

Parliamentary Pastries: Learning Parliamentary Procedure through Cookies

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Abstract

Parliamentary procedure is an integral part of the business of many recreation organizations, but students often perceive it to be difficult and irrelevant to their professional preparation. The activity uses the creation of a cookie recipe to practice the basic meeting business functions in parliamentary procedure. The cookie meeting is an active learning approach that is suited to students with limited or no experience with parliamentary procedure. The format of the meeting simulation is addressed along with practical suggestions for implementation.

KEYWORDS: Parliamentary procedure, active learning, meeting

Parliamentary procedure has been tested, refined, and used for centuries; however, many students perceive it to be an outmoded and useless system. In the simplest of terms, parliamentary procedure is a system used by organizations to make decisions. Although it may seem foreign to many students, parliamentary procedure is used by private for-profit, non-profit, and public organizations to conduct business every day. This activity requires students to develop a recipe for a cookie using parliamentary procedure. It is designed to provide students with a fun and interactive way of learning the basic procedures of a meeting conducted using parliamentary procedures.

A Word about Parliamentary Procedure

When students first hear the term “parliamentary procedure” their initial reaction is most often a blank stare. However, they typically register recognition when the term Robert’s Rules of Order is used instead. While Robert’s Rules of Order is the most well known parliamentary authority in the United States, it is not the only set of parliamentary rules. It is important to make this distinction for students and to emphasize the importance of knowing the parliamentary author-

ity in use for a particular organization. In the cookie meeting activity, one may use *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised 10th Edition* (Robert, Evans, Homemann, & Balch, 2000), but for the depth of understanding required in the activity most parliamentary authorities will function in the same way. There are many organizations devoted to parliamentary procedure in general and Robert's Rules of Order specifically. Parliamentarian Jim Slaughter's website (www.jimslaughter.com) and the National Association of Parliamentarians (<http://parliamentarians.org/>) are two useful resources for an individual to learn more about parliamentary procedure.

Learning Activity

An important part of the learning in this activity occurs through modeling appropriate parliamentary procedure meeting behaviors. One of the first steps to model is to send out an official meeting agenda prior to the class. You can hand the agenda out at the class period before the meeting, but I have found it more effective to send the agenda as an email attachment to all students. Include the significant steps in any ordinary organization meeting such as call to order and roll call, even though this will require you to create artificial information for many of the stages (see Figure 1).

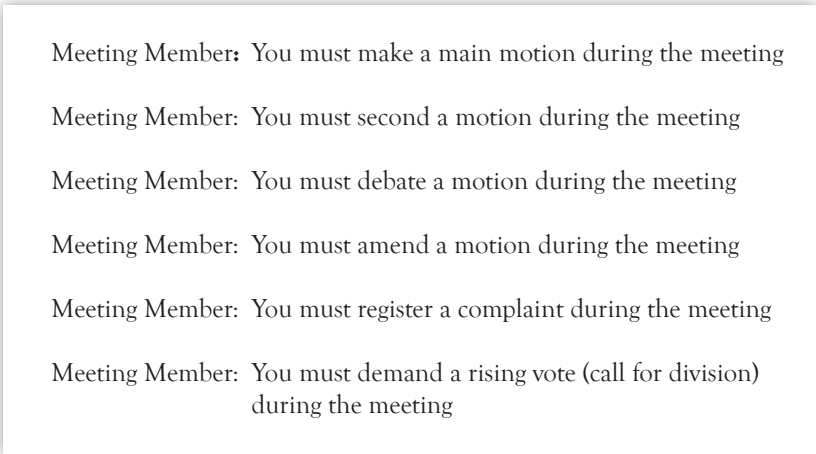
Meeting Agenda	
December 5, 2008	
9:00 am – 9:50 am	
I.	Call to Order – President
II.	Roll Call – President
III.	Approval of Minutes – Secretary
IV.	Officer and Committee Reports
a.	President report – President
b.	Recreation Club Committee report – assigned student
c.	Anecdotes committee report – assigned student
V.	Creating the perfect holiday cookie – President, 30 minutes
VI.	Meeting Evaluation – President, 10 minutes
VII.	Adjourn

Figure 1. Sample Meeting Agenda

In addition to preparing an agenda, you will need to prepare for the cookie recipe portion of the meeting. One approach is to have the students develop the recipe without the aid of any outside resources. This requires students to rely on past experience and general knowledge. A second approach is to provide students with a variety of cookie recipes they can use for reference. The danger here is that

students simply follow a recipe and the meeting loses the back-and-forth debate that makes the experience interesting. Two approaches have worked most effectively in the past. The first approach is to give each student a piece of a recipe (e.g., 1½ cups of sugar or 12 ounces chocolate chips), but to use several recipes and disperse them widely enough that the class is still forced to come together and debate. The second successful approach is to forgo the actual cookie recipe and have students simply develop a cookie order. The success of this approach depends partly upon the creativity of the students, but you can help stimulate discussion by assigning dissenting roles prior to the activity. For example, one might assign a student to role-play a peanut allergy or an extreme dislike of coconut.

