

## **Doing Democracy**

*“Democracy is never finished. When we believe that it is, we have, in fact, killed it.”  
~ Patricia Hill Collins*

### **Overview**

According to Patricia Hill Collins (2009), many of us “see democracy as a thing, a finished product manufactured in the west that advanced capitalist societies can give to the less fortunate” (p. 12). In this lesson, students will explore the concept of democracy and begin to understand that “democracy is a *process*, a way of building community and getting business done...” (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 12). By focusing on the active components of democracy seldom highlighted, students will gain an understanding that they each are responsible for “doing” democracy through their active participation as citizens and community members.

### **Grades**

8-12

### **Essential Questions**

- What is democracy?
- Who is responsible for democracy?
- In what ways is democracy a “process” that we must all participate in?

### **Materials**

- “Crazy for this Democracy,” excerpt and discussion questions, attached
- Sample Images of Democracy in Action (Literal & Abstract), attached
- Art paper and markers

### **Duration**

45-60 minutes

### **Instructions**

#### **What is Democracy?**

1. Write the word “DEMOCRACY” on the board and ask students to brainstorm what comes to mind. (Teachers should have a student volunteer note all thoughts on a piece of chart paper.) As students share their thoughts, remind them that there is no right or wrong answer and encourage their continued thinking with follow-up questions when necessary. For example:
  - What images come to mind when considering this word?
  - What does democracy look like? Sound like? Feel like?
  - What actions do you relate to democracy?
  - Who is included in or constitutes democracy?
  - Who is responsible for democracy?
2. Once students have expended their initial thoughts, review the brainstormed list. If there are any aspects not yet covered, teachers may want to ask guiding questions to get students to consider missing concepts. For example, if all thoughts noted are positive, the teacher might ask, “Are there any potential negative aspects of democracy?”
3. To further the discussion, write or project the following quote from Patricia Hill Collins (2009) on the board and ask students to silently read and ponder it:

“Democracy is never finished. When we believe that it is, we have, in fact, killed it” (p. 182).

Discuss:

- What message is Patricia Hill Collins trying to convey?
  - What do you think she means when she says that “Democracy is never finished?” Do you agree or disagree and why?
  - Based on this statement, do you think we have “killed” democracy? Why or why not? What evidence can you offer that democracy has been “killed?” What evidence can you counter that illustrates that democracy is alive and well?
  - How does this view, that democracy is something that we must “do” and participate in, differ from how we typically speak about or think about democracy?
4. Briefly review the common aspects addressed when teaching about democracy. Explain to students that democracy is often solely defined in terms of political government, be it direct democracy (carried out by the people), or republicanism (elected representatives are given the power to govern by the people, for the people.) Common principles associated with the definition of democracy are equality (equal protection before the law), freedom, and liberty (rights), typically protected by a constitution.

However, the mistake we often make is in viewing democracy as a “thing” (be it a government, one particular action like voting, etc.), and/or a “thing” that others are responsible for, when in actuality, “democracy is a *process*, a way of building community and getting business done...” (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 12) that we are each responsible for.

#### **“Crazy for this Democracy”**

5. Tell students they are going to continue exploring the concept of democracy, particularly focusing on aspects not typically at the forefront of our thoughts. Partner students up and pass out the attached worksheet which includes an excerpt from Zora Neale Hurston’s “Crazy for this Democracy” and related discussion questions. Instruct students to take approximately 15 minutes to read the essay excerpt then discuss the questions that follow. Once students have completed their partner work, have them report their thoughts back to the entire class and further discuss:
- In what ways is Hurston being an active participant in democracy?
  - Why is such dissent, critique and/or commentary, even when pointing out the flaws in democracy, crucial to having an effective democracy?
6. Discuss with students how Hurston was rightfully highlighting the contradiction in the alleged “American commitment to democracy” when “its African American citizens had not yet benefited from it” (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 175). In doing so, Hurston was engaging in the democratic process by speaking out against injustice. In 1945, African Americans may have officially “possessed citizenship rights and thus were beneficiaries of democracy,” but “race and class oppression had routinely stripped them of the rights of first class citizenship” (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 175) throughout the Jim Crow era. Through her thoughtful essay, Hurston was engaging in a critical analysis of the promises of democracy compared to the actual day-to-day experience of an African American under Jim Crow segregation. She was not “abandoning the idea of democracy in the United States” (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 175); rather, she was advocating via her thoughts and writing that democracy be held up to its potential. Hurston “routinely pointed out the failures of democracy when it came to its African American citizens, poor people, and women, and she argued that democratic ideals would remain compromised so long as these and other groups remained second-class citizens” (Hill Collins, 2008, p. 177). Yet, at the same time, she “remained committed to democratic ideals. She did not bring an uncritically patriotic, celebratory fame to democracy. Rather, she cast a critical eye on it” (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 177), as each of us should continue to do today.

### Democracy in Action

7. Prior to class, choose various images that can be connected to democracy in some way; these images need to be copied so that they can be distributed to students. (Sample images are attached that should be cut apart if used. The images provided include both literal pictures of democratic action, as well as symbolic images that will require more creative interpretation on the part of students.)

