
Democracy & Education

Open, Risky, and Antioppressive: Hope for an Agonistic Deliberative Model

Matthew Thomas-Reid (Appalachian State University)

Abstract

First, I review the context for the need of new deliberative models, specifically agonistic deliberative models, for public discourse and for use in training students for public discourse. I then highlight five specific points that I trouble and enrich, principally through the work of Giroux, Arendt, Biesta, and Duarte. While I agree that there is great value in Lo's description of the agonistic deliberative model, I advocate for what Biesta would call a weaker model of deliberation, one that sets the conditions for transformative education but one that does not act as an instrument for it.

This article is in response to

Lo, J. C. (2017). Empowering young people through conflict and conciliation: Attending to the political and agonism in democratic education. *Democracy & Education*, 25(1), 1–9.
Available at: <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol25/iss1/2/>.

IN A TIME and place where public dialogue is both waning yet critically important for the future of the democratic project, Lo has done an excellent job of explicating the context for the need of new deliberative models, specifically agonistic deliberative models, for public discourse and for use in training students for public discourse. The debate on how citizens ought to engage in democratic discourse in a pluralistic society is nuanced, and for this reason, it is salient to consider at least briefly the historical background of democratic discourse that leads us to our current concern. Lo positioned her argument in the context of the deliberative models of democratic discussion developed principally by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose notion of deliberative democracy signaled a significant shift in contemporary discussion of political debate (Lubenow, 2012, p. 58). Habermas was interested in what Cohen (1997) called “collective decisions of the members of a society” but then further considered precisely what it takes for a decision to be collective (p. 407).

Habermas's work moved contemporary debates away from traditional democratic discourse focusing on aggregative, or procedural, democracy to a form of discourse that is not exclusively procedural, one which he referred to as deliberative democracy (Cohen, 1997, p. 411–412). Rather than relying on procedural solutions to conflict, Habermas advocated for what Cohen (1997) called “political justification,” or “free public reasoning among equals” (p. 412). The desired outcome of this public reasoning or deliberation is that once a decision has been made in deliberation, participants “are prepared to cooperate in accordance with the results of such discussion, treating those results as authoritative” (Cohen, 1997, p. 413).

MATTHEW THOMAS-REID (he/him/his) is assistant professor of educational foundations at Appalachian State University. His research interests include philosophy of education, social justice education, and queer theory/pedagogy.

It was at this point that Lo posited yet another pivot, this time away from this deliberative model to that of an agonistic one. The author opened by discussing the very conflicts that arise from pluralistic democracy that I mentioned earlier, and suggested that not only is this pluralism inherently divisive but conflict is in fact productive in a pluralistic society. Lo went on, through an analysis of Habermas, Rawls, Arendt, and Schmitt, to contrast the Habermasian deliberative model with the agonistic one. Lo elucidated the agonistic model through an analysis of the work of Arendt and Schmitt; Lo argued that both embrace unresolved conflict in such a way as to suggest this agonistic deliberative approach. Lo then described in greater detail this agonistic model, its benefits and conditions, and then ended with two useful concrete examples.

I hope with my paper to extend the dialogue of this critically important work through highlighting a few specific points that I trouble and enrich, principally through the work of Giroux (2011), Arendt (1959), Biesta (2014), and Duarte (2001). I suggest five principle areas worth troubling for further exploration. I aim to conclude that a conceptualization of agonistic deliberation would benefit from a weak, noninstrumentalist approach, which I develop further in this paper.

While I agree that there is great value in Lo's description of the agonistic deliberative model, I advocate for a weaker model of deliberation, based on Biesta's notion of weak education, a model that sets the conditions for transformative education but one that does not act as an instrument for it. To that end, I have highlighted areas that I explore to the end of developing a richer dialogue around the notion of agonism. First, I provide a deeper analysis of how emotion is treated in the article; then I explore what is meant by public and political in this context, followed by an exploration of transformation, the conditions for transformation, and the potential for oppression in agonism.

