Feel Free to Change Your Mind
A Response to "The Potential for Deliberative Democratic Civic Education"

Walter Parker

ABSTRACT

Walter Parker responds to Hanson and Howe's article, "The Potential for Deliberative Democratic Civic Education," extending their argument to everyday classroom practice. He focuses on a popular learning activity called Structured Academic Controversy (SAC). SAC is pertinent not only to civic learning objectives but also to traditional academic-content objectives. SAC is at once a discourse structure, a participation structure, and an instructional procedure; and it centers on Hanson and Howe's autonomy-building fulcrum—exchanging reasons. At a key moment in SAC, students are invited to step out of an assigned role and to form their "own" position on the issue. Parker argues that SAC is one way to mobilize a school's assets in the direction of democratically enlightened political engagement.

I APPRECIATE THE ATTENTION Hanson and Howe give to political communication in their article "The Potential for Deliberative Democratic Civic Education" (2011). They advance it as a central platform of liberal-democratic civic education and, on that platform, home in on exchanging reasons on controversial issues. Moreover, they situate all this in the distinction between aggregative and deliberative democracy. This is a good stew that should help us think about the place of deliberation in the school curriculum of a diverse society and the possibilities of a genuine civic mission for the schools.

My response to their paper continues on that trajectory. I add a close reading of a particular classroom practice. Starting from the ordinary ground of curriculum and instruction, I then go inside discussion pedagogy in order to display one way that exchanging (forming, sharing, listening) reasons on controversial issues actually occurs. I focus on a model that has achieved some popularity in classrooms over the past twenty years, both in the United States and abroad,[1] called Structured Academic Controversy (SAC). SAC is a classroom discussion template that is pertinent not only to civic learning objectives but also to traditional academic-content objectives (hence *academic* in its moniker). It is at once a discourse structure, a participation structure, and an instructional procedure, and it centers on Hanson and Howe's autonomy-building fulcrum—the exchange of reasons.

SAC exposes students to information about a controversy and to multiple perspectives on it. Bridges (1979) captured the latter in

his definition of *discussion*: "to set alongside one perception of the matter under discussion the several perceptions of other participants, challenging our own view of things with those of others" (p. 50). SAC goes beyond mere exposure to alternative views because participants must determine, as Hanson and Howe say, "whether what they are hearing requires them to adjust their own beliefs" (p. 4). SAC also delivers academic content, as I show.

All this makes SAC a useful model for deliberation in schools. It is not the only deliberative model that brings controversy and conflict to the foreground of the curriculum, but it has certain features that make it relevant to several of the matters discussed by Hanson and Howe. I want to address three of them. First, I offer a friendly amendment to Hanson and Howe's notion of *when* students might form their own reasons for a position. Second, I join their disagreement with Galston (1989) and Brighouse (2000) by suggesting that SAC facilitates autonomy and promotes it, too. Third, I show how SAC provides students an "occasion" (Oliver, Newman, & Singleton, 1992, p. 103; Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009)—a fertile moment—for identifying and forming their "own" views on an issue. That moment gives this paper its title.

WALTER PARKER is professor of curriculum and instruction and (by courtesy) political science at the University of Washington in Seattle.

SAC was developed by two scholars of cooperative learning, D. W. Johnson and R. Johnson (1985; see also Aronson, 1978; Cohen, 1986). SAC is useful not only in civics and government courses but in social studies courses generally and, to a good extent, across the curriculum. Any one round, or lesson, of SAC occurs in a small group, a team. Johnson and Johnson's starting point is that when students are put in small groups and asked to interact with other students while they learn, conflicts among their ideas, preferences, and perspectives are likely. Rather than avoiding such conflict, SAC mobilizes it.

