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Democracy & Education

From Deliberative Democracy to Communicative Democracy in the Classroom

Lisa Weasel (Portland State University)

Abstract

This response to Samuelsson's typology for assessing deliberative democracy in classroom discussions views his analysis through an equity lens. It offers Young's model of communicative democracy as a resource and argues that incorporating that model's emphasis on greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling into the typology can help to promote more equitable deliberative communication in the classroom. It offers specific tools, based on the author's development of deliberative pedagogy in a biology classroom, that teachers can use across disciplines and educational settings to help promote more equitable deliberative communication in classroom discussions.

This article is in response to

Samuelsson, M. (2016). Education for deliberative democracy: A typology of classroom discussions. *Democracy & Education*, 24(1), Article 5. Available at <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss1/5>

THE QUESTION OF how, and with what intention, deliberative democracy might be incorporated into pedagogy in educational settings is, as Samuelsson (2016) clearly argued in his paper "Education for Deliberative Democracy: A Typology of Classroom Discussions," an important yet contested issue. If we believe that deliberative democracy is an important political tool that promotes broad participation, collective understandings across difference, and engaged action, then providing students with experiences that involve them in activities emulating deliberative processes can contribute to a polity that is skilled and effective in deliberation.

Yet disagreements about which elements of deliberative democracy are most salient, and concerns raised by Young (2000) that narrow definitions of deliberative democracy can lead to exclusivity, have stymied attempts to apply a typology of deliberative democracy in education. To better analyze where and how

classroom discussions exemplify deliberative democracy, Samuelsson drew on Englund's (2006) criteria for pedagogical applications of deliberative democracy. Samuelsson condensed these into three

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core requirements: “the reason-giving requirement, the reflective requirement, and the consensus requirement” (Samuelsson, 2016, p. 3). He then analyzed four classroom discussions in the context of these criteria, seeking to identify classroom situations that embody the qualities of deliberative democracy.

Deliberation and Power in the Classroom: Does the Typology Hold Up?

Samuelsson (2016) placed particular importance on the nature of the questions that drive classroom discussions in determining whether a deliberative democratic discussion is likely to ensue. While he concluded that the topic of the deliberation is less important than the “communicative pattern” that develops, he acknowledged that certain questions are less supportive of deliberation than others. For example, a math problem that has one correct answer is not a good candidate for promoting deliberative democracy, in his analysis. Nor is a discussion focused on the question of whether rape is acceptable or not, since there is already a predetermined answer expected. The example that Samuelsson’s analysis settled on as an example meeting all three of England’s core criteria is one that arose spontaneously in response to the limited engagement of students in the discussion of rape. In this case, the teacher turned the tables and asked the students themselves how they thought the discussion should proceed. A more nuanced discussion ensued, which included questions about forms of participation as well as topic, leading to an apparent consensus that the discussion shift topic to the question of homework and hours of the school day. Samuelsson concluded that this discussion fulfills all three criteria—the reason-giving requirement, the reflective requirement, and the consensus requirement—and thus functions as an example of a deliberative democracy classroom situation.

While it may fulfill these minimum requirements for deliberative democracy, I argue that many problematic elements exist within the description of this discussion that are inconsistent with deliberative democracy. From the transcript cited in the article, the first part of the discussion appears to be a dialogue between the teacher and two very vocal students, Adrian and Christian. From their names, it seems likely that both students are male-identified. The students are arguing for a debate format, a model that traditionally has a winner and a loser. Halfway through this discussion, the teacher aptly points out that not everyone seems comfortable with this format: “Some of you are shy, some of you will shut down, and some of you are disinterested. [She turns toward a group of girls sitting in the front who have been quiet the whole time]” (Samuelsson, 2016, p. 6). In response to the teacher’s question to the silent girls, one student, named Sara, responds, saying, “I don’t know; it’s difficult to say what you think, to express your opinion.” The teacher suggests that it might be easier to write down her thoughts, to which she passively agrees. Adrian immediately interjects and reiterates his preference for a debate. At this point, the teacher acknowledges that Adrian has been dominating the discussion, and the effect that has on shutting down others’ participation. A student named Andrea comments that a debate would be acceptable if the topic wasn’t controversial. Shortly thereafter, the teacher assistant

suggests that they focus on a topic relevant to them, homework and school-day length, and the transcript concludes with a chorus of “Yes!” (Samuelsson, 2016, pp. 6–7).

