Democracy & Education

Understanding Conflict in Education for Democracy.
A Response to *The Value of Conflict and Disagreement in Democratic Teacher Education*

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Abstract

Teachers are often apprehensive about facilitating deliberation in classrooms because conflicts can develop when deliberations surround issues of authentic concern to students. However, conflict is central to deliberation, and the identities and experiences of participants must be reflected in deliberation. These differences challenge the assumptions of neutrality and a common good that can restrain conflict. Harell's article focuses upon many of these aspects of deliberation and the essential role of facilitators as conflicts emerge from deliberation. In my response to Harell, I extend his findings by developing the themes of conflict, identity, and inclusion. These themes are conceptually linked and can guide reflection before, during, and after deliberation. Finally, I discuss the implications for democratic education in general and teacher education in particular.

Understanding Conflict in Education for Democracy

THERE IS A danger in overemphasizing shared understandings, common ground, conflict avoidance, and consensus during deliberation of issues. While one of the objectives of deliberation can be to arrive at the best course of action, other objectives of deliberation can often go unrecognized in communities and classrooms. One of these objectives involves developing a better understanding of the range of perspectives on an issue (Benhabib, 2002). Expanding the range of perspectives often involves conflict because there are a variety of community members in deliberation who are positioned differently in relation to an issue. Deliberators participate with different experiences, knowledge, and identities. This inevitably leads to inequitable power relations in communication because norms of communication are usually dictated by taken-for-granted assumptions enforced by dominant groups. Teachers and facilitators are also influential in enforcing these assumptions. While some views are privileged, others are marginalized. As deliberation proceeds, these differences can rise to the surface. Recognition can increase conflict as perspectives that are usually hidden or unrecognizable challenge dominant perspectives during deliberation. Referring to the value of the conflicts that emerge, Mouffe (2000) wrote:

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Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation. And the fact that this must be envisaged as an unending process should not be cause for despair because the desire to reach a final destination can only lead to the elimination of the political and the destruction of democracy. (pp. 33–34)

Conflict is an essential component of democracy and education for democracy (Ásgeir, 2019; Lo, 2017). When conflict is downplayed in deliberation, the project of democracy is abandoned. Agonistic forms of democracy emphasize this. One of Harell's (2020) key findings focuses upon conflicts during deliberation as he interpreted the value of facilitators stepping back from conflicts that emerged during deliberation. If facilitators step in to solve problems or minimize conflict, one of the most important learning objectives of deliberation is diminished. Rather than focused on a destination, deliberation needs to be provisional and open to critique and reflection. In teacher education, this type of reflection is often seen in teaching standards and is promoted to improve curriculum and instruction.

As it relates to education for democracy, conflict among participants in deliberation is productive in teaching about democracy itself. This was expressed by James, one of the facilitators in Harell's (2020) study: "You want to make sure they don't actually start fighting. But at the same time, that struggle is a large part of how the class is structured" (p. 6). Struggle is productive and a part of growth. To better understand the inner workings of conflict and as a response to Harell's work, I examine how the process of deliberation can be seen through the lenses of identity and inclusion. These are aspects of deliberation that are often downplayed in models where reasons are forwarded by participants without an understanding that reasons emerge from different contexts. The reasons that emerge during deliberation draw upon larger discourses that frame the value of reasons as well as the rhetoric in which these reasons are communicated.

Rather than deliberating from a stance where reasons are decontextualized, the process of deliberation and the contexts in which reasons emerge need to be examined by teachers and students. The political polarization that is intensifying around the globe illustrates how ideological frameworks, discourses, and reasons are connected. One of the main learning objectives of education for democracy is to make these connections explicit to students. This can be embraced by facilitators and deliberators to increase inclusion and, as a result, increase democratic legitimacy through the process and social justice as an outcome. While student understandings of justice will vary, the contextualization of the power relations within deliberations can lead to better understandings of justice. Students can increase their understanding of the relationship between inclusion and justice. In what follows, I provide a descriptive framework for locating the deliberations Harell (2020) reported. Next, I provide additional considerations by suggesting a lens for inclusion in deliberation from Young (2002). I conclude by connecting Harell's findings related to

teacher education for democracy where teachers learn how to facilitate deliberation in their classrooms.

