

Thinking about deliberation

Many concepts in citizenship education are linked to skills – learning about active citizenship is something you can simply learn about (what do citizens do and why?), something you can do (skills of participation and cooperation) and something the teacher can use as a pedagogic strategy (setting up school-based projects and campaigns). Deliberation works in the same way and there are benefits to thinking about how it works as knowledge, as skills, and as classroom practice. The conference gives us an opportunity to think about these separate approaches and also how teachers can bring them together practically.

Deliberation as knowledge

Diverse societies that function as democracies require some mechanisms for coming to shared decisions that respect citizens' diverse beliefs and interests. Majority-rule and competition do not really work satisfactorily to protect minorities so theorists have taken a 'deliberative turn' to explore the ways in which different interests can be reconciled and public problems can be solved. Deliberation refers to dialogue in the public sphere, and theorists and researchers have explored how public talk works, what kinds of dialogue are particularly useful and how the public sphere operates to reconcile differences. Deliberative democracy starts from the recognition that conflict over interests, beliefs and needs is the norm but that an open process of deliberation can reduce competition (a zero sum view of politics) and promote forms of consensus building about what is in the [public interest](#). In practice this includes [citizens' juries](#), [citizens' assemblies](#), [participatory budgeting](#) and [deliberative polls](#), which all seek to use deliberation as a way to develop informed opinions and maximise the shared common ground.

Whilst elements of this rational consensus-seeking vision are clearly idealistic, the theory also seeks to reduce the overtly ideological content of political theory by focusing on the procedural rules for living together, rather than working out what form of belief should be privileged by the state. On this view, in order to commit to live together well, citizens just have to focus on the rules for deliberation and commit to engage in certain forms of dialogue. This means citizens have to focus on the way they make arguments – paying attention to the implications for others, the ways they might be understood, the reasons they can give, and in particular, focusing on argument and evidence. [Habermas](#) (2005) has argued that such a process has a number of pre-conditions that must be met:

- (i) No one capable of making a relevant contribution has been excluded.
- (ii) Participants have equal voice.
- (iii) They are free to speak their honest opinion without deception.
- (iv) There are no sources of coercion built into the process.

The legitimacy of any decision reflects the extent to which these conditions were met. And the point of such dialogue is not simply to put forward one's own position, but to have one's reasons scrutinised and evaluated, and to engage with others in the same way.

Deliberative democracy is therefore a distinctive variant of liberalism, which maintains the focus on the individual's freedom to believe and do as they wish, but which focuses on how these disparate individuals might come together to form a functional society.

Deliberation as skill

The theory of deliberative democracy makes substantial demands on citizens, who have to be capable of both constructing arguments that bear public scrutiny and analysing the views of others. They also need to be able to understand the core issues being discussed, and be able to think about how to balance the diverse needs and interests of citizens. At the very least then, deliberative citizens require skills related to:

- (i) Investigating contemporary issues and understanding the bias and world-views represented in sources of information (critical reading, avoiding fake news etc).

(ii) Building compelling and logical arguments to support a position and be able to adapt one's position and / or argument to accommodate alternative opinions (rational argumentation / justification).

(iii) Making a compelling case for a position in a public forum, engaging the attention and respect of others (performance skills).

(iv) Keeping an open mind, avoiding closing down one's own view, listening critically to others and seeking common ground (critical thinking skills and high level connection-making).

(v) Exercising empathy and toleration to understand alternative perceptions.

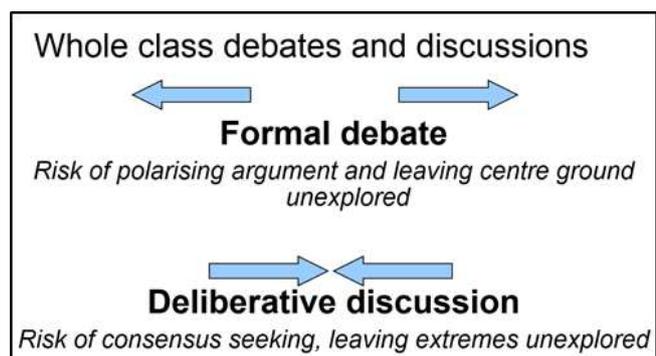
[Barker](#) (2013) has argued that bound up with such skills and abilities we can also see ethical virtues, such as a commitment to justice, the exercise of judgement, moral courage and a belief in moderation.

