
Democracy & Education

The Critique of Deliberative Discussion

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Abstract

My response to Samuelsson's (2016) recent essay offers a different paradigm with which to think about education, deliberative discussion and democracy. I call this paradigm the critique of deliberative discussion. Following Ruitenberg's application of Mouffe's critiques of deliberative democracy to education, the critique of deliberative discussion focuses on what Jameson called the "political unconscious" of deliberative discussions like those presented by Samuelsson. There is literature that critique traditionally moderate-liberal notions of deliberative discussion, which Samuelsson defines his typology: reason, willingness to listen, and consensus. While others, like Ruitenberg, have developed this critique of deliberative-democratic citizenship education, the critique of deliberative discussion takes a left-of-liberal view of each of Samuelsson's requirements for deliberative discussion listed above and describes practical-pedagogical techniques, which teachers and facilitators can use to practice critical discussions. This response's contribution to the debate is therefore not only to critique deliberative discussion but also—following Samuelsson—to offer techniques that translate the critique into classroom practice.

This article is in response to:

Samuelsson, M. (2016). Education for deliberative democracy: A typology of classroom discussions. *Democracy & Education*, 24(1), Article 5. Retrieved from <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss1/5>

SAMUELSSON'S (2016) "EDUCATION for Deliberative Democracy: A Typology of Classroom Discussions" is a neat essay. First, the author mapped out criteria for what counts as deliberative democracy in theory, surveying an important field of philosophical and political scholarship. Next, Samuelsson sculpted three requirements out of this theoretical literature, which actual classroom discussions—flesh-and-blood people, learning together—might satisfy or not, making their discussions more or less deliberative-democratic. These three criteria are: (a) the reason-giving requirement wherein different points of view are presented, each of which being underpinned with reasons that participants put forth; (b) the reflective requirement, where participants display a willingness to listen to and think about one another's reasons, as well as revise these reasons if

new information becomes convincing; and (c) the striving for consensus requirement, where participants attempt to formulate compromises given existing disagreements, from which a unanimity may emerge.

Drawing from observation work in the field, Samuelsson (2016) gave concrete examples of discussions that exhibit one or two of the requirements, distinguishing these discussions from the most

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deliberative-democratic discussion, which includes all of them. The essay is neat, in the sense that the pieces of the argument fit together and achieve the stated goal, all within its stated political paradigm. My response in this essay is not to take issue with any given part of Samuelsson's argument per se but to offer another paradigm with which to think about education, discussion, and democracy. I call this paradigm the critique of deliberative discussion. Following Ruitenberg's (2009, 2010) educational application of Chantal Mouffe's (2000a, 2000b, 2005a) critiques of deliberative democracy (and peripherally Dryzek's [2000] critique), the critique of deliberative discussion paradigm will be more critical than Samuelsson's. By critical, I mean to signal an interest in left-of-liberal thinking about language, politics, and education. In a word from Frederic Jameson, the critique of deliberative discussion focuses on the political unconscious of deliberative discussions like those presented by Samuelsson.

Ruitenberg (2009), for instance, drew from Mouffe's critique of Rawlsian deliberative democratic citizenship to critique accounts like Callan's (1997), calling for an education of political adversaries rather than an education for justice as reasonableness. Rather than a deliberative model of democratic education, Mouffe's model is agonistic, revolving around the "dimensions of antagonism inherent in human relations" (Mouffe 2000b, p.15, Ruitenberg 2009, p. 2), out of which Ruitenberg crafted a radical political education. Elsewhere, Ruitenberg (2009) developed a Mouffian response to deliberation that emphasizes affect and fantasy in citizenship education, focusing on communication, though she did not focus specifically on classroom discussion. (Englund [2012, 2016] defended deliberative democratic discussion from such critiques and is relevant to consider as well—see below.) In general, Ruitenberg's engagement with Mouffe critiqued traditionally moderate-liberal notions such as reason, reflection, and consensus in democratic educational theory, and I draw from hers as well as other agonistic resources such as psychoanalysis, critical race theory, and Marxist philosophy of language to critique Samuelsson's three criteria for deliberative classroom discussion. While Ruitenberg's work focused on citizenship, this response follows her paradigm of critique to engage with Samuelsson's literature on classroom discussion.