Emotion

Lo (2017) stated, "Strong emotive structures . . . may be at the root of conflicts," and further that these emotions have significant value in democratic discourse (p. 5). I wonder, however, if we might explore emotion a bit further and tease out two pieces that deserve further consideration. First, consider the relationship between emotion, rationality, and legitimacy. Lo (2017) wrote, "Students may feel like strangers are only willing to listen and talk about the issues that are rational, rather than to listen to and validate their feelings on difficult issues that are incommensurable with societal norms" (p. 5). My concern here is that it could be read that those with marginal viewpoints are not rational; rather, they are emotional. While it is true that "emotional" doesn't have to be read as "irrational," it is a critical point that the emotions of the marginal do not need validation, as they are already valid. The notion alludes to Delpit's (2006) description of a "paternalism" that suggests that certain marginal groups must "be given voice" (p. 19). Giroux (2011) further suggested that within this paternalism we favor only "meanings, abilities, language forms, and tastes that are directly or indirectly defined by dominant groups as socially legitimate" (p. 22).

While I agree with the author that emotion should not be quelled in the classroom, I suggest a cautionary note: Rather than

simply conceptualizing emotional response as an outlet for marginal groups, we might also allow for the potentiality that listening to the Other might actually teach us something tangible from these emotional responses. As Shapiro (2006) pointed out in *Loosing Heart: The Moral and Spiritual Miseducation of America's Children*, "We must develop the capacity for compassionate attentiveness to the words of the other" (p. 161). This is important because while Shapiro clearly pointed out that "people's identification with a particular point of view is, first, a matter of our emotional connections to it," what ultimately mattered to him was an attentiveness to the words of the Other (p. 161). For this reason, it seems prudent to reiterate that emotion is valuable; it ought not be seen as replacing the need for listening to the words of those who are marginalized (p. 161).

The second concern in relation to emotion involves its usefulness; while I agree with Lo (2017) in her validation of emotion as both acceptable in discourse and potentially fruitful, it is the insinuation that emotion might be fashioned as instrumentalist that seems problematic. Certainly to allow space for the honest and organic expression of emotion is legitimate, but then "to [mobilize] those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs" seems a bit like using emotion as a means to an end, thus instrumentalizing a basic aspect of the human condition (Mouffe, cited in Lo, 2017, p. 6). In addition to the verb *mobilize*, twice the author used the word *channel* in reference to emotional conflict. Once Lo suggested to "channel that conflict positively, as opposed to minimizing or eliminating the conflict rationally," and the second mention of the word was when the author suggested channeling these conflicts for productive ends (pp. 5–6). I am left worrying that this approach risks dissolving "theory into utility" (Giroux, 2011, p. 33). Indeed, even as Lo laid out two agonistic strategies at the end, it seems this focus on "technique" might further serve to objectify and devalue the emotional response themselves (Giroux, 2011, p. 20). A further concern related to this instrumentalism is taken up in the following section, where I consider the implications of what these instruments might be designed to accomplish.

The Public, the Private, and the Political

Lo (2017) was clearly concerned with a waning of the public sphere of dialogue (p. 3). The withdrawal from the public world into the private is cause for concern, and Lo made an impactful point here. Lo (2017), quoting Rawls, noted that public spaces in this sense are places where individuals can "practice public reason," and where "they create the political 'from shared fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture'" (p. 4). Two distinct issues come to mind at this point. First, students are becoming "isolated in an increasingly individualized world or socialized into their own segregated communities" (Lo, 2017, p. 8). This segregation takes the form of communities of faith, thought, and action. Further, Lo (2017) made a second point that this manifests in a rise in the "privatization of schools, universities, and political processes," making this need to reclaim public spaces "for the political" of critical importance (p. 8).

