the A to Z of GOOD DISCUSSION

NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION

to

Business

of

minority
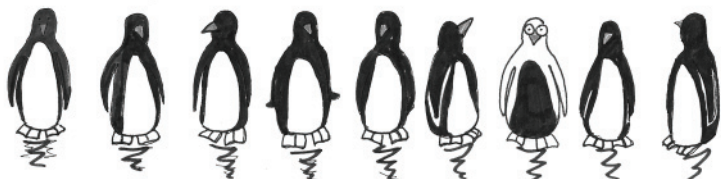
How often do you take part in a bad discussion?

Vicious online message boards, shouts from speeding landrovers, cold calling salespeople, tired arguments over dinner. We've all been sat in meetings that never seem to end, or become dominated by the same people throughout, with little positive outcomes to show by the time they finally finish.

But what is a good discussion?
What happens when you get the process right?
And why is this important?

Hopefully this little guide will start to answer such questions. It seems obvious to say that discussion is a vital part of collective action and education, and yet we sometimes very rarely examine the ways in which we discuss or make decisions as groups, friends and networks.

District Fellows, the 16-25 branch of The Woodcraft Folk, a cooperative youth movement, has been trying to tackle bad discussion for a while now. We've seen how positive, inclusive and engaging discussion is not just a way of concocting the best possible plans and actions, but something worthwhile in itself.

It might sound kind of boring or unimportant, but Good Discussion can be radical. By creating a participatory, direct form of discussion and decision making we start to challenge many of the hierarchies and problems of the so called 'democracy' we live in. Both the content and the form of our discussion about these issues, about positive alternatives, becomes a radical force. So often our ideas of sustainable, equal, cooperative futures are tripped at the first hurdle by embedded, problematic ways of discussing. By not really listening, by ignoring minority voices and championing 'majority' ones, creating needless visions of authority, by inadvertently replicating the things we wish to change.

From university occupations to climate camps, Mexican hills to European squats, from long term workers cooperatives to momentary affinity groups, new ideas of Good Discussion are helping to create real, positive change.

This guide is only a beginning. And it is aimed at beginners, of which I would still certainly count myself. It's a point of reference, a brief run through of some of the key things that we, as young activists, campaigners and plotters (people who often find themselves sat in meetings!) in the District Fellows Movement found useful. It is by no means definitive. I've been tweaking at it for a year or so now, I encourage you to carry on doing so. Hopefully it will be of some use.

The guide needs dedicating to Seeds For Change, who ran the first (to my mind) ever Consensus Decision Making at a DF event, Spring Awakening in something like 2007, and to Phil for inviting them along to that. They certainly informed a number of the sections here too, and I definitely recommend looking over the amazing resources on their website - http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/

- Joel White
Chair of DF Committee

Actions / Active Listening / Agenda / Affinity Group

Actions are when people put themselves forwards to fulfill a specific proposal which has gone through consensus. It's good to keep a big list of these and see how people are getting along with them after meetings.

Active listening is a way of attentively interacting with each other during conversation or meetings, which can help reduce conflicts, foster understanding and strengthen cooperation. We've all been in meetings where texting, picking at food, counting ceiling tiles or simply just trying to construct our next invaluable contribution seems more attractive than actually listening to those who are speaking. This is a problem. Active listening is pretty simple really- make a concerted effort to engage with what is being said, adjust body language to accentuate this and then perhaps offer occasional prompting questions – 'Why did you feel like that?', 'How did you react to ****' etc. *See Nonviolent Communication for an expansion of this*.

WHAT'S THAT MILDRED?

Action Points
1. have fun → Jo.
2. write report on fun had. → Mike.
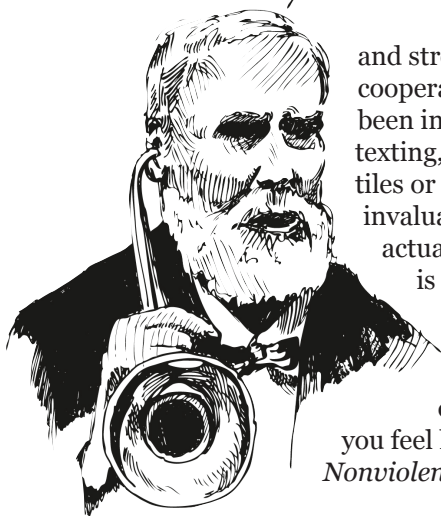
The Agenda is a key part of any meeting, outlining points for discussion over a given time. Participants have to feel ownership of an agenda and be given time to contribute to it at the beginning of a meeting. This is vital. Any confusing, irrelevant or questionable parts can and should be brought up; often the process of doing so is the biggest factor in making the following discussion worthwhile. An agenda can help focus discussion, as people can see a breakdown of what will be coming up next, and it is worth putting it up somewhere visible in the room where a meeting is taking place. Agendas should be adaptable to changes in time and enthusiasm, but any serious modifications should be made by the group rather than one person.