At least with respect to Samuelsson's (2016) three criteria (reason, willingness to listen, and consensus), following Ruitenberg's critique of citizenship education, it is similarly necessary to articulate critical perspectives on discussion and democracy that do not make the same assumptions that Samuelsson's literature makes, drawing as it does from Rawls, Habermas, Guttman, and Thompson. Doing so can also have practical pedagogical outcomes. In what follows, I aim to sketch a few of the critical theoretical notions mentioned above, drawing from Ruitenberg, the sources mentioned, and matching them with pedagogical techniques when teaching with and for discussion (Parker & Hess, 2001). The sketch presented here of the critique of deliberative discussion is only that, and must be brief. This brief critique of deliberative discussion should be read like a blueprint for a larger project of critiquing moderate-liberal accounts of discussion

which aim at democracy through deliberation. To complete the blueprint, I take each of Samuelsson's requirements, describing a critical-theoretical perspective on each, including responses to such critiques by Englund (2006, 2009, 2012, 2016), and finally recommending a pedagogical technique consistent with the critique.

Giving Reasons

Deliberative discussion's emphasis on giving reasons tends not to mention emotion, by which I mean feelings, desires, drives, affects, and other interior modes/moods that are not conscious, rational, or reasonable. People in discussion feel things as well as think things, and insofar as democracies include flesh-and-blood people rather than minds one-dimensionally wired for giving reasons, it behooves us to consider what those emotions are like during discussion: namely, what is happening for participants unconsciously when they put forth reasons. Ruitenberg (2009) drew from Mouffe's psychoanalytic influences to critique deliberative democracy from this perspective. "As psychoanalysts realized long ago," Ruitenberg wrote, "the suppression of fundamental desires and emotions will not make those desires and emotions disappear, but only defer their manifestation" (p. 3). From this insight, Mouffe worried that repressing desire and emotion can lead to tribalism. When it comes to classroom discussion, though, this deferred manifestation can directly contradict the supposed democratic character of the discussion, but in a different way than Mouffe's worry about tribalism. Theories of discussion like the deliberative-democratic model that advocate the suppression of desires (see Englund below) can overlook monarchical tendencies in group dynamics, no matter how much emphasis teachers place on rational deliberation. To see exactly how this works, I would consult Freud's (1975) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Freud claimed throughout his oeuvre, and in this helpful book in particular, that people in groups are not merely conscious minds pursuing rational interest. They also have an unconscious inner lives that inform their behavior. These unconscious lives are driven by love, desire, and sexuality. Freud noted some trends in how psyches (conscious minds and unconscious inner lives) operate when they get together in groups. One thing psyches do is fall in love, become attached, and project previous love-loss experiences onto others in the world, particularly those with authority. When several psyches, like students, do this together with the same person, like a teacher in a classroom, the psyches become partially hypnotized by the person in charge, which alters the way they think and react. Student psyches can tend to treat the teacher like a parent figure, desiring the teacher or identifying with them or rejecting them. The students then treat one another like siblings (see Britzman, 2003). Reason has very little to do with this process and, if left unchecked, can quickly create a monarchical classroom politics where the teacher is a king-father (Backer, forthcoming).

Giving a reason is never as simple as giving a reason, and democracy is different than monarchy. To have democracy in the classroom discussion, while taking students' emotional life into consideration, the teacher should redirect students' emotional tendencies toward the classroom *demos*, or its people rather than a

singular leader. In other words, teachers should encourage students to talk to one another more than with the teacher themselves. Englund (2012) wrote that the critique-from-emotion against deliberative democratic classroom discussion is misplaced, however. He did recognize that the “role of rational, ideal conversation might work as an instrument of power for the teacher” (p. 4). He cited Bernstein and made a Deweyan move away from traditional distinctions between reason and emotion, claiming that deliberative-democratic classroom discussion should be founded on an embodied intelligence.

