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Democracy & Education

Cultivating Moral Imagination through Deliberative Pedagogy Reframing Immigration Deliberation for Student Engagement Across Differences

Lisa Weasel (Portland State University)

Abstract

In “Deliberating Public Policy Issues with Adolescents,” the authors described what they determine to be an unsuccessful attempt at deliberative pedagogy on the topic of immigration in three high school classrooms that differed demographically. Specifically, the authors observed that students failed to engage with evidence, stuck with their initial viewpoints, and only listened politely to those with different views, rather than interacting across differences to reach consensus. While student positionality, as the authors suggest, is important to take into account, there may be ways to reorient deliberations on “wicked problems” such as immigration, which are by their nature prone to polarization, to increase student engagement and learning. By questioning what counts as evidence; reframing the problem of immigration to a specific and more nuanced question relating to the food system; and scaffolding student experiences to provide appropriate historical and social context, the activity may offer more engaged learning outcomes that enable students to cultivate what Swartz and McGuffey (2018) referred to as “moral imagination.”

This article is in response to

Crocco, M. S., Segall, A., Halvorsen, A. S., Jacobsen, R. J. (2018). Deliberating public policy issues with adolescents: Classroom dynamics and sociocultural considerations. *Democracy and Education*, 26(1), Article 3.

Available at: <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol26/iss1/3>

DELIBERATION AS A form of pedagogy has gained in popularity in recent years, as forces of political polarization, globalization, and accompanying daunting social and environmental challenges, such as immigration, climate change, and other “wicked problems” (Rittel & Weber, 1973), face the next generation. Deliberation as pedagogy has been recognized for its ability to cultivate in students the critical thinking and communication skills needed to confront such intractable, complex, and polarizing problems (Carcasson, 2017), to promote civic engagement for youth (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017), and to promote student engagement with evidence and consideration of alternative viewpoints (Hess, 2009; Kuhn & Crowell, 2011).

Yet as with the widespread adoption of any new pedagogical model, along with the potential for transformation arise questions

of how to successfully realize that potential in an educational environment that is increasingly divergent in terms of resources and student identities. Whether deliberative pedagogy can meet the goal of educating students to be critical problem-solvers open to diverse views and experience remains a challenge.

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Power, Positionality, and the Limits of Deliberative Pedagogy

In their article “Deliberating Public Policy Issues with Adolescents: Classroom Dynamics and Sociocultural Considerations,” Crocco, Segall, Halvorsen, and Jacobsen (2018) analyzed and compared deliberations on the topic of United States immigration policy in three demographically distinct regional high school classrooms. Their analysis concluded that due to both contextual and structural factors, pedagogy that was intended to function as a deliberation failed to “stimulate consideration of immigration that led to true deliberation or consensus about a policy recommendation” (Crocco et al., 2018, p. 7). Of most concern to the authors was the failure on the part of the students to change their initial views on immigration, to reach consensus on a solution, or to effectively engage with the evidence that was provided to them.

The authors foregrounded their consideration of such a failure in the need to consider the affective context and positionality of the students in designing deliberative activities, an aspect the authors conclude has been heretofore underaddressed in deliberative pedagogy:

Missing in current discussions regarding civic education are the affective and psycho-dynamic aspects of learning, especially in discussion of controversial issues where students often experience the difficulty of dealing with competing understandings that challenge their already established beliefs. (Crocco et al., 2018, p. 8)

Likewise, the authors recognized the ways in which cultural and linguistic capital influenced the process of deliberation in the different schools they observed. The three schools that they studied varied in the intersection of race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic, and immigration status of the students. In their analysis, the authors referred to the “civic opportunity gap” in which “affluent school environments provide more frequent opportunities for powerful civic education experiences such as deliberations and other activities demanding higher level thinking and student engagement than do schools in poor, urban school districts” (Crocco et al., 2018, p. 2). Nonetheless, students at the predominantly White, affluent suburban school that they studied fared no better in the expected outcomes of engagement with evidence and ability to reach consensus than those in the lower-socioeconomic and more racially and ethnically diverse school in an industrial city.

Using social identity theory, the authors concluded that “positionality matters” and that educators need to “consider in civic education that confirmation bias, sociocultural capital and dynamics, and linguistic processes related to performance and performativity play an important if underappreciated role in classroom discussion” (Crocco et al., p. 8). While recognizing the role of positionality and the disparities in educational opportunities at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status as well as immigration status, the authors concluded that perhaps “uncoupling public policy discussions and deliberations from the need for action or resolution will allow students to explore challenging topics in ways that feel more authentic to their situations” (Crocco et al., p. 8).

