

## **Activity: Is democratic deliberation like other forms of thinking?<sup>1</sup>**

### **PART ONE: On Democratic Deliberation**

Amy Gutmann argues that good democratic deliberation overlaps with other forms of reasoning. Thinking about how to live a life or how to live together is not unlike buying a car, choosing a career, or determining whether to continue with your romantic partner. Each involves asking questions, considering evidence, identifying values, evaluating possibilities, and so forth. Each will likely involve hard choices at some point. We can't always get what we want and sometimes (perhaps often times) we have to choose. Deliberation prepares us for those choices. Gutmann writes:

[Students] learn the three R's largely by direct instruction. They also develop capacities for criticism, rational argument, and decision-making by being taught how to think logically, to argue coherently and fairly, and to consider the relevant alternatives before coming to conclusions. Training of this "didactic" sort is democratically desirable because it enables citizens to understand, to communicate, and in some cases to resolve their disagreements. Without this sort of mutual understanding, we could not expect to achieve widespread toleration of dissent and respect for differing ways of life. (50)

She continues:

Nor could we expect minorities to convince majorities or to be convinced by them, of their point of view. But quite apart from its political function, children will eventually need the capacity for rational deliberation to make hard choices in situations where habits and authorities do not supply clear or consistent guidance. (50-1)

According to Gutmann, deliberative skills are necessary, though not sufficient for democracy.

### **PART TWO: Student reflection**

How is deliberation in the context of buying cars, choosing careers, and navigating romance similar to democratic deliberation? How does it differ?

### **PART THREE: Group conversation**

Take a vote – is democratic deliberation like buying cars (and the like)? Those answering “yes” go to one side of the room, while those answering “no” go to the other. Each group compiles a list of reasons for their chosen view.

### **PART FOUR: Cross-group conversation**

Each group “pitches” their reasons to other group.

---

<sup>1</sup> Created by John Draeger. Made available on [www.beingthoughtful.net](http://www.beingthoughtful.net)