

Teacher's Guide

Lesson: Democracy action cards

Duration 30 minutes | lower secondary professional education, senior general secondary education, pre-university education, intermediate vocational education

Introduction

As a young person, what actions could you take to support, reinforce and sustain democracy in your daily life? What are the options available to you? And why would you choose to take them? This lesson encourages young people to reflect on the culture of democracy and the role they can play in it. Using six action cards featuring an illustration, young people learn that democratic culture is intertwined in daily life and that it entails much more than simply the right to vote.

The action cards function as discussion initiators, inciting young people to consider what they can do to reinforce democratic culture. This involves daily, often minor, activities such as having the courage to express oneself, daring to make individualistic choices in relation to one's subject cluster or listening to various perspectives. Through these discussions, students discover that democracy is more than just a system; instead, it is something that can be actively practised every day. It is something one can *do*, and a democratic culture provides each person with this space and these opportunities. The lesson starts with a short class exploration of various advantages and disadvantages of two opposing political systems: a democracy and a dictatorship. In small groups, students work with the action cards and discuss how each card relates to democracy and which actions they themselves are already taking — or would like to take. The session concludes with a class reflection as well as the following question: which action card would still be possible in a dictatorship?

The action cards can be used across all levels of intermediate vocational education and secondary education, including lower secondary professional education, senior general secondary education or pre-university education. Naturally the discussions can be adapted to the participants' educational level and social world.

Learning objectives

- Students explore the role democracy plays in their daily life.
- Students consider the advantages and disadvantages of democracy and compare these with dictatorship. They also reflect on what these political systems (would) mean for them.
- Students exchange ideas for actions that support and/or sustain democratic culture.
- Students reflect on the vulnerability of democratic constitutional states and the consequences for them if these states should it cease to exist, entirely or in part.

Organisational preparation

- Print one set of six action cards for each group of four students: 3x A4, one-sided, black and white.

Step-by-step plan

1 Examine the following political systems: democracy & dictatorship

As a class, study the democracy and dictatorship political systems and provide the clearest possible insight of their consequences. Start with the following question: can each of you come up with at least one advantage of democracy? Write the answers on the board and discuss them briefly in class. Repeat this exercise for dictatorship and write it on the board next to it, so the contrast becomes visible.

Note: where possible, ask additional questions about each of the answers (refer to the table for examples) and write down any disadvantages that may arise from this on the board. Supplement with any other disadvantages.

Diagram indicating possible answers by students:

DEMOCRACY	DICTATORSHIP
<p>Advantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone is heard • Your voice counts • People generally follow rules • Minorities are protected • Fair and just jurisdiction • Many liberties 	<p>Advantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making is fast • The government is clear • Most people follow rules • Beneficial for those in power.
<p>Disadvantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making takes a long time • Parties hardly ever get their way entirely because of compromises that must be made 	<p>Disadvantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People cannot freely express their opinions • No free press: journalists must write what the government prescribes • A lot of violence (by the state against civilians) • Biased courts, show trials • A lot of fear • Corruption and self-enrichment among those in power

Note: a common misconception among students is the idea that democracy is a culture where 'the majority decides'. This can be tackled by stating that democracy does *not* equal a dictatorship of the majority. A real democracy considers and takes into account the positions of minorities and protects these minorities through fundamental rights.

2 The action cards: democratic culture in your daily life

Introduce the concept of 'democratic culture'. Democracy is deeply embedded in our daily life and in our democratic culture of discussing, conferring, compromising, listening and expressing ourselves. Every day and everywhere. In other words: democracy is more than just the right to vote.

Introduce the action cards: each group of four students receives a set of six action cards. Clearly explain that the cards are open to interpretation and that there are no correct or incorrect answers.

The assignment for each group is to pick three cards and discuss the following for each one of them:

- How does this card relate to democracy?
- What is an example of an action you take or could take in your daily life?

Discuss the answers in class. Present one card at a time and invite input from one of the groups. This way, all cards are discussed through practical examples that are linked closely to young people's social world. Examples include deciding on your subject cluster yourself instead of following friends, daring to express yourself in class and protecting yourself properly online with secure passwords.

During the reflection, emphasise that the actions presented on the cards help strengthen a democratic way of living together — a democratic culture. Without such everyday actions, democracy risks becoming little more than a paper reality.

3 Short presentations

Ask each group to pick a card they think has the greatest impact on reinforcing democratic culture. Each group will have the opportunity to explain why they chose their card and explain the impact of this card on democratic culture.

4 Inversion as the conclusion

Ask the following question: which of the actions on these cards would still be possible if you lived under a dictatorship? Discuss the influence of a political system — democracy or dictatorship — on the freedom you experience in your daily life and actions.

Background information

Examining the advantages and disadvantages of democracy and comparing them with a dictatorship.

In step 1 of this lesson, young people examine the defining features and consequences of these two political systems. It is important to provide young people with the space and opportunity to be critical about democracy as it currently functions and to discuss what might be improved — the perfect democracy versus the current practice.

To strengthen democratic awareness among young people, considering both the strengths and weaknesses of a democratic system, as well as its most extreme alternative, a dictatorship, is very valuable. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this for citizens and how would a political system like this affect your daily life? Who benefits from this system and who does not?

Tip: if the concept of dictatorship is still unfamiliar or abstract, students can first individually complete the [Democracy or Dictatorship decision tree](#) before starting this activity. This will help them to understand and provide advantages and disadvantages of both political systems.

Background to the action cards

The illustrations on the action cards — by illustrator Claudie de Cleen — are based on the book *Against Tyranny* by American history professor Timothy Snyder. It describes twenty actions that foster a reaction to authoritarianism and a democratic society.

The action cards allow for ample interpretation and various actions suit more than one action card. Examples of actions that suit the actions cards include:

- You speak out if you are in favour of or against something.
- You are willing to empathise with people with a different opinion.
- You are individualistic and not afraid to go against the grain.
- You do not take things for granted but instead have a critical attitude.
- You make sure that your digital identity is properly secured and shielded.