What Counts as Evidence? Student Engagement, Identity, and Deliberation

While the positionality, social and linguistic capital, and lived experiences that students bring to deliberative activities do indeed need to be front and center when designing and carrying out deliberations, shying away from the need or desire to seek common solutions risks the danger of detracting from, rather than enhancing, the learning potential of deliberations on challenging, controversial “wicked problems.” Such problems cannot be solved by singular, homogeneous groups but require both reflection on one’s own positionality as well as consideration of a range of views not shared by one’s own group memberships in the context of broader power relations that structure society. Furthermore, the fact that students failed to engage with “evidence” in this study to alter their initial positions calls into question the nature of what counts as evidence, how that evidence relates to the positionality and lived experience of the students, and how the deliberative activity is scaffolded and framed within the overall curriculum and student learning experience. These questions, and their answers, are often rooted in power structures that intersect along lines of race, gender, class, nationality, and other identities and lived experience, and students are rarely asked to participate in or determine the answers to these questions themselves. Without asking such questions, educators cannot address and avoid repeating the limitations on the learning potential of classroom deliberations on controversial topics that fail to take positionality into account. It seems unlikely that simply removing the requirement for consensus or resolution in the deliberations on immigration that the authors observed would lead to greater engagement with the evidence provided, and perhaps would further enable polarization and reinforcement of students’ initial positions.

The classroom deliberations on U.S. immigration policy that the authors observed utilized the National Issues Forum (NIF) curriculum, an established resource for public deliberations in which participants are provided with background evidence and asked to choose from three possible policy options (in the case of the immigration unit studied, these choices were: welcoming anyone into the country legally; preventing undocumented immigrants from entering and deporting those already here; or restricting immigration only to those with specific job-related skills, Crocco et al., 2018). These options mirror very closely current public discourse on immigration policy within the United States that students are exposed to through the media and in daily life.

The NIF curriculum provides packets of “evidence” that participants are instructed to rely upon in their deliberations. As the authors observed, although teachers encouraged students to rely on this material, students rarely drew on the evidence, favoring instead the defense of their initially held positions on the issue of immigration without attention to the provided evidence packets or perspectives other than their own.

While the NIF is widely used as a teaching resource for deliberative pedagogy, an analysis of its approach to deliberating immigration in an earlier version concluded that those materials were “predominantly nation-bound” and mainstream, rather than

multicultural (Camicia, 2007). In particular, Camicia concluded that the NIF materials analyzed were focused on assimilation and lacked appropriate historical perspective: “The inclusion of historical perspectives concerning past injustices of immigration policy in the United States is mainly confined to one paragraph in the NIF text,” (p. 102), which used a quote from Benjamin Franklin’s worries about German immigration’s impact on predominantly British culture in colonial America, “without a critical examination of the concept that colonial America was ever a predominantly British culture” that negates particularly the perspectives of African Americans and Native Americans (p. 102).

Lack of historical contextualization may make supplied evidence less relevant and engaging for contemporary students, who are both distanced from historical narratives due to their constant immersion in the social media of the present and who may not relate to an American past symbolized by Benjamin Franklin’s colonial America. These limitations are not specific to NIF materials; the shifting demographics of U.S. immigration compels high school social studies education to provide a more relevant and complex historical backdrop to today’s immigration situation.

Teachers who focus only on the first three waves of historical [European] immigration are likely to remain metaphorically “stranded” at Ellis Island (Journell, 2009). A European-focused immigrant narrative—rather than a geographically diverse portrayal of contemporary immigration—is unlikely to accurately reflect the changing and nuanced nature of the immigration experience in the United States today. (Hilburn & Jaffee, 2016, p. 52)

Providing more nuanced contemporary historical “evidence” for students to consider may lead to deeper engagement with such evidence and is critically important for affirming and including the positionality of immigrant students and students of color in the classroom.

