
Democracy & Education

Apophatic Listening

A Response to *Deliberating Public Policy Issues with Adolescents: Classroom Dynamics and Sociocultural Considerations*

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Abstract

In our response to “Deliberating Public Policy Issues with Adolescents,” we address the matter that students seem to be reluctant to changing their minds, opinions, and initial positions in classroom deliberations and instead see such deliberations as an opportunity to perform and publicly announce their preexisting views. We argue that this calls for an increased focus on teaching students how to listen to each other and that such a focus should come in the form of teaching them apophatic listening. We also propose pedagogical practices that could be used for teaching students this particular deliberative skill.

This article is in response to

Crocco, M. S., Segall, A., Halvorsen, A. S., Jacobsen, R. J. (2018). Deliberating Public Policy Issues with Adolescents: Classroom Dynamics and Sociocultural Considerations. *Democracy and Education*, 26(1), Article 3.

Available at: <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol26/iss1/3>

IN “DELIBERATING PUBLIC Policy Issues with Adolescents,” Crocco, Segall, Halvorsen, and Jacobsen (2018) presented their highly interesting study of high school classroom deliberations. According to their study, classroom deliberations often fall into similar patterns as dysfunctional real-life democratic deliberations. Students rarely change their minds, opinions, or initial positions but rather see deliberation as an opportunity to perform and publicly announce their preexisting views. Furthermore, they seem more willing to make use of, and believe, arguments, evidence, and facts that support their original belief and tend to ignore what fails to make sense according to the

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schema already developed. Moreover, their opinions seem to be determined by their identity as well as their social and cultural backgrounds. Based upon these findings, Crocco and colleagues asked scholars interested in democracy and education, and educators interested in facilitating classroom deliberations, to be aware of these aspects and to reflect on them. However, how to do so is not fully explained:

These factors shape the ways in which adolescents, like adults, approach the role of evidence in making arguments and deciding upon action from competing possibilities. Reflecting on how to structure discussion and deliberation to account for or mitigate the influence of these factors might be one way to move forward. Educators deal with how these factors influence classroom dynamics on a daily basis, as their students strive to defend themselves, their perspectives, and their positionalities from anything that disturbs and disrupts . . . (Crocco et al., 2018, p. 8)

Furthermore, the authors wrote:

Going forward, therefore, what might be helpful would be for researchers and educators to explore the best structures, pedagogical approaches, and opportunities found within civic education for attending to the complex and nuanced relationships among the dynamics of communications or their breakdowns, the power relations that operate through them, and the forms of identity . . . (Crocco et al., 2018, p. 9)

The question for us scholars is, then, what to make of the findings presented by Crocco and colleagues (2018). First, however, we need to look at a small, yet significant, difference between democratic deliberations in classrooms and practices related to education for deliberative democracy. The authors' study investigated the former—deliberations taking place inside classrooms—and although the results might seem daunting, they did not say anything about the possibility for educating students for deliberative democratic participation. The study revealed how high school students perform when asked to deliberate, not what they are capable of learning. Thus, the study does not deem the project of education for deliberative democracy to be valueless. Instead, the study contains two important pieces of information regarding such an education. First, it is often assumed that students (should) learn deliberative skills and values by participating in democratic deliberations (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015), and the study provides us with important information about some of the challenges of classroom deliberation. Second, it shows what students struggle with the most and thus what an education for deliberative democracy should focus on.

Considering the second piece of information first, Crocco and colleagues (2018) identified two interrelated problems. The students focused on articulating their points of view and consequently did not listen to the arguments presented by others, and they consistently failed to change their minds. Adding to the equation that in the current political climate citizens as well as politicians seem to have an increasingly difficult time talking with those holding different opinions about important policy issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), we argue that an education for deliberative

democracy should focus more on teaching students, our future citizens, how to listen to each other. Deliberative democracy at its very core is about justifying laws with the use of reason (Held, 2006), but listening is a vital component. Yet within theories of deliberative democracy, the aspect of listening has received little attention (Dobson, 2014). By looking beyond the field of democratic theory, however, Dobson (2014) has created a definition of what a good deliberative listener is, namely, an apophatic listener. In the deliberative process, apophatic listeners start by being quiet. They do not interrupt the speakers. This creates time and space for the speakers to articulate their points of view. Furthermore, apophatic listeners do not simply sit there and eagerly await their turn to speak. They use their own silence to reflect upon the speaker's message. At the same time, they leave themselves open and hold their own understandings in abeyance in order to make room for the speaker's voice to arrive in its authentic form. However, eventually they start to participate actively. At first, they ask follow-up questions in order to make sure they have understood the speaker correctly. After this, they run the speaker's meaning through the process of their own understanding and develop a new interpretation of the problem at hand. They then present this alternative understanding to the speaker, whereupon they start to engage in the collective process of co-constructing a mutual understanding regarding the issue being discussed (Dobson, 2014).