While there is much in these notions that are of critical importance, it is vital to point out that the public and the political

are terms that might need further examination. First, while Lo developed understanding of the political and the public from the work of Arendt, the article did not make mention that Arendt (1959), in “Reflections on Little Rock,” made a stark statement about children and the political and public spheres:

The conflict between a segregated home and a desegregated school, between family prejudice and school demands, abolishes at one stroke both the teachers’ and the parents’ authority, replacing it with the rule of public opinion among children who have neither the ability nor the right to establish a public opinion of their own (p. 56)

Contextually, it is important to note that Arendt here was speaking specifically of the American civil rights movement school integration, and she believed rather strongly that children of color in this instance were being used as political pawns when they had no business being in the public or political forum. This raises an important query: Are public schools really public forums at all, or are they are in fact only simulations of the public world? If the latter is true, should they be treated as such and not approached in quite the political fashion that one might a public space?

To be clear, I am not arguing that education is not political or even that there is nothing political that happens in the classroom. Clearly this is not true; from curricular biases, gerrymandered districts, hidden curricula, and systemic racism, it is demonstrably true that schooling is already intensely politicized. However, if we return to Arendt’s (1959) notion of *vita activa*, there might be a distinction to be made between the political aspects of school and having students “do” politics. The active doing of politics is, for Arendt, a public and specifically adult endeavor.

But I do think that there is something to be said for the simulation of the public, and the examples that Lo provided might well serve as this type of simulation, but with a caveat: The simulation is not a place to act, but to practice acting, and then reflect critically on this action. In the words of Duarte (2001), referencing Arendt, “thinking is a solitary, apolitical endeavor that happens apart from political affairs of everyday life” (p. 210). If democratic education is to flourish, surely allowing students space to think becomes a cornerstone of practice, especially following an agonistic simulation. Otherwise, one cannot move from acting (or simulating an act) to thinking on that act in order to enrich and develop meaning.

With that in mind, we come now to a critical delineation between the personal space and the public life in the classroom. If, as Duarte (2001) stated, “thinking, properly speaking, cannot occur when one is ‘in the world,’” we ought not force students to make public utterances on their thinking about social justice concerns in all contexts (p. 216). This directly challenges what Duarte (2001) called “models of learning that leave no room for ‘inner speech,’ and, thus, appear to ‘infantilize’ students by requiring them to constantly ‘speak their minds’” (p. 207). Using what Duarte (2001) called a pedagogy of contemplation, the pedagogue might “echo the voice of the Delphic Oracle and exhort students to ‘stop and think’ in order to take up the most challenging yet pressing of learning assignments: know thyself” (p. 216). The social justice project in classroom spaces then becomes one of

contemplative thinking about students’ prejudices and hatred without the threat of aggression present in public discourse, understanding that the “activity of thinking [as opposed to public debating] is among the conditions that make [people] abstain from evil doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it” (Duarte, 2001, p. 220).

This thinking cannot occur in “public,” or specifically around others. As Duarte (2001) went on to say, “The need to withdraw from the company of others and, thereby, to ‘stop and think’ is . . . an integral part of the human condition” (p. 202). To conclude this section, I would reiterate that the teacher that uses agonism ought to potentially consider two key ideas. First, that the use of this public discourse style ought to be used in simulation only, and second, there should be the opportunity to “clear some discursive space for the articulation of alternative pedagogical models” that give space for reflective thinking on the political simulation (p. 207).

Transformation and Oppression

The next point that I explore is that of the truth of oppression. Lo (2017) certainly demonstrated that there is pedagogical value in agonism, and I see this as principally preparing students for the public world, that they might not withdraw from the world of political discourse. Lo, however, suggested that agonistic deliberation can “transform” students, and it is this notion that I trouble in this section. Lo elaborated about this transformative understanding by suggesting that:

Instead of having students engage in political tolerance, which sets aside differences temporarily to logically consider the rights available to everyone, agonism asks students to transform their ideas about the world. Instead of just putting their difference on hold for the sake of human rights, the agonistic process encourages students to challenge their own positionalities (as well as one another’s positions) in the conflict. (p. 6)

In the midst of what Shapiro (2006) called “a culture that emphasizes a ‘cool insensitivity’ to the feelings of others,” students might be transformed through a method of agnostic deliberation (p. 161). The concern here is that in this agonistic model, even if much might be learned about respecting the rules of engagement and public dignity, it seems difficult to imagine agonistic discourse transforming someone. A part of the problem here comes from the fact that the teacher seems to be more facilitator or midwife of the process and therefore not actively exposing students to truths about privilege and oppression. Certainly a topic might present opportunities to engage around issues of social justice, but it doesn’t seem as though this is guaranteed to occur. As Bettez, Black, Conley, and Ezzell (2008) wrote in “Social Justice Activist Teaching in the University Classroom,” “Education that does not address issues of privilege and oppression is not transformative education . . . [and] avoiding issues of power and inequality allows students to continue to believe prevalent myths” (p. 283).