Affinity Group are a group of people who come together with a common cause, often to take direct action. The group is usually formed with a distinct task in mind, and can use consensus decision making in order to achieve this task in the most democratic, inclusive and successful way.

B *Balance / Breaks.*

Balancing the style of a meeting is a difficult but important skill. Everyone has their own preferred method of discourse and a good facilitator will acknowledge this in the planning of discussion, depending on what points have come forward. Balancing discussion styles should also be a collective job, as clear proof that effort is being made to accommodate everyone's individual preferences is often the first step to making it a reality. The balance between Open Space and Large Group Discussions is a good example, as for instance 'designing a new flyer' would be difficult to do with 50 people in a circle, but discussing a large change in constitution or something which affects everyone might seem more suited to one group. Being clear about the choices behind this is really helpful in making people feel like their own preferences are valued.
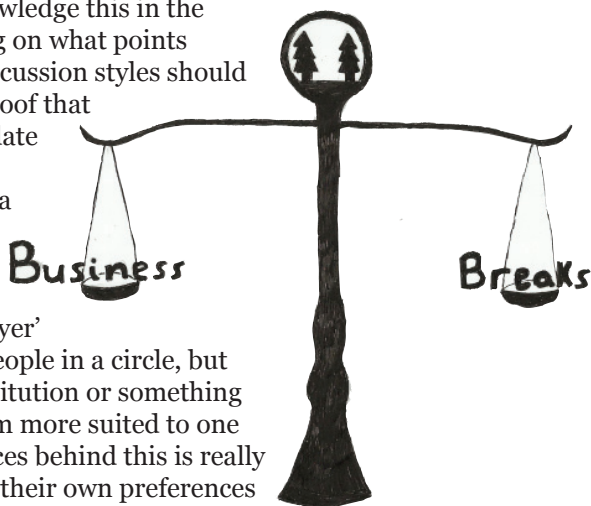
Breaks are key to a good meeting. This is partly because having people eating, drinking and lounging during a meeting can be bad for discussion, but also because everyone needs a bit of fresh air, a chance to move about a bit and time to digest what has been said once in a while. Try put breaks into an agenda and signpost them as they approach, ie- 'We'll just do this next item on the agenda then all go for a ten minute cuppa.'

C *– Consensus / Circles*

Consensus decision making is a wonderful, participatory, empowering alternative to normal 'first past the post' voting and vertical, rather than horizontal, discussions. It works creatively to involve all persons in a decision and makes a group commitment to find solutions that everyone can live with. It is more than just a compromise, often bringing up surprising new solutions that may not have surfaced under majority voting. It is a dialogue amongst equals in which every person has the power to make changes, or prevent changes they find unacceptable, resulting in greater commitment to decisions and solutions. The process usually involves something like this-

1. The problem, or decision needing to be made, is defined and named. It helps to do this in a way that separates the problems/questions from personalities.

2. Brainstorm possible solutions. Write them all down, even the crazy ones. Keep the energy up for quick, top-of-the head suggestions.

3. Create space for questions or clarification on the situation.

4. Discuss the options written down. Modify some, eliminate others, and develop a short list. Which are the favourites?

5. State the proposal or choice of proposals so that everybody is clear.

6. Discuss the pros and cons of each proposal - make sure everybody has a chance to contribute.

7. If there is a major objection, return to step 6 (this is the time-consuming bit). Sometimes you may need to return to step 4.

8. If there are no major objections, state the decisions and test for agreement.

9. Acknowledge minor objections and incorporate friendly amendments.

10. Discuss.

Check for consensus.
This usually involves hand signals (*See* **Jazz Hands!**) and can involve people '*Not Supporting*' but allowing a decision anway, '*Standing aside*' if they personally can not do something but are happy for others to, *Vetoing* (*see* **Veto**) to stop it or '*Agreeing to Disagree*' and leaving the decision for later or breaking it down into key issues. There are far more in depth guides to consensus available, and it is worth consulting these or getting people who have experience of consensus decision making along to meetings when you first attempt it.