By defining deliberative listeners as apophatic listeners, the dynamic of the deliberative process is altered. The responsibility for creating a mutual understanding is not solely placed on the speakers anymore by asking them to articulate their positions in ways they think others can understand, which is implied in the traditional meaning of *reciprocity* (see, for example, Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). This responsibility is also placed on the listeners. This means a shift in focus from primarily seeing democratic deliberation as an argumentative process, in which participants argue for their own positions, to seeing it as an interactional process in which reaching justifiable solutions is a collective achievement (Sprain & Black, 2018). Furthermore, this shift means that participants in democratic deliberations need to approach deliberations with an alternative mind-set. They need to approach them as processes in which to develop an understanding of each other and each other's positions. Moreover, the participants need to be prepared to allow others to actively challenge their "stand points" and be willing to put their initial prejudgment up for evaluation (Healy, 2011). According to Sprain and Black's (2018) investigations, the way people approach each other and each other's positions in deliberations seems to be more important for establishing a successful deliberative interaction—an interaction that contains reason-giving exchanges marked by disagreement, listening, respect, and inclusion—than how well they argue for their own positions.

By focusing on this, we argue that democratic deliberations can overcome the dysfunctional pattern in which participants are preoccupied by presenting their own perspectives and trying to convince others of the correctness of these and instead follow productive processes of cooperation.

For educational scholars, the next logical question is how to teach students to be such apophatic listeners. Returning to the pedagogical assumption above—that deliberative skills and values are (best) learned through participation in democratic deliberations—we can explore a nuance of this question. We can now consider how we construct classroom deliberations so that students can practice meeting different opinions and can practice apophatic listening. Studies on multidisciplinary groups of people with diverse disciplinary backgrounds show that given the right conditions, participants can come together in group discussions, accepting each other and each other's perspectives as resources, and co-constructing mutual solutions to common problems (Ness & Søreide, 2014; Ness & Riese, 2015; Ness, 2016; Ness, 2017). In order for this to happen, however, they need to trust each other, they need to show each other respect, and they need to meet each other's opinions with curiosity and openness. When they do this, they can establish a social climate that allows them to engage in a process of collective knowledge production (for more, see Ness & Riese, 2015; Ness, 2017). These findings mirror the findings of Sprain and Black's (2018) investigations of real-life deliberations. In order to establish a productive communicative interaction characterized by reason-giving, disagreement, and a focus on the issue at hand, the most important factor is that participants accept each other's differences, approach them with honesty and interest, and show each other respect by genuinely listening to each other. The importance of trust and respect regarding establishing successful deliberations has also been emphasized by Hess and McAvoy (2015). If participants are to enter deliberations as political equals, discuss with the intention to compromise, and reach fair mutual resolutions, they need to trust each other. They need to regard themselves as part of a (democratic) community concerned with the common good, one that does not act on pure self-interest. If they trust others to make good decisions in light of the common good, the likelihood of them being able to communicate across differences increases (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). From this, we can extract a first pedagogical implication: in order to construct democratic deliberations inside classrooms, teachers should focus on establishing a social climate characterized by trust and respect.

If we look at the classroom deliberations in Crocco and colleagues' (2018) study, however, it appears as though the emphasis was on reason-giving, argumentation, and the use of evidence rather than the aspects of trust, respect, and interaction.

Discussions and deliberations of public policy issues in classrooms have been shown to enhance students' skills in reasoning and argumentation, use of evidence to back claims, consideration of alternative perspectives, and compromise in pursuit of consensus. (Crocco et al., 2018, p. 1)

Perhaps this contributed to why the students focused more on arguing for their own perspective instead of listening to others. According to Sprain and Black (2018), a common obstacle to establishing successful deliberative interactions is an overly extended focus by the facilitators on the reasons given, the statements articulated, and the evidence used. Thus, even though the types of arguments used are important concerning the

legitimacy of deliberative decisions (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) regarding establishing a desirable pattern of communication, it seems to be the wrong place to start. In order to establish successful deliberations, the focus should not be on the reasons given or the facts used, as it arguably was in this study, but on developing a social climate characterized by trust, respect, and honesty (Sprain & Black, 2018). The success of implementing deliberations inside classrooms largely depends on making students feel comfortable (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

