

JUST FOUR WORDS

In most peace negotiations, the biggest challenge is to reconcile the many, often conflicting goals, hopes and outlooks of the various sides. The end result is always a compromise. The goal is not to negotiate a victory for one side. The goal is but to arrive at whatever solution is satisfactory enough for all sides, and is one that they can all pledge to remain committed to.

WHAT THE EXERCISE IS ABOUT

- Time: one class
- Divide the class into groups, and ask each group to come up with four words on the topic.
- The groups are then combined and they have to reach an agreement through negotiation and compromise on just four words.

THE GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

This exercise is aimed at negotiating a shared view on a given topic. It helps the students to see that although this common view is usually not present at the beginning of negotiations, it can be created together by all those involved. The exercise is also a good demonstration of how decisions can be made in any kind of group. As such it's an excellent group exercise.

HOW THE EXERCISE SHOULD PROCEED


Ask the students to choose a Word, idea or a concept that he or she wants the group to examine.

This could be related to the aim of the exercise (conflict, teamwork, communication), or something that's come to notice at school or elsewhere. Whatever the matter, the topic will bring out different views on it.

Divide the class into groups, preferably of four, eight, or twelve students. Each group member needs a pen and paper.

The teacher asks each student to write down four words that the given topic, word, or concept brings to mind. The students should not confer on this. If the given topic is for example "conflict", some of the most obvious words evoked would be war, disagreement, struggle, etc.

Then ask the students to form pairs; if this leaves someone out, a three-person group is



fine. Each pair has at most eight different words on the given concept. Their task now is to reduce this to four words through negotiation and compromise.

When each pair has just four words on the topic, two pairs join together. Then these four-person groups repeat the process of negotiating and compromising their way to a four-word list. Then these small groups combine and repeat the process, until eventually the whole class has agreed on a final list of just four words (if there's not time for this, a good goal is a final list of eight words).

THINGS TO DISCUSS AFTER THE EXERCISE

Write up the final list for all to see.

- Ask the students to describe some observations about the words on the final list.
- Did anybody gain new insights on the given topic in the course of the exercise?
- How did it feel to do the exercise?
- What did the students learn from the exercise?

In the overall process of negotiation and compromise, the students will significantly deepen their individual understanding of the given topic. Depending on the choice of topic, the overall process is likely to lead to:

- A broader and deeper understanding of the different perspectives that different people can have on the same word or topic;
- A shared understanding of decision-making and of the topic at hand;
- Insights about the main causes of dispute that arose during the exercise.

It is not possible to predict what outlooks and nuances the discussions will create. But hopefully the exercise will impress on the students that this participatory approach is a very effective way of reaching a solution that all can accept.

A common reason for breakdowns in communication is that that group members have highly diverging interpretations of a specific matter. The exercise allows the students to see that there can be important advantages in being able to arrive at a common view through negotiation and compromise.

This exercise was developed by Alan Sharland.