Yet the Deweyan sidestep is more of a repression than a solution. Calling for embodied intelligence and asking us to collapse the difference between reason and emotion are insufficient responses to Freud’s theory of the unconscious. Ignoring the unconscious has more than theoretical consequences: It has practical consequences in classroom. Monarchical tendencies in classroom discussion have been born out in the research on distorted classroom discussion, which the deliberative-democratic tradition rarely mentions. If educational discourse analysts from 1968 until 2003 are to be believed, the majority of allegedly democratic discussions in United States classrooms may actually be monarchical recitations precisely because students focus on teachers more than one another (Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zesler, & Long, 2001). Emphasizing student-to-student interaction to facilitate against their unconscious investment of the teacher with monarchical power is only one of a suite of considerations regarding the ways power can complicate reason-giving in discussion, but considering the unconscious lives of discussion participants as they put forth reasons while encouraging reason-giving can help to avoid the distortion of discussion into recitation (Backer, 2014).

How can teachers do this, exactly? Harkness pedagogy is a helpful resource (Backer, 2015). One technique Harkness teachers use to get students focusing on one another rather than only the teacher is writing down everything that students say. If a teacher is busy writing down student comments, then they cannot make suggestive eye contact, respond immediately, or otherwise dominate the discussion and become classroom monarchs. Taking copious notes extends wait time, makes the teacher’s attention unavailable for emotional and intellectual dependence, and focuses the teacher’s attention on students’ own words. Another technique is the check-in. At the beginning of a discussion, students should somehow (with a partner or to the whole class or to themselves) say their names and how they are feeling. Engaging with students’ emotions explicitly at the beginning of a discussion can correct the sometimes unconscious forces that drive reason-giving during discussion, something deliberative discussion tends to leave out of the picture (Backer, 2016).

Willingness to Listen

Samuelsson’s (2016) reflective requirement entails a willingness to listen to others’ reasons in discussion. But not all students and teachers will be willing to listen to one another equally: They may be sexist, racist, classist, xenophobic, homophobic, ableist, or otherwise discriminatory against one another’s identities.

Deliberative democracy tends to downplay how racialized, classed, and gendered identities prevent harmonious interaction, rarely mentioning that it may be difficult for a man to listen to a woman putting forth reasons, or difficult for a White person to listen to a Black person putting forth reasons, a trans person to a cis person, and vice versa. Solnit (2014) has popularized the term *mansplaining* to refer to the way men speak in privileged ways, for instance, and conversation analysts have demonstrated the many ways gender influences speech habits (Tannen, 1993). Often, advocates of deliberative democracy like Englund reduce these critiques to identity politics. But this is misleading. As Ruitenberg (2010) pointed out, “liberalism, in its emphasis on the individual, has underestimated the importance of belonging to collectivities” (p. 3). Focusing solely on the individual is a predictable move for liberal-deliberative theories. What they call identity is also group membership, and people who participate in discussions belong to collectivities whose habits, epistemologies, and histories can diverge dramatically—even to the point where it is difficult to listen to people who belong to different collectivities, particularly oppressor collectivities.

Hooks (2003) has described how people from her African American and lower-class background did not talk the same way as upper-class White students at Stanford University. As a professor, she noticed that her students discriminated against certain raced and classed forms of talking:

I have found that students from upper-and-middle class backgrounds are disturbed if heated exchange take place in the classroom. Many of them equate loud talk or interruptions with rude and threatening behavior. Yet those of us from working-class [and African-American] backgrounds may feel that discussion is deeper and richer if it arouses intense responses . . . Few of us are taught to facilitate heated discussions that may include useful interruptions and digressions, but it is often the professor who is most invested in maintaining order in the classroom. (p.148)

Hooks highlighted two sites where identity makes it difficult to be willing to listen given the racial and class positions of discussion participants. The first site is the student-student exchange. Upper-class students may be “disturbed” by working-class speech patterns, equating it with “rude and threatening behavior.” If a student feels threatened or offended because of class differences in speech, it will be difficult for that person to be willing to listen to whatever reasons that speech puts forth. The second site is the teacher-student exchange. What a teacher perceives as an interruption or digression or disruption, for instance, may be a racial or classed pattern of speech that is earnestly, in its distinctive style, putting forth reasons. If the teacher is not willing to listen to that kind of talking, then a willingness to listen fails. In addition to commenting on her students as a teacher, hooks also elaborated on how her university classroom was not a welcoming place for her to express herself when she was a student, and teachers must be cognizant of the ways they and their students discriminate against certain ways of speaking that are raced, classed, and gendered.