In order to establish a desirable social climate, however, facilitators of deliberations need to actively moderate them and actively steer them in the desired direction. This constitutes a second pedagogical implication. According to Ness' research on multidisciplinary groups, it is vital that leaders of a group discussion explain the aim of the discussions along with the rules of engagement. Furthermore, in order to stimulate the knowledge development process in the groups, they need to emphasize the value of listening to and reflecting on other perspectives, traditions, and positions. Leaders are moderators who must stress the importance of helping people with diverse knowledge to understand each other (Ness, 2017). Moreover, they have to urge participants to pay close attention to how they talk to each other and to always be respectful and mindful about their differences (Ness & Riese, 2015). This makes participants aware of what is expected of them. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of having an explorative and positive social climate within the group. Furthermore, if the leaders instruct participants on challenges involved in group discussions, participants can be made aware of the traps they can fall into and how to avoid them. For example, during an interview, participants from one multidisciplinary group Ness studied explained that when they found themselves in a disagreement that could have disrupted the communication but managed to stick to the instructions given by their leader—to keep the tone and climate respectful—they found that disagreement was not that harmful after all. Rather, they gradually started to develop trust in each other and in the process (Ness & Søreide, 2014; Ness & Riese, 2015).

Thus, a parallel to these group discussions would be that teachers leading classroom deliberations should start by describing the aim of each deliberation. Is it to develop different alternatives to vote on, to reach a conclusion, or simply to inquire further into the problem at hand? Furthermore, they should explain to the students the importance of meeting other perspectives with openness and curiosity, of respecting each other's differences, and of genuinely listening to what others are saying. They should explain that listening in democratic deliberations involves staying quiet when others speak, keeping an open mind regarding others' opinions, and carefully trying to understand others as they articulate their points of view. They should also explain that listening is an active process that requires them to process others' opinions through their own schema in order to construct a new meaning of the problem. Finally, it requires that the students are willing to have their own opinions evaluated and discussed. In addition, teachers could make students aware of the common problem that in democratic deliberations participants tend to

focus too much on their own argumentation and to believe facts that support their own position while disregarding facts that do not support it.

Experience from research with multidisciplinary groups shows that it is crucial to refer to these instructions continuously during discussions and not only in the beginning, especially if the discussions start to drift in undesirable directions. This is what actively moderating group discussions means (for more, see Ness & Egelandstad, 2018). This is something the teachers in Crocco and colleagues' (2018) study did not do. After having helped the students understand the material to be discussed, the evidence to be used in the discussions, and the rules of engagement, they "mostly stayed out of the way thereafter, except for occasional reminders that students should reference the evidence . . ." (Crocco, et al., p. 3). However, if the teachers had actively moderated the deliberations and helped the students by guiding them in the desired direction, the results might have been different. For example, they could have asked follow-up questions in order to make the students reflect on their own statements, to keep them on topic, and to keep them from dominating the verbal space (Molnar-Main, 2017). They could have played the devil's advocate and pushed the students on their own thinking and thus avoided political polarization, which tends to crowd out the voices in the middle and make it difficult to communicate across differences (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). One might think that regulating the verbal space would discourage participation, but in their studies, Hess and McAvoy (2015) found the opposite to be true, and clear norms, moderator feedback, and active moderation actually encouraged student participation. The importance of having an active moderator for the productivity and successfulness of democratic deliberations has also been emphasized by prominent deliberative scholars such as Fishkin (2009) and Levine (2018).

This brings us back to the distinction between democratic deliberations inside classrooms and deliberative educative deliberations. If the aim is an educational one—to make students practice democratic deliberations inside classrooms—the aim of the teacher has to be to establish a democratic deliberation. Otherwise, the exercise only becomes a test of what students are capable of doing without teacher assistance. This is, however, not what we are interested in here. We are interested in assisting students in creating classroom deliberations that allow them to practice particular skills, specifically apophatic listening. This idea is a basic extension of the pedagogical principle that before someone can do something on their own, they need the assistance of a more competent other. Thus, teachers leading classroom deliberations should not just sit back and let them unfold unmoderated, and the teachers need to actively moderate them and steer them in the desired direction. This is especially important in the beginning of a discussion. However, as the students practice, they will gradually become more competent at apophatic listening, and after a while, hopefully, they will be able to engage in democratic deliberation without assistance (Englund, 2006). Thus, the teacher can slowly fade into the background and let the students deliberate on their own. A possible gradual development of such a scenario would be

to let students assume the role of a moderator instead of the teacher (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