Circles are blatantly an amazing shape. Discussions always seem to go better in a circle, especially one where everyone is on the same level and can see each other. Go circular!
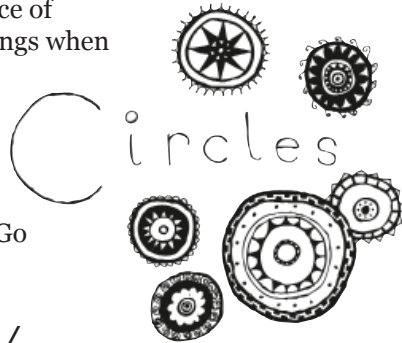
Direct Democracy / Diversity

Direct Democracy is all about the original 'people power' element of democracy- that it should allow every individual control over the decisions which affect them. In doing so it contrasts with representative democracy, in which people are elected to make decisions on the mandate of others. In a meeting individuals either bring purely their own views or represent the views of a larger group who have nominated or elected that individual to represent them, so both kinds of democracy occur. It can be very hard for an individual to keep their personal views from overpowering the views of those they are representing when they speak. Strong reminders from a facilitator to the group are often needed. Striving to ensure people feel they can personally contribute to decisions which affect them is vital. Where this is not possible 'representatives' of groups should be made acutely aware of their role as such and care should be taken that they have consulted those they represent both before and after meetings or decisions.

Diversity is a difficult thing to get right in terms of decisions and discussions. Is there something wrong if an anti-racist group only includes white people? Some might think so. What about discussing feminism without any wimmin present? It seems fair to worry about the validity of such a discussion, depending on specifics. In a spectrum which can stretch from quotas and tokenism to narrow minded monoculture, aiming for a diversity of participants can seem daunting. This shouldn't stop you trying! As is often the case, process is the key; an overt attempt to question the diversity of a group is often the first big step to challenging the roots of such an issue. Evaluation of your methods and aims whilst questioning why a group is lacking in diversity would be the first step towards challenging it; but it is also worth noting that when it comes to opinions- your common goals and shared ideas, whilst not totally diverse, are what defines you.

E *Empowerment / Evaluation*

Empowerment is about helping individuals and communities develop strength and confidence in their own abilities. Everyone in a meeting or discussion should feel empowered, but working towards it often rightly relates to those who may be more marginalized than others. It means having an impact on decisions, access to information, a range of options to choose from, involvement in change, overcoming stigma and increasing positive self-image. Empowerment relates to diversity and is again difficult to get right. Too often, those with power think empowering others is as simple as a go round the circle or a deliberate question 'what do you think, as someone from a low income background!?', but empowerment has to be led by those who are un-empowered and is often more about leveling off power relations from the top. It shouldn't be patronizing or tokenistic. The whole group should take practical steps; explaining concepts, swapping facilitation roles, providing prior information, taking every proposal seriously, collectively trying to ensure nobody dominates the discussion; to make sure everyone leaves feeling empowered.

Evaluation is really important in practically all meetings/ discussions. It can really help make people feel empowered, whilst throwing up lots of interesting ideas for next time. Facilitators should allow for some evaluation to be anonymous, whilst also letting a general discussion take place about the different elements of each meeting. Small groups are often useful, as is ensuring that those who facilitated or organized the discussion take a back seat. Don't forget to actually take it into account next time, and keep good notes of what gets said! Evaluation can seem tough because it will inevitably take longest when a meeting has been crap and everyone wants to just move on, but those are the moments when evaluation really must be utilised and respected.

Facilitation

Facilitators help guide meetings in an impartial and hopefully productive way. Good facilitation is usually vital to successful discussions and meetings. They should -

- monitor the agenda
- keep time
- manage the group process
- encourage participation from all attendees
- help participants understand different points of view
- foster solutions that incorporate diverse points of view
- manage participant behaviour
- create a safe environment
- teach new thinking skills and encourage people to properly think over different ideas

There are training courses and books aplenty for prospective facilitators, many are very worthwhile, but it is also useful to have a number of different facilitators during a meeting, depending what is being discussed- or even to call in outside facilitation for specific debates. One of the main things to remember as a facilitator is to be creative, to try to stay aware of the moods and feelings in the room and to stand aside if you feel your own opinions will affect a discussion. It is crucial that facilitators are clearly, consistently neutral during any discussion. See 'Seeds for Change' for a proper, brilliant expansion of this.

Guidelines

It's often useful to collectively come up with a list of **guidelines** at the start of any meeting. They could be vague; 'respect each other ', or specific; 'No alcohol until we're finished'. It can be a good way for people to make initial contributions to the room and the collective nature of the process usually ensures people are much happier to abide by what is said.
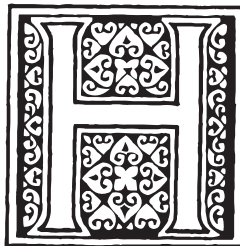

Hellos!

A good **hello** can make or break a meeting. Name games, stickers and introductions are great, but if you have time it can be really good to spend a bit of it getting people to properly talk to each other before a meeting starts. Speed dating style circles, splitting up existing groups so that they talk to one another, mingling time... The more time breaking down worries, awkwardness and cliques, the better!