The day of the class meeting, arrive far enough in advance of the class time to arrange the room in a circle or semi-circle to promote engagement and discussion. If possible, consider holding class in a different room. Holding class in a different environment can help students to step more easily into the role-playing required for success. As students enter the room, greet each of them formally and hand them a packet you have previously prepared. The packet should include the meeting agenda, their assigned roles and tasks for the meeting (see Figure 2), and a “cheat sheet” for parliamentary procedure. You can assign each student multiple roles or tasks to complete during the meeting.



Meeting Member: You must make a main motion during the meeting

Meeting Member: You must second a motion during the meeting

Meeting Member: You must debate a motion during the meeting

Meeting Member: You must amend a motion during the meeting

Meeting Member: You must register a complaint during the meeting

Meeting Member: You must demand a rising vote (call for division)
during the meeting

Figure 2. Sample meeting tasks

Unless you have a student in the class who is very familiar with parliamentary procedure, it is best if you serve as the meeting facilitator. This is an opportunity for you to role-play and have fun with the activity as well. Bring a gavel for a prop, have the participants address you as “Mister or Madame President” during the meeting, or find other ways to set the stage for the experience. As the meeting chair, be sure to begin the meeting on time and follow your agenda closely.

As you conduct the meeting, it may be necessary to prompt the participants to take action. If a student tries to take action, encourage them, and, if necessary, correct their use of procedures. In the course of the meeting, you may use the term “sidebar” to address what is going on within the meeting while reinforcing that what is said during the sidebar should not actually be part of the meeting. For example, students sometimes want to perform an action that would be detrimental to the overall goal of the activity, such as voting down a motion to include a cup of butter in the cookie recipe. In this case, one would use a sidebar to remind them that if they vote against this motion we would end up with cookies without butter because a substantially similar motion cannot be made during the same meeting. This sidebar reminder is usually sufficient to encourage students to amend the motion.

Conclude the meeting with a meeting evaluation. It is recommended that you include five to fifteen minutes for the meeting evaluation as part of the meeting itself, rather than adjourning the meeting and then trying to evaluate the meeting. Including the evaluation as part of the meeting makes students aware that it is coming since it will be included on the agenda. This encourages some students to participate in the meeting with a critical eye. The meeting evaluation may be the best part of the class and encourage a longer time for discussion whenever possible.

Learning Outcomes

The most significant learning outcome is that students see some relevance to using the systematic approach of parliamentary procedure. Many students share during the meeting evaluation portion of the activity that fewer opinions and options would have been explored if parliamentary procedure had not been used.

A second learning outcome is that students develop comfort with a system to which they have not previously had exposure. While the students report they would not be prepared to facilitate a meeting using parliamentary procedure, they do say that they could be an active member in such a meeting.

Other Recommendations

Based on past experience, it is a mistake to bring the actual cookie recipe supplies to the meeting. Although the visual process of making the cookie dough on the spot is very appealing, it significantly lengthens the process and removes focus from learning parliamentary procedure. The knowledge that you will bring the cookies to the next class is usually enough incentive for a lively exchange.

The cookie meeting does not function well as a stand-alone activity. Students will need build-up to the activity in order for it to be effective. Ideally students will be exposed to parliamentary procedure through a reading and/or a lecture before the simulation. There are many short, easy-to-read introductions to parliamentary procedure (e.g., Cozart, 1998; Dean, 2003; Slaughter, 1999; Slaughter 2004; Webster, 2001). Assigning several of these short readings or perusing a relevant website would serve as an appropriate lead-in to a lecture and the activity. It should be noted that articles on Robert’s Rules of Order written before 2000 may differ from

more recent articles on several points since they are based on an earlier version of the work. One may choose to supplement the reading and lecture with a small group parliamentary procedure quiz before the meeting as well.

The cookie meeting simulation has been an effective way to engage students in learning about parliamentary procedure, but one should be cautioned that it does not create proficiency with parliamentary procedure. It would be helpful to require students to follow-up the meeting by attending an outside organization's board meeting in which parliamentary procedure is used. Students almost always report feeling more engaged and interested in the meeting they observe because they have some familiarity with the format of the meeting. Requiring students to attend such a meeting reinforces the concepts of parliamentary procedure and demonstrates to students that parliamentary procedure is still relevant and in use by organizations.

Most students will not lead large and complex meetings requiring strict adherence to parliamentary procedure in their first professional job, but the principles learned in the cookie meeting activity are useful in helping students to manage a number of situations they will encounter early in their careers. Understanding the system and rationale underlying parliamentary procedure can help students facilitate staff meetings, make presentations in front of boards, and feel comfortable and prepared to actively join in professional organizations.

There is a sense of silliness with the cookie meeting content, but it works well for helping students grasp the fundamentals of conducting meetings using parliamentary procedure. Having the meeting focus on creating a cookie recipe engages the students since they will anticipate the "reward" of cookies at the next class. The topic of creating a cookie is non-threatening to students, so it pairs well with the topic of parliamentary procedure which students may perceive to be complex, rigid, and obsolete. Finally, the cookie creation allows students to see (and eat) the results of a meeting conducted using parliamentary procedure. Even if the results are inedible, it creates a memorable learning experience.

References

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