12-11-2015

# Communication and Citizenship: Reflections on Classroom Practice

Kristina Horn Sheeler
*IUPUI*, ksheeler@iupui.edu

Anne Weiss
*Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis*, haweiss@iupui.edu

Ryan Aaron D'Souza
*IUPUI*, dsouza.r.a@gmail.com

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

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

# Communication and Citizenship: Reflections on Classroom Practice

## Abstract

This essay reflects on a semester-length classroom activity designed to give students an opportunity to practice their citizenship skills. We approach the problem of lack of citizen participation as a communication challenge and present our adaptation of Deliberative Polling to provide students with opportunities to: 1) research alternatives on an issue related to citizenship, 2) hone their research and critical thinking skills, and 3) participate in communication on issues related to citizenship with focused reflection on the communication processes involved. Because the topic is citizenship, students discuss issues related to political participation (e.g. voting) and are asked to reflect on their own practice of citizenship throughout the process. The activity allowed students to experience an alternative to the "either/or debate" perception of politics and gave them tools to participate in politics differently, and in more satisfying ways.

"Students perceive politics, as it currently exists, as always an 'either/or' debate with no other options. . . . They seek more middle ground with regard to both policies and political parties" (Kiesa, Orlowski, Levine, Both, Kriby, Lopez, & Marcelo, 2007).

## RISE @ IUPUI: Deliberative Polling in the College Classroom

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is an urban campus in Indianapolis, Indiana with a long history of encouraging student participation, discussion and dialogue through creative in-class and outside-of-class activities. Probably most known in these efforts for Democracy Plaza, an open space in the middle of campus filled with chalkboards on which students can voice ideas or opinions in response to questions or meet to discuss issues of the day, the campus actively promotes and has worked to institutionalize these sorts of activities. The RISE initiative is one such effort to support and institutionalize intentional, deep-learning to foster critical thinking, civic, and life-long learning. The RISE to the Challenge Initiative stands for Research, International experience, Service-learning, and Experiential learning and contributes to students' intellectual, professional, and civic development. Students are challenged to incorporate at least two of the four RISE experiences into their undergraduate education, with a notation appearing on their transcript when a particular experience has been completed. Faculty, then, are challenged to develop diverse RISE experiences throughout the curriculum.

One of the authors of this essay received a RISE Course Development Grant to implement an experiential learning project incorporating deliberative polling around issues of citizenship and civic participation. The project itself was designed to respond to a particular problem experienced most notably in the political communication classroom. For several semesters, one of the authors of this essay asked students to discuss their socialization into politics. Students reflected on many issues, including parents' political affiliation, socialization in schools, running for student government, voting, and following political candidates on social media. One of the most startling and consistent revelations semester after semester was students' dislike of talking about political issues with individuals who disagreed with them. Many students operated under the common frame that politics is a battle or war, with winners and losers, "shots fired," "sneak attacks" and "covert operations" (Bhavnani, 1991; Iyengar, 1989). While select students may feel comfortable voicing their ideas and opinions on Democracy Plaza chalkboards, the same was not necessarily the case in the classroom. Such attitudes hamper the possibility of a vibrant democracy when students participate as citizens in our wider political culture.

Twenty juniors and seniors participated in this intervention as part of a course focused on citizen participation, political discourse, and the opportunities and challenges of a deliberative democracy. The project provided students with an opportunity to 1) research alternatives on an issue related to citizenship, 2) hone their research and critical thinking skills, and 3) participate in communication on the topic of citizenship with focused reflection on communication behaviors. Because the topic was citizenship, students discussed issues related to political participation (e.g. voting) and were asked to reflect on their own citizenship practices.

Deliberative Polling (DP) was developed by James Fishkin in 1988 and incorporates pre- and post-polling along with deliberation to assess what an informed citizenry would conclude about a particular issue. Our semester-length project adapted the Stanford University Center for Deliberative Democracy Toolkit[1] for K-12 teachers for implementation in the college classroom. While we engaged in the polling activities traditionally central to DP, we chose to focus on the communication experience of deliberation, bolstered by research on citizenship and participation, two of the four RISE experiences.

Our focus on communication comes from our belief that democratic participation is inextricably intertwined with communication (Reich, 2007). Therefore when any form of political discussion is consciously avoided, as our student-participants noted, we believe participation deteriorates. If our students are reluctant to voice ideas and opinions in what is supposed to be a safe space—the classroom—then it is no wonder that political participation more broadly is thought to be on the decline while divisiveness is becoming more and more entrenched.

