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# Democracy & Education

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## Beyond Just Techniques: Toward Deliberation Facilitation That Minimizes Harm.

A Response to *Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom: The Interplay of  
Facilitative Technique and Design to Make Space for Democracy*

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### Abstract

In “Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom: The Interplay of Facilitative Techniques and Design to Make Space for Democracy,” the authors offered several useful techniques for the facilitation of standard classroom deliberations. However, not all open controversial issues are created equal, and many have the potential to implicate student identities. In those cases, it is imperative that facilitators move beyond basic techniques and think about how to conduct deliberations that protect marginalized students and do not validate systemic injustices. In this response to “Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom,” I extend upon the authors’ argument and offer suggestions for how to effectively engage students in deliberations of sensitive issues.

### This article is in response to

Nishiyama, K., Russell, A. W., Chalaye, P., Greenwell, T. (2023). Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom: The Interplay of Facilitative Technique and Design to Make Space for Democracy. *Democracy and Education*, 31(1), Article 4.

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**I**N THEIR ARTICLE “Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom: The Interplay of Facilitative Technique and Design to Make Space for Democracy,” Nishiyama et al. (2023) described the results of a Deliberation in Schools project with K–12 students in Australia. The purpose of the project was to identify how instructor facilitation enables deliberative norms within classroom contexts, as well as to determine what skills and considerations teachers need to facilitate classroom deliberations in an inclusive way. Facilitating deliberative discussions remains challenging for teachers, particularly in this current period of hyper political polarization in which civic discourse in K–12 education has received increased scrutiny, and the advice that Nishiyama et al. gave is both well-reasoned and useful.

In short, it is hard to quibble with the facilitation recommendations that Nishiyama et al. (2023) offered in their article with respect to standard classroom deliberations. Yet many social issues present increased challenges for teachers, particularly in ethnically diverse nations like the United States and Australia. Dealing with *controversial identity issues* (Journell, 2017, 2018a), which can be defined as open issues that implicate student or teacher identities, requires additional thought and facilitation skills that are not directly addressed in Nishiyama et al.’s article.

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In this brief response to “Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom,” I extend Nishiyama et al.’s (2023) recommendations to account for controversial identity issues, as well as open social issues that involve assessing stances that could be considered as acting contrary to justice. I first summarize Nishiyama et al.’s argument and note the strengths of their article. Then, I describe the more complex types of open issues that teachers are likely to face and offer points of consideration for how teachers may choose to facilitate such issues in the classroom.

### Strengths of “Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom”

As Nishiyama et al. (2023) rightly noted, deliberation is imperative to a functioning democratic society. As many democratic theorists have argued, being able to tolerantly listen to and weigh contradictory viewpoints and come to an informed decision about how best to proceed is at the heart of democratic decision-making (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1981/1985). Given the historical mission of public schooling to prepare youth for democratic participation, it is not surprising that having students engage in deliberations of policy has been, and remains, an essential aspect of quality civic education (Dewey, 1916/1997; Engle, 1960; Evans, 2021; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

While deliberation has solid theoretical support within the civic education literature, it can be difficult to implement in practice. Many teachers are wary of having students deliberate social issues for fear of the discussion turning into a shouting match or encroaching on topics that may run afoul of community sensibilities or beliefs. Therefore, skilled facilitation is needed for successful classroom deliberations, which is the focus of Nishiyama et al.’s (2023) study. As Nishiyama et al. noted, poor facilitation of classroom deliberations can have deleterious consequences, ranging from silencing students to inflammatory discourse that may be potentially harmful to students or teachers.

Nishiyama et al. (2023) started by defining three approaches to deliberative facilitation, as outlined in the literature (Dillard, 2013): *passive*, which describes facilitators who are uninvolved with the discussion beyond establishing a basic structure; *involved*, which describes facilitators who maintain control over the ensuing discussion by asking questions, summarizing/interpreting opinions of participants, and challenging student beliefs via playing the devil’s advocate; and *moderate*, which describes facilitators who only participate by asking probing questions or attempting to encourage broader participation. Nishiyama et al. acknowledged that “different contexts require different forms of facilitation” (p. 3) and argued that, in practice, deliberative facilitation is “complex, dynamic, and [requires a] responsive nature” (p. 3).

