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## **Deliberation in the classroom - on the potential of deliberative ideals for a more civic education**

Gil Baptista Ferreira<sup>1</sup>

### ***Abstract***

*This article seeks to answer a very simple question: what is promising about deliberation in school education? For that, it sets out to examine how deliberative democracy can provide new ways to consider educational practices, from a civic perspective. In other words, it seeks to identify the possible and advantageous approaches linking the ideals of deliberative democracy and the educational process. It starts reviewing the idea of public deliberation, presenting it as a proposal to achieve informed, participated and founded decision-making. It could be possible to obtain a more civic and autonomous process of education through an ethical use of discourse (Habermas). In the second part of the article, we will attempt to show how deliberative ideals can be applied, advantageously, in the classroom. To this extent, the autonomy of individuals (students) to participate in reasoning processes of problem solving as well as the ability to receive and accommodate different views and diverse experiences will be emphasized. This perception highlights the need to incorporate deliberative normative ideals in the classroom.*

### ***Keywords***

*Deliberative democracy, deliberation, civic education; pedagogy.*

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As a researcher in communication and, at the same time, as a teacher, I easily note how people tend to consider arguments more under a perspective of contradictory, and less in a cooperative and deliberative manner. More than a careful examination of the arguments that support each of the opposing views, interlocutors often tend to defend a position as being their own, in opposition to the other, immediately framed as an opponent in a fight. However, arguments widely described as adversarial tend to be more hostile and silencing than the deliberative engagement, and thereby, influence negatively practices and results, from a democratic point of view (Kroll, 2005). In many ways, *deliberative democracy* is not the approach typically employed or even expressed by students and faculty. Simply put, deliberation can replace, or at least complement, many of the top-down and privileged models pervasive in our institutions. In other words, deliberation can help to change how we think about engagement both on campuses and in community settings.

In this article, I will take into account the promising directions of deliberation in education. In fact, in the most recent years, deliberation has been used as a tool for campus administrators 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 in the creation of deliberative guides to community issues (Bray, Pedro, Menney & Gannotti, 2014).

The focus is here, at the same time, much more generalist than specific. I'll try to discuss the benefits of the deliberative ideals in the space of the classroom. First, I briefly consider two prominent conceptions of democracy, both associated with the

notions of autonomy and supported by a liberal perspective of citizenship. Specifically, I'll start comparing an aggregative perspective of democracy with a deliberative perspective. From this comparison, I want to emphasize the advantages of incorporating deliberative practices in the classroom in order to promote communication skills that enable the obtaining of informed and founded decision making. The starting point is clear and precise: if the development of deliberative skills should be a purpose for teachers in general, the application of these skills inside and outside the classroom should be the basis for a healthy democracy. As a result, I'll present some structural lines for a practical model of civic education supported by this perspective.

### **Deliberation and aggregation**

In the early 90s of the last century, political theory dedicated to the study of democracy suffered what some refer as a deliberative turn, which marked in a decisive manner the democratic political theory of the early part of the twenty-first century. With emphasis on the discursive aspects of the political process, the so-called occupy now a central place in the discussions about the meaning of democracy, and the place that now assumes a whole political theory of communication. The roots of this conception of democracy are not new; from Aristotle to Kant, Rousseau, Dewey and Arendt, many figures from the history of political ideas present deliberative democratic tendencies as a source of inspiration.

What is new is the attempt to present a distinctly deliberative alternative made from the critical theory tradition (and, in some other versions, from the liberal thesis of Rawls),

in response to a political and social reality marked by an increasingly transnational capitalist system, by a cultural system that confronts traditions from various parts of the world with decisive developments in the notion of citizenship. As stated by Jürgen Habermas (1996), (whose work is commonly viewed as the theoretical framework of this model), the deliberative democracy ideal seeks precisely to adapt the institutions to the complex societies, decentralized, pluralistic, multicultural that traditional forms of representation, dominant tend to betray.

