

Considering the Role of Values in Public Policy

One of our mandates as teachers is to help students become active citizens by entering into the debate on public policy. Consideration of values will be central to these discussions. However, some students enter the discussion unsure of what is meant by values. This simple values exercise can clarify the concept.

Although we probably do not all work from the very same value system, we do tend to share some values or beliefs. It is because we prioritize those we have in common differently, and mix them with others that we do not share, that we often disagree on policy steps. Thus, beneath our disagreements on public policy choices we can often find areas of common ground. Identifying this is helpful as we try to understand the views of others and work together to find ways to move forward despite our seeming disagreement.

Procedure

Give each student a sheet of cards, each with a word from the box below printed on it. Have them separate their sheet into individual cards.

Read the first two words from the box and instruct them to put these two cards in order with the one on top being the one they consider most important. Read a third. Now have them reorder their list. And so on until each student has a stack of ten organized in order of priority to him or her. (They will be arranging them as they might a hand of cards.) Pause to let them reorder them if they wish. You may also want to invite them to add one or two that were not on the list.

Considering Values	
Freedom	Justice
Tolerance	Self-reliance
Equality	Community
Cooperation	Stability
Security	Democracy

When they have finished, ask the students if they found this easy or hard. What was hard? Some of these values will be easy to prioritize. Others will involve trade-offs that make prioritizing very difficult. This is the point of the exercise. And different students will probably have difficulty with different choices. You may want to ask for a couple of volunteers to tell about their lists. On what basis did they make their decisions? Did others see it differently? What lies behind these values? Take one or two and carry them back to core values, e.g., What is it about democracy that you value? You may find that, for some people, one or two of these are core values. For others, those same values may be secondary to other, more foundational values.

You will find that some of these words can mean different things to different people. Some students may want to argue over meaning. Since the object of the exercise is to get students thinking about the values they hold, the words can carry different meanings for different people and still hold together as an exercise. Don't let this bog you down. The purpose of this short exercise is only to raise the issue of values in foreign policy and demonstrate that making choices among values is not always easy.

Freedom



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Justice



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Tolerance



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