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Preparing Students to Collaborate Across Divides: Deliberative Pedagogy, Communication, and Community

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Abstract

Democracy—with its complicated problems, multiplicity of positions, and often deeply held convictions—has always been messy. How do we prepare students to participate meaningfully in this type of world, where issues are complex and opinions vary widely? Knowledge about democratic ideals and development of civic dispositions is important, but for students to fully participate in democratic life, they also need skills to use when collaborating around difficult problems. This essay explores the educational paradigm of deliberative pedagogy as understood through its origins in the political idea of deliberative democracy. It discusses the difficult transition of deliberative democracy into educational practice, and suggests deliberative pedagogy might be more seamlessly incorporated. It also considers implications of this pedagogy for teacher preparation programs. Finally, it suggests ways in which this paradigm supports the mission of liberal arts institutions, especially as it concerns discourse, community, and life within a democratic society.

Shouting, sensationalism, and name-calling all exemplify what might be described as an increasingly hostile culture of communication (Gerhart, 2009; Leskes, 2013; Potthoff, Mantle-Bromley, Clark, Kleinsasser, Badiali, & Baugh, 2009). When engaging with complex problems and differences of opinion, our habits of communication appear to be growing more contentious. But is this discord really worse than in the past? Possibly not; our democratic history is filled with moments of conflict and belligerent communication. To think that current toxic behaviors are “products of the modern era” negates a long history of struggles within our democratic past (Leskes, 2013).

Democracy—with its complicated problems, multiplicity of positions, and often deeply held convictions—has always been messy (Gerhart, 2009; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). One current condition that might be intensifying discord is the constant and instantaneous barrage of noise, opinion, misinformation, and incivility afforded by ubiquitous social media (Gerhart, 2009; Leskes, 2013). However, this discord also might be due to our own limitations. We might simply be ill equipped to meaningfully engage with challenging social problems—weak in skills such as listening and reasoning, and lacking the capacity to communicate respectfully across chasms of differing opinion.

Whether the climate of discord is worse now or then is unclear. But as educators and especially as teacher educators, this divisive discourse raises a serious question: how do we prepare students to participate meaningfully in this type of world, where issues are complex and opinions are widely divided? It is a difficult question with uncertain answers, and it requires consideration of both the theoretical and practical dimensions of politics, language, and education, as well as an awareness of where these realms might intersect (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Robertson, 2008).

Institutions of higher education are increasingly being considered as essential sites for exploring this question, in part because of their capacity to integrate ideas, skills, and practices in a multi-dimensional way—through classes, forums, community service, and lectures, to name a few (Longo, Manosevitch, & Shaffer,

2017; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). This, along with their ability to unite students and community, has led some to consider them “among the nation’s most valuable laboratories for civic learning and democratic engagement” (National Task Force, 2012, p. 2). Teacher education programs are important sites as well, with their purpose of educating future teachers who will, in turn, help future students to develop civic capacity (Robertson, 2008).

But both institutions and teacher education programs have struggled with addressing all of the elements needed for civic participation. The practical skills and democratic dispositions needed for collaborative decisions (which involve difficult problems and divergent interests) prove especially challenging to address. An institutional focus on service learning, for example, does not necessarily develop these skills in students. These projects tend to be oriented toward participation, not problem solving (Stitzlein, 2010). Likewise, teacher education programs that relegate all of the “democracy talk” to history of education or foundations classes can fail to create modes of practical discourse. These stand-alone courses might focus on important ideas and attitudes, but they lack a wider, integrated context as well as the development of practical skills and practice. Knowledge about democratic ideals and development of civic dispositions is important, but for students to uphold their responsibilities for full participation in democratic life, they will also need skills that can be put to use when collaborating around difficult problems (National Task Force, 2012).

Deliberative democracy—discussed more fully in the next section—seems to offer a way for schools to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed for students to fully participate in civic life. It focuses on complex problems and the use of reasoning and deliberation for collaborative decision making. But this approach—firmly rooted in political philosophy and theory—has transitioned unevenly into educational practice (Robertson, 2008; Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). Its ideas remain firmly enmeshed in political theory, causing educators to struggle when implementing it in educational settings. This has led to inadequate translations of

ideas and situations where theorists and educators “talk past each other, to the detriment of both” (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015, p. 76). In the end, this approach has been imperfectly realized in practice, unable to bridge the significant gap between political conceptions and educational practice.