I — Inclusion

I'm a big fan of this little mantra: **'Never blame exclusion on the excluded'**. How very Zen... But seriously, inclusion is a cornerstone of successful discussions and movements. It is totally wrong to blame those who do not take part: "They're too young," "They don't understand the issue properly" etc, especially if it concerns them directly. Have a look through this A to Z, think about how you may be excluding others from participation and... ACT!
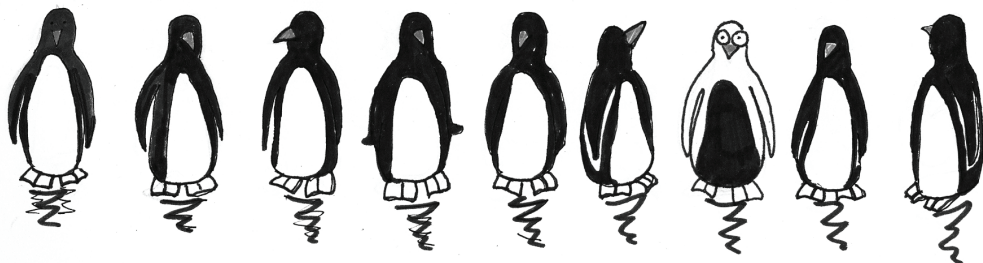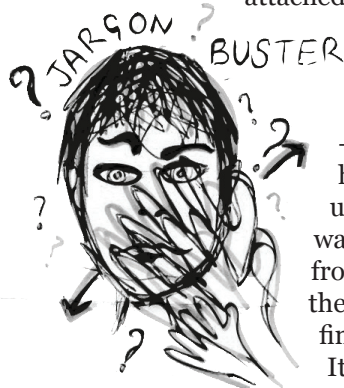

its never fun to be the one feeling excluded

J — *Jazz Hands/ Jargon Buster*

Hand signals are a way of helping consensus decision making move along with ease. The **'Jazz Hands'** or 'Silent Clapping' are happily the most well known, indicating agreement – consensus – but there are a lot of other ones which can be used too. See attached chart for a few nice drawings!

Jargon Buster – this is a consensus hand signal that usually involves waving one's hand in front of one's face with the palm facing and fingers outstretched. It basically means, I don't understand what you are saying. *See* **language**.

Jus.sssSs$$st
SSsSsSsssss$$$ign

Here!

... just where Exactly?

K.

– Kafkaesque
Alright, so K was hard. **Kafka** wrote about invisible bureaucracy, impassive interrogation and false trial. In real life it has come to mean situations that are impossibly complex, illogical or difficult to escape. Make sure your meetings are not like that! Read Kafka!

Ever felt like this in a meeting? Drawn by Kafka himself.

Language

It's really good to be aware of **language** in discussions. This can mean anything from not using / challenging offensive or derogatory terms, speaking plainly without difficult technical language, or even ensuring there are proper translations and explanations available to people who do not speak English (there's quite a few of them around you know!). Practically it can also mean asking people to speak up, not mumble, or stop waffling. There are hand signals to help with this, but be careful not to stifle people's point because they are not as used to public speaking as others.

Laptops

Aren't **laptops** cool?! And Ipads? And swanky phones? Well actually, laptops et al can become a surprisingly large barrier between participants and the meeting. Physically they get in the way of listening and eye contact and from an egalitarian point of view it can be pretty

?

Procedural Motion

Qu... Amend...
#... ...eral Council

WTF?
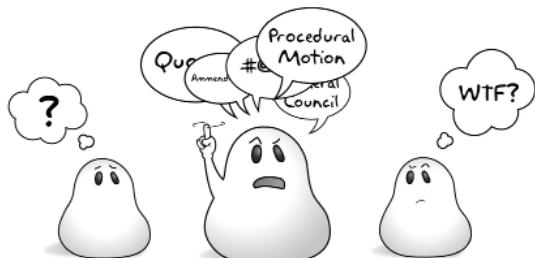
jargon

rubbish being the only person in a room who didn't have £200 to splash at PC World. More often than not they get used for online grazing, illicit games of minesweeper and other pointless trivialities. Question whether the technology you think seems invaluable actually is and you can usually avoid it, unless of course, you're taking minutes. (You will also find you have more room in your rucksack!)

