CDM to the classroom.

Teaching CDM

I teach technical communication courses and have used CDM for several years after learning it through my work with cooperatives and collectives. Whether teaching a theory or practical class, when I teach CDM, I draw from existing facilitation and consensus guidelines, including Leonard Joy's (n.d.) "Collective Intelligence and Quaker Practice." I also adapted Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), a facilitation technique for polarizing issues of race, policing, or other community issues. I use these and other techniques to inform my pedagogical uses of CDM, including teaching students to:

- Trust the collective intelligence of the group to make healthy decisions
- Practice productive silence via listening attentively
- Allow comments to "hang in the air," rather than rushing to fill the void or to address a comment
- Understand dissent and disagreement is fundamental to the health of the group

- Accept the value and validity in their own lived experience as important to decision making
- Understand that while each of us knows something, together we know a lot

These principles are foundational to productive dialogue in the class.

Application: CDM in practice

Practicing CDM in class requires readings that introduce it and practice through low-stakes activities. Readings that prepare students for the work and help them see the value in it include, as previously mentioned, Leonard Joy (n.d.) and other Quaker readings, CDM in cooperatives and collectives, world café, and other facilitation strategies that will build foundational knowledge for reaching consensus. For example, I have often opened the first week of class by dividing up Joy's (n.d.) points among student groups and asking them to create scenarios where the CDM principles would apply in our specific class (or how a principle would not).

Giving students the chance to practice CDM in low-stakes activities is also important. Common class activities include leaderless exercises where they work toward agreement without a discussion leader or "fishbowl" activities where students engage in reflection on group dynamics. Working without a designated leader is an important part of these exercises as it puts them into negotiation with each other. Improv activities have also been particularly effective in this regard.

One especially effective activity is a "town hall" discussion with a goal of being generative rather than competitive, adapted from Steven Vargo (2012). In this case, students are divided into three groups: one on each side of an issue and an audience. Each side is given a turn to speak, then the audience asks each panel tough, open-ended questions prepared in advance. At the end of the debate, instead of having a "winner," the audience pieces together each panel's strongest points to generate new knowledge about the topic.

Students often have commented on the efficacy of this approach to class discussion. One student said:

> *The type of respectful team dynamic we all developed was encouraging for me, because it created an atmosphere that was relaxed enough to get the work done, and help each other out at the same time, because we all had something new to learn...The only part that was difficult for myself, was*

> *being willing to extend myself in that respect and trust that I wouldn't be taken advantage of, for which I ultimately wasn't.*

This student recognized that the discussion and "team dynamic" allowed for him/her/them to "extend" themselves and "trust" that they would not be exploited. Another student called attention to the usefulness of sharing ideas that were ultimately not used, saying they "learned how to get along and collaborate with various personalities and also be okay with not always having my ideas used." This last point emphasizes that CDM helps students to differentiate between personal preference and group goals.

One effect of CDM is unpacking the presuppositions students bring with them about how groups *should* function and make decisions together. If nothing else, students are exposed to one alternative to consider when working with others in class, on the job, and in their communities. Teaching students to reach consensus with their ideas and to build new knowledge together helps them learn from each other, see themselves and each other as valuable to the group and to the community. Helping them to move away from adversarial or competitive sharing to collective creativity and generating ideas together can make for a more productive, healthy, and inclusive discussion in the classroom and, hopefully, in the world.

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