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What are Democs?

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Democs is an acronym standing for 'Deliberative Meetings of Citizens.' Democs have been developed by UK think tank Nef (the new economics foundation) to make it easier for people to work out, share, and express their views on public policy issues. We wanted something that anyone who wished could use, to give the possibility of reaching large numbers at reasonable cost.

We have produced a game, in kit form, that allows a group of around six people to find out about an issue, discuss it, seek common ground, and give their views. This takes a couple of hours or so. It can be used with a facilitator as part of a formal public meeting (a recent gathering in Edinburgh, UK brought together over 80 people using nearly 20 kits) or informally without a facilitator by a group of friends or family around the kitchen table.

Democs were developed initially in the field of human genetics. Nef has recently produced and distributed 100 kits as part of the UK government's GM Nation debate. This examines whether genetically modified crops should be grown commercially in the UK. Democs made their first foray into local government in June 2003, being used by the Greater London Authority to consult on their ambient noise strategy.

Participants at a Democs launch event, June 2002



What happens

Each game has the same four elements but the content of these varies according to the topic. These elements are:

- policy positions
- fact cards
- issue cards
- scenario cards

Box 1: Scenario 3: Should Ruritania go GM?

A large US-based multi-national seed company Biotechfarm wants to get its GM products into the European market, but is stalled by European Union (EU) public opposition to GM in existing member states. Ruritania soon hopes to become a member of the EU. Biotechfarm decides to target it, and makes a presentation to the Ruritanian government promoting the benefits of the company's GM variety of an indigenous Ruritanian crop. The Minister of Agriculture is eager to sign a contract, believing it will benefit the struggling economy. She is advised to hold a public consultation about whether her country should introduce GM crops. She puts a notice asking for comment on a Ministry website for two weeks. Few people know that the website exists, but she concludes there is no public opposition to Ruritania going GM.

What happens in the game varies a little depending on the topic. This example is based on the GM kit mentioned above.

Everyone in the group of six or so starts by introducing themselves and by reading some scenario cards illustrating the personal and social dilemmas that the topic throws up. Box 1 shows an example of a scenario card.

Someone, an outside facilitator or a member of the group, sets the scene, summarises what will happen, and introduces the guidelines for a good conversation (Box 2).

People are offered the chance to suggest amendments to these guidelines, although they almost never do. Everyone is dealt a yellow card to wave if they don't understand what is going on or if someone else is not abiding by the guidelines.

One person acts as dealer. He or she deals out to the players 36 fact cards in six categories. There are two rounds where everyone has the chance to read out a card they think important or to ask a question. Someone might ask, 'What GM crops are we talking about?'. Someone else might say 'I think I've got a card that helps' and read out the fifth card in the 'What sort of GM?' category: 'Most current applications of GM involve increasing a plant's tolerance to herbicides or resistance to insect pests'. Other cards give examples of crop types. Everyone contributes from the cards in their hand; everyone gets to ask basic questions without looking stupid.

The fact cards chosen as most important are laid out on a table, in no particular order. Issue cards are then dealt. For example, 'Can sufficient GM or non-GM choice be offered through clear labelling?'. Everyone chooses two and places them on the table.

People then discuss the main issues and work out what is really important for them. One person might ask, 'Are any of these GM crops going to produce something which would benefit my family? Or are they just for the profits of

Box 2: Guidelines to a good conversation

1. **We are all equal** – one person, one voice as well as one person, one vote.
2. **Your view matters** – especially if you are the only one who holds it because no one else will say it, but share air time.
3. **Speak the truth of your heart** – if you find yourself speaking on behalf of others, try asking a question instead.
4. **Listeners are as important as speakers** – work at listening well and allow others to finish before you speak.
5. **Seek to understand** – rather than persuade.
6. **Seek the wisdom of the group** – together we have far more knowledge and wisdom than any of us can have alone. You can always learn from others however far apart you appear to be.
7. **Look for common ground** – this is the way forward.
8. **Notice when you feel surprised or confused** – this is a sign that what you've just heard challenges what you believed or valued before. What are your beliefs and values on this issue? Is there a conflict between them?

some big company?'. The group records the discussion by making clusters from related fact and issue cards. They often link the issue card in the previous paragraph with fact cards such as 'Forthcoming EU law is likely to require any food containing over 0.9% of products of GM origin to be labelled'.