Minutes

It's usually worth having someone taking **minutes** during a meeting. Where this does happen be sure to check that whoever is doing so still feels able to contribute when they want, and that the final minutes are read and checked for discrepancies by everyone in attendance.
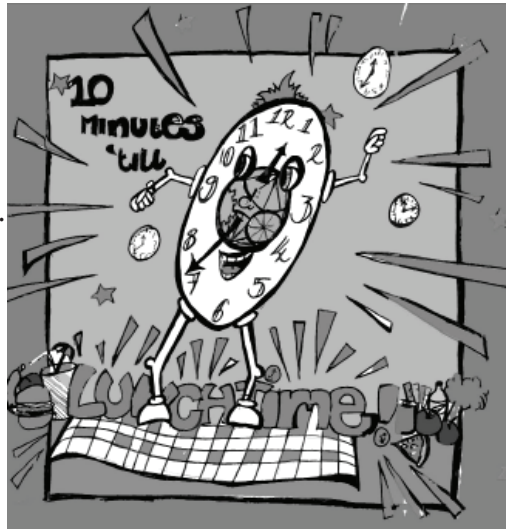
Nonviolent Communication

NVC is a way to communicate with greater compassion and clarity. It focuses on two things: **honest self-expression** — exposing what matters to oneself in a way that's likely to inspire compassion in others, and **empathy** — listening with deep compassion. Central to NVC is the idea that everything a human being does is motivated by human needs and that conflict between groups is usually a miscommunication of these needs based upon manipulated language. It is typically separated into four sections (OFNR):

1. To observe without evaluation, judgement, or analysis,
2. To express feelings which these observations evoke,
3. To express needs connected with these feelings,
4. (optional) To make a specific request of another person to help meet an

could you pass the custard creams please dear?

NON - VIOLENT COMMUNICATION
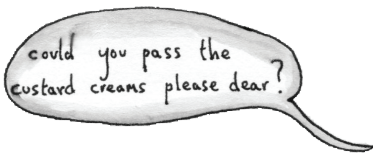
unmet need, and to enrich life of everyone involved. Essential in this is that the other person is to be left free to honour or decline the request.

The focus on neutral terms (objective facts ie - 'I have no pencil sharpener') rather than judgements ('Pencil sharpeners are right / wrong'), followed by feelings ('I feel useless'), needs ('I need to write') and requests ('please will you lend me your pencil sharpener') can be really useful to good discussion and have been used by its creator Marshall Rosenburg, in conflicts across the world.

Open Space

This refers to any number of different meeting styles, usually characterised by no prior groupings or agendas, a freedom of movement around a meeting space and/or a number of smaller, organically established discussions. In practice it can often mean that different people say they would like to facilitate small discussions about specific things, whilst the majority of people walk around and dip into different bits of discussion as they please. **Open Space** can be a great way for people who are less confident in large meetings to have a say or lead a discussion. It is especially important with open space to feedback to the whole group, as people will want to see a broad picture of what has been said in each mini discussion, and also to make sure that facilitators have correctly understood people's ideas and points.

Preparation / Proposals / Personal attacks

Good **preparation** is key to good meetings. Think about starting to put an agenda together and sending it around, how the space which is hosting the meeting will work, what practical things you will need (paper, pens etc), how to encourage good discussion, who should do what on the day (food prep, minutes). It's tempting to just rock up to a meeting meeting and think it will all run smoothly, sometimes it does, but it's not fair to fail people in a discussion simply due to a lack of preparation.

Proposals should come naturally through good discussion and need to be tested

for consensus before people Action themselves to do it. Anyone can make a proposal, and it can be good to have a list of proposals, actioned or not, for people to look over towards the end of a meeting.

Personal attacks are never a good thing and should always be avoided. However, sometimes it is clear that individuals have specific disagreements which need taking into account. It can be useful to make a guideline which requires people to 'Address the Meeting' rather than individuals, or for mediation between individuals to take place during breaks in group discussion.

Quiet moments
Sometimes it's really nice to just kick back and think about what has been said in a meeting. A facilitator may just ask everyone to be silent for a minute or so, to think over their opinions and evaluate their contributions.

Respect
It is obviously very important that each and every person in a meeting is **respectful** towards each other's opinions and makes a concerted, collective effort to ensure nobody unfairly puts down, intimidates or ridicules each others points of view. Another nugget worthy of a bad t-shirt slogan -Respect is most important when you disagree entirely with what another person is saying. Or as Voltaire once apparently said- 'I may disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it'. Agreed?!

Roles within a discussion
There are a number of **roles within a discussion** other than faciliation, sometimes called co-faciliation.
It can be useful to have someone 'Taking Hands' to see who is next to talk and help make sure everyone gets a say. Timekeepers, people who watch the door and fill in late arrivals- Think about what extra help your facilitator might need in your discussion.