Nishiyama et al. (2023) then went on to describe the findings of their study, which consisted of 10 deliberations with year 5 and year 11 students in Australia. They identified four challenges to inclusive deliberation facilitation, which were power, inequality, diversity, and disagreement. Amid their findings, they offered several recommendations (e.g., “fishbowl” discussions, asking probing questions) and provided ample evidence of how these

strategies increased student participation. As already noted, K–12 teachers who are struggling with enacting successful deliberations in their classrooms would benefit from reading this article and incorporating many of the recommendations made by the authors. From a technical standpoint, then, this article is quite useful, particularly when engaging students in standard deliberations that do not encroach on aspects of identity.

### Toward Facilitation That Minimizes Harm

Not all issues, and thus deliberations, are created equal, however. In their article, Nishiyama et al. (2023) offered benign deliberations as examples (e.g., “How can we make the school better?”; “Is Australia a peaceful nation?”), which likely would not elicit emotional reactions from students. Many of the issues that students might deliberate in U.S. classrooms would fall into the same category (e.g., “Should the Electoral College be abolished?”; “Should the federal government regulate what is served in school cafeterias?”). Students may have strong feelings on these types of questions, but they could likely deliberate them in tolerant, reasoned ways. For these types of deliberations, the major hurdles would likely be lack of participation or knowledge of the topic, both of which can be addressed through effective facilitation techniques like the ones recommended by Nishiyama et al.

Other issues discussed in classrooms can elicit emotional reactions, particularly when they implicate student identities. Research has shown that students often have emotional responses when discussing controversial issues, which can affect both the tenor and substance of the discussion (e.g., Garrett & Alvey, 2021). To their credit, Nishiyama et al. (2023) briefly acknowledged this aspect of deliberation facilitation, focusing specifically on a deliberation about gender discrimination in which male students were dismissive of female students’ lived experiences. They advocated for a structured approach for deliberation facilitation that allowed the “girls to speak passionately about their personal experiences and allowed boys to also voice their views on the topic” (p. 7). They further elaborated:

*[The discussion] was significant that [the boys] were not silenced by their lack of personal experience of discrimination and were able to express scepticism and consider the issue at a broader political level. At the same time, the deliberative atmosphere required that each listen respectfully. This seemed to create a space where male students were able to engage, listen, and learn from females’ experiences, while both could think about the issue systemically. (p. 7)*

On the surface, there is much to like about this facilitation approach: The female students were given space to talk about their experiences, the male students were forced to listen to those experiences, and the male students were able to disagree. Yet, when issues infringe on student identities, additional thought needs to be given to whether the deliberation should be enacted at all and, if so, what format it should take.

Nishiyama et al. (2023) did not discuss open versus settled issues—which was not necessarily needed, given that it was clear they were focusing specifically on open issues—but it is useful to briefly describe the distinction here. Hess (2009; Hess & McAvoy,

2015) has noted that open issues are those that have multiple valid or reasonable viewpoints and, thus, should be taught in a balanced way that allows students to weigh evidence and make an informed decision. Settled issues, however, only have one valid or reasonable viewpoint; students should be made aware of the settled position, and contrary opinions should not be promoted or validated within the classroom environment.

The problem is that there is no agreed upon way to determine whether issues are open or settled. While space limitations prevent an exhaustive discussion on this topic, there are three main criteria outlined in the literature for determining an issue's openness: the epistemic criterion (Hand, 2008), which defines issues as open only if there is hard evidence to suggest that they should be open, and the political (Gutmann, 1987/1999) and politically authentic criteria (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), which determine openness based on factors ranging from hard data to public sentiment to legislative efforts (for a more detailed discussion of these three criteria, refer to Journell, 2017, 2018a). Most issues are going to be considered open or settled on all three criteria; for example, none of the criteria would suggest that teachers should entertain an opinion that slavery should be legal or that women should not be allowed to vote.

Occasionally, however, the criteria diverge. For example, I have written about how teachers should respond to transgender bathroom laws that have been introduced throughout the United States in recent years (Journell, 2017). Using the epistemic criterion, it would be a settled issue; no reputable data exist that suggests allowing transgender individuals to use the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity poses any detriment to society or to other patrons wanting to use the restroom. Yet the issue would be deemed open using the political or politically authentic criterion because it is clearly open within society (i.e., state legislatures are proposing/passing laws about it). So, what should a teacher do in this situation? There is no "correct" answer, but I would respond to that question in this way:

*Giving those who oppose transgender bathroom rights, for example, the space to articulate their beliefs that, at present, have no empirical justification and are based on stereotypes, misinformation, and bigotry would invite intolerant discourse that could result in emotional or physical harm to transgender students. . . . Moreover, by framing transgender bathroom rights as controversial without any empirical evidence to suggest that it should be, teachers would be inherently framing the act of being transgender as controversial. Such a message, whether intended or not, is problematic. In those cases in which there is a clear empirical justification for teaching an issue that implicates students identities as settled, doing so may be prudent, even if some might argue that such a stance undermines the democratic purpose of education. (Journell, 2017, pp. 347–348)*

Returning to the discussion of gender discrimination presented in Nishiyama et al.'s (2023) article, one might question whether such an issue should even be considered open and worthy of discussion. Admittedly, I am not knowledgeable about Australian society, but if it is analogous to the U.S. context, I would argue that, epistemically, it is unquestionable whether gender discrimination exists. If

that is the case, it may be more appropriate to frame gender discrimination as a settled issue, given that framing it as open puts female students in the unenviable position of having to defend their life experiences from scrutiny by those who, broadly speaking, benefit from gender discrimination.

Acknowledging that gender discrimination exists does not mean that the topic is out of bounds for deliberation, but it involves reframing the question. Instead of asking whether gender discrimination exists or whether it is a significant societal problem, a more productive question might be "What should be done to address gender discrimination?" By reframing the question in such a way, the facilitator is stating unequivocally that gender discrimination is problematic, which hopefully will minimize comments that seek to delegitimize female students' experiences. As a result, the deliberation not only becomes more productive from the standpoint of addressing a societal problem but it also becomes a safer space for those who may feel marginalized by the topic.

The same thought process needs to take place even when facilitating deliberations on issues that are open both epistemically and socially. As already noted, deliberation of open issues is a hallmark of quality civic education, but many open issues implicate identities of students and teachers (e.g., Conrad, 2020; Dabach et al., 2018; Journell, 2011a, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Kim, 2021; Stevens & Martell, 2021) and force them to consider viewpoints that either overtly support the marginalization of people like themselves or justify systemic processes that lead to the marginalization of individuals within society. As a result, some scholars have argued that we should rethink the role of deliberation as a central tenet of civic education (e.g., Gibson, 2020).

While I remain in agreement with Nishiyama et al. (2023) on the civic importance of deliberation, I believe facilitators need to take this potential for harm seriously, particularly in this current moment in which attacks on vulnerable populations within schools is becoming commonplace. Nishiyama et al. did acknowledge that "respecting diversity does not mean 'accepting everything'" and that facilitators need "to set boundaries on what is acceptable and respond to what might be considered 'extreme' behaviors and views" (p. 6). Unhelpfully, the example that they gave was hurling insults, which is problematic in any type of deliberation. In a deliberation of an issue that implicates student identities, tighter parameters are needed. In a description of one of their deliberation facilitations, Nishiyama et al. (2023) stated that they tried to reconcile the natural power imbalance in the classroom by "remaining open to all ideas (however 'random')" (p. 5). Yet remaining open to all ideas during a deliberation on an issue that implicates student identities invites bigoted opinions to be framed as legitimate. Worse, if facilitators ask participants to "justify their views by asking 'How do you know?' or 'What are your reasons?'" as Nishiyama et al. recommended, it only gives those bigoted opinions more credence (p. 8). Although recent research has shown that even bigoted or extreme statements can be made into teachable moments (Lozano Parra et al., 2023), the amount of potential harm that such statements could cause should give facilitators pause.

## Facilitating Deliberations That Implicate Identities

How, then, should teachers facilitate deliberations of open issues that implicate student identities and have the potential to give voice to viewpoints that promote injustice? The most obvious answer would be to avoid deliberating those topics. From a civic education perspective, however, avoidance is not ideal; many of the major civic issues being debated around the world are related to race, gender, sexuality, class, or other aspects of identity, and it is important that students have the opportunity to engage in conversation about these difficult, and potentially taboo (Evans et al., 1999), issues with their peers. Therefore, I believe that avoidance should be a last resort for teachers.