While this example appears on the surface to fulfill the minimum requirements of reason-giving, reflection, and consensus, it is obvious that a small number of students dominated the discussion; that girls, a group often marginalized in classroom discussions, were silenced; and that the teacher and teacher assistant led and facilitated by offering suggestions, rather than by having solutions arise through a deliberative exchange between class members. Of course, these dynamics are not uncommon in classrooms, although such a situation, in which one group dominates and another sits silently or otherwise acquiesces, with the teacher arbitrating as the voice of authority, can actually work against the principles of deliberative democracy, as it further reinforces marginalized voices while allowing dominant perspectives to appear as consensual. Samuelsson (2016) identified a “common core” of elements present across definitions of deliberative democracy as “discussion in which different points of view are presented and underpinned with reasons, and participants listen respectfully to each other and reflect on other participant’s claims and arguments” (p. 2). The fact that the classroom discussion described by Samuelsson appears to fulfill the minimum criteria, yet runs counter to this definition that he cited, suggests that further intervention is needed.

From Deliberative Democracy to Communicative Democracy in the Classroom

Young (1996) has noted the importance of attending to the role that both external and internalized power differentials play in thwarting the intended goals of deliberative democracy. She emphasized that deliberative democratic exercises cannot erase the role of economic and political differences nor internalized attitudes and responses to power differentials as they play out in deliberative contexts. Any assumption that they can, she wrote,

fails to notice that the social power that can prevent people from being equal speakers derives not only from economic dependence or political domination but also from an internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak, and from the devaluation of some people’s style of speech and the elevation of others. (p. 122)

In the classroom discussion described by Samuelsson (2016), there are clear tensions between different participants’ “sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak,” (Young, p. 122) as is made obvious by the teacher’s articulation of one students’ domination of the discussion and a group of girls’ silence. Moreover, these tensions tend to fall in line with socially and culturally constricted forms of discourse, particularly regarding gender. Young (1996) detailed the ways in which certain forms of discourse and debate often found in deliberative democracy contexts conform to gender norms:

Speech that is assertive and confrontational is here more valued than speech that is tentative, exploratory, or conciliatory. In most actual

situations of discussion, this privileges male speaking styles over female. A growing literature claims to show that girls and women tend to speak less than boys and men in speaking situations that value assertiveness and argument competition. When women do speak in such situations, moreover, they tend to give information and ask questions rather than state opinions or initiate controversy. (p. 123)

Because students bring their social and cultural conditioning with them into the classroom, these dynamics are thus likely to be ubiquitous in discussion settings and difficult to counter without specific intervention. In considering how the dominant speech culture serves to silence not only girls and women but also people of color, Young (1996) concluded that “this discussion-based theory of democracy must have a broader idea of the forms and styles of speaking that political discussion involves than deliberative theorists usually imagine” (p. 124). Young termed this broadened theory “communicative democracy,” rather than deliberative democracy, to emphasize the importance of equalizing forms of communicative interaction in the pursuit of consensus.

To support such equalizing, Young (1996) suggested three additional elements of deliberative discussions that make them more consistent with a communicative democratic process: greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling. *Greeting* represents an initial connection between participants, unrelated to content or topic for the day. Young describe greeting as such:

Especially when parties to dialogue differ in many ways, either in their culture and values or in the interests and aims they bring to discussion, their efforts to resolve conflict or come to agreement on a course of action cannot begin without preliminaries in which the parties establish trust or respect. (p. 129)

Sometimes it is assumed that in classrooms such trust and respect is already present, or is at least acknowledged to be required by rules and guidelines. Yet prefacing discussions with icebreakers or check-ins that give each participant an opportunity to present their personal context aside from the topic can open up space for more students to bring their voices to the conversation and can help all students respect the differences and perspectives of each class member.

Rhetoric is important in that it broadens traditional definitions of *rational speech*, which are highly valued in deliberative contexts, to include emotions and figurative language, which broadens the types of discourse, and identities of speakers, which are valued and considered relevant to a deliberation. The academic nature of the classroom leans heavily toward privileging what is considered “rational” and “objective” discourse, which divorces arguments from speakers’ personal situations and discounts humor, wordplay, and figures of speech. In contrast, “with rhetorical figures, a speech constructs the speaker’s position in relation to those of the audience. Through rhetoric the speaker appeals to the particular attributes or experience of the audience, and his or her own particular location in relation to them” (Young, 1996, p. 130). In the example cited by Samuelsson (2016), rather than chastising Adrian for his aggressive speaking style, which certainly was learned and

rewarded within dominant society and schooling, the teacher might have drawn attention to different means of expression and led the class to consider the range and types of rhetoric that are important to the discussion.