Before SAC begins, teachers find the controversy in the topic they want students to engage. Instead of teaching about the protection of endangered species or a concept like healthy diet as though these topics were devoid of argument, instructors identify and then help their students participate in that controversy. Rather than teaching about the American Revolution as a bundle of established facts, as though the colonists were destined to declare their independence, teachers help students revive and re-argue the case for and against independence. The study of a topic—ecosystems, diets, revolutions—is designed so that the disagreements at its core are, in a developmentally appropriate way, the object of study. Furthermore, the processes of reasoned argument are the means for studying those disagreements. To use convenient if imprecise labels, the objective is both *academic* (learning content) and *civic* (learning to dialogue-across-difference; to form, share, and listen to reasons). SAC is a tightly organized (hence *structured*) classroom procedure for having these informed arguments. SAC makes this kind of study possible even for many beginning teachers and young students. The procedure as I have adapted it (e.g., Parker, 2003, 2006) follows.

First, the teacher assigns students to diverse, four-person teams and then asks the teams to take a few minutes to develop a team name (icebreaker; team bonding). Second, each four-person team is divided into two pairs, and each pair is assigned to one side of the controversy. (There are more than two positions in most controversies, of course, but that complication is set aside in SAC for the purpose of introducing students to the issue. The issue can be complicated later, after the SAC; and, by then, students will have a stake in the issue, which should make further study more meaningful.[2])

On the American Revolution, the question could be this: Should the colonies declare their independence from England? One pair is assigned to the Patriot arguments that eventually led to independence, and the other pair to Loyalist arguments against independence. The teacher tells students that in thirty minutes or so, each pair will present its position and reasons to its opposite pair.

Third, the teacher provides each pair (or helps the students gather) background information on the topic and assigned position. Depending on the topic, the textbook may provide background, and supplementary resources, such as primary documents, can be assembled to provide position-specific information and reasons for the position. Newspaper editorials are a good source, as are essays, photos, and so on.

Fourth, each pair presents to the opposing pair in the team. Students are told that they need to listen carefully to the other pair so that they can, at the next step, reverse perspectives, now feeding back the position and reasons of the other pair to its satisfaction. In the final phase, a genuine discussion begins as the two pairs join together again as a team, now for the purpose of finding out whether or not they can reach a consensus on the issue. The teacher announces, "You no longer need to represent your assigned position. Feel free to change your mind. Go ahead and have a genuine discussion of the issue, and see if you can reach a decision on the issue."

To review:
1. Students are assigned to teams.
2. Teams are divided into pairs, and each pair is assigned a position and told to prepare a presentation of its position and reasons to the opposite pair.
3. Pairs study the issue and prepare the presentation.
4. Pairs present to one another, listening carefully to the reasons given.
5. Pairs feed back what they have heard to the satisfaction of the other pair.
6. Genuine discussion: Students are told they can drop the assigned positions and see if their team can reach a decision on the question or, if not, then clarify the disagreement.

This is SAC. Now to the three matters I want to discuss. We have seen that students are assigned to a position at step 2; they don't choose sides. Hanson and Howe write, "Only by identifying their own reasons for a position on an issue can students engage in deliberation" (p. 3). In classroom practice, however, we can, and often do, engage students in deliberation *before* they identify their own position and reasons. SAC does this. It is an instructional procedure that aims to help students identify their own position and reasons, but it accomplishes this first by giving them a position and reasons on a simplified, two-sided issue; only at its conclusion does it invite them to form their own view. Autonomy is in this way nurtured, or in the discourse of activity theory, scaffolded or assisted (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991). To use Brighouse's (2000) terms, teachers deploying SAC are both facilitating and promoting autonomy. Importantly, teachers are not doing this by throwing students into the deep end of the pool; rather, students are given a ladder and floaties—hence, SAC makes use of facilitation, making something easier. I return to this later, but now to the third matter, that SAC provides the opportunity for students to form their own opinions.

In SAC, students are led quickly into a topic's contested space. This occurs at steps 1 and 2. Before they have studied the issue, they are placed in a team, and then a pair, and then are told they will be presenting a position and an argument to the other pair. Only then are they given time to study the issue and prepare an argument. This proceeds from what can be called the "engagement first" principle (Parker et al., 2011): Steps 1 and 2 engage students and create a need to know the background information and the position-specific reasons that they will examine at step 3. During the paired presentations, students are responsible for listening to one another's reasons. Most interesting is the final step, when students have the opportunity to drop the position to which they

were assigned. This is that fertile moment mentioned earlier. Students now search for their own reasons. They must decide whether to stick to the assigned position they have been defending or abandon it. They may have developed some investment in the assigned position by now; or, if they happen to have had a pre-SAC position on the issue, they may seize the opportunity to defend it.