Accompanying students’ lack of engagement with evidence, Crocco et al. (2018) also lamented the students’ failure to engage with positions different than their own. These two phenomena may be connected. Describing their observations of the students, Crocco et al. noted that “they may have listened to opposing views politely but it was not evident that they were, as a result, reassessing their initial positions” (p. 7). This polite, but disengaged, compliance with experiences other than their own reflects the failure of the activity to cultivate what Swartz and McGuffey (2017) referred to as a sense of “moral imagination.” (Notably, the students in Crocco et al.’s affluent, White suburban high school were found to use linguistic terminology emphasizing morals and morality, very different from what Swartz and McGuffey referred to as “moral imagination.”) In addressing the social justice mandate to teach immigration in a way that circumvents historical and ongoing injustice to marginalized groups, Swartz and McGuffey stated that “crucial to this approach is the cultivation of ‘moral imagination’ which entails the capacity to see ourselves within a network of relationships that encompasses the alleged ‘other,’ to accept the ambiguities and paradoxes intrinsic to that web, and to affirm and engage in creative acts” (p. 105). To accomplish this,

Swartz and McGuffey suggested inclusion of accurate and nuanced materials that connect past to present: “This can involve critical historical, legal, narrative, rhetorical, philosophical and sociological approaches to integrate past and contemporary accounts of subjectification in the United States” (p. 105). In addition to providing engaging material that helps students connect current discourse and positions to the past, it can provide multiple avenues for students to engage with both their own subjectivity and the perspectives and experiences of those different from them.

From “Stranded on Ellis Island” to Food Justice: Reframing Immigration Deliberation

In addition to considering what kinds of evidence students are provided with for deliberations, attention to the nature and framing of the question also may play a role in whether and how students engage with evidence and critically reflect on their own positionality. While deliberation is by its nature most applicable to “wicked questions,” which by definition preclude quick or easy answers, it is important to steer students away from broad and simplistic questions and solutions, and frame the question in a way that encourages student investigation of facts, evidence and lived experience that go beyond surface arguments. In the case of U.S. immigration, the NIF framing of the problem “Which of these three courses of action do you think U.S. policymakers should take regarding immigration?” does little to encourage students to frame the problem for themselves and drives students into three predetermined and familiar options. Given that the U.S. Congress and successive presidential administrations have repeatedly approached immigration using this framing and failed to come up with a successful solution, and given that as a result, most students will be heavily primed to side with one of the proposed solutions, the educational potential in such a framing appears limited. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the authors came to the conclusions that they did. Their observations may reflect more the structure and framing of the deliberation, rather than the deliberation process itself.

A more fruitful framing for a high school deliberation on immigration policy might instead focus on the question of the dependency of the U.S. food and agricultural system on undocumented immigrant labor. Current U.S. immigration policies are inconsistent with the need for authorized immigrant labor in the fields and factories where food is produced; this reliance on undocumented immigrant labor in turn is tied to food pricing and availability. Although the students in Crocco et al.’s observation will have different relationships to food, agriculture, and immigrant labor based on their positionality, because everyone eats, this provides an opportunity for students to acknowledge their differential positionalities with regard to the food system and the labor involved in it. Furthermore, because this element of immigration policy and immigrant experience is not foregrounded in public discourse surrounding immigration, students may have less rigid and predetermined positions and be less primed to give predetermined answers. Because the focus is on the food system specifically rather than immigration more broadly, it may be easier for students to change their preconceived views, listen to differing opinions

more openly, or at the least, become better informed and compelled to gather evidence to support or refute certain assumptions and facts related to the topic. Will food prices go up if undocumented immigration is curtailed? Who will this impact and how? How did the U.S. food system come to depend on undocumented immigrant labor to provide adequate food supply? What is the role and view of multinational corporations, large and small farmers, and other employers in the food system in this problem? Here, students may find that, for example, conventional assumptions about partisan political alliances are blurred; many conservative Republican farmers and ranchers for example oppose restricting immigration, because of the impact on agricultural labor (Dickerson & Medina, 2017; Goldbaum, 2019). This may provide students with examples of how reflection on one's positionality and stakes may complicate otherwise binary partisan lines.