The Problem of Shared Assumptions

One of the first difficulties that emerges in deliberation can be an overreliance on shared assumptions and a vision of a common good (Knowles & Clark, 2018). The different characteristics and objectives of various models of democracy and democratic education indicate a complex landscape where such assumptions must be examined (Sant, 2019). To understand the functioning of deliberation and the types of learning objectives that stem from the process, it is important to understand some different assumptions about the attributes and goals of democracy. When these are better understood, it is easier to align our learning activities with learning objectives in democratic teacher education and K–12 classrooms.

Habermas (1994) provided a lens for sorting out some of these assumptions through his examination of three normative models of democracy: liberal, republican, and proceduralist. These are contested terms with multiple meanings, so some brief descriptions of how Habermas used the terms is necessary. The liberal model of democracy relies upon a type of market rationality where individual preferences are expressed through mechanisms such as voting. Since these expressions are largely individualistic, they can lose some of the ethical or moral considerations that are expressed through activities such as deliberation where multiple community members discuss their opinions. In classrooms, it is common to see a list of preferences that students vote on in a similar manner as they might express their preferences when purchasing something at a store. An overreliance upon this type of activity communicates a vision of community that is market driven. The republican (small "r" and not the political party) model of democracy emphasizes a communitarian concept of democracy. There is a strong assumption in the republican model that members of a community share a common ethical-political understanding. However, when this assumption is made, those with differing opinions are often excluded from deliberation because their perspectives are not shared by the dominant group. In classrooms under this model, students participate in discussions where rules are predetermined, and assumptions are made about the perspectives that are acknowledge by dominant groups. Dominant groups enforce a predetermined ethical-political understanding, and marginalized perspectives are often excluded from deliberation.

An overemphasis on voting or a shared ethical-political understanding are problematic because power is often veiled by a "neutral" process. The process itself can function to remove conflict by delegitimizing marginalized views. Teachers and students can reflect upon how inequitable power relations distort communication toward dominant perspectives. If implemented with a social justice goal in mind, a proceduralist model of democracy attempts to address the drawbacks of the liberal and republican models. Deliberation aims at identifying the differences between the ways that stakeholders understand what is best for their communities. Since the legitimacy of deliberation rests upon the degree to which all those who are affected by decisions

are part of the decision-making process, differences must be acknowledged and included in collective decision-making.

The deliberations illustrated in Harell's (2020) study can be framed by referring to the elements of these three models. One of the groups in the study, referred to as Carly's group, experienced conflict when members of the group disagreed over the structure of their learning activities. Their deliberations focused upon the way that they would interpret instructional materials and how to allocate time for learning activities. If a liberal model were imposed, the members would have presented some options and voted on a course of action without much discussion. This would have downplayed the degree of conflict between group members because majority views would exclude minority perspectives during voting. There were some indications that the republican model was structuring communication in Carly's group when participants referred to overarching assumptions of the larger group in order to place boundaries upon the deliberations of Carly's smaller group. This appeal to a shared understanding would also downplay the degree of conflict. Both currents, liberal and republican, could function to downplay the existence and nature of conflict within the group.

