

Five Nations Network Conference

Democratic talk: from discussion to deliberation

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Democratic Deliberation: Inside and Outside

Opening keynote [transcript]

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Introduction

Initially I would like to say thanks to Conor Harrison for the invitation and to the conference for giving me the opportunity to present some ideas.

I'd like to say something in brief about the context for my being here today. Over a decade ago I wrote a framework for a proposed senior cycle curriculum, called 'Citizenship Studies', in response to on-going discussions about a future senior cycle follow on to an already existing junior cycle curriculum Civil Social and Political Education (CSPE) in Irish post-primary schools. Commissioned by the Curriculum Development Unit of the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC), the task was not to write a curriculum but to consider how one might be framed including what its founding values might be.

Democratic Deliberation as a general idea

There were some background considerations then that are relevant to today's discussions which I'd like to present here.

Firstly, the anticipated new curriculum was for post-compulsory age students, many of whom, by aged 18 and still in school, would also have full citizenship rights in the state.

Secondly, was the radically and rapidly changing nature of Irish society – from a Catholic, mono-cultural state to a multicultural, increasingly secular one, a process still on going.

Thirdly, as a political scientist, I held the position that a curriculum devoted to the study of politics and society could not assume consensus on substantive issues from sexuality to state power; and, in principle, there were no topics not amenable to enquiry therein.

This was partly inspired by a turn in political theory and political life towards an interest in how democracies work outside of electoral systems and institutions (governments, bureaucracies), accepting that, as societies become more diverse and complex, conflict over values and norms would become increasingly ubiquitous and heated and that resolving these conflicts would require knowledge, insights, capacities for moral and ethical reasoning **and** a willingness to deliberate, and that structures and practices for such deliberation would exist as part of public life. (The recent Citizen's Assembly in Ireland is one manifestation of this turn).

From the start then, we conceived future students of this curriculum to be agentic, or as having political agency and full moral autonomy, and to be entitled to be treated as such within the curriculum. We felt that the pedagogy needed to embrace this view.

We also felt that the skills/content divide often brought into such curricula was not helpful and that the traditional emphasis on 'action' could miss a critical point: that democracy **is** deliberated **AND** constitutes the place where we most starkly bump up against the challenge of what philosophers call 'the other' whether based on lines of race, class, ethnicity, religion or any other identity marker. The curriculum needed to reflect this reality, we felt.

Ultimately, we proposed 'Citizenship Studies' as a curriculum to be built around 'citizenship' as the central concept or a norm, that holds the dynamic relationships between the individual (as citizen or non citizen), the state and society, locally, nationally and internationally.

And as to the founding values? In brief: we proposed that the curriculum would be framed and grounded in democratic deliberation as both a communication and pedagogic strategy and as providing its core values. In so doing, this would shift the curriculum towards focusing on the **process** of deliberation, democratically, as pedagogically rich, appropriate, and as providing a critical civic virtue. However, we did not frame this as a curriculum whose function was to fix democracy or produce exemplary or 'good' citizens. We saw DD as an end in itself as well as a means.

So: what did this mean for our curriculum? Let's say this allowed us think about the classroom **as if** a public sphere and bring the rules and values of DD from outside, to inside that classroom.

To jump in quickly: what is DD not. It is not about 'debates': typically two sides of an argument with winners and losers determined by say majority vote or strength of argument. Nor is it 'discussion' which we can think of as more free ranging deliberation, with no necessary end goal, not deliberately purposive and without any requirement to directly engage with ideas other than one's own. No collaborative requirement exists in either of these approaches.

DD arises from and is informed continuously by two core and irreducible assumptions about democracy:

1. that everyone is morally autonomous (autonomy)
2. that everyone is equal (equality).

DD then builds outwards from these two core values. In what follows I treat how we unpacked this for a curricular framework.

We identified 12 points that summarised how democratic deliberation could manifest itself in a curriculum. However, I would like to provide a short cut here today.