This leads to Young’s (1996) third criteria for communicative democracy, which is *storytelling*. Storytelling offers a means for such a broadening of rhetoric, where the emphasis is placed on narratives, rather than simply objective, disembodied arguments. In this way, the teacher might have invited students to tell a story about a time when a deliberation was successful or satisfying for them. These personal narratives could lead into further discussion about how the group should pursue the question at hand (the teacher’s original question: “How would you like to continue working with this topic?”). Storytelling and narrative in this way provide context to participants’ positions; Young claimed that “narrative also contributes to political argument by the social knowledge it offers of how social segments view one another’s actions and what are the likely effects of policies and actions on people in different social locations” (p. 132).

In some ways, Young’s (1996) additional criteria seem as if they should be quite at home in a grade school classroom setting. School cultures evolve their own forms of greetings, in which students recognize others in their peer groups, whether through particular forms of handshakes or physical greetings or verbal terms of welcome and acknowledgement. While this greeting may not be uniform across students and student groups, and may even serve as a form of signaling in-group/out-group membership, a greeting is nonetheless a familiar informal communicative form for grade school students. Rhetoric, which attends to “the forms and styles of speaking that reflexively attend to the audience in the speech” (p. 130), is also common in casual communication between students. Peer group membership is important in social interactions among students, and casual communication among students is often laced with direct and indirect forms that acknowledge and seek to appeal to peers.

Likewise, storytelling is also familiar to students and is often cultivated in lower grades as an acceptable verbal and academic format (at least in the United States). As students move up the grades, storytelling as an appropriate academic form becomes replaced with notions of objectivity, fact, and value-neutral argument in classrooms. However, storytelling continues to serve an important role in social interactions in school settings, often as the conduit through which rhetorical appeals to peers takes its form.

While these additional elements—which Young (1996) cites as characteristic of a communicative democracy that is more egalitarian in its participatory engagement—might be familiar, they are often directly and indirectly discouraged within the classroom context. While they may still be considered as acceptable forms of peer communication in informal social settings, the emphasis on “reasoned argumentation” often serves to exclude these forms. As students proceed through the educational process, they often internalize these value judgments and the associated forms considered as rational communication.

Thus, teachers must explicitly seek to include and cultivate these qualities in discussions, as students themselves may not bring

these forward. Without explicit attention to structures that seek to equalize power and encourage participation across diverse groups and individuals, even those discussions that do appear to meet Samuelsson's (2016) minimum criteria for deliberative democracy are likely to further reinforce inequities in participation and avert the goals of broad participation and collective understandings and actions that characterize most definitions of deliberative democracy.

Yet it is not enough to merely incorporate the elements of greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling into deliberative experiences for students. Teachers miss an important educational opportunity if they do not make explicit to students the role that these elements play in supporting participation and illuminating how power functions in deliberative democracy. Doing so makes a conscious space for the acknowledgment and discussion of the ways in which power enters and can influence the direction and outcome of a deliberation, allowing participants to check the consistency of their aims and values with their outcomes. Explicitly acknowledging the role that greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling play also serves as an important model for political discourse based on more inclusive principles.

With increasing emphasis (in the United States, at least) on developing students' familiarity and usage of "academic discourse" and "academic language," teachers may feel challenged to justify the incorporation of alternatives to dominant and expected communication styles. Yet rather than viewing these forms of deliberation as counter to expected standards, teachers can utilize varying modes of discourse to highlight to students the connections between different forms of discourse and power, the need to develop and engage multiple modes of communication, and the virtues and constraints of various types of discourse.

Structuring Discussions for Deliberative Democracy: A Case Study from Biology

Samuelsson (2016) noted that the teachers in his empirical study were "all interested in democracy as an educational aim, as well as in classroom discussion as a pedagogical practice. However, they were unfamiliar with the concept of deliberative democracy prior to participating in this study" (p. 4). In some ways, then, it is encouraging to see that some elements of deliberative democracy did arise spontaneously in class discussions, although Samuelsson noted the limitations in meeting his minimal criteria in three of the four cases he analyzed. Furthermore, in the fourth case that he described as meeting the stated standards for deliberative democracy, serious inequities seem to persist. From this presentation, it appears that in order to fully meet both Samuelsson's minimum criteria, as well as Young's (1996) additional criteria for communicative democracy, teachers need to structure classroom discussions to explicitly foster these forms. This in turn suggests that perhaps more nuanced criteria for classroom deliberation needs to be developed.

