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Deliberation or Simulated Deliberation?

Peter Levine (Tisch College, Tufts University)

Abstract

The work of Crocco and her colleagues, "Deliberating Public Policy Issues with Adolescents," combines two important fields—deliberative democracy and discussion as a pedagogy—with a study of policy deliberations in three classrooms. Their article yields valuable insights. As the authors note, the results are disappointing. This may be because the students were not actually asked to deliberate, if "deliberation" means discussing in order to make a decision. After all, the students could not decide US policy on immigration. Their discussion was a kind of simulated deliberation. Evidence suggests that we may see better results from real deliberations that occur within student-led voluntary associations or from simulated deliberations in which the students role-play powerful decision-makers, rather than playing themselves in a discussion that has no political impact.

CROCCO AND HER colleagues (2018) have conducted a valuable study of discussions in high school classrooms. The results are generally disappointing. In the groups asked to talk about Internet privacy, "even discussion faltered since the students saw so little problem with the perceived trade-offs between the advantages of social media and privacy concerns as to barely generate a conversation" (Crocco, Segall, Halvorsen, & Jacobsen, 2018, p. TK). The discussions of immigration were livelier. However:

> Few students changed their minds regarding immigration as a result of these events, and even fewer students drew significantly on the evidence we provided them. Instead, students mostly used this opportunity to voice their already held beliefs about immigration, which largely reflected their positionalities coming into this exercise, at least among the focal students. They may have listened to opposing views politely but it was not evident that they were, as a result, reassessing their initial positions. (Crocco et al., 2018, p. TK)

Since students did not reassess their own opinions, demonstrate improved understanding of information or others' perspectives, or develop a shared view of the problem, Crocco and her colleagues feel that the discussions failed to meet important criteria for "deliberation." They frame their study as an experiment with deliberation that did not work.

The disappointing results are certainly not a mark against the article. On the contrary, we badly need to see null results in print so

PETER LEVINE is the Associate Dean for Research and Lincoln Filene Professor in Tufts University's Jonathan Tisch College of Civic Life. He has secondary appointments in the Tufts philosophy and political science departments. He previously directed Tisch College's CIRCLE, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. His most recent book is *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America.*

that we can reflect on why some interventions do not seem to work for their intended purposes. In this case, I propose a possible explanation that seems consistent with the rich qualitative data that Crocco and her colleagues (2018) present. In my view, the students were not asked to deliberate, because "deliberation" means communicating in order to make a collective decision. Evidence from other studies shows that when people make real decisions under favorable conditions, they focus on listening and learning, they are open to changing their opinions, and their conversations are relatively productive (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

These classroom discussions are better described as simulated deliberations, in which the students pretend to be deciding on behalf of the United States. Nothing could happen as a direct result of their talk because they are not empowered to decide public policy. Nor are they asked to pretend to be people who have the power to make decisions, such as members of Congress in a simulated legislature. Instead, they play themselves in the somewhat artificial context of a discussion of what the United States should do. I interpret the null result of this study as a function of this artificial context and suggest that we may see better outcomes from: (a) real deliberations, in which students make consequential decisions, and (b) simulations of fictional or historical decision-making. There is not enough comparable, published research on these different kinds of discussions to confirm my hypothesis empirically, but it is consistent with theoretical literature about group dynamics, with some previous evaluations of classroom interventions, and with the observations that Crocco and her colleagues (2018) offer.

The authors (2018) situate their experiments in the burgeoning literature on deliberation. Google's NGram tool, which scans all books published in English, finds that the phrase "deliberative democracy" became 144 times more frequent between 1985 and 2008, increasing every year during that period. Its popularity was presumably driven by the intellectual work of theorists like Habermas and Gutmann (to name just two) and by the many organizations that actually organize public deliberations. Lee argues that the field of "dialogue and deliberation" attracts more than $100 million annually and employs thousands of specialists. She asserts that organizers and proponents of deliberation have "influenced democratic politics and work and community life beyond their wildest dreams." Their models have "metastasized across sectors and among vastly different groups of people" (Lee, 2015, pp. 52, 7, 28).

Lee writes about adults' deliberations in community settings. Discussing controversial current events is also one of the "Six Promising Practices" for civic education in K–12 schools (Gibson & Levine, 2003). In classrooms, moderated discussions are used to improve students' understanding of contested issues and to teach skills and dispositions that are important in civic life, such as understanding and respecting alternative views (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Ho, McAvoy, Hess, & Gibbs, 2017). The same pedagogy has also been found to help with moral development (Nucci & Gee, in press).

"Discussion" is a broader term than "deliberation," and not much of the prior research specifically considers deliberative conversations in classrooms. That shortage of research makes this new article especially welcome.

