

7-1-2014

The State of Our Field: Introduction to the Special Issue

Laura W. Black

Ohio University, laura.black.1@ohio.edu

Nancy L. Thomas

Tufts University, nancy.thomas@tufts.edu

Timothy J. Shaffer PhD

Wagner College, tjshaffer@ksu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

Recommended Citation

Black, Laura W.; Thomas, Nancy L.; and Shaffer, Timothy J. PhD (2014) "The State of Our Field: Introduction to the Special Issue," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol10/iss1/art1>

This Introduction is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Public Deliberation by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

The State of Our Field: Introduction to the Special Issue

Abstract

This article introduces the special "State of the Field" issue. The essay highlights some of the key tensions that our field is wrestling with at the moment, and advocates that we think carefully about the terms we use to describe our work. It previews the articles in this special issue and urges future work in the field to take up the ideas, questions, and challenges posed by these essays.

Keywords

deliberation, democracy, civic life

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the board of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium for many conversations that helped us to develop this issue. We also thank the organizers of the 2014 Frontiers of Democracy conference, where many of these ideas will be discussed and conveyed through a special session. Finally, we thank the International Association for Public Participation for its support of JPD and the work presented in this issue.

In 2009, The Democracy Imperative, Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the University of New Hampshire held a conference where we said there was “No Better Time” for our field to gather together, reflect, and act. Given the political scene at the time, we were optimistic about the future of our field and the work that lay ahead. Since then, our field has made amazing contributions to civic life by offering new models for public participation, helping people in communities productively address problems, integrating deliberation into political systems on a variety of scales, engaging conflicting parties in high quality dialogues, and using new technologies to scale up our work and reach people around the globe. These efforts from our growing community of practice have garnered some interest from people outside of our field and some of our work has been very successful.

Correspondingly, the academic attention to our work has increased exponentially in the last decade. Research on deliberation, dialogue, public participation, youth engagement, and civic studies spans many disciplines. Not only has this increased attention meant a healthy level of submission to the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, but research from our field also appears in more disciplinary journals in political science, communication studies, education, public policy, and several other fields. Handbooks in these fields have begun to include chapters on deliberation, which has gained the attention of scholars who otherwise had not been involved this work. The interdisciplinary work of our field is evident in several recent books such as *Democracy in Motion* (Nabatchi, et al., 2012), *We are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (Levine, 2013), and *Talking Together* (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009).

And yet, these years also included many challenges and disappointments. As incoming editors of JPD, we believe we are now at another juncture where it is time for us to take stock of who and how well we are as a field.

Defining “the field” for our work is no easy task. Our field consists of both practitioners and academics, and those scholars come from a wide range of academic disciplines. Some of us may consider the field to be a group of people, a community of practice, while others may see the field as an idea of concept that has a corresponding a body of work. As a collective, we share a commitment to broad democratic values and efforts to meaningfully engage people in public processes. However, we call our work many different things, and each of these terms has specific meaning to those of us who use it, and our particular organizations and efforts have different missions, methods, and goals. We are also cognizant of the fact that people do this work without ever naming it as such, often simply because they think of deliberative work just as what they do.

To help us consider the state of the field, we pose the question: What should we call our field? Does “public deliberation” describe the scope of the work described in this special issue – and the Journal more broadly? Other options might include “public engagement,” “deliberative politics,” “service,” “public work,” “dialogue,” “collaborative governance,” “citizen-centered change (or policy making),” “activism,” “social entrepreneurship,” and “community organizing.” And what is our goal? Are we striving for “civic renewal,” “deliberative democracy” or even “nation building”? Sadly, terms like “politics” and

“political” are now used interchangeably with “partisan,” and are turn-offs to many community members who might otherwise be engaged. Benjamin Barber’s “strong democracy” makes sense as an agenda, but perhaps not as an intuitive descriptor for citizen-driven social action and policy change. Matt Leighninger’s *The Next Form of Democracy* probably best describes what we’re seeking, but what does it mean to people who haven’t read his book?

We also need to be concerned with what the late Edgar Beckham of the Association of American Colleges and Universities called “the conflicting languages” of diversity and civic engagement. Beckham described “an obstacle to collaboration” as a “lack of fit between the rhetorical approaches used by the two groups.” He wrote,

Those who want to strengthen the civic mission of the research university discern something in history that should be “recovered.” They tend to speak of “renewing” or “recapturing” a spirit of public involvement, identifying their goal as something that once existed but which has been lost... In stark contrast ... those who advocate campus diversity tend to appeal to future achievements, optimistically describing a time that lies ahead of us, when our institutions will become more inclusive and more hospitable for all who work and study there. More importantly, this group does not so comfortably resonate to images of a lost golden age, nor to the idea that we might profitably recover something of that sort (Beckham, 1999, 6-7).

We raise the issue of language because it matters. What we call ourselves shapes how we think of what we do and how external audiences understand the scope and purpose of our work. Moreover, the tension described by Edgar Beckham is reflected in the writings of several authors of this issue.

The aim of this special issue is to consider the state of our field; to reflect on where we come from, what we are doing, what challenges we face, and where we think our field could go in the future. As editors, we see JPD as an important site for defining the field and engaging scholars and practitioners across the globe in meaningful conversations about our work. So, we reached out to some of the leaders in our field and to some newer voices. We asked them to reflect on the state of our field. In our invitations, we posed the following questions:

- What is the scope of our field? What issues and practices are at the core? What innovations are pushing the boundaries of our field?
- How do participatory practices shape the larger social/political context? How does or should public engagement contribute to contemporary problems of democracy?
- What don’t we know about democratic principles and practices? What questions should we be asking? What lines of inquiry need more attention?
- What role should impartiality play in our work? What are the tensions between deliberation and advocacy? Do we all agree that dialogue, if done well, leads to

collaboratively-made decisions and citizen action or that deliberation, if done well, addresses unequal power dynamics?

