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Deliberation In and Through Higher Education

Abstract

This article explores how deliberative democracy has the ability to change how colleges and universities function. Deliberation offers a powerful way for students, faculty, staff, and community partners to learn and practice modes of reasoning and deciding together in a variety of settings such as classrooms, other campus settings, and in communities. The article includes scholarly resources as well as examples of deliberation in various contexts. The article suggests that deliberation can replace, or at least complement, many of the more familiar models pervasive in our institutions.

Keywords

Deliberation, Higher Education, Civic Engagement, Deliberative Pedagogy

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Deliberation in Context

In recent years, we have increasingly heard the call for higher education to play a more active and engaged role in communities, not simply as experts providing solutions but as partners and collaborators in relationship with non-governmental organizations in the United States and elsewhere (McIlrath, Lyons, & Munck, 2012; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). The “community engagement *movement* in higher education, or some might say *field*, is at a critical moment” because it has grown in recent decades, yet it still faces considerable obstacles as institutions seek to cultivate deep, pervasive, integrated, and developmental engagement (Hoy & Johnson, 2013, p. xvi). In many ways, “deliberative democracy” is not the approach typically employed or even expressed by students and faculty. It is overshadowed by phrases such as “service learning” and “community partnerships”—both important, yet partial elements of the broader civic engagement movement. However, deliberation can help change how we think about engagement both on campuses and in community settings. In this essay, I will highlight resources, examples, and promising directions of deliberation in higher education.

There are important resources for those interested in deliberation becoming more fully integrated into how colleges and universities function. One such volume is *Deliberation & the Work of Higher Education*. It is comprised of “several practical ways of creating space for deliberation in higher education—in classrooms, residence halls, fraternal houses, and local community settings—where students may learn and practice modes of reasoning and deciding together” (Grattan, Dedrick, & Dienstfrey, 2008, p. 9). There are other publications of note. Nancy L. Thomas edited a special issue in the *New Directions for Higher Education* series on *Educating for Deliberative Democracy*, and, with Martín Carcasson, a special issue of this journal looking primarily at discipline-based approaches to deliberation (Thomas, 2010; Thomas & Carcasson, 2010). For someone looking for diverse voices and perspectives on the topic of deliberation in higher education, these publications provide helpful introductions, regardless of one’s particular area of interest. This leads to the central point of this article: deliberation is manifest in numerous places and ways in and through higher education.

Deliberation has been used as a tool for campuses to understand issues of diversity and to “provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogues about issues that most concern them” (Olivos, 2008), as an andragogy for adult learners in a doctoral program (Johnson et al., 2014), and as a way to involve parents as co-creators and researchers with respect to the creation of deliberative guides on community issues (Bray, Pedro, Menney, & Gannotti, 2014). Additionally, deliberation can and should be used to co-create community-based action research; to change campus climates to address negative aspects of campus culture, such as sexual assault; and to make institutional decisions, with participatory budgeting being one example of how that can and does occur.

Further, there are efforts to create organizational structures for deliberation, such as centers for deliberative democracy (Carcasson, 2010a, 2010b) or to at least integrate deliberative elements into the more familiar centers for engagement that don’t often explicitly have a deliberative dimension (on these broader centers, see Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Colleges and universities have the opportunity to break open how they think about teaching, learning, research, engagement, and organizational structure by

being deliberative in approach and style. To do so, however, administrators, faculty, and students must expand much of their thinking to include efforts that decentralize institutional privileges and interests. For the sake of simplicity, I focus on two areas that include much of the deliberative work taking place in higher education: the classroom and community-based engagement.

Deliberation in the Classroom and in the Community

Deliberation in the classroom has taken many forms. Authors such as Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill write about the democratic classroom by creating a learning environment that models democratic habits and practices, including deliberation (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, pp. 13-14). Joni Doherty, of Franklin Pierce University, articulates a deliberative pedagogy that has shaped her teaching and engagement work, one that “call[s] for a rethinking and restructuring of the activities of teaching and learning.” Using deliberation in both the classroom and community adds yet another way to address public issues alongside service learning opportunities that position students and faculty members as co-creators with the broader community around new insight or knowledge. As Doherty puts it, “Student are not *doing for* or *learning about*, but rather are engaged in relationships marked by reciprocity (Doherty, 2012, pp. 25, 26).