How to do this? Progressive stack is one discussion tactic from Occupy Wall Street that addresses this problem of exclusion in communication. Ask participants to raise their hands before speaking and then write their names down on a list. This list is the “stack.” Participants who identify as belonging to historically privileged groups (White, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis-gendered, middle-class men) make sure to let others who do not identify with such historically privileged groups speak before the former. Rather than a universalist approach to deliberation where all are equals, using progressive stack takes a reparations approach to deliberation. Students with traditionally marginalized heritages have not historically had the opportunities to express and develop their thinking in discussions, particularly in higher education contexts. The progressive stack redresses this historical imbalance. Of course, classrooms are different spaces than social movements like Occupy Wall Street. Teachers should use the progressive stack alongside clear preparation and scaffolding, including workshop activities that set a groundwork for understanding gender and racial privilege as it operates in communication. I like to use McIntosh’s (1988) “Knapsack of White Privilege,” along with practicing I-statements that encourage students to communicate both feelings and reasons in reaction to points made during discussion.

While liberals like Englund (2012) have claimed that teachers should “hesitate in promoting” such “passionate” considerations of identity (p. 4), critical educators like hooks know that such considerations must be part of pedagogy to counter-interpellate the layers of violent injustice enacted by governments and economies against diverse groups. What is “suitable” for Englund looks to critical educators like a call for a politics of respectability in classroom discussion.

Consensus

Like reason and willingness to listen, consensus is vulnerable to critique from the left as well. Ruitenberg generally has oriented her engagement with Mouffe’s critique of deliberative democracy around agonism, or the antagonism constitutive of human societies. Mouffe’s pluralist politics leads to a radical-democratic form of citizenship education, an agonistic approach including “those types of conflict that would put into question the basic institutions of democracy (Mouffe 2005a, p. 120, in Ruitenberg 2009, p. 6) and the fundamental ‘ethico-political’ principles of liberal democracy” (Mouffe 2005a, p.32, Ruitenberg, p. 6). While Ruitenberg has proposed three areas for political education rooted in Mouffe’s approach, classroom discussion is not one of them. It would be not a stretch of the imagination to infer that consensus-seeking deliberative discussion is inconsistent with the agonistic approach, or at least the critique of deliberative democracy. To develop this inference further and extend Ruitenberg’s proposals for a radical-democratic education to classroom discussion, one avenue to explore is the way consensus supports what Lyotard (1984) called metanarratives.

Habermas’s (1975) writings have contained, as Samuelsson (2016) noted, a hallmark theory of consensus-seeking deliberation. Lyotard’s (1984) *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* is,

among other things, a response to Habermas’s argument about consensus-seeking speech acts during deliberation in *Legitimation Crisis*. One of postmodernism’s founding texts, Lyotard’s book focuses on language games, Wittgenstein’s metaphor for ordinary speech. Lyotard reminded us that language games have rules but argued that these rules are determined by powerful interests. There is a general agonistics in communication, he claimed, a large-scale struggle among competing social forces, over which language-game rules should be followed in discourse. This general agonistics happens in political campaigns, commercials, news media, and classrooms as well. Who decides what is a sensible thing to say, for instance? Where do the terms of debate, presuppositions, and questions come from in classroom discussions? Lyotard has claimed these nuts and bolts of discourse—the very words we use—derive from metanarratives, big-picture stories, and ways of thinking about social life. The metanarratives at work in the school’s wider social context tend to set the table for discussion (though participants can be creative with what they find on the table). For Lyotard, the economic metanarrative of postindustrial and financial capitalism decides at least some of the rules of the language game we play in classrooms. Maybe these rules can be put on the table and examined in the classroom through the right kind of discussion. However, consensus-seeking discussions may not be that kind of metanarrative-examining discussion. Looking for consensus may yield the kind of ideological resonance that leaves the general agonistics over language-game rules hidden from view, and permits those with power to win the struggle by default. Uncritical consensus-seeking can be like forfeiting a competition to secure one’s vision of the world.