We approached the challenge of citizen participation as a communication challenge. If "the essence of politics is talk," as Robert E. Denton, Jr. (2004, xii) reminds us, then we wanted to give our students opportunities to practice their talk. In doing so, students constituted themselves as citizens (Kock & Villadsen, 2012) and began to adopt a rhetorical perspective that was not fearful or skeptical of oppositional views, but was instead reasoned, valuing of others, and skillful in navigating the challenges that political participation presents. Premised on communication practice and reflection, we modified DP to create a more conducive environment for participation. Thus, we focused on *communication* as citizen participation before turning to improving the *process* of participation.

---

[1] The Toolkit is located at the Stanford University Center for Deliberative Democracy site: http://cdd.stanford.edu/toolkit. References throughout this essay to the Toolkit can be accessed via this link.

**Deliberations in the Classroom**

Keeping with the spirit of the DP process, during the early days of the semester we administered a pre-survey opinion poll on four issue-sets related to citizen engagement: 1) participation and citizenship, 2) exercising choice, 3) becoming informed, and 4) serving one's country.[2] The survey assessed initial student opinions on whether various issues will increase citizen participation. Following the pre-survey, we asked students to prepare background materials to share with their classmates prior to deliberations. The background materials[3] included information examining each issue-set mentioned above compiled into an easily readable format. This research activity functioned to hone students' inquiry and critical thinking skills and emphasized the process of weighing pros and cons to assist students in gathering information and weighing alternatives as a precursor to the deliberative process.

Once the background materials were completed, students formed deliberation groups of six to eight students and participated in a total of six hours of deliberation. The purpose of the deliberation groups was to give students the opportunity to practice citizen participation by discussing the issues presented in the background materials, weigh alternatives to create an information-rich environment, and to become mindful of personal communication behaviors during a discussion of issues on which not everyone agreed. Graduate students were solicited and trained to serve as moderators.[4] The purpose of the moderators was to facilitate discussion and deliberation on the issues and to keep the groups moving forward. Following deliberation, students completed the post-deliberation survey.

After the first half of deliberations, we devoted considerable time to a discussion of the communication challenges experienced so far and how to approach the situation differently. Students were reminded that the goal of the deliberations

---

[2] The survey can be accessed via the Toolkit and instructors will be able to gather survey data and graphs via Stanford University's Center for Deliberative Democracy. Instructors may wish to include additional demographic questions as well as questions on political engagement—e.g., watching political news, having political discussions, becoming informed, or engaging in other behaviors that might be considered necessary for citizenship, such as voting.

[3] Instructors should be cautioned that completed background materials for this activity are available online at Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy. Instructors may find these materials useful for reference, but the purpose of this adaptation was to challenge students to develop their own materials *without* the aid of this resource.

[4] Moderator guides are available online via the Toolkit.

was not advocacy, but weighing alternatives and gathering as much information as possible. Students responded that the most prevalent challenges included:

- The perception of too much agreement rather than exploring alternatives.
- Talking over one another or individual conversations rather than group discussions.
- Too little interaction in which students responded to one another directly.
- Difficulty focusing on the bigger issues of increasing participation and citizenship.

During reflection, students were provided the following suggestions:

1. Focus on issues, not positions—students were encouraged to remember the bigger picture—whether this issue might increase participation and citizenship activities. They were instructed to be open to alternatives, and try not to advocate only for their personal opinion. Focusing on the end result, and how the issues might allow us to get there, rather than specific positions, was encouraged. This particular question was helpful: Why/how might a reasonable person disagree with my position?
2. Play devil's advocate, consider the opposing view—the above recommendation naturally leads into the task of playing devil's advocate. In particular, if a group experienced a situation in which everyone seemed to agree, the group was encouraged to stop and consider the alternatives. The moderator would ask one person to start this process and others were encouraged to participate as well.
3. Listen, paraphrase—some groups experienced a situation in which no one seemed to hear one another. To counter this challenge, students were encouraged to paraphrase the other. In other words, "what I hear you saying is . . ." and the other person responded as to the accuracy of the paraphrase.
4. Yes, and . . . –once students mastered paraphrasing, they were encouraged to go one step further and build on what one person said. Similar to comic improvisation, students paraphrased, indicated how such a statement could contribute to increasing participation, and then extended with one more reason/view/example. In this way, students practiced good listening and discussion skills which validated the other person and added to the conversation in productive ways.

The following reflections on two of these challenges provide insight on the value of focusing intentionally on communication before focusing on the process of deliberation.