Deliberative pedagogy might be the answer to bridging this divide. It is founded on deliberative democracy and political ideas, yet it also locates itself firmly within both educational theory and practice. Its framework provides both a way of teaching and a means of developing a deliberative character (Matthews, 2017). Most important, it builds the deliberative skills and dispositions necessary for engaging respectfully with others over difficult problems.

This essay explores the educational paradigm of deliberative pedagogy as understood through its origins in the political idea of deliberative democracy. It discusses the difficult transition of deliberative democracy into educational practice, and suggests that the framework of deliberative pedagogy might be more seamlessly incorporated. It also considers implications of this pedagogy for teacher preparation programs. Finally, it suggests ways in which this paradigm supports the mission of liberal arts institutions, especially as concerns discourse, community and life within a democratic society.

Deliberation—Process, Skills, and Dispositions

Deliberation is a process of reasoning at the center of both deliberative democracy and deliberative pedagogy. It shares characteristics of civil discourse, but engages participants in different ways. Civil discourse could simply be described as a reasoned, mutually respectful conversation (Leskes, 2013). It involves no structure and has few requirements other than the necessity of respectful speaking and listening. Participants use civil discourse to learn about issues; and using it builds skills in critical analysis, logical thinking, respectful engagement, and listening (Leskes, 2013). Although deliberation shares many of these basic functions, it has important differences.

Deliberation, unlike civil discourse, involves reason-giving and the justification of positions (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). It requires careful analysis of positions and weighing of alternatives and is focused on “questions affecting the public good” (Robertson, 2008). Additionally, it can have a transformative effect on participants who might experience new awareness of the complexities of a problem after sharing with and listening to others (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Deliberation also involves a decision, one considered the “best” decision given the available perspectives and problem. Unlike debate, deliberation is not about winning, convincing, or even necessarily compromise. Rather it moves participants to greater insights and toward a collectively determined decision that will best serve the common good (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

In addition, unlike civil discourse, deliberation relies upon elements of character that will compel deliberators to engage fairly and consider the public good when making decisions. Virtues such as respect, civility, a “willingness to listen to others who disagree” and an openness to different perspectives all underlie the deliberative process (Robertson, 2008).

Understanding deliberative pedagogy requires an understanding of deliberation and of deliberative democracy (the approach from which it derives). It also is necessary to consider the ways in which deliberative democracy has been imperfectly realized, as it has moved from idea into practice so that the benefits of deliberative pedagogy might be more apparent.

Deliberative Democracy

Deliberation and democracy have been long-time partners in politics—as early as fifth-century Athens and involving Pericles and Aristotle, by one account—but the meanings and roles of each have changed as political theories have evolved (for a brief history, see Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). “Deliberative democracy” unites both terms and refers to a conception of democracy where participants struggle toward a decision over a complicated problem in a way that involves reasoning between people, justifying

positions, and the consideration of options and trade-offs. This guarantees that participants have the opportunity to speak and be listened to in a mutually respectful manner (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Shaffer, Longo, Manosevitch, & Thomas, 2017).

Deliberative democracy requires participants to make a decision amidst a tangle of considerations and differing opinions, and while members move toward a “best” solution, it does not mean that their personal positions are the same or even aligned in the end. It merely requires a common agreement upon and support of a decision deemed to be in the interests of the common good. Even though there may be continued disagreement, the process promotes respect for the collective decision, and in the end it serves to legitimize the collective decision-making process (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

This conceptualization of democracy situates deliberation at the center of democratic life, and it took shape in the 1980s out of dissatisfaction with prevailing democratic practices (Barker, McAfee, & McIvors, 2012). By one account, these popular practices treated citizens as vote-holders whose preferences could be manipulated using democratic processes, an approach which elevated special interest groups and engendered aggressive competition for votes (Barker et al., 2012). General frustration with this paradigm and a desire for greater inclusion of everyday citizens in decision-making processes led to a shift away from this “voting-centric” interest group politics and a movement toward local political processes and participation (Barker et al., 2012). Deliberative democracy provided a new political paradigm, one that focused on citizen voice and emphasized participation through deliberation (Barker et al., 2012).

Over time, this political paradigm matured, especially with regard to the idea of deliberation and what this term should entail. Early critics of deliberative democracy, for example, often focused on the ways in which the term “deliberation” was problematic or limiting in nature (Barker et al., 2012; Robertson, 2008). These critics took issue with what they perceived to be an overly narrow definition of deliberation, one that restricted the practice of deliberation to engagements of reasoned discourse. According to

critics, this narrow understanding favored impartial accounts and made no room for emotion or other forms of expression, a restriction that by its very nature excluded certain voices and privileged others (Barker et al., 2012). However, proponents of deliberative democracy viewed these early criticisms of deliberation as oversimplifications. Regardless, the process of deliberation as defined by recent work explicitly involves wide parameters and includes elements such as storytelling, personal accounts, and emotion (Barker et al., 2012).