In its essential features, deliberative democracy is based on a set of assumptions that distinguish it from competing theories. Joseph Schumpeter (1994), in his classic work of political theory from the 40s of the last century, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, raised the question: is it possible for the people to govern? For Schumpeter (1994), the democratic process is just the opposite: a political method that is a certain type of institutional arrangement for achieving political and administrative decisions.

Before turning to deliberation, the democratic ideal was defined primarily in terms of aggregating interests as well as individual preferences into collective decisions, through instruments such as elections and principles such as political representation - in accordance with a design of liberal representative democracy that reserves to the citizen the task of periodically choosing their representatives, without the need to be directly involved in processes of deliberation and decision making. The metaphor of the “political market” is used in this context (to the extent that citizens choose among the offers presented to them) in search of the greater personal satisfaction.

In line with this perspective, the political problems in complex societies are understood as problems of "governmentality" - for which the answers should be found in structural and formal devices, such as the administrative system and representation, the aggregation of interests and the general concerns about social coordination. Similarly, behind the conflicts of another order, from ethical and moral grounds or from a social justice plan, the answer is obtained through voting – assigning the individuals the task of finding (or be constituted as such) a representative (usually a political party) in the decision making formal process.

It's as a challenge to this political idea that deliberative democracy comes to deny, inter alia, the private nature of the formation of aggregating preferences, and to emphasize the need of public debate and reasons exchange about what is fair. As Guttmann and Thompson (1996) wrote, deliberation is (on different levels of government and within various social contexts) the most legitimate way to solve conflicts about social justice issues. In the same way, the decision-making process that results from deliberation among free and equal citizens is the more defensible way of justification. An idea that finds complement in the words of Manin (1987): since political decisions are to be imposed on everyone, it seems reasonable to pursue (as an essential condition of legitimacy) the deliberation of all or, more precisely, the right of every one to participate in the deliberation.

Not ignoring the formal aspects of decision-making processes, the deliberative model opposes the aggregative perspectives of the notion of *rational debate*, as a paradigm to any procedure. In the genesis of the theoretical formulation of this model lies the contribution of Manin who distinguishes two senses of deliberation - as a *process of*

*discussion* and as a *decision* -, linking theory and practice through the dependence of the second meaning on the first. From here, Joshua Cohen could formulate what is one of the first clarifications of this model: a conception of deliberative democracy should be organized around an ideal of *common justification*. According to this ideal, to justify the exercise of collective power is to proceed on the basis of free public reasoning among equals. A deliberative model institutionalizes this ideal (Cohen, 1997).

### **Searching an equal and inclusive dialogue**

Understood in this way, deliberation claims its truly democratic nature in the sense that it incorporates some of the basic principles of the democratic ideals, such as the equality of all participants and the sensitivity to public concerns, attaining in the public debate its authority and its legitimacy. Taking into account the ideas of participation and the necessary extension of the arenas of public life, this model of democracy, in its most habermasian form, is based on the assumption that democratic participation can only be achieved if it includes fair (ethical) communication, in its normative ground.

It is from this perspective that a deliberative conception of democracy is presented as a consistent response to the transformation of a public space that claims to make itself heard and asserted, based on the capacity owned by all citizens to rationally decide about collective decisions concerning themselves.

From the *democratic element*, as a way of participation in collective decision-making by all affected by the decisions, and from *the deliberative element*, related to the inclusion in these processes of all the participants committed with rationality and impartiality

values (Elster, 1998), the deliberative model advocates the possibility of founding the authority and legitimacy of the laws in some form of *public reason*, redefining it as power communicatively generated, extensible not only to the formal components of deliberation (oriented decision-making), but also the informal ones, as a result of the discursive exchange occurring in the public space.