Returning to the first piece of information that Crocco and colleagues' (2018) study gave us, a reasonable question is whether group discussions among multidisciplinary groups in an organization are equivalent to democratic deliberations among students involving highly conflictual topics such as immigration. Is it the same to ask a person working with innovative knowledge development for a large company to change his or her opinion, or have it evaluated, as it is to ask citizens discussing public issues to change their deeply rooted personal values, some of which might be deeply connected to a person's core identity? If not, then a direct transference of the research conducted on multidisciplinary groups might not be possible. However, the findings from the studies on multidisciplinary groups in organizations were transferred to student groups attending seminars in higher education (Ness & Egelandstad, 2018). These seminars involved students from different institutes and different faculties. Using the same approach as in the work with the multidisciplinary groups, the seminar leaders informed the students of the purpose behind the group work—to learn the academic content in the course but also to meet other perspectives from other faculties and traditions and to use these as resources for learning. Furthermore, they instructed them to meet each other with openness, curiosity, and respect, and then they actively moderated the group discussions throughout the semester. At first, the students found it challenging to meet other ways of thinking. However, they gradually started to open up and show more curiosity toward each other and started to let others evaluate their opinions. The discussions that in the beginning showed a similar pattern as the deliberations in Crocco and colleagues' (2018) study started to become more explorative and interactive. Hess and McAvoy's (2015) findings from studies of classroom deliberations are similar. Systematically subjecting students to classroom deliberations over the course of a semester seems to make them more comfortable with disagreement and compromises regarding deliberative decision-making (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Thus, even though asking someone to change their position when it involves deeply rooted personal values is arguably more demanding than asking someone to change their opinion on matters unrelated to their core identity, it nevertheless appears to be possible to teach students to become better at listening to, and interacting with, those holding different opinions.

In our response, we thus argue that perhaps it is insufficient to subject students to only an occasional classroom deliberation in order to teach them apophatic listening. Perhaps they need to be subjected to these kinds of practices on a more regular basis. According to Dysthe (2011), seeing others and their perspectives as something positive to engage with and something to learn from can only be developed by prolonged participation in activities centered on the presentation of different perspectives. Yet our (Western) schools rely heavily on the presentation of knowledge as facts and on pedagogical activities that ask students to identify and produce correct answers, which do not provide students with opportunities to present and encounter different perspectives (Dysthe, 2011; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). According to Molnar-Main's

(2017) study, when students are not provided with clear answers, they tend to freeze or freak out. In fact, we would argue that a focus on factual knowledge not only causes students to miss out on the opportunity to practice apophatic listening but it might counteract it. If students are to learn to regard others as co-creators of a mutual understanding, they cannot be taught that everything has either a right or a wrong answer. This diminishes the legitimacy of alternative views. Furthermore, if they are rewarded for being right and punished or left unrewarded for being wrong, they inevitably are taught that it is important to be right. If this is the way they approach knowledge in the majority of their classes, a few classroom deliberations here and there probably will not make a huge difference. Thus, if students are to learn the deliberative skill of apophatic listening, perhaps schools need to alter the way they present knowledge on a more regular basis and focus on rewarding students for presenting different perspectives, for approaching each other with openness and curiosity, and for changing their opinions. The teachers could start by modeling this type of behavior by, for example, openly disagreeing with someone or changing their positions on matters (Dysthe, 2011).

We have in this article argued for the importance of teaching students, our future citizens, the skill of apophatic listening and have suggested that this could aid in solving the problem of having deliberations turn into dysfunctional processes of competition. The results from Crocco and colleagues' (2018) study show that students might have an especially difficult time changing their opinion and seriously listening to others when they are discussing questions involving deeply rooted personal values. Perhaps it could be possible to develop the skill of apophatic listening as a core value in 21st-century learners and to help students look at themselves as individuals who can change their minds, and perhaps this would make changing their positions come more naturally to them. Teaching students apophatic listening will probably not transform all democratic problems in society—problems such as social inequality and political polarization are far too complicated to be corrected solely by this—but it can help transform individuals and shape how they approach deliberations and how they behave in the public sphere (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Thus, we argue that by focusing on teaching students to be apophatic listeners, they will be better equipped to participate in democratic deliberations and to avoid the pitfalls discussed in this paper.

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