The discussion has the potential at this point to become an occasion. Students might, and we can hope for this, switch from a defensive stance to an inquisitive one. They might become curious about what position to take up *now*. They know something about the controversy by now; not a lot, certainly, but enough to be a reasonably informed participant in that contested space—a legitimate player. This is an accomplishment. With the participants now having studied, presented, and listened to one another, the discussion can be an intelligent one. As Duckworth (1996) wrote in her gloss on Piaget, "Knowing enough about things is one prerequisite for having wonderful ideas" (p. 14). She concluded,

> *The more we help children to have their wonderful ideas and to feel good about themselves for having them, the more likely it is that they will some day happen upon wonderful ideas that no one else has happened upon before.*

Having argued at the beginning of the SAC with an assigned position and reasons, students are, by its final phase, somewhat knowledgeable thanks to the study and exchange of arguments. Moreover, and here again is that fertile moment, the students are then liberated from the assigned role to identify their own position and reasons in discussion with others. I have listened to a good number of these small-group discussions in upper-elementary through college classrooms, and most often they are exploratory in nature rather than bombastic, inquisitive rather than defensive. Pre-SAC views on the issue, or what Hanson and Howe call "settled views" (p. 2), may be revived with gusto, but in my experience this is rare. The prompt "feel free to change your mind" creates an occasion when students may abandon the assigned position and reasons, yet are not asked to do so. This prompt pays no attention to what a student's preexisting view, if any, may have been. Consequently, the opportunity can be fresh, a sort of reset moment. Following the deliberate and structured defensiveness of preparing, sharing, and listening to positions, there is a sudden groundlessness—an uncertain future. "Feel free to change your mind."

Why? The listening-and-feedback process at steps 4 and 5 matters. This is what Waks (2010) calls "giving ear to" the other argument. It entails "waiting in suspense . . . with attentive expectation or anticipation" (p. 2744). Having prepared, presented, and defended a position, which in SAC lessons becomes for all practical purposes a student's own position, and then having given ear to the other position, which in this context is most definitely not the student's own, and then, on top of this, being liberated from the assigned position and allowed to "change your mind" if the student wants—all this may leave the student wondering just where his or her own mind truly is on the issue. Students, to borrow a phrase from Kerdeman's (2003) treatment of Gadamer, may be "pulled up short." Sometimes, Kerdeman writes, "our beliefs are thrown into

doubt without, and even despite, prior deliberation on our part" (p. 294). For some students, this may be one of those times. Despite prior deliberation and, perhaps, a settled opinion on the issue, or without either of these, the sharing of and listening to reasons followed by the opportunity to form a position anew may be an occasion for deeper learning and, perhaps, growth.

Let me move toward a conclusion by scoping out from this examination of an instructional procedure to view Hanson and Howe's chief concern: the possibility of deliberation in liberal-democratic civic education. Here, a conceptual alert is needed. Liberal democracies differ from illiberal ones. Liberal democracies are profound political achievements for those who value diversity. Political activists from James Madison to Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King, Jr., fought for liberal democracy. Picture this: A youthful Twitter revolution manages to oust a tyrannical government, and then elections are held. Imagine that these elections install new leaders who proceed to deny civil rights and liberties to, and in other ways revile and perhaps even kill, political opponents and members of marginalized minority groups. The tables are turned; yet, after all the struggle and sacrifice, tyranny comes roaring back, this time thanks to a democratic election. This would be an illiberal democracy. It is a democratically elected government, but one that lacks or ignores constitutional limits on its power and fails to protect civil rights and liberties (Zakaria, 1997).