Deliberation also matured with regard to purpose. Early understandings of the goal of deliberation focused on reaching consensus, but current conceptualizations express a different goal. Deliberation is used to advance members toward a decision that functions best for a given problem, even if this solution does not align with all members’ beliefs and even if members continue to hold differing positions after their decision (Barker et al., 2012; Shaffer, 2017). It employs discussion and justification of positions, along with considerations of the public good, with a purpose of minimizing differences between positions to arrive at an agreed-upon result (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). This expansion of the purpose of deliberation is more sensitive to the complexity of problems, the depth and breadth of stakeholder positions, and the nature of disagreement (Barker et al., 2012; Shaffer, 2017).

These clarifications in definition and purpose helped solidify the paradigm of deliberative democracy and more clearly illuminate its benefits. For instance, the deliberative process necessitates that people provide justifications for their own understandings, a process which often clarifies their positions. It provides a forum for the expression of multiple positions and voices, which offers listeners an opportunity to refine their thinking (Shaffer, 2017). The multiplicity of ideas and voices that are present during deliberation even helps to clarify the problem being considered, as it reveals perspectives that may not have been visible initially. Deliberation also helps to bring differing opinions together using a process dependent upon respect. It “cannot make incompatible values compatible, but it can help participants recognize the moral merit in

their opponents' claims when those claims have merit" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 11). In short, the deliberative process uses discussion, listening, and reasoning to elevate the careful consideration of challenging issues. The diversity of positions that emerge enable members to weigh a variety of options as they move toward an agreed-upon course of action.

The current conceptualization of deliberative democracy is situated in political theory, but it intersects with education in important ways. First, it requires a set of reasoning and communication skills and a refinement of thought that must be taught, leading one theorist to claim that the educational system is "the single most important institution outside of government" for developing deliberative capacity (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 359). When considering the list of characteristics that make up a deliberative nature—careful listening, critical thinking, and clear articulation of ideas, for instance—it becomes clear that many are already being cultivated in schools in one form or another (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). Those that may be less present in schools, such as opportunities to engage "respectfully with views different from one's own" (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015) and to participate in the "give and take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions" (Guttmann & Thompson, 1996) still clearly align with many educational aims.

From Political Conceptions to Educational Practice— a Difficult Transition

These overlaps make it relatively easy to theorize about the intersection of deliberative democracy and education, but the reality of implementation is more difficult. The research involving deliberative democracy as it pertains to education consistently aligns on two points—on what the practice of deliberative democracy should look like and that the development of a deliberative nature requires explicit instruction and practice (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). Beyond these two points, however, myriad disagreements occur, especially regarding the scope and purpose of the deliberative process (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015).

Problems specifically arise when the purpose of deliberation moves away from a means of minimizing differences—when the purpose moves to unrelated goals like "taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions" or "anger management" (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). Educators make research connections such as these in an attempt to connect political theory with educational practice, but these connections move too far away from the meaning and purpose of deliberation as expressed in political theory. In essence, the two groups use the same term, but they define it in fundamentally different ways. Political theory assigns a very specific definition and scope to the term, but educators often rely on a commonly understood definition. As a result, the research findings from educational studies are not aligned in meaning with the findings from political studies, which results in a collection of seemingly disparate research, none of which builds on itself (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015).

Implementing deliberative democracy through service learning opportunities provides another example of the uneven transition of this idea into educational practice. While the service learning approach might align with the requirements of deliberative democracy in some elements (e.g. where students are involved in settings which offer a variety of perspectives and which expose students to different communities, perspectives, and concerns), there often is little opportunity for collaboration and even less opportunity for real issue engagement (Stitzlein, 2010). In addition, an attitude of volunteering—viewing the work as an outsider coming in—often prevails, instead of a desire to function and learn within the community in full (Stitzlein, 2010). Service learning opportunities provide some civic interaction, but the overall experience, process, and purpose differs substantively from deliberative democracy.

Understanding the idea of deliberative democracy and the imperfect ways it has been realized in educational practice provides a fuller context for the idea of deliberative pedagogy. It also provides some issues to be aware of when enacting this pedagogy in practice.