Once they have ordered the clusters, people can fill in a questionnaire that will be included in the Government's official consultation on GM crops.

With subjects other than GM, we usually have three or four policy positions that people vote on at the end of the game and sometimes at the start as well.

The table below shows the voting on over-the-counter (OTC) genetic testing kits. These kits test for the presence or absence of a particular gene chromosome. They diagnose diseases such as Huntington's, genes that may lead to future diseases, and people who don't have a disease but may pass it on to others.

We ran six events on this for the UK Human Genetics Commission (HGC). Forty-seven people attended the six events. The votes for the policy positions, which the HGC developed from a earlier consultation, are shown in Table 1. Note that they do not sum to 47 in all cases, showing that one or two people forgot to vote.

People could also add their own policy positions. For instance, one group said, 'Add to position four issues related to confidentiality and the need for reliable, unbiased information before and after test'. (This is an example of the balance we have tried to strike between providing structure and simplifying things, so that the game can be completed in an hour and a half, and giving participants as much control over the proceedings as possible.)

Participants follow the guidelines for a good conversation and wave a yellow card if anyone contravenes them



Table 1: Policy positions

	1. No strict regulation	2. Voluntary regulation with no restriction on types of test	3. Voluntary regulation with restrictions on types of test	4. Strict regulation
	Leave it to the market. Let consumers find out information. Existing consumer protection will ensure quality of products and services.	Voluntary codes of practice covering issues such as consent and information, quality standards etc. No restriction on types of tests available. No legal sanction. Could be issued by government or an advisory body, or by an industry body. This is roughly the current position in the UK.	Voluntary code of practice for some tests covering issues such as consent and information, quality standards etc. Other tests, which could have a high impact on the client (e.g. for Huntington's Disease) could not be sold without a doctor's involvement.	Similar to prescription-only drugs or HIV testing kits. Offence for person other than registered medical practitioner or other authorised person to offer a controlled genetic test.
Not acceptable	40	29	5	11
Acceptable	3	12	21	14
Support	1	1	20	18
Abstain	1	3	1	1

Table 2: Fact cards for OTC genetic testing kits

First set of categories	End result
Definitions	Definitions
Principles for genetic information	What genetic testing does
What genetic testing does	Technology
The general context	NHS testing
The legal context	OTC testing
	Regulation

Developing the cards

So far, we have used an independent expert to develop the cards. On GM we chose Donald Bruce, an ethicist from the Society, Religion, and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland. He was someone whom the civil servants responsible for the debate felt would be respected by both sides. To have a single perspective though is not ideal and was forced on us by lack of time. In future we will probably add an advisory group representing organisations from different sides of the argument.

The first step is often to work out what the six categories of fact cards should be. Table 2 relates to the Human Genetics Commission (HGC) inquiry into over-the-counter genetic testing kits. It compares our set of categories, based on the HGC's own consultative document (we could only think of five categories) with the end result. We found it more helpful to look at exactly what genetic testing does rather than at general principles. We identified that people would want to understand the difference between testing on the National Health Service (NHS) and over-the-counter, and so added sections on each.

Since the game will be played by lay people, it is essential to involve them in at least reviewing the cards. This is what we failed to do when the trade experts within Nef developed a set of cards on Oxfam's trade policy. The Democs team checked the cards but we all know something of the topic so we didn't pay enough attention to acronyms. We had a set of cards called 'Trade and MNCs' which referred to the WTO and LDCs. (These acronyms conceal 'Multi-National Companies', the 'World Trade Organisation' and 'Less Developed Countries'.) One complex card, which in retrospect baffles even me, said that, 'More than 50 developing nations depend on three or fewer primary agricultural commodities for more than half their export earnings'.