However, Crocco and her colleagues (2018) find disappointing results. One of the two proposed topics fizzled completely when the students expressed a high degree of agreement about it. The other topic generated conversations but not much evidence of deliberation. Students expressed diverse views but rarely, if ever, changed their minds. A person can be responsive to others in a deliberation without changing her opinion; for instance, she can gain and express appreciation for alternative views. But Crocco and her colleagues do not indicate that students were responsive in these ways either.

The authors (2018) describe the conversations insightfully and derive some findings about how students view immigration. That makes the article read like a good qualitative study based on focus groups, in which the goal is to learn what people say when put together with peers (i.e., in contrast to one-on-one interviews). The questions for a focus group are: What do individuals already believe about an issue? And how do group dynamics affect their beliefs? A focus group is different from a deliberation, in which a group weighs alternatives, learns, and decides on a collective course of action. Although the intent of these classroom discussions was to encourage the students to deliberate, they seem to have turned out more like focus groups.

To make the article's findings even a bit more disappointing, I would note that classrooms are in some ways enviable settings for deliberation. The students are required to attend, to prepare, and to talk constructively. The teacher is a trained professional. The topic can be chosen to yield fruitful conversation. The classroom is somewhat (although not completely) insulated from external pressures: For example, no interest group will organize its members to attend in force or picket outside the classroom's door to sway the discussants. The number of participants is manageable, and they can spend a significant amount of time on the task.

These advantages are sorely lacking in the world beyond classrooms. Dzur has asked, "Who will spark public deliberation, where will it take place, [and] how will the strong counterdeliberative forces in American political life be kept at bay?" (Dzur, 2008, p. 77). If deliberation doesn't work when the topic is chosen to be amenable to discussion and a trained teacher leads a discussion for a finite group of peers inside a classroom, why would we expect it to work in the US Senate, on cable news, or in a large metropolitan area riven by social inequality?

On the other hand, there is an important way in which these classroom discussions were not deliberations and might not be expected to work well as such. The core idea of deliberation is group decision-making: A group deliberates when it decides what to do. A deliberation is a discussion "that is aimed at reaching a decision on an action plan that will resolve a problem that a 'we' faces" (Parker & Hess, quoted by Crocco et al., 2018, p. TK).

The students in these three classes did not actually decide about immigration. At most, they might shift their individual opinions on that topic, and if they encouraged others outside the class to change their opinions in similar ways, that could possibly affect national policy by influencing those people's votes. But that is a remote form of impact for any citizen to consider, and especially for students who are not old enough to vote themselves. The United

States is an "Imagined Community" (Anderson, 1991), not a group of people who literally make decisions. The real group—a classroom full of students—was pretending to deliberate.

It is interesting that even students at the school with a large immigrant population tended to talk about immigrants as "they" when they deliberated about national policy. They were essentially role-playing the government or perhaps a body of influential citizens of the United States. As Crocco and her colleagues write, "Participating in the public debate about immigration in U.S. classrooms positions one as an insider with all the privileges of excluding outsiders that result from this status" (Crocco et al., 2018, p. TK). This is evidence that the students experienced the discussion as a kind of role-play.

Students *actually* deliberate when they manage voluntary groups: clubs, teams, and informal movements or networks. Participating in student-led extracurricular groups is one of the Six Promising Practices for civic education (Gibson & Levine, 2003). A third relevant Promising Practice is simulation: playing roles in virtual processes such as a Model UN, a simulated Constitutional Convention, or an online game version of a presidential campaign. Parker and Lo (2016) found that entirely redesigning the Advanced Placement US History curriculum around simulations had powerful benefits for the students. In these cases, there is no real decision to make, but a realistic simulation of a high-stakes process encourages to students to act like decision-makers.

To sort out these pedagogies, we might make two distinctions. Students can either discuss in order to make an actual decision or they can pretend to deliberate about a hypothetical decision. And they can either play themselves or role-play someone else, such as an ambassador to the UN or a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1789.

	Students play themselves	Students role-play fictional or historical characters
Real decisions	1. Student-led associations in which the members make decisions	2. Planning exercises in which students (or others) are asked to play roles in a game that yields actual advice to a government (Gordon & Schirra, 2011)
Simulated or hypothetical decisions	3. Classroom discussions about policies, in which the question is: "What should the US do?"	4. Simulations of the United Nations, a trial, the Constitutional Convention, etc.

The examples described by Crocco and her colleagues (2018) belong in cell three Students play themselves in a discussion about what "we" should do, where "we" actually means the government of the United States. It seems plausible that all the other cells would be more effective than this one. Students should either represent themselves in making real decisions or else play powerful decision-makers in simulated processes that yield fictional outcomes.