As Harell (2020) described, the facilitators could have stepped in to remove conflict from Carly's group. This could have easily occurred if the facilitators would have overemphasized the role of majority vote or appealed to the norms and rules of the larger group. Instead, the facilitators did not interrupt the conflict by applying control over the deliberation. The result was that the group's deliberation produced a better understanding of the role of conflict in democratic communities and the importance of questioning taken-for-granted rules for collective decision-making. The deconstruction of shared assumptions produced new understandings of the issues at hand, and conflict produced an enlarged understanding of the issues under deliberation. Harell wrote of one of the participants:

> Joan left the course with a better sense of how a group progresses and gets better at making decisions the longer they work together. She might not have gained these insights on such a deep level had she not experienced disagreement during the democratic process herself, as a student. (p. 6)

The conflicts during deliberation helped Joan and other members of Carly's group learn more about curriculum, deliberation, and democracy. Conflict was integral to the legitimacy and quality of the learning outcomes because the conflicts reflected increased inclusion. The role of facilitators was key in encouraging this process to unfold. Harell (2020) wrote, "Facilitators of democratic teaching can support their students by providing reflective spaces to debrief on past decisions and exercising restraint in the face of conflict and disagreement" (p. 7). Rather than privileging a destination, other objectives related to deliberation and democracy, such as contingency, critique, and reflection, were highlighted. By learning how to work through this process, the participants in the teacher education course were better positioned to teach these learning activities and objectives in their K–12 classrooms.

Power, Inclusion, and Exclusion in Deliberations

While the three normative models presented can increase understanding of some possible outcomes of group decision-making and the value of conflict, an examination of power dynamics can be used as an additional form of reflection and analysis. Participants in deliberation approach issues differently depending upon their unique experiences, knowledge, and identities (Heilman, 2011; Weasel, 2019). When this is explicit in deliberation, the democratic legitimacy of outcomes can increase because dominant forces that distort communication are brought forward as part of the process. Because dominant assumptions and modes of communication shut some perspectives and voices out of the process, conflict is diminished and goals of education for democracy are weakened. By better understanding how power functions in conversations, participants can be more reflective throughout the process. Deliberators and facilitators are located within fields of power relations. Defined by historical and contemporary discourses, these fields influence what individuals and perspectives are recognized in deliberation. If these fields go unexamined, taken-for-granted assumptions distort communication and deliberation.

Harell (2020) indicated that there were differences in power between the dominant views of the group and the disciplinary backgrounds of the participants. For example, Joan described one of the power dynamics in the group: "Carly wanted to run the group. And so we did. We went along with it, and we did what she needed to do, which is process all of it. Because she's a literary type" (p. 4). Carly appealed to her authority as an English teacher to lead the effort in interpreting the text and establish time allotments for the learning activities. The group's deliberations were influenced by this power dynamic. Joan and Sandy appealed to the overarching rules of the larger group in the course to place boundaries on their learning activities. Joan described the conversation: "At one point, Carly wanted to change the givens for the small group, and [Sandy] said, 'But wait a minute—we can't change the givens'" (p. 5). Both appeals to authority, one disciplinary and one a shared understanding, indicated some of the power inequalities that influenced deliberation. In other words, the reasons that were shared drew upon larger discourses of power relations. One of the ways to extend Harell's findings toward education for democracy is to focus upon ways to increase inclusion by identifying how these power relations function in deliberation. In other words, participants in deliberation can learn from examining how these relations structure what is and isn't said in deliberation. Once these influences are identified, conflicts add another dimension of understanding of democracy and education for democracy.

Young (2002) has provided a useful framework for increasing inclusion during deliberation in communities and classrooms (Camicia, 2016; Weasel, 2016). In addition to the three normative models of democracy that I discussed before, Young's elements of greeting, rhetoric, and narrative can add another layer of analysis to the deliberative process in Harell's (2020) case study. Through greeting, rhetoric, and narrative, teachers and students can reflect upon different aspects of deliberation. Greeting implies an ethical

relationship for students to recognize each other's positions. In Harell's example, this relationship develops through participants examining each other's positions on the instructional activities. As participants worked through different levels of conflict, they increased their level of greeting toward each other. They increased their willingness to recognize each other's perspectives with a communicative rather than a strategic goal. Greeting is an important element in developing a sense of community within a group and a commitment between group members toward inclusion.