While I understand that an agonistic deliberative model is conceived to give power to the marginalized and develop transformation, it seems that without some sense of value placed on

issues of power, privilege, oppression, and inequality, a model that lets students get there from agonistic deliberation seems almost an attempt by the teacher to develop detachment, or even neutrality. On the one hand, Lo (2017) wrote that traditional deliberative models might leave the marginalized with “feelings of disempowerment [that] may be entrenched further by a deliberative framework that hopes to leave students with a ‘feel good’ or ‘everyone is a winner’ perception” (p. 5). I see how traditional deliberative models might do this, but I am unsure that the agonistic model is demonstrably different in this regard. With this in mind, I cite Lo again, this time speaking about agonistic deliberation: “Agonistic deliberation, on the other hand, would take great care to validate students’ perspectives no matter how bizarre, jarring, or irrational they may seem” (p. 7). A problem arising here is that validating students’ perspectives, no matter how bizarre, seems very similar to the “everybody is a winner” way of thinking. I suspect that Lo saw agonistic deliberation as more specifically validating marginalized students’ perspectives, but still this seems to be leaving the situation value free. Were these agonistic deliberations coupled with explicit discussions of power, privilege, oppression, and inequality then we might be able to realize Macedo’s (1994) vision that “we must first read the world—the cultural, social, and political practices that constitute it—before we can make sense of the word level description of reality” (p. 27). Specifically, without a working understanding of these kinds of concepts, the experiences of marginal communities might continue to seem distant, vague, and unintelligible, even in the midst of agonistic deliberation.

Finally, in this section, I want to critically consider the very notion of transformation. While it seems a bit of a paradox, the experience of education might be transformative yet becomes more difficult when educational models seek to transform. When describing an emancipatory teaching experience in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991) pointed out that the teacher “had transmitted nothing. He had not used any method. The method was purely the student’s” (p. 14). In contrast, Lo (2017) made clear in this article that there is a goal in mind for this agonistic deliberation and that the techniques explored are instruments for achieving “future transformation—transformation of how everyone in the class perceives their realities” (p. 7). To trouble this idea, I turn to philosopher Gert Biesta (2014), who, in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, pointed out that “transformation can never be driven from the perspective of the self and its desires, but always requires engagement with what or who is other” (p. 3). Could agonistic deliberation allow for the possibility of transformation by the Other? Certainly, but I think that transformation involves always a risk, and positioning transformation as something that can be accomplished through a model seeks to eliminate the risk inherent in the transformative pedagogical event.

Creating Conditions for Transformation

How can we provide the conditions for the kind of transformative experience agonistic deliberation has the potential of being? I pose this question because there are some tacit assumptions that need

unpacking to understand how groundwork might be set to make this agonism function. Lo (2017) wrote, quoting Mouffe:

Agonism anticipates to face and struggle with a dissimilar adversary. This distinction is important because “an adversary is a legitimate enemy, an enemy with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy.” (p. 6)

