

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION MAKING

ABSTRACT

The RTD activity is designed to facilitate understanding about environmental decision making. Students explore a particular issue from multiple perspectives by interacting both online and face-to-face with their peers about a topic in assigned "stakeholder" roles. Students gain an appreciation about the complexity of the issue being examined as they are exposed to different viewpoints about the topic other than their own. The activity has application in any situation involving a group of stakeholders who are meeting to discuss a 'real life' issue, with the aim of reaching consensus about the best course of action.

KEYWORDS

Roundtable; Consensus building; Environmental Decision Making

CONTACT

Elizabeth Devonshire
University of Sydney
ldevonsh@med.usyd.edu.au



DESCRIPTION

The RTD role play is built around the interactions of a group of stakeholders who are meeting to discuss a real life environmental problem. Students are given access to a broad range of online and hard copy reading materials. They are also encouraged to find their own resources. The round-table exercise is implemented over 4-weeks and it involves four main activities:

1. Each student conducts their own research about the topic in general and from the particular perspective of the stakeholder role they are assigned. A "stakeholder position paper" is submitted by each student.
2. Students examine the other stakeholder position papers and post one question from their own stakeholder position to each of the other stakeholders. Asking questions of each stakeholder position leads to an interplay of ideas and perspectives (students helping students). Each stakeholder position represents an individual perspective, but prior to the face-to-face negotiation each student is exposed to the multiple perspectives as a step towards appreciating the complexity of environmental issues and achieving balanced outcomes.
3. Students meet face-to-face to present their position paper and then try to reach consensus on an issue raised by the facilitator (who has selected one of the contentious issues/questions presented in the online discussion).
4. The exercise is concluded by students reflecting on their learning experience.

AUDIENCE/GROUP SIZE

The activity can accommodate 12 to 72 students. Depending on numbers, students are divided into small groups (between 10 – 16 participants) and allocated 1 out of the 16 stakeholder roles to play. Some stakeholder roles may or may not be used.

TIME AND SETTING

The activity is conducted over a 4 week timeframe in a 3rd year undergraduate unit of study. All aspects of the role play (briefing, 'in role' participant interaction, debriefing) occur in an online context.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The activity provides opportunities for the development of specific and generic outcomes:

- Gain appreciation of the intricacies of (environmental) decision making
- Gain insights into the perspectives of other stakeholders and the importance of a participatory approach to environmental decision making
- Develop conflict resolution and negotiation skills
- Integrate and synthesise a range of information resources

RESOURCES

Formal literature (journal articles via electronic reserve in the library); Web-based material (Government reports and discussion papers); Grey literature (unpublished reports, scoping papers etc with direct information on the case study itself); Lecture material and background briefing and information papers, plus a debriefing summary provided on WebCT.

ASSESSMENT

- 5% is awarded for round-table exercise itself, based on position paper and questions to other stakeholders.
- 15% is awarded for an essay based on round-table scenario. This essay integrates lectures, reading, and the round table exercise itself.
- An exam question is also closely linked to the exercise, asking students to address one of the primary themes of contemporary approaches to water resources management that emerges through the module.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

STAGE 1	Roundtable Discussion BRIEFING Face to face <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Activity Briefing (face to face)▪ Allocation of Stakeholder Role	Week 1
STAGE 2	Roundtable Discussion ACTION Online and independent study <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Developing Stakeholder Position▪ Reviewing other stakeholder positions Face to face <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Environmental Meeting	Week 1-3 Week 4
STAGE 3	Roundtable Discussion DEBRIEFING Face to face <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Review and debrief Independent study <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Reflective report	Week 4 Week 5

REUSABILITY

The roundtable discussion activity (RTD) is reusable in a variety of learning contexts involving consensus decision making.

REFERENCES

- Brierley, G., Hillman, M., Devonshire, E. & Funnell, L. (2002). *Description of Round Table Exercise: Environmental Decision-Making about Water Resources in Physical Geography*. Retrieved Nov 22, 2004, from Learning Designs Web site: <http://www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/exemplars/info/LD26/index.html>
- Brierley, G., Hillman, M., & Devonshire, E. (2002b). Learning to Participate: Responding to Changes in Australian Land and Water Management Policy and Practice. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. 18: 7-13.