**Challenge: Too Much Agreement**

The challenge of too much agreement occurred when group members vocalized their consensus with the previous speaker and then extended on the comment or added a related position, at the absence of considering alternatives. It appeared the agreement functioned as a way to enter the discussion and achieve common ground. Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amenqual, and Gastil (2006) inductively developed characteristics of deliberation based on observation of deliberative groups and indicated that good deliberative moments are characterized by two themes: "maintaining a positive 'group atmosphere'" and "making progress on the group's task" (p. 12). The instances of agreement constructed in our classroom certainly helped groups develop a positive atmosphere early on and achieve common ground and the appearance of a free flow of ideas, as Mansbridge et al. suggest, but did not always help the group move forward on its task, at least during the first portion of the activity.

For example, on the issue of civic journalism obligations and increasing the public's capacity to become informed:

**Table 1. Agreement as a Way in**

| Transcribed Talk | Reflection |
|---|---|
| DX: I agree with that. I was thinking more, this is where journalism is going anyway; it can't really backtrack to a civic journalism, cause I always think it's gonna be selling a message, but I do think that now with social networking, the internet, people do have an opportunity now to be more civically inclined. | Extends point and brings up a new angle. |
| J: Yea, to become engaged, yea. | |
| N: Yea, you just have to go out there and find it. | Supportive atmosphere |
| DX: Yea, that's the tough thing. | |
| J: Yea, one thing that's necessary is not just to chat among your friends…what you do, but to talk to people on the other side of the fence civilly, debate about…just trade ideas… | Yes, and |
| T: I think with civic journalism, or any journalism, how do you keep your bias out of it? . . . Walter Cronkite . . . | Question and example |
| J: A watchdog? | |
| DX: Now there's more…to keep the journalists honest. | |

| | |
|---|---|
| T: Well, because they have competition. | |
| DL: In one of my classes we discussed the progression of information that we receive. When the president was on TV you watched that TV because it was on your channel every single time. Unfortunately, I think, like JN said, we don't want to be informed. We think any journalist is trying to sell his spin. [Group vocalizes agreement.] | Acknowledging other |
| N: Maybe that's the media's fault though; maybe that's the reason we don't want to be informed because we don't believe anything these people have to say anymore. | Alternative perspective |

As the evening progressed, this group became better at asking questions and engaging one another and demonstrated a good degree of mindfulness during the activity to create a supportive atmosphere. At one point the group, at a moment of agreement, even joked about their group atmosphere of agreement.

**Challenge: Talking Over One Another**

Another group had difficulty during the first night giving everyone the floor. Instead, group members talked over one another, held side conversations, and used the time to state positions rather than engage the issues. Noise became a problem because members had to speak loudly just to be heard. However, on the second night, after some encouragement, moments of silence, and moderator prompts, this group engaged the issues in productive ways using the communication strategies presented. Students practiced turn-taking, listening, and extending on the previous speaker. For example, on the issue of proportional systems increasing choice among voters:

**Table 2. Turn-Taking, Extending, Yes, and…**

| Transcribed Talk | Reflection |
|---|---|
| Z: So, one thing people don't like in this class is that people vote for a party; they don't know who they're voting for… | |
| L: It says here the PR system would benefit by having multiple parties… It seems more people are involved because there are so many parties that represent what each citizen could represent for themselves… | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Moderator: Do you agree, point 3, implementing this system, would give everybody at least a minor chance of holding public office, do you agree? | Productive moderator prompt |
| Z: I think it would take a long time. | |
| A: So again, the overarching question is, would this increase participation? | Focus on bigger picture issues, not position. |
| M: Participation and representation, more choice… | |
| Moderator: in the next paragraph, another advantage would empower the voters. It assumes voters are not currently empowered. Do you agree? | Productive moderator prompt |
| L: I think so. As much as I didn't like the tea party, I think it's representative of what our country needs because clearly that party is showing something that the other 3 parties are not. So I think it would make people feel empowered, 'cause even the tea party candidates didn't have a lot of political gain. It was still a big movement and still continues to get larger. | Extending on previous speaker, considering issues not opinions |
| A: That example, tea party candidates, wouldn't have to try to fit themselves into the cookie cutter mold of the Republican and Democrat and I also like that same paragraph, the PR system …the percentage of the vote would translate into seats, so it really it, it's more proportional, more representative. | Yes, and |
| L: And you might have more bi partisanship. If you have 6 different parties holding seats, then you might have more things going through; you're not going to have a deadlock, D here, R here, we're not going to move. | Yes, and |
| A: Yea, yea. | |
| …. | |
| A: That's interesting because more people could participate as a candidate. | Return to issue |
| L: In that same party? | |
| A: Yea, it's not just who's voting or how many people are voting, but more people could participate in the system itself. | Yes, and |

| | |
|---|---|
| Z: That's gonna be tough, because if you have 500 people running for the same office,….we can hardly handle 10 people running for the same office, let alone 500, so I think in that system you'd almost not be able to get to know any of them. | Devil's advocate |

Based on these two examples as well as our experiences in the classroom, focused reflection and considered attention on the talk certainly helped our students communicate more effectively not only during the second half of deliberations, but even during the remainder of the semester.