I highlight this passage because I wonder if the conditions are typically set to make this happen. I certainly agree that it is possible to set the conditions for a shared adhesion to these principles, but also I argue that it cannot never be assumed as a given. This is particularly true in light of the fact that we, as a culture, have difficulty even developing a clear definition of freedom (Greene, 1988, p. 19). Given the structural disconnect between signs like freedom and their significations, I turn to back to the philosopher Gert Biesta (2014), who argued that “the teacher not only needs to give the learner the truth, but also needs to give the learner ‘the condition of recognizing it as truth’” (p. 50 Quoting Kierkegaard). Biesta, in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, outlined an approach whereby there is a focus on the conditions-that-might-lead-to as opposed to a formula-for-the-development-of. Biesta (2014) referred to this distinction as “weak” versus “strong” education (p. 11). In this conceptualization, the teacher still oversees an act of creation, or “an act of bringing something new into the world, something that did not exist before” (Biesta, 2014, p. 11). The difference is that in the weak form of creation, the focus is on the conditions that allow for creation; by extension then, we might think of developing a weak deliberation as setting the conditions that allow for a democratic transformation during agonistic deliberation. Applying aspects of Biesta’s weakness in education to deliberative models would see agonistic models allowing for the very risk that might actually result in transformative learning experiences, without envisioning a specific end result. In short, we cannot simulate encounters with the Other that produce transformative experiences; rather, we might envision creating spaces that empower the marginalized Other to share their experiences without expecting a particular result.

Conclusion: Deliberation without Oppression

In a final point, I want to leave a caution about existential reality in the process of agonism. Lo’s (2017) notion of validating the narratives of marginal groups is extremely powerful, and I am in total agreement that “rather than providing only rational evidence to logically back up their assertions, students can provide anecdotal stories or experiences that give rise to their thinking” (p. 8). This resonates because it really does speak to the classic feminist statement that the personal becomes political. However, there is a cautionary point here, and I think that it comes from the flip side of this argument. Everything that is allowed for with marginal groups will become fair game for those with oppressive viewpoints, and this is somewhat alarming, as I have witnessed firsthand in my classrooms that students often have a great deal of emotionally charged and anecdotal evidence to justify racism, homophobia, patriarchy, and other troubling ideas. It is true that “peoples’ identification with a particular point of view is, first, a matter of our

emotional connections to it” and that “one must start by acknowledging that one’s own perspective is a story that might occlude, distort, or silence the experience of the other” (Shapiro, 2006, pp. 160–161). If we take these to be true, then agonistic deliberation perhaps risks the further marginalization of certain groups by legitimizing racist, sexist, and other bigoted points of view. This is why, when developing conditions for the agonistic deliberative event, it is critical to allow for risk and therefore leave the project open but also to create conditions that at least minimize the likelihood of aggressions against marginalized and vulnerable populations. Yes, agonistic deliberative models of pedagogy are needed to strengthen democratic debate, but care must be taken to execute a weaker model of deliberation: one that sets the conditions for transformative education, does not act as an instrument for it, and is at its core antioppressive.

References

- Arendt, H. (1959). *Reflections on Little Rock*. Retrieved from Congregation Beth Shalom: <http://bethsholomf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Reflections-on-Little-Rock.pdf>
- Bettez, S. C., Black, W. R., Conley, R., & Ezzell, M. (2008). Social justice activist teaching in the university classroom. In S. C. Bettez (Ed.), *Unsettling beliefs: Teaching theory to teachers* (pp. 273–296). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Biesta, G. J. (2014). *The beautiful risk of education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cohen, J. (1997). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In J. Bohman & W. Rehg (Eds.), *Deliberative democracy: Essays on reason and politics* (pp. 67–92). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people’s children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Duarte, E. (2001). The eclipse of thinking: An Arendtian critique of cooperative learning. In M. Gordon (Ed.), *Hannah Arendt and education: Renewing our common world* (pp. 201–224). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Giroux, H. (2011). *On critical pedagogy*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lo, J. C. (2017). Empowering young people through conflict and conciliation: Attending to the political and agonism in democratic education. *Democracy & Education*, 25(1), 1–9.
- Lubenow, J. A. (2012). Public sphere and deliberative democracy in Jürgen Habermas: Theoretical model and critical discourses. *American Journal of Sociological Research*, 2(4), 58–71.
- Macedo, D. (1994). *Literacies of power: What Americans are not allowed to know*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rancière, J. (1991). *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Shapiro, H. S. (2006). *Losing heart: The moral and spiritual miseducation of America’s children*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.