RESPECT

ARETHA FRANKLIN STYLE
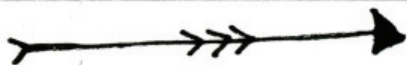
quiet
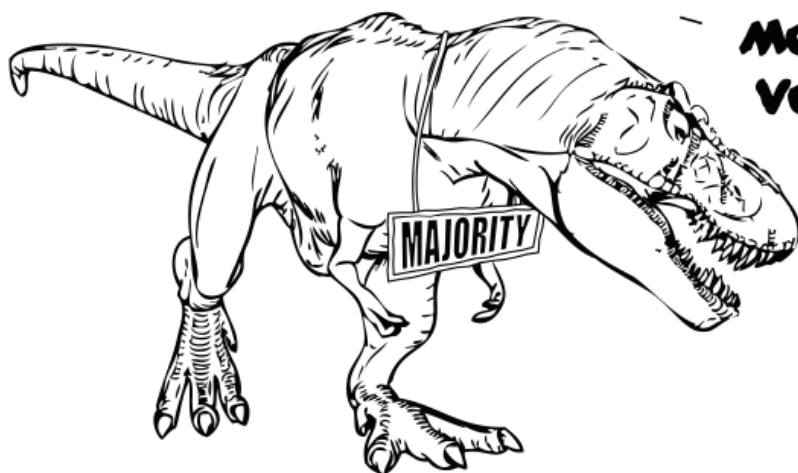moments

Small Groups / Spokescouncils

One of the best bits of advice anyone who has sat in any long meetings will ever give you is this: split into **small groups**. It's beneficial for the shy or quiet, better for listening, lets people actually make friends, feel supported, pitch ideas and take stances they might otherwise fear. Small groups are the way. Just make sure that whoever is feeding back from each group takes care to reflect what has been said and allow time for everyone as a whole to listen to the different opinions of each small group.

A **spokescouncil** is a collaborative way of making decisions with a number of affinity groups. In the anti-globalisation movement spokescouncils are often called to help plan big actions, with as many as 1000 participants, various languages and all manner of different people present. Affinity groups will send representatives to a spokescouncil, who will then report back when decisions need to be made, this allows for consensus decisions to be reached with potentially huge groups and is an amazing thing to behold.

small groups
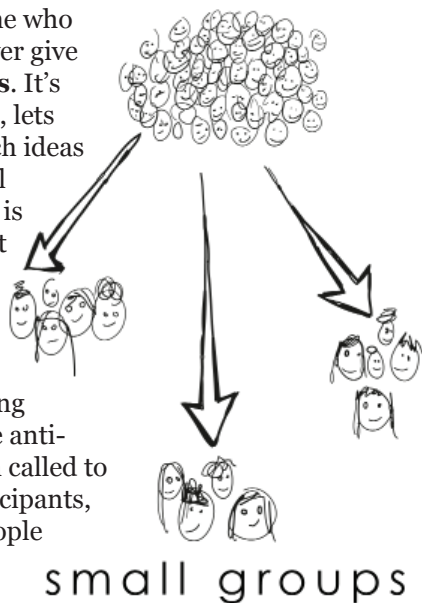
Tyranny of the majority

This is when the the judgments of a majority, by vote or action, place the interests of the majority so far above those of dissenting individuals that the latter may be actively oppressed. Consensus seeks to eliminate this, but it is still

RAAHH.. MOVE TO VOTE!

MAJORITY

minority

worth being aware that sometimes a majority is either deceptive, manufactured or dangerous. So for instance, attempts to gain equal rights to marriage by gay people in the USA are consistently thwarted by a very large majority of heterosexual, married people. Or in a meeting people may try to call some kind of vote in order to 'speed up the process' simply because they feel like if they are winning an argument at that particular time, that they can get more people to vote with them than against. It is always worth collectively noting that even if at a meeting there are a majority of people who think one thing, it is not necessarily the right thing. Consensus and proper discussion should never be sidelined in favour of speed, or simply because people feel like they are part of a majority.

Usefulness.

Every so often it can be quite nice to just ask – **How useful is this discussion?** What useful action will come of it?

Veto

A single **veto**/major objection blocks any proposal from passing. If you have a major objection it means that you cannot live with the proposal if it passes. It is so objectionable to you/ those you are representing that you will stop the proposal. Perhaps the best way to think about a veto is more as a psychological tool that exists more as a possibility than a reality, the fact that it exists should be enough to make everyone think twice before they create a situation where it might end up being used. A gnarly discussion veteran once told me that you should imagine using

the Veto maybe once or twice in *your whole life,* and most would expect you to have to explain your decision afterwards depending on the group.

W *World Wide Web / Warm up Games / Wee Breaks*

There are lots of tools on the **Internet** which can help in the preparation and implementation of good discussion. Start with open source software which can encourage you to share ideas and adapt agendas in collaborative, cool ways. http://crabgrass.riseup.net/ lets individuals sign up to communicate, edit and prepare. A lot of the inspiration / phrasing for this piece came from Seeds for Change - http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/ - who have a load of really good information about consensus / facilitation and will come out to run workshops about how to run effective participatory meetings / campaigns for groups.

