

The Social Barometer Exercise*

Facilitation Guidelines

This exercise serves well as an ice breaker, stimuli for discussion and critical thinking, establishing an interactive classroom atmosphere, and as a means for forming diverse student groups for class debates and research projects. This exercise may be used for an entire class period and/or periodically for shorter time periods throughout the semester whenever you think the class needs something lively and enjoyable.

When you facilitate this exercise, be sure to call on every student. Make certain that everyone is involved. Often you will play devil’s advocate. Your function is not to promote a particular view so much as to encourage your students, through interested questions, to explain why they literally take a particular position on a particular issue.

To set up the exercise, if you have a long, free space for student movement, center yourself facing the entire group of students. Explain that you will give them a series of statements. If they strongly agree, they will move toward one specified side (right or left of you) of the spectrum. If they strongly disagree, they will move to the opposite side of the spectrum. They also are free to situate themselves anywhere in between the extremes of agreement/disagreement depending on how strongly they feel about the given issue. If space is limited, use the 4 corners of your room as vectors.

As the students respond to your questions on why they moved to the agree or disagree positions, they are free to change positions if one of the other students says something that persuades them to modify their original viewpoints. Remember that your function is to keep everyone involved, ensure that students articulate thoughtful reasons for their selected positions, and not allow the discussion to become too personal or rowdy. Once the students get the hang of this exercise, frequently you will only have to ask the first question on a particular topic. They often will maintain a fluid, lively, and respectful dialogue once you get them started.

Typically, I suggest you begin with a relatively innocuous topic, then gradually move toward more controversial and even “hot-button” issues. Your key questions in facilitating this exercise will be: “Why do you strongly agree or strongly disagree with this statement?”

When you use this exercise to form groups for other projects, ask the participants to notice who is most similar and most different from them on the various issues. At the end of the exercise, ask your students to find 2 other students most similar to them and link arms—forming a small group of 3. Then ask each group of 3 to find a basically dissimilar group and link arms with those group members—forming a working group of 6. This should ensure some lively diversity when they work together on the next selected class project.

* From Dan Berman, Director of University 101, University of South Carolina.

Sample Topics and Questions (a bit dated, but can give you an idea)

1. Types of music: i.e., country, classical, heavy metal, rap, jazz, etc.
2. The Yankees/Cubs/Cardinals/Red Sox/etc. have a chance at winning the World Series.
3. The majority of undergraduates at my university will have cheated or performed at least one act of academic dishonesty before graduating.
4. I would rather be alone or with one close friend in a beautiful nature setting than at a lively, fun party with a large group of people—many of whom I do not know.
5. At a state university, it is inappropriate (and perhaps unconstitutional) to recite religious invocations or organized prayers over a public address system before such large group assemblies as graduation, convocations, or football games.
6. It was appropriate for the L. A. Dodgers stadium police, on August 8, 2000, to eject from the stadium a lesbian couple who were kissing in public.
7. Student athletes should not be admitted or offered scholarships unless they meet the same academic requirements that are demanded of all other students.
8. Three years ago, the NBA fined and suspended a player who refused to stand during the playing of the national anthem. He said it violated his religious beliefs. The NBA was justified in taking this action.
9. At some point in the future, Hillary Rodham Clinton will announce that she is a candidate for the position of President of the United States.
10. A constitutional amendment should be passed banning abortions.
11. The drug war has failed and our prisons are tremendously overcrowded with individuals arrested for possession of illegal substances. Possession of such substances should be decriminalized and additional funding instead should go into new drug treatment centers.
12. The U.S. Supreme Court decision to stop the recount in Florida concerning the 2000 presidential election was: (a) an appropriate judicial decision, or (b) an inappropriate political decision.
13. The average price this summer of a gallon of gasoline will be: a. under \$3.50; b. under \$4; c. under \$4.50. Have participants place themselves along a continuum reflecting their predictions.