Deliberative Pedagogy

Deliberative pedagogy derives from deliberative democracy and subsequently shares many similarities. But unlike deliberative democracy, which focuses on reaching a collective decision benefiting the common good, deliberative pedagogy focuses within the realm of education and its extended community (Longo et al., 2017). Deliberative pedagogy is both a process involving deliberation and a pedagogical approach. This dual functioning makes it not only a set of skills and dispositions to be taught, but also a model of how to teach them (Longo et al., 2017).

As with deliberative democracy, deliberative pedagogy “encourages students to encounter and consider multiple perspectives, weigh trade-offs and tensions, and move toward action through informed judgment” (Longo et al., 2017, p. xxi). The overarching purpose of deliberation in deliberative pedagogy is for its use in achieving civic and democratic ends, not for building discrete skills. It also can move students and universities into more active encounters with their community through its emphasis on bringing groups together to take part in deliberative opportunities (Longo & Gibson, 2017).

In addition, deliberative pedagogy sets forth a pedagogical approach that aligns with established educational theory and philosophy. In its reliance upon democratic conceptions; its process which equates learning with school as well as community; its preference for active, collaborative learning; and its orientation away from the “banking” model of education, for example, it aligns clearly with the educational conceptions of Dewey and Freire (1970). Deliberative pedagogy also bears elements of engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994) in its challenge of the current pedagogical paradigm of higher education (Longo et al., 2017, p. xxv). Deliberative pedagogy privileges holistic, “collaborative, participatory, and democratic approaches” in the classroom instead of traditional methods of information conveyance (Longo et al., 2017, p. xxv). Because of these connections, deliberative pedagogy situates firmly within the realm of education.

Successful enactments of this pedagogy take a variety of forms

in both higher education campuses and classrooms, but all implementations share the fundamental element of engagement. Genuine engagement “opens people’s perspectives and tends to make them more aware of issues occurring across groups,” which “makes them more likely to get involved in civic efforts organized to address the unsolved issues” (McTighe Musil as quoted in Kozma, 2013, p. 7).

Deliberative pedagogy relies on “high impact practices” to promote this engagement. These practices—such as first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, undergraduate research, and diversity/global learning—engage but also accelerate student learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU], 2018). When used in conjunction with a variety of perspectives and voices, they also can “disrupt the norms” (McTighe Musil as quoted in Kozma, 2013, p. 7). In practice, deliberative pedagogy might look like “reciprocal partnerships” that bring community and students together in shared engagement (Longo & Gibson, 2017, p. 38). It allows for “the co-creation of shared spaces for dialogue and collaborative action in the community.” In some schools, deliberative pedagogy has taken the form of “intergenerational learning circles with new immigrants, forums with community members on public issues, and multi-year civic-engagement courses” (Longo & Gibson, 2017, p. 38).

Locations for engagement may vary, from conference spaces to dorm spaces, gathering spots on campus or within the local community—anywhere that will facilitate engagements, deliberation, and practice (Shaffer, 2014). And, deliberative pedagogy functions as a resource for any group on campus to use, not just students—available also to members of student affairs, residence life, and administration, for example (Shaffer, 2014).

In classrooms, deliberative pedagogy can be implemented as the focus and purpose of an entire course—from syllabus construction to a final deliberative forum involving class, campus, and community members (Brammer, 2017; Shaffer, 2014)—or it can be a guiding focus for the curriculum within a discipline—e.g.,

communications studies (Drury & Carcasson, 2017) or science (Drury, 2017). Within schools of teacher education, it can help students develop greater capacity for meaningful engagement in their school communities, and it can guide them in developing the practical skills needed to build and sustain their own learning communities. For teacher educators, it moves democratic ideas and values out of theory and into meaningful action in schools and communities.

Although there will be inevitable tweaks and adjustments to focus and language as this pedagogical approach matures, it has a strong foundation and is assembling a growing research base (Thomas, 2017). Its deep ties to democracy and clear integration within education's theoretical and pedagogical tradition make this pedagogy a viable option for use within and across disciplines and at every institutional level. And, in those institutions that have embraced it, this pedagogy brings civic and academic worlds together, diminishing the disconnect between what happens in the classroom and what happens in the "public square" (Thomas, 2017). Deliberative pedagogy seems to be emerging as a viable paradigm, helping students "to engage with others in democratic, inclusive, and respectfully discursive practices" (Doherty, 2012).