Gordon and his colleagues supply examples for cell two. They build simulations of real communities, ask participants to play fictional residents, and derive input for local governments from the game (Gordon & Schirra, 2011). My colleagues and I also built a hybrid when we invited students to pretend to be legislative aides to their actual US Congresswoman and to conduct real-world research on a local issue in a simulated congressional office (Poole, Berson, & Levine, 2011).

Real decisions have real stakes. Elaborately constructed simulations encourage participants to *feel* that they face stakes. For instance, in the Legislative Aide game, students cared deeply about how computer-generated, fictional characters responded to their ideas (Poole et al., 2011).

When we discuss without having a decision to make, the stakes are obviously low. Here, the evidence from elections is relevant. Voters do make decisions, but each voter's impact is minuscule in any large community. The psychologist Paul Bloom writes, "If you want to see people at their stupidest, check out national politics, which is replete with us-vs.-them dynamics and virtue signaling, and where the cost of having silly views is harmless" (Bloom, 2016). We don't struggle to understand the facts about issues "like climate change or the arms deal with Iran" because we know that our influence on such issues (via a vote) is minimal. However, Bloom adds

> It's revelatory, then, that we do much better when the stakes are high, where being rational really matters. . . . Look at the discussions that adults have over whether to buy a house or where to send their kids to school, or consider the social negotiations that occur among friends deciding where to go for dinner, planning a hike, or figuring out how to help someone who just had a baby. Or even look at a different sort of politics—the type of politics where individuals might actually make a difference, such as a town hall meeting where people discuss zoning regulations and where to put a stop sign. My own experience is that the level of rational discourse in these situations is high. (Bloom, 2016)

The observation that people are at their stupidest in national elections goes back at least to Joseph Schumpeter, who wrote in 1942 that even educated and successful people display a shocking "ignorance and lack of judgment in matters of domestic and foreign policy." He predicted:

> Without the initiative that comes from immediate responsibility, ignorance will persist in the face of masses of information however complete and correct. . . . The typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective. (Schumpeter, 1942/2008, p. 261)

However, as Bloom notes, people are more impressive when they face concrete decisions.

Despite differences in social position and local culture, people who govern themselves in small groups tend to reinvent the same highly functional practices for making shared decisions (Mansbridge, 1983). These practices are not always perfectly in keeping

with the ideals of deliberation. They are not fully compatible with Habermas's "ideal speech situation" in which "no force except that of the better argument is exercised" (Habermas, 1976, pp. 108, 110). For instance, groups often find ways to manage uncomfortable dissent offstage instead of confronting it publicly. Such practices reflect experience about how much disagreement a real group can handle before its members walk away.

Citizens must learn how to form groups, how to keep people involved and contributing to groups, how to discuss important topics in order to inform consequential decisions and give everyone a voice, how to make decisions in the face of persistent disagreement, and how to relate properly to outsiders. These are complex tasks, intellectually and ethically demanding.

The traditional way to learn them was via direct experience. Thomas Jefferson promoted local government in the form of "ward republics" that would manage "the small and yet numerous and interesting concerns of the neighborhood" and give "to every citizen, personally, a part in the administration of the public affairs" (Jefferson, 1816). Not long after Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans learned the art and science of association by forming and managing voluntary groups (de Tocqueville, 1841, vol. 2, sec. 2, ch. 5).

At our best, Americans have learned to deliberate by making actual decisions in small groups and have then expected national leaders to demonstrate similarly deliberative behavior in forums like the Senate. That is the Tocquevillian model of democracy in America. It links small-scale actual deliberations to deliberative democracy at the scale of the nation by way of citizens who have learned deliberative values from experience.

Unfortunately, associative opportunities have badly eroded. Kawashima-Ginsberg and Sullivan (2017) have estimated that about 30% of urban and suburban youth—and twice as many rural youth—live in "civic deserts," communities where they perceive no opportunities to be part of voluntary associations and civic activities. According to a 2017 national survey, just 28 percent of Americans say that they belong to any group that has leaders whom they consider both accountable and inclusive (Atwell, Bridgeland, & Levine 2017, citing the Understanding America Study from the Center for Economic and Social Research at the University of Southern California).

If Americans are no longer learning the arts and sciences of association—which include deliberation—by actually managing their own voluntary groups, then to compensate for that loss is the main challenge for civic education in our time (Levine, 2012). Practicing discussion of current, contested national issues may help. I would not call that pedagogy "deliberation" unless it involves actual decision-making by the students as a functioning group. I would call it "simulated deliberation" or just "discussion." The paper by Crocco and her colleagues is an insightful study of such discussion. The results are a bit troubling, although students may have gained in ways not assessed in the paper, such as learning to speak well in public. Meanwhile, I would advocate for a renewed appreciation of student-led voluntary groups, because these are places where youth can literally deliberate.

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