With care, every card can be short and clear. For instance, an early card on genetic testing was, 'Currently, individuals who require a genetic test are referred by their GP to an NHS clinical genetics service. This should ensure

Box 3: Development of cards on stem cell research

Trial runs of the game with volunteers showed up the need to introduce IVF into the range of topics because the status of the embryo raised questions for people about this chronologically earlier issue. (IVF stands for 'in vitro fertilisation'. Eggs and sperm are combined outside the womb to create an embryo. When it has grown to eight cells, one or two are transferred to the womb.) New technical questions were raised. What normally happens to the placental cord? What consent for research are IVF couples invited to give and at what stage? Is it possible to take one or two cells from an early embryo to make stem cells, without destroying the embryo (as is done for pre-implantation genetic diagnosis), and could such an embryo be implanted and achieve a viable pregnancy? Although implantation of an embryo used in research is currently illegal under UK law, would this notion make a difference for someone who objected to embryo research because it destroyed live embryos?

that testing is performed to high standards, and that full information and counselling is provided'. The word count was halved by editing this down to, 'Currently, individuals are referred by their GP to a specialist, to see that they get information and counselling'.

Trials improve the content as well as the style. Box 3 describes the development of cards on stem cell research:

The benefits of taking part

To the end of January 2003, nearly 350 people had taken part in around 60 games. We usually asked them to fill in a questionnaire at the end of the game. The questions were designed to test various hypotheses that we had developed about the effect of taking part. Our database shows that:

- Half the participants ended up with an increased understanding of views different from their own, and a quarter became 'more sympathetic' to them.
- A large majority managed to 'identify dilemmas' in their 'thinking and feeling' and just over a quarter resolved them.
- Seventy per cent felt 'slightly clearer than before' on the rights and wrongs of the issue and 12% felt much clearer.

Comments we have had include:

It reminded me of Monopoly [a board game] when I was a kid, when that was the only time people talked to each other.

A terrific way of getting unspoken views into the open and enabling a richer discussion.

Everyone contributed on an equal footing. The amount of prior knowledge does not really matter since facts are given during the course of the game.

Many participants end up with an increased understanding of views different from their own as a result of playing Democs



The responses we have had suggest that Democs have the following strengths:

- a game structure that makes them safe and enjoyable
- information is provided, so no prior knowledge is needed
- deliberative, in ways that encourage learning and the search for common ground
- the link to live issues and the opportunity where possible to influence policy on these issues
- quick to play
- appear to whet people's appetite for more
- very adaptable, e.g. can be run with or without a facilitator, informally at home, or as part of a large public meeting

Could they be useful for me?

You might consider using Democs when:

- you want to involve a large number of people

- they need some information in order to tackle the issue in question

As ever, the disadvantages tend to be the flipside of the advantages:

- It takes time and effort to develop the cards. It wouldn't be worthwhile for a single event with a few people.
- This is true even if you wanted to cover a topic for which a set of cards had already been developed. Some of the cards will need adapting because legal frameworks vary from country to country, because new research has been reported, and so on.

Democs works well if a game is facilitated by someone who has played before, so they know what to expect. We haven't yet achieved our ambition that anyone can be given a kit and can use it straightaway. It is too different from anything they are likely to have experienced before and

there are too many different bits of paper. We'll be working to make it simpler and to make it easier to play, for example by providing videos so that people new to it can see what to expect. We also intend to try providing a little training to facilitators, then supporting them to organise and run games.

In a social science research context, clients often want representative samples. The flipside of producing a kit for anyone who wants it is that the people who play are unlikely

to be representative. Again, we are working on this, to see for instance if there is a way of weighting the views of participants according to their under- or over-representation.

In conclusion, we've overcome some but not all of the reservations of the sceptics. We used one view as the title of our report on the evolution of Democs. We called it, 'So you're using a card game to make policy recommendations?'. Underneath we printed a quotation from Albert Einstein: 'If at first an idea is not absurd, there's no hope for it'.

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NOTE

Do let us know if you want to have a go. We'll try either to post you a kit or email you one, depending on where you are. They're free, although each kit costs about £30 to make, so donations are always welcome. What is even more important, though, is that you have a go and send us back the feedback forms so that we know how you got on.