Englund (2012) chastised such critiques of consensus, however, as being unjust. Making reference to Erman (2009), Englund claimed that “deliberation [is] constitutive of conflict, i.e. starting from different, struggling views,” (p. 4). To Englund, who has cited Habermas and Guttman, deliberative discussions are constituted by “different views . . . confronted with one another [where] arguments for these different views are given time and space to be articulated and presented in the classroom” (p. 3). While discussants may have differing perspectives, and these perspectives can conflict with one another in discussion, Englund missed the point of the critiques of consensus. People who confront social struggles and participate in discussions are different than people whose perspectives confront one another in discussion. The latter is an intra-discussive feature: It is an aspect of the perspectives at play during any given discussion, namely whether these perspectives are in agreement or not. Thinking only about the confrontation of different positions during deliberation, in a classically liberal way, puts out of sight the material conditions of discussants’ existences and the extra-discussive social forces that impact (and can be impacted by) their discussion. Conflicting views that confront one another during discussion may be a certain kind of “struggle,” but it is very different than the ways discussants themselves live with class conflict as workers, racial struggle as people of color, and gender oppression as women and queer folk. Lyotard’s point is that such struggles determine the rule of language games that speakers play, which Englund’s

response did not address. Rancière's (1995, 2015) work on dissensus is a helpful resource here. Rancière's idea of democracy casts the *demos* as a disruptive problem for existing social forces. In Rancière's terms, consensus-seeking talk will probably not disrupt what is sensible to say. Disrupting existing social forces requires dissensus rather than a perpetual attempt to agree. The kind of deliberative discussion Samuelsson advocates may fit into this nondisruptive category.

How to question metanarratives in classroom discussion? The Brazilian philosopher of education Walter O. Kohan practices a pedagogical technique called collective questioning that permits a disruption of the sensible and does not seek consensus, but rather holds questions and tensions during the discussion. At the start of a discussion, ask students to go around and offer a question about the text or subject matter. It is important to only permit questions rather than comments or arguments. Next, write these questions down so that the group can see them clearly. Then, as a group, everyone (teacher included) thinks about connections between these questions. Then the teacher may ask, "Which question should we start with?" or "Who would like to begin?" Haroutunian-Gordon (2014) practices a similar kind of questioning for discussions where students interpret literature. This kind of collective questioning prioritizes questioning for its own sake, tension, and *aporia* rather than consensus, compromise, or decision-making.

Language Is Ideology

In general, the critique of deliberative discussion follows the same path as Ruitenberg's critique of deliberative-democratic citizenship education. Just as Mouffé's agonistic approach to democracy is a critical alternative to Rawls's and Habermas's deliberative tradition, the critique of deliberative discussion is a critical alternative to the deliberative tradition of classroom discussion attributed to Guttman, Thompson, and Englund. The critique of deliberative discussion takes a different paradigmatic approach to language and its relationship to politics. One way to think about the critique of deliberative discussion is by placing a new emphasis on ideology and language. Rather than thinking of language as a mode of communication through which, if practiced in a certain way, individuals can make informed decisions about controversial issues—that is, as nonideological speech—the critique of deliberative discussion holds that all language is ideological. What is said, thought, and heard registers participants' imagined relations to real social conditions, and these imagined relations are alive and at work during discussion, rather than bracketed. The ideological quality of discussion may be unconscious; it may operate through identity and difference among participants; or it may operate in the rules of language games established by metanarratives that set the table for discussion. Elaborating how language is ideological, the French Marxist philosopher Jacques Lecercle (2006) gave the example of "the cat is on the mat," a sentence used in books that teach young children about grammar. An example of a sentence that appears not to have any political quality, "the cat is on the mat" is actually rich in connotations, setting its speaker and listener within an

institution—i.e. a relationship of places ("we lay down the rules of grammar here [at school]" . . .) and hence a power relation. It imposes on both of them the self-evidence of its transparency (which is a symptom of ideology in the traditional pejorative sense of the term), starting with the child who must copy it, illustrate it, and learn it by heart at school. This sentence clearly illustrates that ideology is language and language ideology; it is the product of a collective assemblage of enunciation (it does not—and never will—have an author); it has served to interpellate generations of school kids as speakers. (Lecercle 2006, p. 172)