Deliberative democracy draws our attention to the reality of engaging in a sustained conversation on a topic of great personal importance, with people who disagree vehemently, in order to walk away having learned something important about the other, and worked towards a compromise. This process demands a certain ethical orientation towards the collective good and requires fairly sophisticated set of skills to be able to engage productively.

Deliberation as pedagogy

Clearly school can function both as a mini public sphere in which young people can practise these kind of challenging sustained dialogues; and as a space where they can learn the skills required for effective participation. This implies we need to pay attention to the types of talk we use as citizenship educators, and the ways in which we prepare young people.

Traditional competitive debates successfully model one very important aspect of democratic processes, but the common structure of splitting speakers into proponents or opponents of a motion, can be polarising, with a tendency to explore the extreme arguments, and to simplify responses into a straightforward 'for' or 'against' category. This can encourage participants to listen to others purely in order to 'rebut' or refute their arguments in some way. By contrast, other forms of debate (such as the [model UN](#)) provide more explicit encouragement to explore a full range of opinions, embrace nuance, and seek accommodation. Such deliberative debates focus on refining and amending a statement, which is prepared as the basis for debate and negotiation. This focuses on listening, being open-minded and flexible and seeking consensus. One could argue that the deliberative model inducts young people into the messiness and imperfections of democracy and illustrates that democratic debate leads to compromise. In many ways it is the expectation of an outright victory for one's own views which fuels dissatisfaction with politics, but which itself mistakes the purpose and promise of democracy ([Flinders](#), 2012).



Launching prematurely into debates on controversial issues may lead some young people to close down their thinking before they have had an opportunity to consider the issues fully. In addition to these two styles of formal debate therefore, there are a range of more exploratory discussion strategies that prompt students to reflect on their own preconceptions, begin to explore unresolved issues, and start to open their thinking to accommodate new information and new perspectives. Indeed such exploratory discussions may be vital in the context of controversial and

sensitive issues, where the nature of the controversy needs to be explored before any attempt to resolve the issue is undertaken.

The relationship between knowledge and skills

As educators we are used to talking about the curriculum as knowledge and skills (and maybe also values or attitudes), and these sub-headings are frequently used in formal curricula or qualification specifications to organise the content. But there is a debate about how separate these really are. It may seem obvious that understanding how elections work is about knowledge, whilst spotting bias in election materials requires critical literacy skills. When we hold a classroom debate about proportional representation, we have to teach students the knowledge they require about elections, and the skills required to construct a good argument and make a persuasive contribution to the debate. Reflecting this twin focus we might also devise two assessment strategies – an essay to gauge their understanding of elections and the nature of PR, and a debate feedback sheet to judge their ability to debate, which might typically include skills such as reasoning, listening and responding, organisation, expression and delivery ([ESU](#), online). However, in reality of course the two are not so easily distinguishable. A good argument about PR is good because it is well-constructed, well-delivered and well-received in the room, and it is good because it builds on a deep understanding of the issue of PR, the broader nature of elections, and the even broader idea of democracy. It's not possible to make a 'good' argument unless you understand what elections are for and how democracy works. This has led Christine Counsell to call the knowledge / skills divide a 'distracting dichotomy' ([Counsell](#), 2000) because in some important sense, they are two sides of the same coin – skilful practices draw on knowledge (explicit or tacit) and knowledge is only really evident when we use it in some way (to explain, argue, investigate or make something). In our teaching that is evident in the way we plan debates, and we might all recognise Counsell's warning that "teaching often goes wrong if we plunge into getting children to have an argument about something and they don't know enough" ([Counsell](#), 2017). But there are also dangers in focusing excessively on knowledge acquisition, without paying sufficient attention to what the knowledge is for, and what young people do with it.

Some questions for reflection to start our conference

This sets the scene for us to consider a number of questions in relation to deliberation and citizenship education:

1. What do we teach young people about democracy and the role of dialogue?
2. What forms of talk do we value in our own classrooms, and how do we help students to build their capacity for these?
3. What are the teaching demands (and risks) in running deliberative classrooms?
4. What forms of public dialogue are modelled in the media, social media, mainstream politics and single-issue campaigning groups? How well do these reflect the ideals of democratic deliberation?
5. To what extent do schools operate as spaces for young people to routinely engage in deliberation that acknowledges real conflict and diverse world-views that are not easily reconciled? And to what extent do we gloss over them to 'celebrate' diversity?
6. What (if anything) should we do across the school, and within citizenship classes, to engage with the idea of deliberation? And are current practices sufficient?

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