In its most conventional theoretical way, from a deliberately conceived perspective, the democratic process begins in non-institutional spheres. They are usually considered spontaneous and interconnected communication networks of civil society, responsible not only for the identification of new problems but also for the discursive elaboration of such problems, for the organization of collective identities as well as for the selection of the best arguments. It is from here that one could set the political agendas that would guide the political decision-making process, through proper representation. Therefore, this process could be referred to as a *two-track* model, in the sense that it seeks to articulate deliberations oriented to decision processes with the informal procedures in the public space. This includes both *political powers* in its institutional forms and *citizens* – in a process where the "formal" institutions provide an institutional framework for a wider communication, non-centered, anonymous, in a dispersed public sphere, involving all individuals.

Because it is based on a discursive theory, successful deliberation depends on the interaction of institutionalized deliberative procedures with a public opinion, informally developed (Habermas, 1996). Thus, this is an explicitly normative and procedural theory of democracy, focused on the respect for the requirements of legitimacy of



democratic processes. Therefore, legitimacy depends on the observation of a set of impartial procedures of deliberation.

### **Preconditions for deliberation**

Following Benhabib (2002), those standards (i.e., general rules of action and institutional arrangements) that can receive the consent of all affected by its consequences can only be considered valid (i.e., morally binding). Such an agreement can only result from a deliberative process with the following characteristics: 1) participation in the decisions is regulated by norms of equality and symmetry; all with the same opportunities to initiate speech acts, to question, interrogate and open the debate; 2) everyone has the right to question the arguments presented in the dialogue; 3) everyone has the right to introduce reflexive arguments about the procedural rules of the discourse and the way they are applied or conducted.

Having understood this, deliberation could be presented as the more appropriate institutional and conceptual framework to theorize the democratic experience in complex societies and to allow the expression of difference without fracturing the identity of the political body or undermining the current forms of sovereignty (Benhabib, 2002).

So, the deliberative model base the decision-making process in the exchange of reasons and arguments-a process in which all individuals involve themselves beyond their personal interests, in order to achieve the *common good* - distinguishing itself, as we have seen, from mechanisms of pure aggregation of individual wills. Indeed, if

minorities are excluded from the public space and pushed to the margins through the mechanisms of aggregation, then deliberation will be presented as a way to attract these margins.

The deliberative democracy model must favor a type of public sphere composed by contesting and argumentative networks, overlapping each other (Benhabib, 2002). Within and between these networks, public debate is essential to mutually clarify the interlocutors; discussion encourages individuals and groups to articulate good arguments that defend their causes and reframe their views, in order to be accepted by the other participants. Thus, through discourse we pursue not exactly the discovery of our real interests, but a collective interpretation of how we understand our most important interests. A deliberative system at its best allows participants to better understand themselves and the environment they live in. It helps participants to modify themselves and others in a better direction for them and for society (Mansbridge, 1999). In other words: it's a social learning process of how to seek the common good and justice - a process sustained in a public speech that selects understandings and views, questioning arguments before they gain strength, become weak or even disappear.

### **The classroom as a deliberation space**

Following the ideas outlined in the previous sections, it is now clear that the practical exercise of deliberation has its achievement in the development and exchange of arguments in various contexts of everyday life. A possible way to define these practices

is to describe them as the *fair-minded* and reflexive examination of all possible solutions (Kroll, 2005). This way, any deliberative argument can be achieved through dynamics of group discussion, particularly in conversations between people who develop, in good faith, an effort to reach the best decision. In fact, if we look at the structure of the most productive discussions to solve problems, we can easily identify a pattern: they contain multiple proposals discussed before reaching any decision.

It is following this model that this section will explore the usefulness and the gains of incorporating some principles of deliberation in decision-making processes in the classroom.

We take as a starting point a prerequisite. Before beginning a process of deliberation in the classroom, students must be available to reach an understanding, rationally motivated, on *their* moral beliefs about controversial topics. Although seemingly simple, this step is the necessary cornerstone for understanding the epistemological premises of democracy, from a deliberative perspective, and it decisively determines the way individuals place themselves behind others, in any context - and specifically in the classroom.