That said, student safety should be at the forefront of all educators' minds, and a commitment to teaching for justice requires "one eye firmly fixed on students . . . and the other eye looking unblinkingly at the concentric circles of context—historical flow, cultural surroundings, and economic reality" with a goal of helping students "identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then drive to move against those obstacles" (Ayers, 1998, p. xvii). All educational spaces are different, and if teachers do not believe they can facilitate a deliberation of a sensitive issue in a way that will avoid emotional or physical harm for one or more of their students, then they should consider a different course of action. Knowing one's students, particularly those students who may be marginalized within the context of the deliberation, can aid teachers in making that decision. I believe, however, that in most cases, deliberations that implicate student identities can be conducted successfully, even when students whose identities are implicated are in the room. The remainder of this section outlines different approaches that teachers can take to minimize harm when facilitating discussions.

### *Reframing the Question*

One way to approach such a discussion is to move away from a free-flowing deliberation and instead reframe the discussion in a way that acknowledges the openness of the issue within society but clearly positions any potential injustice as an unviable option. Hlavacik and Krutka (2021; Krutka & Hlavacik, 2022) have described this approach as civic litigation and argued that it "dwells on [the question of responsibility], encouraging a conversation where different dimensions of responsibility are examined" (Krutka & Hlavacik, 2022, p. 200).

In other words, instead of asking a question like "Should the federal government enforce the law and deport undocumented immigrants?" that could obviously have harmful consequences for some students, a civic litigation approach might ask, "How has the federal government created an untenable situation at the border, and what should be done to encourage would-be immigrants to take a legal pathway into the United States?" Such framing acknowledges the open issue of border security and illegal immigration but does so in a way that does not place blame or scrutiny on the immigrants who are seeking a better life in the United States and instead asks students to deliberate the systemic issues at the heart of the problem.

## *Increasing Involvement*

If teachers choose to have a free-flowing deliberation on an issue that implicates student identities, then facilitation becomes extremely important. Returning to the approaches to facilitation outlined by Nishiyama et al. (2023), deliberations of sensitive issues is not the time for passive facilitation. I would argue that even moderate facilitation is risky. Teachers need to take an involved approach to facilitation when deliberating controversial identity issues to ensure that emotional and physical harm is avoided. If expressly bigoted viewpoints are raised, it is incumbent on the teacher to disavow them, and even if legitimate positions that have the potential to marginalize students are offered within the course of the deliberation, teachers need to be able to take control of the discussion and frame them in ways that are less harmful.

### *Utilizing Teacher Disclosure*

Finally, one way that teachers can shield students from harm is by interjecting themselves in the deliberation and advocating for the position that is counter to that which has the potential to marginalize students. Teacher political disclosure is a controversial topic within the educational literature, with some scholars believing that teachers revealing their political beliefs to students has the potential to stifle student discussion (e.g., McAvoy & Hess, 2013). While it is certainly preferable for students to be able to deliberate issues among themselves, and they are not well-served by a teacher dominating the discussion, there is strong theoretical and empirical support for what Kelly (1986) termed a committed impartiality approach (e.g., Cross & Price, 1996; James, 2009; Journell, 2011a, 2011b, 2016a, 2016b; McCully, 2006), which is when teachers share their personal opinions with students but in a way that allows contradictory opinions to still have merit in the classroom.

If students know that their teacher supports the side of the controversial issue that is in solidarity with students who may be potentially marginalized, it lets those students know that someone in authority has their back, and it may restrain their peers from articulating bigoted or otherwise hurtful comments during the deliberation. In recent years, particularly as U.S. politics has become increasingly inflammatory following Donald Trump's election in 2016, research has offered numerous examples of teachers disclosing their political opinions to students in an effort to either comfort students whose identities were being attacked within the prevailing political discourse or shield vulnerable students from personal attacks from peers (e.g., Dabach, 2015; Dunn et al., 2019; Geller, 2020; Payne & Journell, 2019; Sondel et al., 2018). Such disclosure, of course, assumes that the teacher does not hold personal views that would further marginalize students, which is not always the case (Journell, 2011a).

## **Conclusion**

In "Deliberative Facilitation in the Classroom," Nishiyama et al. (2023) illustrated both the importance of deliberation facilitation and the difficulty involved in doing it effectively. They did an admirable job of outlining basic techniques and elements to be

mindful of in order to facilitate classroom deliberations that engage students and ensure equitable, robust participation. However, additional thought should be given to the safety of students during deliberations of sensitive issues that may implicate student identities. In those situations, basic techniques are not enough; teachers must make additional decisions—some of which may have the adverse effect of limiting open participation—to protect vulnerable students and maintain a justice-oriented focus in the classroom.

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