Warm up games can be a great way to get people invigorated before and after a discussion, whilst also loosening everyone up to feel less inhibited.
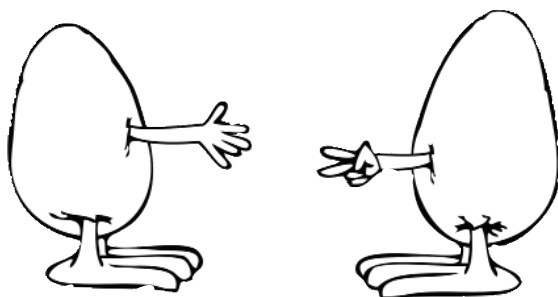
Wee breaks – very few discussions are ever important enough to negate your basic right to a good wee. Make sure everyone knows this, and value the personal head-space as you empty that bladder!
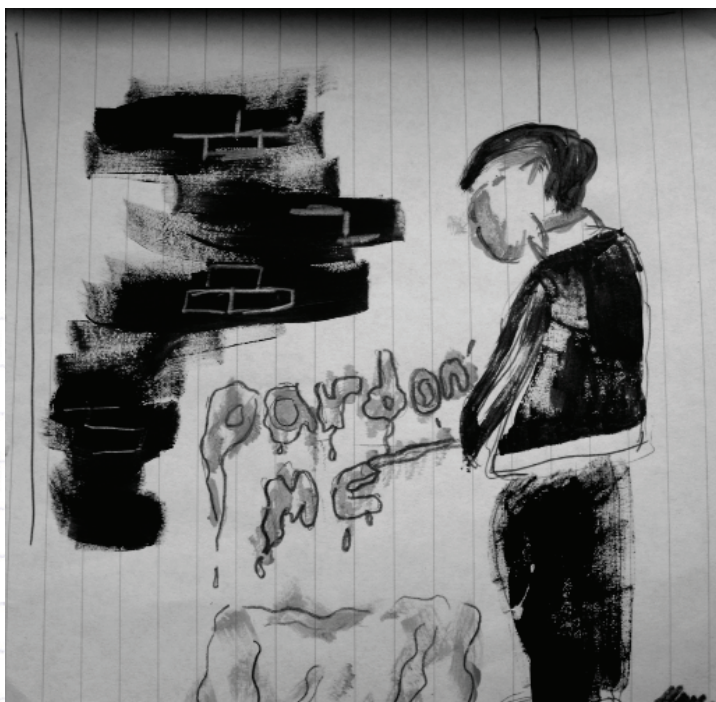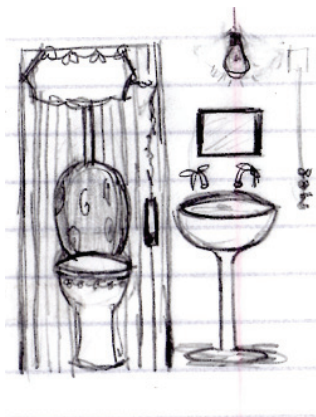
X XX-Chromosomes!

Let's face it, blokes have a tendency to dominate meetings if left unchecked. You can apply your own feminist, biological, patriarchal analysis to that if you want (and you should!) but from my experience it can be easy for men, however subconsciously, to dominate discussion. Keeping a check on how societal-imposed hierarchies of LOUDNESS are creeping into your discussion is very important! Gender means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, be aware of this and again, if you are in a position of privilege within wider society (whether in terms of race, gender, sexual preference, physical ability, background etc) it's YOU who should be making the biggest effort to challenge your own judgments and adapt your style of discussion so that it does not exclude anyone.

Y Yes!

It's a cliché, but **positivity** really is SUPER! Instead of putting down what people have said, why not just throw your own proposal into the pile and debate them as equals? It can seem a bit too '80's self motivation video' but why not start points with a positive statement: 'I like

your idea for this reason but feel like you may not have thought about this particular problem'. There's nothing worse in a meeting than someone who just rubbishes all proposals without putting any of their own forward.