My own experience with deliberation in the classroom has shown the possibility of intimately connecting content with pedagogy. One of the most intentional examples of this came during the first week of a course when going over the syllabus with students. As a course designed to connect deliberative democracy theory and practice, I made the intentional decision to introduce deliberation by allowing the students to jump into an opportunity to discuss with one another a central—and significant—aspect of the course: how they would be graded. They determined what weekly assignments, participation, deliberative forum preparation and implementation, and final papers would be worth. Additionally, students evaluated themselves and their peers, further taking on responsibilities for their educational experience. If we take deliberation seriously, it can be a truly powerful pedagogy that promotes civic learning and citizenship, often by learning how to engage others in safer spaces before stepping out into professional or community environments (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, pp. 55-58).

Speaking of Politics, one of the most complete studies on the topic of deliberation in the classroom and its impact on students, was written by two Wake Forest University professors who studied the different ways college students could learn about and engage in politics—in traditional and in more explicitly deliberative ways (Harriger & McMillan, 2007). Writing about this study, David Mathews notes how, “Deliberating was not presented as just a way of conducting forums but as a way of living democratically” (Mathews, 2014, p. 151). It was more than an introduction to the topic of deliberation; it was put into practice in the classroom, on campus, and in the community. This leads to the topic of deliberation as a form of civic engagement.

Doherty’s statement about engaging in reciprocal relationships points to the role of deliberation in civic engagement, especially as an alternative to adversarial and expert-driven approaches (Carcasson, 2013). Similarly, Nicholas Longo writes about a

deliberative pedagogy in the community that is a “collaborative approach that melds deliberative dialogue, community engagement, and democratic education,” and can transform these elements by “creat[ing] space for reciprocal conversations that are grounded in real-world experiences.” (Longo, 2013, pp. 2, 5). But a challenge remains with respect to the civic engagement movement in higher education. While volumes wrestle with the implications and possibilities of engagement (Beere, Votruba, & Wells, 2011; Butin & Seider, 2012; Hodges & Dubb, 2012), little is written about the deliberative element of this work. “Deliberation” is outside the increasingly familiar discourse and practice of engagement. Becoming an engaged campus is a step in the right direction, but it also matters how those processes occur—both on campuses and in communities.

Promising Directions

So what is promising about deliberation in higher education? I argue it is its ability to impact and disrupt multiple contexts. As noted above, deliberation can be integrated into nearly every dimension of higher education, creating new opportunities and approaches to everything from teaching to budgeting. Simply put, deliberation can replace, or at least complement, many of the top-down and privileged models pervasive in our institutions.

Finally, I want to acknowledge one of the most established but overlooked forms of higher education’s engagement with communities as an example of how deliberation can help broaden our thinking about even the most established dimensions of our institutions. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 established the Cooperative Extension Service involving the United States Department of Agriculture, land-grant universities, and local communities, with the goal of educating and working with citizens through programmatic initiatives. Cooperative Extension’s role includes but goes beyond the application of technical expertise to include deliberative, community-based engagement—both historically and today (Shaffer, 2012, 2013).

A recently launched initiative by Imagining America called “Extension Reconsidered” is using deliberative approaches to expand how land-grant universities develop and sustain “mutually beneficial and reciprocal” engagement beyond technical problem solving and service learning by embracing the “work of naming and framing public issues and problems and deciding among various alternatives what should be done about them” (Imagining America: Scholars and Artists in Public Life, 2014; for a more thorough introduction see Peters, 2014). This initiative is based largely on the idea that deliberation can play an important role in defining how higher education engages communities through opportunities to discuss what that might mean. There are examples of how participating institutions, such as Oregon State University, have brought together campus communities to discuss how to expand and reimagine Cooperative Extension’s work (see http://outreach.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/extensionreconsidered_agenda.pdf).

Deliberation has the ability to change how those in higher education teach and engage students and communities, but also how we operate as organizations. Put baldly, deliberation has the ability to alter how higher education functions. This is done by cultivating space for diverse ideas and marginalized voices to be heard and valued in the classroom, on campus, or in the community—regardless of whether we are talking about

students, faculty, staff, administrators, or community partners. We can seek to understand and address problems in a number of ways. Deliberation should be one of them.

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