Even the most apparently apolitical utterances set speakers within institutions and power relations just by saying them, like between students who unconsciously project monarchical powers onto teachers. These allegedly apolitical sentences, particularly in classrooms, always imply commands, and impose the kind of self-evidence and transparency which accompanies ideology (like metanarratives). Whenever students and teachers sit down to have a discussion, their sentences are laced with ideological meanings, couched in ideological imperatives, and layered with ideological histories.

Defending the deliberative discussion from such critiques, Englund's (2012) imperative is for teachers and students to "learn 'to live educationally,' to continuously reconstruct our experiences, using the results of that experience to shape subsequent experiences" (p. 8). For Englund, living educationally requires three things: first, using "deliberative communication first to create a deeper learning [such] that the learners themselves verbalise their arguments and their knowing" (p.8); second, creating "a sense of community at different levels, both within the classroom and in relation to the greater society which the school class is a part of" (p.8); third, developing students' "judgement ability" in navigating the fact/value distinction (p.8). (These come from Englund's comments in response to Ruitenberg. For more on Englund's position itself, see Englund 2006, Englund 2009, and Englund 2016.) Yet in each case, there is no awareness that language—the very stuff of deliberation—is soaked in ideology. Imagined relations to real social conditions are embedded in arguments and knowing, shapes our understanding of the school's relationship to society, and constructs teachers' and students' abilities to judge. Deliberation is shot through with ideological meanings that present in discussions which deliberative-democratic theories of classroom discussion rarely acknowledge. Even the most apparently apolitical utterances come from somewhere—words themselves are social entities without single authors—and then go on to interpellate speakers and listeners. Deliberative discussions such as those elaborated by Samuelsson (2016) do not think of language as ideological in this way. On the other hand, the critique of deliberative discussion takes language as ideological (just as Ruitenberg's Mouffian critique of citizenship takes democracy as agonistic), holding that unconscious drives, identities, and metanarratives are at work in classroom discussion.

Conclusion

The purpose of this response paper is make another paradigm of thinking available to readers interested in thinking about

classroom discussion and democracy. Samuelsson's (2016) essay has provenance in the Rawlsian and Habermasian traditions of deliberative democracy, articulated by Guttman, Thompson, and Englund, which prioritize giving reasons, willingness to listen, and consensus as hallmarks of deliberative discussion in the classroom. This neat formulation is just one paradigm of thinking about what is at stake democratically during classroom discussion. Another paradigm, which I have called the critique of deliberative discussion, offers a different perspective following Ruitenberg's work on radical democratic citizenship. The critique of deliberative discussion highlights the unconscious and emotional lives of participants in discussion, how drives and desires can influence the democratic quality of interaction while giving of reasons. The critique names the tensions among identities in discussion, specifically the way race, class, and gender undermine participants' willingness to listen to one another during discussion. Finally, the critique of deliberative discussion understands consensus in the context of a general agonistics over the rules of language games, acknowledging how metanarratives set the table for discussion, guiding what counts as a legitimate and sensible statement during classroom discussion. In general, the critique of deliberative discussion holds that language is ideological and that therefore classroom discussion is enmeshed in political struggle. Techniques and practices such as the Harkness pedagogy, check-ins, progressive stack, and collective questioning can help teachers practice the critical paradigm. The techniques help us walk the walk that the critique of deliberative discussion recommends. Speaking from my own experience as a teacher, these techniques can create a tangibly different kind of democracy in the classroom. When teaching with the critique of deliberative discussion, democracy becomes a radically participatory activity engaging students' desires, struggles with identity, and focuses on dissensus and disrupting problematic consensus in society rather. Democracy in this paradigm is a *demos*, and the critique of deliberative democracy makes space for this *demos* in classroom discussion.

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