Civic education in societies with liberal-democratic ideals, then, is obliged to cultivate democratically and liberally enlightened and engaged citizens. These are citizens who know and do particular things. They know, for example, the historical rarity of liberal-democracy and the frequency with which it tumbles into majority mob rule and then autocracy. And they do things, too: for example, voting, protesting demagoguery or hate speech where they find it, and protecting religious and other cultural groups from government incursions. Moreover, they can and do communicate with one another across their differences in ways that make cooperative living possible—Dewey's (1916) "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 93). Communicating reasons, Hanson and Howe note, entails mutual respect. This is not the same as liking or admiring others, but respecting "the autonomy of others and the accompanying right to hold moral positions on public issues that may differ from their own" (p. 2). This is not to be confused with a prescriptive command that people should respect one another. It is better understood in the indicative sense: Exchanging reasons indicates respect. Veuglers (2011) is direct: "Autonomy is not isolated individuality but the way a person relates to the other" (p. 1). As an on-the-ground practice, exchanging reasons is incoherent without recognition of the inner life of others. Achieving this is no small feat, of course, which is why democracies fall short of their ideals, why fundamentalist monism wins adherents, and why civic education ought to be the chief mission of schooling in societies aiming to be liberal democracies.

Liberal democracies can be either aggregative or deliberative, as Hanson and Howe say. And it is on the deliberative platform that educators can help young people to develop the habits of exchanging reasons rather than the habits of bringing only settled views to the

table and arguing for them. There's an important place for that, certainly, because of unequal power relations: "Don't mourn, organize," and "Fight for your rights" (see Schutz, 2008). But schools, generally, are better used for deliberative education. My "own" reason for saying so is that schools have key assets that can be mobilized toward this deliberative end. One, they have an explicit mission: to educate. Two, they have a curriculum, which can be shaped in the direction of education for liberal democracy. Three, they have a diverse student body—probably the most diverse space most youth find themselves in. (Even in an era of resegregation, the school is likely to be more diverse than the home, the extended family, or the church, temple, or mosque. There are *strangers* at school.[3]) Four, they have instruction, including deliberative procedures such as SAC that can be aimed both at the traditional academic-content objectives and at the development of liberal-democratic consciousness. Such instruction includes scaffolding: helping students perform at levels they could not attain without it—in this case, helping them form and articulate their own reasons and listen to the reasoning of others. And this brings us back again to the second of the three matters I wanted to discuss in this response.

To review, the first was about sequence: I showed how SAC has students dive into deliberation with an assigned position and reasons, thus beginning a deliberation *before* they have formed their own views. The third was about that fertile moment when students are invited to drop the assigned position and reasons: "Feel free to change your mind." But the second is what I want to emphasize in closing: SAC tries to facilitate autonomy and promote it, too. As Hanson and Howe say, "It would require very stilted conversations, indeed, if teachers went through the motions of asking for and giving reasons but remained noncommittal as to the value of such an undertaking" (p. 2). In the context of schools and classrooms, this is entirely unambiguous. We facilitate learning in order to achieve valued curriculum goals (in today's jargon, *standards*). In schools, the facilitation of liberal-democratic civic consciousness is integral to—and aimed at—the goal of increasing it.

Enlightened political engagement is desirable in societies that are attempting to be liberal-democratic polities, but it doesn't appear without cause or context. It is constructed, and some portion of this construction work occurs in schools at the intersection of curriculum and a diverse student body, with instruction that orchestrates these two on a civic mission. It is built, in other words, at the meeting point of study, guidance, and argument in public settings where difference and controversy are plentiful, valued, and mobilized. Other construction sites are necessary, too, but this one matters.

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Notes

1. For example, Avery, Levy, and Simmons (2010) report on the Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) project, which included teachers and students at eight European (Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine) and eight U.S. (Chicago; Denver; Fairfax County, Virginia; Bloomington, Indiana; Los Angeles; Montgomery County, Maryland; North Jersey, New Jersey; and Columbia, South Carolina) sites.
2. On the value of iterative learning cycles, see Bransford et al., 2006.
3. I elaborate in "Listening to Strangers" (Parker, 2010) and "Democracy, Diversity, and Schooling" (Parker, in press).