Under conditions of DD, the classroom, like the public sphere, assumes all participants are **equal** and are morally and ethically **autonomous**, though we added that that autonomy and equality coexist in a world in which all human relations are characterized by interdependency. This we posited as a philosophical statement about the human condition and not a prerequisite for democracy.

The rules for proceeding in DD, in addition, required participants to

- respect difference and recognise the right of all to hold different opinions
- accept that DD is characterised by reciprocity
- participate in an open and transparent way orientated towards resolving difficulties through
- non-violent means

Today, after additional reading for today's proceedings, I would explicitly name other guiding principles. These are that DD requires accepting the possibility of:

- being wrong and of changing one's views.

And that proceedings can be considered democratic only if they are conducted in such a way that:

- the autonomy and equality of participants are preserved **and** enhanced.

In other words, for proceedings themselves to be democratic they must be based on and institutionalise these norms derived from the irreducible preconditions of equality and autonomy. This translates into a requirement to respect difference, assume equality of participation without precondition and to engage with all others in a reasoned, purposeful and transparent way. Thus DD creates a dynamic and generative, not a static and functional process. In this sense, it is understood, that participating in DD is in itself transformative – of the individual and of the collective. This is its very purpose.

So far we have begun to identify some key qualities about DD that might flow from the two preconditions of democracy. To capture more precisely what DD might look like, I would like to offer two quotes.

For Shawn Rosenberg (a US based psychologist): DD (though he uses a slightly different term) involves the production of a “collaborative consideration of a problem or an issue, through the assertion of facts or value (as personal narrative or explicit claims) that are actually or potentially backed by reasons clarified by elaborations which may then be subject to challenge, defense and revision” (Rosenberg ud: 3).

For Lee Jerome (2017), DD involves ‘engaging in a sustained conversation on a topic... with people who disagree....in order to walk away having learned something about the other, and worked toward a compromise’.

What we can see from both of these quotes is that the meaning making in DD then is a purposive, constructive activity that has both subjective and inter-subjective dimensions. What does this mean? In DD, participants are required, in a structured manner, to bring to the surface (from within) their own positionality, which is inevitably linked to their identity and is certainly about values (subjective), and then to engage with those of others (intersubjective). For Rosenberg, DD thus is very much about developing the psychological resources of the participants themselves and the cultural resources available to them. It necessarily involves reflecting on the discourse itself.

“The objective is to foster modes of communication that not only enhance the subjective capacities and integrity of the individuals., but also contributes to the flexibility and sustainability of the larger social contexts within which they are embedded” (Rosenberg, ud: 12).

What Rosenberg speaks of here is the socio-emotional component of DD. Participants engage with each other in a deliberate way, are lead to reflect on their own subjectivity and, in time, be prepared to support and validate the views held, in a manner that affirms these...and accepts that the process necessarily transforms them (Rosenberg, ud: 13).

Democratic Deliberation in a Classroom

This is the broad theoretical approach and of course this needs translation into a classroom. Here I can but only sketch what this could look like.

In designing the Citizenship Studies framework, we understood DD as supporting and guiding the curriculum delivery not as constituting THE curriculum. In other words, while its values (equality, autonomy) would be found all the way down, any such curriculum would of course involve content: learning about institutions and processes such as electoral systems, the history of the welfare state, and so on. A curriculum built on DD would not necessarily look any different in substantive content from one without. The difference will be found largely in delivery, expectations of engagement and in the holding values.

So, to what that might look like. By necessity, students would have to be led into the process of democratically deliberating and probably quite slowly and, of course, in a democratically deliberative manner. Pragmatism would have to be found aplenty. It would be messy and slow – like democracy itself.