Here I reflect on my own experience of structuring an undergraduate biology classroom around deliberative democracy discussions, with an eye toward preventing some of the exclusive dynamics that developed in the example that Samuelsson (2016)

cited. In addition to helping to flesh out more detailed criteria for judging classroom discussions as deliberative, I also offer suggestions for concrete tools that might help teachers who wish to promote deliberative democracy in their classrooms more quickly and effectively move discussions in that direction.

In my experience, Samuelsson (2016) was correct to place heavy emphasis on the structuring of questions that guide classroom deliberative discussions. As Samuelsson noted, the question is often context-specific: "A question directing one classroom discussion toward a democratic deliberation does not have to do the same in another classroom or at another time. Thus, finding a question with the right balance is up to the person (teacher) leading the discussion and is dependent on a number of contextual factors" (p. 8). Considering which kinds of questions will fulfill Samuelsson's typology (reason-giving, reflection, consensus) and will be amenable to Young's (1996) communicative forms (greeting, rhetoric, storytelling) is important. These considerations can be as simple as fine-tuning the question so as to invite these elements in. It also may mean reconsidering what "counts" as a consensus solution.

For example, in one of Samuelsson's (2016) cases, characterized as a "problem-solving discussion," the question at stake is a mathematical problem, with groups discussing the solution to 344 divided by 4 . When the question is posed as "the solution to the math problem," it appears that while there was discussion and disagreement, the existence of a singular correct answer limited disagreement and promoted some individuals being "right" and the rest being "wrong." The dialogue in this case also again exhibited traditional gender stereotypes, with students with male names dominating and one student with a female name interjecting hesitantly and concluding in the end that she had been wrong: "Charlotte: Oh [sounds happy], I just counted wrong, funny. Markus: Yes, very [pretends to be laughing]" (p. 5). This might imply that math questions as a whole would be off-limits for deliberative discussions. However, when we reframe the question, and actively discourage right-wrong answers, even concrete math problems can provide useful and even very apt questions for deliberative discussion. In this case, if the question is framed as "What is the best way to solve the problem 344 divided by 4 ?" the discussion moves from what the correct answer is to strategies for solution. Without active encouragement, though, this too could lead students to believe that they must identify a singular "correct" strategy. If students are encouraged to use storytelling to reflect on how they best solve math problems, and to "think out of the box" for solutions by focusing on identifying the "least common denominator" that they can all agree on, then rather than identifying a specific singular "best" strategy, students might come to an agreement that the best strategy is one that draws on one's existing strengths in math. For one student, this might mean solving the problem using an algorithm ("because I'm good at algorithms and they usually work for me"), while for another it might mean using strategies of compensation (finding easily solved whole numbers and then adding or subtracting the difference), or doubling or halving strategies. In the specific example of 344 divided by 4 , after reflecting on the different strategies raised by different students, applying

these to the problem at hand might reveal that an algorithm is the most direct approach, since 344 is already evenly divisible by 4, and so the group might consent that an algorithm is best in this case. On the other hand, for some students, alternative strategies might still seem to make more sense, and then the group would need to “fall back” on a consensus that the best strategy is to draw on a strategy that is familiar and works best. In fact, vestiges of this type of deliberative approach can be seen in the transcript of the discussion cited, with different students testing out strategies of halving and other ways of breaking down the problem.

While the outcome of reframing the question in deliberative approaches does not necessarily lead to the identification of a singular “correct” answer to the problem of 344 divided by 4, it does serve perhaps an equally important learning goal for math. If students have the opportunity to explicitly reflect on different strategies for solving such a math problem and identify those strategies that work best for them and with regard to particular problems, they are likely not only to access better tools for problem solving but also to gain confidence in their mathematical abilities.

This example illustrates the potential of transforming questions and discussions to meet not only Samuelsson’s (2016) three minimum criteria but also incorporate elements of Young’s (1996) communicative democracy. However, in my experience, realizing the deliberative potential of particular questions and discussions that follow requires careful facilitation and structure on the part of the teacher. Equitable deliberations in schools do not arise of their own accord, as Samuelsson’s examples show. In attempting to promote deliberative discussions in my own classroom, admittedly somewhat different than the classrooms observed by Samuelsson, I have found the following tools and structures to be useful.