The next step considers that students enter the classroom with diverse experiences, different levels of familiarity and differing perspectives about those issues. To this extent, for some students one issue could be familiar, resulting from experiences and ways of involvement outside the classroom - which range from mere conversations with family to the most advanced forms of activism. At the same time though, and for several reasons, some other students may have never seriously considered this topic before.

Taking this into account, any deliberative session should include adequate time for students to present their arguments and positions to the class, as well as a session of questions and answers. In some cases (Cole, 2013), it is suggested that students complete a form for each participant, which involves taking notes on every presentation and identifying the main arguments and possible questions for each one. Only when all presentations are made could it be possible to involve the entire class in deliberation sessions, towards the creation and development of a common statement or decision.

During this process, there are two different aspects to be highlighted: taking into account a) the group of students with greater knowledge and involvement with an issue and b) the indifferent or unaware group. Thus, a deliberative educational practice should value the involvement of the first group and stimulate, in these students, a deepening reflection from its own perspective. Regarding the second group, a deliberative education should encourage them to take into consideration that issue. In fact, students generally tend to have some inclination towards any one subject, even if this position is unconscious or poorly grounded (Hanson and Howe, 2011).

In both cases, an action framed from the deliberative perspective will ask students to identify the reasons for their positions, even if the only initial reason is the influence of significant others (parents, friends) on this subject. To answer a simple question: why do I think so? This is how the framework within which students understand the reason behind their own beliefs develops.

The answer to the previous question has a decisive significance: only after identifying the reasons behind the positions they take, an individual may engage in a deliberative process. If it is true that the reason of a certain position could have a moral or affective

nature, this process will allow students to understand that these factors may also be subject to an understanding under rational order parameters.

### **Deliberative dialogue**

In a following moment, having identified the reasons that support their own beliefs about controversial issues, it is important that students learn how to share those beliefs with others. In this process, a key element from a deliberative approach is the willingness to listen to others. And, if students are prepared to understand the basics of their own beliefs (including argumentative relativism associated with their beliefs), they will be easily motivated to listen carefully –to the beliefs of others as well as the arguments associated with them.

Furthermore, as students recognize in themselves the availability to adjust - or even change - their beliefs in better supported arguments, they will also be available to hear the reasons of others, and even counter them with their own. Gutmann and Thompson (1996) related a tendency of individuals to identify arguments of moral order that support each position, making them acceptable from an impersonal perspective. As a result, students will develop a willingness to share beliefs and arguments, moral and rationally sustained. They consider themselves as holding arguments with potential to influence others. By their side, these others similarly must be (or become) available and accessible to external beliefs held rationally.

The importance of exposing oneself to multiple perspectives should be highlighted. From a deliberative point of view, listening means more than the mere audition or

exposition to a sound, to a sentence or to some words. In fact, it entails, in varying degrees, individuals with distinct perspectives, which they can accept or refuse. By comparison with other perspectives, students appraise the possibility - the need - to adjust their own arguments, which remain under evaluation. But also teachers, identifying in the students specific forms of rationality and some distinct and unexpected statements or positions, benefit from them as a singular index of perspectives that should necessary be present in the classroom. This is what Nicholas Longo calls a deliberative pedagogy: 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: 2, 5).

### **Mutual respect and understanding**

We are led to another key aspect of the deliberative practices in the classroom. In fact, one of the goals of civic education in the classroom is to teach *mutual respect*. Let us take as reference the concept of reciprocity, as proposed by Gutmann and Thompson (1996). A key element of reciprocity concept implies that individuals recognize the moral status of the other as a structural condition for any deliberative process (and of all social life, in its general terms). In this case, reciprocity implies that students learn to consider the others as legitimately involved in the presenting of point of views with moral value and rational support – and not as defending purely strategic perspectives. Similarly, students will be able to identify and reject this type of behavior, due to their strong inadequacy to the nature of a deliberative process. During this

process, the teacher must act as a moderator, facilitating deliberation through each group. But students should exercise the same function in each of the smaller groups that emerge.