For instance, the curriculum would likely have to begin with the two core values and a deliberative process around them. Let’s take the idea of equality. From a content perspective, the history of the idea could be treated including for instance its social history (e.g. suffrage campaigns to more contemporary issues of sexual orientation and so on) and why this idea is critical to democracy. Structured into the lesson plans would be deliberative moments in which students could be invited to begin to think about how their own conceptions of equality are 1) felt, 2) shaped and 3) reinforced or repudiated in the media, the dominant culture, within their own cultural setting, by peers, parents and so on. Deliberating in small groups and into larger groups about their response, they could be guided by ‘rules of engagement’ (not interrupting, active listening, learning appropriate language to challenge or question contrary views) and group exercises could explore differences between and amongst students, constructed over time in a directed conversation. Students would probably have to learn to be

vulnerable in and supported by the process – to be willing to admit uncertainty and to learn to voice discomfort and to seek from each other clarifications, accommodations and commonalities.¹

Equally, the core value of autonomy could be used to draw out and learn how to deliberate democratically while laying out the foundation and its significance in politics and society.

It could be envisaged then that a slow unfolding of the idea of democratic deliberation would run alongside a content-orientated enquiry into related political and social concepts such as human rights, the idea of the balance of power state, electoral processes and so on.

From the very outset, day one I suggest, it would become clear that the classroom would contain the idea that the participation of each person is purposive (deliberation is towards a common purpose) and is necessarily reflective. Each participant is understood to be embedded in a cultural context that will impinge on their views and this will be brought to the surface; and that the deliberation is collaborative and mutually impacting - views will impact on each other.

I do not for one moment think this would be simple. That is not to say it should be declined.

Some concluding comments:

Firstly – it would be foolish not to recognise that Democratic Deliberation in a classroom sets the bar high. It would require great modification/adaptation not least of all to be age-appropriate, and to acknowledge curricular requirement (students have to be examined). Our framework was for post compulsory school-age students.

Secondly, Democratic Deliberation in a classroom requires particular set of skills of the teacher who is both delivering content and facilitating that deliberation. In this the role is perhaps different from that in other subjects (this may make it more desirable!). The teacher becomes a skilled mediator not only guiding but also, importantly, modelling the deliberation. Again, the bar is high!

Thirdly, it would be equally foolish, given this context today of where we are meeting, not to acknowledge the implications of the Prevent programme on such a classroom. However, I suggest that the implications of this programme, its ‘chilling effect’ on free speech and the free circulation of ideas (Ramsay 2017), are simply amplified in a DD classroom.

In conclusion, the key contribution of DD in the curriculum is a grounding ethos which contains both the curriculum and a communicative strategy or the *how* of the delivery. As a communicative strategy it involves cognitive dimensions but also socio-emotional components. Participants are required to engage with each other in a way that validates personal feelings, identities and their relationship to the social connections or cultural contexts of the participants.

In returning to this topic for today’s talk, I was struck by how much more literature there is on the process of Democratic Deliberation and also how much the socio-emotional aspects are being drawn out. We can see that, or the appreciation of the important relationship that exists between politics and subjective identity (a link that informs the rationale for Prevent, for instance) has become more significant in political life. It informs much analysis of the current widespread disaffection from both political life and from democratic institutions, such as found in populist politics. In embracing this link as a positive resource in both its personal/psychological and cultural manifestations, Democratic Deliberation works purposively with it towards collaborative transformation. It thus ties up several layers of within (within the person, within sets of cultural values) and without (in the classroom, in the study of politics and society or the public realm).

Hence, the conclusion of Jean Bethke Elshtain (1997) and other political theorists that Democratic Deliberation is ultimately about what she calls ‘habits of the heart’: trust and goodwill, virtues without which, she says, democracy can be quickly emptied out. No classroom or curriculum can prevent the emptying out of democracy

¹ Some existing practices can be drawn in here, Non Violent Communication (NVC), active listening, lessons from the idea of transversal politics used in peace processes or post conflict situations and so on.

but classrooms can acknowledge and validate the affective aspects of democracy, or the importance of 'habits of the heart'. The difficulties that such an approach might produce in a classroom are precisely those that will arise in the public sphere and, as such, can be welcomed rather than feared.

Thank you

Works Cited

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