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

Incorporating deliberative pedagogy into teacher preparation programs has a number of clear benefits—for both the programs and teacher candidates. With regard to preparation programs, the use of deliberative pedagogy has the potential to move these programs in a direction directly counter to the forces that are pushing them toward over-standardization. There has been much discussion in the literature about the ways in which preparation programs have begun to narrow in response to current standardized teacher assessments. Both course content and student focus have shifted in an attempt to align with these assessments, a shift that often has resulted in the replacement of rich discussions about community, learning, and experiences with courses and conversations focused on mechanics, procedures, and the interpretation of

assessment rubrics needed for passing the professional portfolio assessment (Alfaro, 2008; Denton, 2013; Greenblatt & O'Hara, 2015). Embracing deliberative pedagogy in preparation programs counters this narrowing and standardization because of its essential use of dynamic interactions with community, content, and learners. Engaging with communities and individuals in this way challenges teacher candidates to "go beyond the mechanics of the practice" and teaches them how to engage directly and meaningfully with their communities in real-world settings (Alfaro, 2008). Deliberative pedagogy also grounds teacher preparation programs firmly in the greater mission of building and sustaining community.

Deliberative pedagogy in teacher preparation programs also benefits teacher candidates, as it provides candidates with a set of real skills that emerge organically from experience. These skills are dynamically derived, and their grounding in human interactions and in community makes them deeply meaningful to candidates. For example, teacher candidates can read case studies about the need to listen, but this skill takes on new depth of meaning when candidates participate in community forums and in this way come to recognize "the wisdom of community voices" and the fact that these voices are "legitimate sources" of knowledge (Longo, 2013, p. 8).

In addition, teacher preparation programs that train their candidates using deliberative pedagogy have the potential to produce future teachers who are deeply in tune with the nature and complexities of the communities in which they will teach. Teacher candidates are able to connect in a real way with the communities that they might become a part of, which aligns them more directly with the strengths, issues, and concerns that are important to the community and their learners.

These experiences also highlight the necessity and benefits of involving diverse community voices in the educational process. One teacher who enacted deliberative pedagogy in a K–6 teacher preparation classroom found that many of the graduated teachers continued to practice deliberative pedagogy once they had entered into their own classrooms and actively sought to build connections

with families and communities. (For a full description of deliberative pedagogy as enacted in one K–6 teacher preparation setting, see Alfaro, 2008.) These teachers also brought their community commitments into teacher leadership roles that allowed them to further the work of involving the community in learning. Understanding the value, role, and potential of community engagement is a vital part of teacher preparation, and it is among the more difficult parts to realize when developing future teachers. Teacher candidates who experience the benefits of community engagements firsthand will deeply appreciate the significance of this component.

Who Will Lead the Way?

The dispositions and skills needed for meaningful deliberation are not innate and must be taught (Matthews, 2017, Robertson, 2008). As noted earlier, institutions of higher education seem the logical choice to lead the way in this effort to build deliberative capacity in students given their educational capacity, resources, and reach (Robertson, 2008; National Task Force, 2012). Liberal arts institutions, especially those with teacher education programs, might be compelled to lead the way for another, more deep-seated reason—mission.

The democratic practice of deliberation aligns with the overall mission of liberal arts institutions because deliberation requires more than process or skills—it involves an ethical dimension as well (Robertson, 2008). Deliberation relies upon dispositions and character traits that will guide participants to act in the interests of the common good and of community. The establishment of community lies at the center of the mission of liberal arts schools, especially those with teacher education programs.

One mission statement—from an association of liberal arts institutions with teacher preparation programs—illustrates the fundamental importance of community for these schools. The mission statement of the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education (AILACTE) mentions community explicitly in three of the five mission points that it encourages its members

to emphasize. The mission statement highlights “the importance of community,” “the obligations that individuals have in community,” and “the role that individuals and communities have in a democratic society” (Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education [AILACTE], 2018). These institutions recognize that principles such as respect and openness, and behaviors such as the willingness to consider other viewpoints and to act with others’ interests in mind are foundational to communities of learning. These not only align with mission-specific goals involving community and democratic engagement, but they are the same principles needed for deliberation.

There is no question that engaging in the work of democracy, with its plurality of opinion and complex problems, is difficult. If we are to fully uphold our civic and community responsibilities, we must be able to proceed in the face of this complexity in a way that upholds standards of respect and democratic values. For liberal arts institutions—especially those with teacher preparation programs—leading the way in this effort to build deliberative and civic capacity in students provides a way to move mission into the forefront, making it both a prominent and integral part of all that is done within the educational community.

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