Zapatistas

Ha! Bet you thought I'd have a crap one for Z right? Not at all. **The Zapatistas** are a living example of inclusive, participatory democracy and discussion. Based in Chiapas, Mexico, they are mostly made up of indigenous people from the area, with a large international support network. Since declaring war on the Mexican state in 1994 the group have been engaging in primarily nonviolent resistance against the various paramilitary and state based armies which have threatened to try and re-seize their land. They retained their independence with a huge network of international solidarity behind them and a commitment to principles of direct democracy. The groups operate fortnightly rotating councils made up of men, women and children over 12, who make decisions using consensus methods in open, accountable meetings. They have no visible leaders, a charter of Women's revolutionary law and have always been careful to make sure that any member of the community can be free to criticize or amend processes, decisions or strategies. Though it can seem a long way away, it is always worth remembering that people like the Zapatistas are using good methods of discussion and participation to create incredibly positive social change.
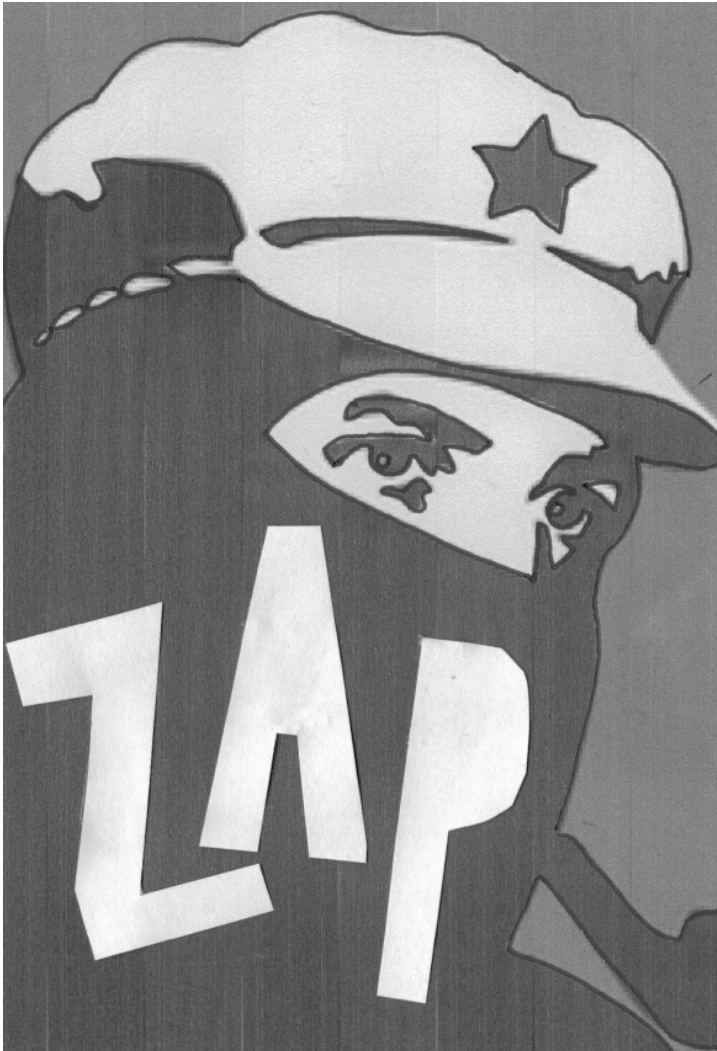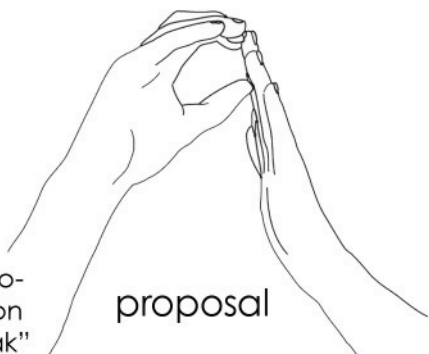
hand signals
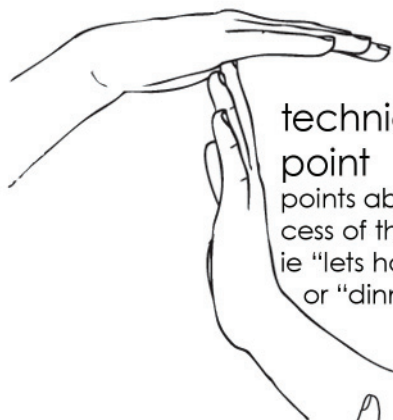
technical point
points about the pro-
cess of the discussion
ie "lets have a break"
or "dinner's ready."

proposal

direct point
only for points directly relating
and only relevant to what is being
currently said.

veto

point
join the discussion!

**language/
jargon buster**

consensus

Further Reading.

There's a whole load of incredible literature about direct democracy, participatory discussion and consensus decision making. Try your local library or nearest radical bookshop!

http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/
http://www.akpress.org
http://www.rhizome.coop/
http://www.radicalroutes.org.uk/
http://www.crimethinc.com/tools/downloads/zines.html
http://www.consensusdecisionmaking.org/
http://www.cnvc.org/ - Center for Nonviolent Communication

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