Framing immigration dilemmas and policymaking around food, agriculture, and labor can also help to overcome the "stranded on Ellis Island" nature of historical perspectives on immigration. The U.S. has a long history of immigration policy tied to agriculture and food production and security. Starting in the early nineteenth century, successive waves of immigration to the U.S. from Asian countries provided agricultural labor on plantations and filled a broader need for workers across industries (Minkoff-Zern, Peluso, Sowerwine, & Getz 2011). Later, the Braceros program provided temporary work permits for Mexican agricultural laborers between 1942 and 1964 in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II (Brown & Getz, 2011). The Braceros program shares elements with a more recent H2 visa program for so-called "low skilled" workers, and understanding this longer-term view of history may give students a different view of the way that current immigration policies and circumstances are rooted in and have been predetermined by past practice. Immigration policy in both of these instances has fluctuated with relative labor demands, much of it related to food, with periods of permissive policies and even active recruitment alternating with notorious exclusion laws and active discrimination and mistreatment of particular groups based on race and nationality. In recent times, the case of immigrant labor in the slaughterhouse industry in Postville, Iowa, has cycled through phases of Latino immigrant workers, followed by Somali immigrants, after a much-publicized immigration raid in Postville in 2008. In all of these cases, immigration policies tied to agriculture have not only shifted the flow of people but have impacted the lives and well-being of immigrants in the U.S. Exclusion policies and raids both draw on policy and use policy to reinforce biases and discrimination against immigrants in general and against specific nationalities and ethnicities in particular. Understanding and investigating the connections between current and historic policies and their impact on immigrant lived experience in the U.S. are important elements of helping students to be able to cultivate the "moral imagination," as expressed by Swartz and McGuffey within the context of U.S. food systems, and students' relationships in this complex web.

While no set curriculum exists for structuring immigration deliberations around food and agriculture in secondary classrooms, this does not mean that teachers need to construct these

from scratch. Online resources for teaching about the Bracero Movement (<http://braceroarchive.org/teaching>) are available and offer resources that can be used in the classroom either before or during deliberation activities. The U.S. Library of Congress provides online high school teaching materials on immigration from China and Japan, some of which focuses on agricultural labor (<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/alt/japanese2.html>) and all of which covers important aspects of the bias, discrimination, and racism that accompanied such immigration policies and lived experience. Postville, Iowa, has become a case study for the intersection of immigration policy and agricultural labor, and a range of resources are available that can be used to introduce this case study to students (Artz, Jackson, & Orazem, 2010; Herbert, 2009) and to deepen student understanding of the far-reaching consequences of immigration policy on health and human rights (Androff, Ayon, Becerra, & Gurrola 2011; Juby & Kaplan, 2011; Novak, Geronimus, & Martinez-Cardoso 2017). Documentaries that focus on first-person experiences (Argueta, 2010) can be particularly compelling preparation for students' awareness and recognition of their own positionality in relation to immigration in the food system.

Scaffolding for Student Agency: Evidence through Engagement

In addition to adapting available resources such as these to the deliberation format specifically, teachers can also focus on scaffolding students' learning to prepare them with necessary background and tools for obtaining their own evidence, and contextualizing their own positionality, during deliberations. Providing an opportunity for students to gather their own evidence is likely to promote deeper engagement and ownership and can create collaborative opportunities for students to engage in critical conversations as they work through conflicting or supportive evidence for their positions. For example, students may be assigned to determine the economic impact and contribution of immigrant labor on food supply, a complex but relevant problem that is both not immediately obvious and requires a degree of critical thinking. Alternatively, students can investigate the labor and production of specific foods that they and their families consume, an activity that can promote community engagement and learning outside of the classroom and can expand students' exposure and understanding of those who are different from them in a less polarized context. Such an activity also sets the stage for student acknowledgment and awareness of positionality in a lower-stakes context. In schools with student representation from immigrant agricultural communities, such activities can reinforce and draw on marginalized students' lived experience and affirm their cultural capital through their firsthand knowledge of the issue.

Adding considerations such as these to Crocco et al.'s analysis of deliberations on immigration in the high school classroom need not negate the authors' focus on their observations of students' lack of engagement with evidence and the stultifying effect of forced consensus on preventing students from deeply engaging alternative viewpoints. These concerns remain, regardless of how a deliberation

is structured and what the topic is. Acknowledgment and attention to the positionality and affective elements that students, particularly of high school age, bring to classroom deliberations should not be discounted. With a “wicked problem” as polarized and entrenched as U.S. immigration policy, these pitfalls will always exist and can be hard to rectify. The potential to reinforce damaging dynamics and exclusionary discourse is always a risk, especially when we shift classroom structures to allow students to collectively guide their own learning. However, by scaffolding student preparation, reframing the question, and taking a more open-ended approach to deliberating immigration policy through a specific focus on how immigration intersects with the food and agricultural system, more opportunities for students to engage a seemingly intractable problem through a new and potentially transformative lens may lead to greater opportunities for developing a “moral imagination” than standard approaches currently yield.

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