Tell students that they are going to continue exploring the concept of democracy as a process, rather than a “finished thing” that is separate from our daily lives. Place students into small groups of 3 and provide each group with an image for examination. Tell students to analyze the image provided and to discuss how it can be interpreted to represent a component of democracy. Tell groups to be prepared to share their picture and interpretation with the remainder of class in approximately 5 minutes. While there is no right or wrong answer for image interpretations, encourage students to “think outside of the box” and delve into the active components of democracy that may be represented in their picture.

8. Once students have culminated their group discussions, ask volunteers from each group to summarize their group’s image and thoughts regarding how it connects to democracy. As students share their thoughts, track the themes, actions, concepts, etc. on a piece of chart paper. Once all groups have presented, post this list beside the initial “democracy” brainstorm that students completed at the beginning of the lesson (see Step 1). Ask students to compare the two lists and note any new understandings or themes that seem to have emerged.

### “Democracy is...”

9. As a culminating activity, provide each group with a piece of poster board or chart paper and instruct them to create a visual representation focused on completing the prompt of: “Democracy is...” Give students guidelines for their final product, such as:

Your final poster must...

- be a response to the prompt: “Democracy is...”
- contain literal or abstract images, drawings, symbols, and/or colors
- contain a phrase, slogan, or text that helps viewers interpret the poster’s topic/message
- be original, creative, and well thought out
- include contributed thoughts and designs from each group member

Encourage students to brainstorm various ideas before beginning their design. Posters can be finished in class or due on a future date, depending on the teacher’s time constraints.

10. Once students are ready to turn their posters in, hang them around the room or in another location (such as the hall, media center, etc.) and allow students to do a gallery walk to view one another’s work. Teachers can number each poster and have students write down feed back in chart form as they rotate around the room. For example:

Poster #	My interpretation of the poster’s message	What I liked about or learned from the poster	Questions I have

11. Culminate with a discussion:

- Which poster struck you most and why?
- Which poster do you feel best completes the prompt of “Democracy is...” and why?

- If someone who knew nothing about democracy viewed this gallery, what do you think their first impression of democracy would be and why? What would they learn and why? What would they perhaps not understand that they would need to know?
- Based on this lesson, what have you learned about democracy that you did not know before? Or, how have your views on democracy changed? Explain.

**Resources**

Collins, P. H. (2009). *Another kind of public education: Race, schools, the media, and democratic possibilities*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books.

## STUDENT HANDOUT

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Excerpt from "Crazy for this Democracy" By Zora Neale Hurston, 1945

They tell me this democracy form of government is a wonderful thing. It has freedom, equality, justice, in short, everything! Since 1937 nobody has talked about anything else...The radio, the newspapers, and the columnists inside the newspapers, have said how lovely it was. And this talk and praise-giving has got me in the notion to try some of the stuff. All I want to do is to get hold of a sample of the thing, and I declare, I sure will try it. I don't know for myself, but I have been told that it is really wonderful.

...

I accept this idea of Democracy. I am all for trying it out. It must be a good thing if everybody praises it like that. If our government has been willing to go to war and to sacrifice billions of dollars and millions of men for the idea, I think that I ought to give the thing a trial.

The only thing that keeps me from pitching headlong into the thing is the presence of numerous Jim Crow laws on the statute books of the nation. I am crazy about the idea of this Democracy. I want to see how it feels. Therefore, I am all for the repeal of every Jim Crow law in the nation here and now. Not in another generation or so. The Hurstons have already been waiting eighty years for that. I want it here and now.

Source: *Negro Digest*, 1945

**Discuss the following questions with your partner then summarize your answers on notebook paper:**

1. What strikes you most about this excerpt, or, what do you find most interesting and why?
2. How would you describe the tone of this piece?
3. What message is Hurston trying to convey? How does her tone contribute to her intended message?
4. What contradictions are being highlighted by Hurston?
5. How do you think Hurston feels about democracy? What evidence in the passage makes you think this?
6. Based upon her message and what you already know about Zora Neale Hurston, how would you characterize her and why?
7. If you were to give this passage another title, what would you call it and why?
8. Considering the time period this was written, how is Hurston "doing" democracy by writing this essay?

Sample Images of Democracy in Action (Symbolic)



Source: <http://nowsourcing.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/social-media-democracy.jpg>

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Source: [http://www.aids-services.com/images/volunteer\\_hands.jpg](http://www.aids-services.com/images/volunteer_hands.jpg)



Source: <http://www.ttdash.org/volunteers.html>

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Source: [http://img.timeinc.net/time/asia/magazine/2007/0205/a\\_democracy.jpg](http://img.timeinc.net/time/asia/magazine/2007/0205/a_democracy.jpg)



Sample Images of Democracy in Action (Literal)



Source: <http://www.nvdaily.com/news/2009/04/volunteers-clean-up-trail-at-third-winch.html>







Source: [http://www.marclamonthill.com/mlhblog/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/war\\_protest\\_102809.jpg](http://www.marclamonthill.com/mlhblog/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/war_protest_102809.jpg)

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Source: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/tunisia-teach.jpg>



Source: [http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3218/3002590407\\_f53267852e.jpg](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3218/3002590407_f53267852e.jpg)

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Source: [http://www.courtinnovation.org/\\_images/uploads/presentation\\_YJB.jpg](http://www.courtinnovation.org/_images/uploads/presentation_YJB.jpg)