My class is a large, nonmajors introductory biology course at an urban four-year public university with an access mission. As such, my students represent a diversity of academic trajectories; many are transfer students from local community colleges, some are returning to college after an absence of months to years from higher education, and a small number are traditional college-age students just a few years out of high school. Most students work and/or head a family outside of school, and the majority are commuters to our campus. While this is admittedly a significantly different population than Samuelsson’s (2016) secondary school cases, many of the same challenges for deliberation exist, and over several years of experience with the explicit goal of encouraging deliberative discussion (Weasel & Finkel, 2016), I have identified the following pedagogical structures to be supportive and consistent with both Samuelsson’s typology and Young’s (1996) communicative principles.

- a. *Break students into manageable groups.* Groups need to be big enough to promote a range of views and approaches, yet small enough so there is time and space for everyone to speak. Often, large discussions involving the whole class make it easier for nonparticipants to slip by and for dominant voices to overtake the conversation.
- b. *Assign students roles in each group.* I pass out a worksheet with the stated roles and have students select their preferred roles

the first time the group meets. In subsequent meetings, roles rotate, and students are encouraged to take on roles they are less familiar with. Roles include leader, facilitator, summarizer, scribe, spokesperson, and “devil’s advocate.” By assigning each student a role, participation is clear, and a range of participatory styles and preferences can be accommodated. The role of devil’s advocate is particularly important, as that person has responsibility to raise questions and cultivate marginal views and perspectives. Distribution of roles can help to disperse power throughout the group, and makes explicit the value and importance of the different elements and tasks needed to ensure broad participation.

- c. *Begin group discussions with greeting check-ins unrelated to the topic at hand.* While time constraints and the emphasis on academic content and culture tend to discourage informal “chatting” among students during class time, a relatively unstructured check-in where group members each speak about how their week is going, something that has been on their mind lately, or something that is going well for them in class can help to make space for each student to speak on a low-stakes topic and helps to orient and contextualize student identities and values prior to embarking on the discussion topic. These types of check-ins also function in an informal manner to draw out latent differentials of power and positionality and to set the stage for varying rhetorics, which can then be referred back to during the formal deliberation.
- d. *Frame questions that encourage storytelling.* By selecting and framing questions in a way that makes them relevant to students’ lives, storytelling can emerge naturally in the context of discussions. Of course, this will vary depending on the students and the subject matter. In my biology course, one of the deliberative questions I pose is “Should sugary drinks be excluded from SNAP (governmental Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, i.e., food stamps)?” This is both an actual policy question that has been debated in several US cities and states and something that many students, particularly some of the more marginalized students, have direct investment in. Framing the question to encourage storytelling related to direct experience can shift the power balance away from neutral, factual discourse and bring direct personal experience into the deliberation as a valid and necessary element of consideration. As Samuelsson’s (2016) example illustrates, when students have an active stake in a question, they are both more likely to reach consensus and to be able to bring their own stories to bear on the discussion.
- e. *Reward groups for the breadth and diversity of the positions they consider, rather than on the speed or ease at which they reach consensus.* While consensus is the eventual goal of deliberative discussions, it is important to encourage and incentivize (via grades and other evaluations) groups to solicit and consider the widest range of possible concerns in their deliberations, rather than aiming for a speedy resolution. The devil’s advocate role is of particular importance for

keeping this priority at the forefront. In this case, students should be reminded of the importance of acknowledging power and authority of various stances and modes of communicating them. By intentionally attending to power in their process of reaching consensus, students can make connections between the need for and the means of garnering a breadth of experiences and information and the robustness and validity of their outcome.

These strategies do not necessarily require that teachers have a deep understanding of deliberative democracy, although familiarity with Samuelsson's (2016) typology and Young's (1996) communicative principles will be useful in promoting and structuring equitable classroom forums. While deliberation in classroom discussions can take many forms and must be tailored to the individual student context, subject matter, and process, interventions such as those above can be adapted to a variety of educational settings, and can be useful in restructuring patterns of classroom discussion in the direction of equitable deliberative communication.

As we seek to give students opportunities to experience discussions with broad participation and develop common understandings of and across differences, leading to engaged action, it is important to consider not only the three elements of

Samuelsson's (2016) typology (namely reason-giving, reflection, and consensus) but also the means by which these are accomplished. Young's (1996) principles of communicative democracy, as well as the specific tools discussed here, can help to steer classroom discussions towards equitable models of deliberation tailored to specific learning contexts.

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