

Background: At the beginning and end of the quarter we will be creating definitions of sustainability. This activity will give you practice in the consensus process—a process that encourages sharing of information, openness to the ideas of others, and coming to a decision as a group. Comparing our definitions at the end of the quarter will give us insight into what we have learned.

Beginning of the Quarter Instructions:

Step 1: Individually, brainstorm ideas, concepts, or examples that represent sustainability or some aspect of sustainability. Please be inclusive and add anything that comes to mind. 5 min.

Step 2: In groups of three (triads) you will share and discuss your lists.

First: Introduce yourselves to each other

Second: Do a “go round” by allowing each member to take a turn explaining and answering questions about the list they created from their brainstorm. In a go round the focus of the group should be on one member at a time. Other members can ask questions in order to gain clarity, understanding, or offer a different perspective, but should not offer examples from their own lists. 15-20 minutes.

Third: As a group, decide on the four or five best ideas, concepts or examples that represent sustainability. You should not just take one idea per person. Rather, you should discuss which items are most important for the group. Be open to other perspectives. Disagreement is an asset in the consensus process and allows the group to discuss the issue in more detail, understand differing positions, and potentially seek alternatives. It’s also important to remember that consensus is not about making a unanimous decision. Rather, consensus is a process of making a decision that is best for the group which means it’s the best decision the group can make in the time provided. 15-20 minutes.

Fourth: Once you have your four or five best ideas, think of a way to use them in a sentence or short paragraph defining sustainability. Once you have crafted a sentence, write the sentence in large letters on the blank paper provided for you. Put your group members names **ON THE BACK OF THE PAPER**. Then turn in your group’s definition. 10 minutes.

Step 3: Using the overhead, we will read every groups definitions of sustainability anonymously. We will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each definition. As you comment on definitions remember to be respectful and constructive and phrase your comments thoughtfully. As your definition is being discussed by others try to keep an open mind, it’s often very difficult to hear critiques of our work or perspectives. Try to listen to the perspectives and insights of the commenters.

Step 4: Work with your group to revise your definition of sustainability incorporating what you learned in the large group discussion. Write your revised definition on the back of your original definition and turn it in.

End of the Quarter Instructions:

Step 1: Individually, brainstorm ideas, concepts, or examples that represent sustainability or some aspect of sustainability. Please be inclusive and add anything that comes to mind. 5 min.

Step 2: In groups of three (triads) you will share and discuss your lists.

First: Do a “go round” by allowing each member to take a turn explaining and answering questions about the list they created from their brainstorm. In a go round, the focus of the group should be on one member at a time. Other members can ask questions in order to gain clarity, understanding, or offer a different perspective, but should not offer examples from their own lists. 15-20 minutes.

Second: As a group, decide on the four or five best ideas, concepts or examples that represent sustainability. You should not just take one idea per person. Rather, you should discuss which items are most important for the group. Be open to other perspectives. Disagreement is an asset in the consensus process and allows the group to discuss the issue in more detail, understand differing positions, and seek alternatives. It’s also important to remember that consensus is not about making a unanimous decision. Rather, consensus is a process of making a decision that is best for the group which means it’s the best decision the group can make in the time provided. 15-20 minutes.

Third: Find a way to express each idea or concept in one word, a short phrase, or an image. Write one idea or concept per extra large sticky note provided. Remember to use large print so that everyone can see your writing once the sticky notes are on the white board.

Step 3: We will go round multiple times. At each go round, each group will share one of their sticky notes with the class. At your turn, one member of your group should come down, explain your idea or concept to the class, and place the sticky note on the board. Try and place your sticky note next to like ideas or concepts. It’s fine and even desirable to have the same or similar ideas and concepts as other groups—it just means there is more agreement within the group. As we place more sticky notes on the board, we will group them into categories we create.

Step 4: Once all the sticky notes are on the board we will start to create a definition of sustainability. We will first arrange the sticky notes into different categories and then arrange the categories. Then we will create a sentence or paragraph based on the arrangements of sticky notes on the board.

Step 5: We will then compare our new definitions with our small group definitions from earlier in the quarter. What is different? What is the same? Are there any elements missing? How is the class definition of sustainability different from other more popular definitions (e.g. the definition of sustainable development from the Bruntland Commission’s “Our Common Future”)?