This type of exercise is crucial for students adopting an attitude of mutual respect. Firstly, there is a need to give each colleague the space for his participation; then, there is the necessity to evaluate the rationality and the merits of his/her arguments; finally, due to the equality conceded to various perspectives and information, it is important to set all the arguments in a new light and review them. As part of living and engaging deliberative democracy, students develop civic virtues like honesty, tolerance, and respect. These virtues are enacted through civic skills like seeking out alternative perspectives, privileging the status of the common good, and achieving fair consensus (Pamental, 1998).

### **Does deliberation work?**

There is a warning sign though: deliberation in larger groups tends to be a painful, difficult and frustrating process. Specifically, it is a process that takes time, as showed some important experiments developed in this area. For this reason, the time-consuming nature of deliberation must be taken into account when scheduling activities of this nature. Nevertheless, the literature on this subject shows that, in essence, students respond favorably to the deliberative processes. As an example, I consider an empirical study carried out in this area by Cole (2013). There, students were invited to share their perspectives on deliberation, and were inquired about the advantages or disadvantages

of it as part of a decision-making process. The study collects some answers in this sense: "deliberation gave me a good opportunity to understand both sides of an argument" or "...it is an effective way to test my own beliefs and to get multiple views on a matter" (ibid: 9).

Another student stated that the advantage of deliberation is to have 20 different perspectives in a discussion, pointed to a collective decision. Finally, another student noticed that deliberation allows the entry of individual concerns in the group's agenda. Only through this, some issues could be considered by all members, and appreciated before reaching any decision or making a collective statement. 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.

Certainly, some students observed how deliberation is not a quick and easy process. A student, quoted by Cole (2013: 9), refers to a "very difficult and time consuming process, but that generates good results." In the same vein, another student said that on the one hand the deliberation is good because it examines all perspectives and sides of one issue, but on the other hand, it wears patience with the time required to carry out its steps. Nevertheless, throughout this processes, 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 (Shaffer, 2014).



**Final remarks**

Certainly, the deliberative ideals could appear a little naive and idyllic, at first. In fact, the real world seems to be better suited to an aggregative conception of democracy than to a deliberative design. In pragmatic terms, it is even legitimate to question whether, in a civic education, students shouldn't learn to act in a political world as it apparently works.

Clogging the previous dilemma, the answer is both yes and no. Civic education is established as an important opportunity not only to learn about the most common political processes, but also to view them through the lens of mutual respect and autonomy. Deliberative democracy is, above all, a normative political theory, developed specifically as an alternative to democratic models of aggregative nature in order to better fit the ideals (not the practices) of democracy. As we noted before, deliberation has the ability to change how those in higher education teach and engage students and communities, but also how we operate as organizations. The capacities acquired stand counter to or are capable of overcoming some of the pressures on democracy to be more individualist and consumer driven and prepare future citizens to delicately deal with the seemingly irreconcilable differences of an increasingly diverse life in society.

As demonstrated above, the purposes of "transposing" the ideals of deliberative democracy to the classroom could be summarized in the development of skills that allow the deepening and the perfecting of democracy - from a healthy and exigent citizenship, and through the training of an ethically responsible discursive. The majority of the previous studies showed that the incorporation of deliberation in the classroom benefits the learning potential of students. As Doherty puts it, "students are not *doing*

*for or learning about*, but rather are engaged in relationships marked by reciprocity” (Doherty, 2012: 25, 26). In addition, research suggests that the activities of the deliberative type (considered as a whole) allows students to learn skills and gain confidence in areas of argumentation, informed discussion and citizenship. So, 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: 55-58).

We believe, at last, that an attempt to better understand the advantages and practical problems of deliberation applications in the classroom is making its first steps yet contains some natural and expected limitations. Above all, is the yet scarce number of systematic experiments and its respective evaluation. The enormous potential of deliberation is obvious: 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 occur (Schaffer, 2014). Similar to other areas of practical application of the deliberative model, research in its application in the classroom should be continued along with the practice and evaluation, gearing towards the construction of general models which can serve as a reference for educators and future research.

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