## Implications

We learned many things about communication during this classroom activity focused specifically on communication, rather than only pre- and post-polling traditional for deliberative polling research. First, when students were made aware of communication challenges, by the facilitator or during instructor-led reflection discussions, and were provided strategies and opportunities for addressing the challenges, they did a better job of asking questions and engaging one another to bring in additional information. Agreement functioned not only as a way in, but also as a way for the student to suggest "I hear you." Both are important to maintaining the positive group atmosphere noted in the literature and to allow students to experience a certain level of comfort even when discussing issues on which they might disagree with their classmates. Constructing an atmosphere conducive to deliberation may even require the collegiality we witnessed before tasks can be accomplished. Moreover, each group demonstrated incredible improvement in their ability to interact with one another, extend the discussion, ask questions, consider the bigger issue and play devil's advocate regardless of whether there was agreement. This initial positivity translated into a level of comfort to attempt some of the other communication strategies, such as playing devil's advocate, in order to make progress on their task. Thus, both of Mansbridge et al.'s (2006) characteristics of good deliberative moments were realized in many instances during the second half of the activity.

Second, both of the above examples demonstrate the value of providing students with opportunities for reflection and reinforce Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, and Staats' (2014) conclusion that reflection plays a powerful role in learning. Clearly, by stopping to focus on the talk and providing students with time for reflection in order to produce strategies for creating productive deliberative moments, the discussion changed. It's not just that opinions changed, which is

confirmed time and again in the deliberative polling literature, but the talk changed, responding to Ryfe's (2005) call that we need to do more work on what actually happens during deliberation. Further, assessing the talk reinforces the need for communication education and activities such as this one where students have the opportunity to practice their citizenship skills and reflect on the communication involved.

Third, we learned that students found the activity valuable, even though they found the deliberations difficult. Student evaluations of the activity indicated the experience as a whole was valuable 9.1 on a 10-point scale (10 = extremely valuable). Preparing the background materials was valuable 8.7/10; the deliberation itself was valuable 8.8/10. Students indicated being informed about politics and political issues was most important to being a good citizen (8.1/10). They also indicated that increasing political participation was important 9.2/10 (14 students indicated extremely important) and it was important to be informed about politics 8.3/10 (10 students indicated extremely important). In other words, by acknowledging the value in the activity, political participation, and political knowledge, we hope that some students will practice these values as they go from classroom to community.

This sentiment was picked up by the students themselves as they wrote a final essay on the value of the deliberative polling activity and the possibility of a deliberative democracy to address the divisiveness in our current political culture. Many students wrote about the communication challenges they experienced, in particular the fact that "those who like to speak will speak" and others would remain quiet. Further, some students wrote that their classmates may use the activity as an opportunity to state a position over and over, which could cause others to be quiet or polarize the audience. This sentiment is not that different from the concerns expressed at the beginning of the class, or of the challenges our political culture presents, more broadly. However, as one particular student concluded: "Fortunately, we have been given the raw materials for social and political life and we must utilize these components thoughtfully." Another expressed a similar conclusion. This activity has "shown me that it is possible for citizens to discuss political issues in a productive manner all the while showing respect and courtesy to differing opinions." One student even acknowledged that his passion for an issue created a blind spot for him, and the activity helped him to be able to move past personal opinion to the broader issue of citizen participation and how to relate to those with whom he may differ.

Finally, while students expressed informed skepticism about the possibilities of a deliberative democracy to address the divisiveness in our current political culture,

students indicated the personal value of the activity and the learning that took place. In addition to the comments addressed above, students indicated that the activity demonstrated the value of remembering "that there are other ideas out there" and "that there are other people standing around us." Similarly another student wrote: "I discovered that even though I had my political biases for particular issues, I was still able to research the opposing viewpoint and thus gather materials supporting why an individual would reason with it." There seemed to be a growing realization coming through the essays that bringing a rhetorical perspective to bear on political dialogue, discussion and/ or deliberation creates a level of mindfulness that focuses on the perspective of the other and enhances a sense of the common good versus personal interests.