- What question, if you could answer it, would transform the way we understand public engagement in a diverse democracy?

We asked authors to write short, reflective, accessible essays that addressed some area of concern noted in the questions. As editors, we reviewed the essays, managed revisions, and organized them into this issue. You will find variation in the style and approach, reflecting the diversity that comprises the field itself.

Overview of the Special Issue

We could have organized these essays in many different ways. Across the essays we see themes related to integrating our work into public institutions, using new technology, working toward social justice, grappling with ideas of neutrality vs. advocacy, and building relationships across difference. There are many potentially meaningful connections across the essays that can frame our understanding of the field. In the end, we decided to organize the essays in a relatively straightforward way so that readers can consider the connections that are most important to their own work.

The first set of essays reflects on *the scope of the field*. These essays consider questions of who we are and what our roots are. They discuss what is or should be included in the field and how our efforts fit in with different or related disciplines. They highlight some key issues for us to consider as we define our work to ourselves and to external audiences, and they push us to think about who we want to be.

The second set of essays outlines some *challenges we face as a field*. These essays demonstrate longstanding issues such as the relationship between social justice and the processes we advocate, and the ways in which we do or do not adequately address diversity in our work. They highlight some of the difficulties we have faced in our attempts to integrate with political systems or promote long-term social change. They also raise questions about the lack of success for some of our key innovations such as online deliberation and participatory budgeting. These essays push us to think seriously about how we can address these challenges.

Finally, the third set of essays points to some *promising future directions*. Some of these essays should be read as in conversation with the challenges as they provide examples of initiatives that have had success. These essays highlight promising innovations, consider ways to move forward, and call for future work.

We also include book reviews. The books included in this special issue point to the breadth of this field. One of the books reviewed is written by a preeminent philosopher, a second is a collection of scholars asking big questions about deliberative civic engagement from around the world, and the third is written from the perspective of community leaders advocating for a “slow democracy” that allows people to reclaim and reimagine democratic life.

Next Steps

We hope that this issue will inspire discussion, collaborative action, and research in our field. We urge readers to take seriously the claims made by these authors and respond to them in your own work. We see this as an ongoing process and we hope that this issue is just the beginning of a longer conversation within our community.

To help further those conversations, we will convene at the upcoming Frontiers of Democracy conference in July 2014, where many of these authors will have the opportunity to talk about their reflections and their responses to one another's essays. They will discuss their answers to questions such as "what binds us together as a field?" "What is the most promising recent development in the field?" "What is the most troubling sign or greatest challenge?" and "What should we do moving forward?" After this conference, we, as editors, will write an "afterword" to this special issue where we discuss what comes from the Frontiers meeting. That afterword will then be published in this issue.

We invite you, as readers, to participate in conversations about these ideas and use them to further research and practice in the field.

References and Suggested Reading

- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Beckham, E. (1999). "Civic Learning and Campus Diversity: Bridging the Language Gap." *Peer Review* 2(1), 4-7.
- Carson, L., Gastil, J., Hartz-Karp, J. & Lubensky, R. (2012). *The Australian Citizens' Parliament and the future of deliberative democracy*. State College, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Clark, S., & Teachout, W. (2012). *Slow democracy: Rediscovering community, bringing decision making back home*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green.
- Jacobs, L. R., Cook, F. L., Delli Carpini, M. X. (2009). *Talking together: Public deliberation and political participation in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Leighninger, M. (2006) *The next form of democracy: How expert rule is giving way to shared governance and why politics will never be the same*. Vanderbilt University Press.
- Levine, P. (2013). *We are the ones we have been waiting for: The promise of civic renewal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mathews, D. (2014). *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

Nabatchi, T., Gastil, J., Weiksner, M., & Leighninger, M. (eds.) (2012). *Democracy in motion: Evaluating the practice and impact of deliberative civic engagement*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Author Information

Laura W. Black is an associate professor of Communication Studies at Ohio University and is the current Editor for the *Journal of Public Deliberation*. Her research focuses on group communication and interaction in deliberation and dialogue with a specific focus on facilitation practices, storytelling, and disagreement. She has written several chapters in edited books about deliberation and has published in academic journals such as the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Small Group Research*, and *Communication Theory*. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington.

Nancy Thomas directs the National Study on Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and other higher education research at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service. She also co-founded and co-directs the Democracy Imperative and is a senior associate with Everyday Democracy and an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*. Her research and practice interests are in college student political learning and engagement in democracy, deliberative democracy, and free speech and academic freedom. She earned her EdD at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and JD at Case Western Reserve University School of Law.

Timothy J. Shaffer is Director of the Center for Leadership and Engagement at Wagner College, and is Associated Faculty in both the Department of Education and Department of Government and Politics. He is also co-director of The Democracy Imperative and Associate Editor of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*. His research interests include historical and contemporary forms of civic engagement and the public philosophies that animate citizens. He earned a bachelor's degree in theology from St. Bonaventure University, masters degrees in public administration and theological studies, respectively, from the University of Dayton, and his Ph.D. from Cornell University.