When participants in deliberation examine rhetoric, they focus upon the ways that discourse influences what can and can't be said in deliberation. In other words, they examine the modes in which reasons are expressed and how dominant modes of communication are often privileged. Rhetoric also influences the weight given to different reasons. For example, appealing to disciplinary structures or larger group rules were efforts within Carly's group to give weight to reasons and set the bounds of what can and can't be considered reasonable. When students can analyze how rhetoric and discourse function in deliberation, they can better understand how some perspectives are excluded from deliberation. This process can be seen in the ways that Carly's group framed the justifications for their perspectives. Each of the members appealed to dominant discourses of disciplinary boundaries or group rules to express their perspectives.

Finally, Young (2002) presented narrative as an effective way to increase inclusion within deliberation. When students can express their unique perspectives, knowledge, and experiences in deliberation, there is an opportunity for an increase in perspectives and legitimacy. This was apparent in some of the deliberations when participants in Harell's (2020) groups mentioned their unique experiences in teaching and their individual learning objectives. Participants can identify dominant narratives that frame issues and counternarratives that present different perspectives. This can function to increase inclusion and the legitimacy of deliberation.

This added level of reflection can increase our understanding of the value of conflict and inclusion. Referring to Young's (2002) elements as an important sources of examination for teachers and students, Weasel (2016) wrote, "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" (p. 4). This added layer of analysis provides the means for students to understand how power, inclusion, and exclusion function in deliberation. The conflicts that emerge provide participants in deliberation opportunities to better understand inclusion. By adding this analysis of how power functions below the surface of deliberation, teachers and students can increase their understanding of how inclusion and legitimacy work to support democratic decision-making. Harell's (2020) case study provides an illustration for how conflict can be understood productively and on multiple levels of analysis.

Education for Democracy and Teacher Education

Harell (2020) pointed to the importance of providing instructional activities in teacher education programs that facilitate deliberation. Through deliberation, teachers can build democratic communities among themselves and their students. Harell wrote, "By experiencing conflict and disagreement during deliberative decision-making, participants gain insight into facilitating democratic education in their own classrooms" (p. 7). Facilitation of deliberation and discussion are challenging, and programs such as the one that Harell reported on can support teachers in their understanding of deliberation, inclusion, and democracy. By providing the knowledge and experiences necessary for teachers to understand democracy in various ways, we help them build the capacity to structure their curriculum and instruction similarly. Once teachers understand the value of conflict, inclusion, and legitimacy, they can better understand the principles of democracy that they want to include in learning activities and objectives for their students.

In my teacher education classes, students examine these principles of democracy and inclusion through different learning activities. These include Young's (2002) elements of greeting, rhetoric, and narrative. Prior to deliberation, my preservice teachers discuss social studies curriculum and the ideologies that are embedded in it. This provides a point of departure for understanding how people approach issues differently depending upon their identities, lived experiences, and knowledge. An ethics of recognition can emerge where the element of greeting develops prior to and during deliberation. Students form an agreement to attempt to recognize other perspectives in deliberation even when these perspectives can be relatively unrecognizable to them. During deliberation, students identify elements of rhetoric that might exclude individuals from deliberation. For example, they can examine the discourses in which reasons emerge. What are the discourses related to climate change, school funding, or immigration policy that influence the reasons that emerge during deliberation? How are these discourses related to inequitable power relations among participants and larger society? Finally, narratives and counternarratives provide individual stances in relation to deliberation. The conflicts that emerge are built upon multiple elements related to recognition, inclusion, legitimacy, and democracy. Reflection, in my teacher education classes and in Harell's (2020) example, is integral to the process before, during, and after deliberation. Students can identify the forces that distort communication and work against inclusion in order to increase inclusion. In Harell's article, we see Carly's group work through the process and increasingly appreciate the importance of conflict. By highlighting the different perspectives of participants rather than downplaying them, they were better able to see the value of recognition, conflict, and inclusion within collective decision-making.

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