Given these results, if students indicate that it is important to be informed and to increase political participation, our hope is that they will continue to practice their communication skills to demonstrate these opinions and constitute themselves as citizens.

## Conclusion

Based on this experience, we offer the following advice for instructors and practitioners who, like us, seek to integrate more discussion-based activities into the classroom. We suggest spending even more time at the outset discussing perceived differences, underlying assumptions, and the communication challenges that result, along with the tools to manage these differences. For example, on the political socialization survey mentioned earlier, we asked students to identify their political affiliation. This information could be shared with students in such a way to provide an opportunity for students to discuss their assumptions (e.g. what percentage of students in this class identify as independent, democratic, republican) and the barriers or misperceptions that accompany those assumptions as well as ways to overcome those barriers. We found that opportunities like this for students to think about their implicit biases along with shared goals and common ground really worked to diminish the perception of intractable conflict and construct a classroom atmosphere that was conducive to communication. Others who wish to embed discussion activities into their classroom practice may wish to adopt similar methods. Discussion-based teaching is not easy, and its successful integration depends on constructing a classroom atmosphere based on mutual respect and the perception of safety. Continual reflection, helping students process the events of the day, can work to mitigate some of the challenges.

In the future, we would like to build in even more time for focused classroom reflection on the talk, problems, and challenges, and have students respond with

how to address them. Even to the point of stopping the deliberation mid-stream, we would focus students on the difficulties in-the-moment and give them an opportunity to respond reflectively, with the goal of thinking about communication as a process which can create a more just world. Clearly students indicated such a realization on the small scale of the deliberation group, but broadening the focus to emphasize the value of a communication perspective in order to reframe politics from an argumentative to an alternative frame is the goal of this and other case studies which take a rhetorical approach to assessing deliberation.

At the beginning of the semester in which this activity was conducted, students indicated that one of the biggest drawbacks to participating in political discussions was not feeling free to express themselves on divisive issues. This activity created an environment where students could practice talking politics and explore their personal opinions of what it means to be a citizen. As we found from our analysis of student comments, which will be submitted for publication soon, students concluded that being a good citizen means "being informed about politics and political issues" and that it is "important to increase political participation" and to be receptive to opposing views. We hope this activity and others like it foster an alternative to the perception that politics is an "either/or debate," giving students the tools to practice their citizenship in different, more satisfying ways as they RISE to the IUPUI Challenge.

# References

Bhavnani, K. K. (1991). *Talking politics: A psychological framing of views from youth in Britain*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Cole, H. J. (2013). Teaching, practicing, and performing Deliberative Democracy in the classroom. *Journal of Public Deliberation, 9*(2), Article 10. Retrieved from http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol9/iss2/art10/

Denton, R. E., Jr., (Ed.). (2005). *The 2004 presidential campaign: A communication perspective*: Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield.

Di Stefano, G., Gino, F., Pisano, G. P. & Staats, B. R. (March 25, 2014). *Learning by thinking: How reflection aids performance* (HBS Report No. 14-093). Retrieved from Harvard Business School Technology & Operations Management Unit website: http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=47062

Fishkin, J. S. (1988). *Deliberative Polling®: Executive summary*. Center for Deliberative Democracy. Retrieved from: http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/docs/summary/

Gastil, J. (2000). *By popular demand: Revitalizing representative democracy through deliberative elections*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Iyengar, S. (1989). How citizens think about national issues: A matter of responsibility. *American Journal of Political Science*, *33*(4), 878-900.

Kiesa, A., Orlowski, A. P., Levine, P., Both, D., Kirby, E. H., Lopez, M. H., & Marcelo, K. B. (2007). *Millennials talk politics: A study of college student political engagement*. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

Kock, C., & Villadsen, L. S. (2012). *Rhetorical citizenship and public deliberation*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.

Mansbridge, J., Hartz-Karp, J., Amengual, M., & Gastil, J. (2006) Norms of deliberation: An inductive study. *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 2(1), Article 7. Retrieved from http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol2/iss1/art7

Reich, W. (2007). Deliberative democracy in the classroom: A sociological view. *Educational Theory, 57*(2), 187-197.

Ryfe, D. M. (2005). Does deliberative democracy work? *Annual Review of Political Science 8*, 49-71.

Tannen, D. (1999). *The argument culture: Moving from debate to dialogue*.  New York, New York: Random House Digital, Inc.