Democracy & Education

Restoring the Political

Exploring the Complexities of Agonistic Deliberation in Classrooms.
A Response to *Empowering Young People through Conflict and Conciliation: Attending to the Political and Agonism in Democratic Education*

John Ambrosio (Ball State University)

Abstract

This article is a response to a theoretical and philosophical examination of agonistic deliberation in classrooms, which requires accepting the legitimacy of perspectives that are outside of prevailing societal norms and the expression of political emotion. The author argues that students must develop certain dispositions to achieve productive ends in negotiations and that the role of teachers in the deliberative process must be clarified. He concludes that modifying instructional practices to include agonistic deliberation can potentially open up public spaces in classrooms for more inclusive and equitable deliberative practices.

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 and Education, 25*(1), Article 2.
Available at: https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol25/iss1/2

I n "empowering young People Through Conflict and Conciliation: Attending to the Political and Agonism in Democratic Education," Lo (2017) argued that deliberative dialogue, which aims to reach agreement and build consensus through rational argument and compromise, can disempower students who have perspectives on controversial issues that are incommensurate with societal norms and who express political emotions in negotiations. In her view, procedural norms in deliberative dialogue that seek to mitigate conflict and foster conciliation and norms of rationality that delegitimize emotions, marginalize these students in classroom discussions.

Lo (2017) examined various notions of the political, as elaborated by Schmitt (2007), Arendt (1958), Rawls (2005), and Habermas (1984, 1990, & 1993), and concluded that "the political consists of natural conflicts that arise from pluralistic society" (p. 2). Since conflict is intrinsic to pluralism, agonistic deliberation seeks to empower students by harnessing and channeling their social frustrations into political actions, to incite students to engage politically by helping them understand the origins of political conflict, the perspectives of adversaries, and their own positionalities.

Drawing on the work of Mouffe (1999) and Ruitenberg (2009), Lo (2017) argued that Rawls (2005) and Habermas (1984, 1990, & 1993) "saw the political as a process of reaching an agreement or mutual understanding" through reason and conciliation, while

JOHN AMBROSIO is associate professor of Social Foundations of Education in the Department of Educational Studies at Ball State University. Most recently, his research interests focus on post-colonial curriculum theory and leadership for social justice and transformation in higher education in South Africa.

Schmitt (2007) and Arendt (1958) "embraced unresolved conflicts as an essential part of the political" (Lo, 2017, p. 4). In Lo's view, Rawls elided the political by presupposing that individuals will assume "the original position behind a veil of ignorance," that is, act *as if* they are ignorant of their social positioning and advantages in negotiations, whereas Habermas subsumed the political in the "process of determining principles of justice that all might agree on," which "relies on practical discourses and deliberations as procedures to encourage reconciliation, instead of the original position" (Lo, 2017, p. 4). However, the process of reaching agreement or mutual understanding in both cases is governed by prescriptive norms that are preconditions for participation in deliberations.

Emotive Passions

In addition, Lo (2017) claimed that the conciliatory processes articulated by Rawls (2005) and Habermas (1984, 1990, & 1993) "overlook strong emotive structures that may be at the root of conflicts," which can "leave students feeling demoralized or disenfranchised" (Lo, 2017, p. 5). However, while Lo recognized the relation between emotions and political conflict in negotiations, she did not explore the pedagogical implications of this observation for agonistic deliberation. That is, she did not take account of the "unspoken emotional investments" students have in "unexamined ideological beliefs," in their identities and sense of belonging, that can be challenged or threatened in political conflicts over controversial issues (Boler, 1999, p. xiv).

Boler (1999) argued that the supremacy of reason over emotion is the result of a long historical process rooted in Western cultural and scientific discourses that pathologized emotions, linked them to essentialist notions of women, and taught us to think about emotions in ways that devalue their importance in informing cognition and moral judgements. In Boler's view, emotions are "a site of social control," enforced through rational discourses, and a "mode of resistance to dominant cultural norms" (pp. xiv–xv). Because emotions are a terrain of ongoing cultural struggle, she argued, recognizing the legitimacy of emotions in deliberations is a *political* act of resistance to hegemonic norms and forms of authority.

From this perspective, agonism, which seeks to mobilize political passions toward democratic ends, can be understood as a pedagogical intervention that contests the dominance of rationality in deliberative dialogue. However, Boler (1999) was not suggesting that we dispense entirely with rationality, only that we recognize that reason is informed by emotions, which are "moral evaluations or judgements" that are "central to our ethical reasoning" (p. xvi). Thus, acknowledging the value of emotions in deliberations is essential, not only to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized students who articulate their views through emotive passions but to inform the ethical reasoning, moral judgements, and political actions of all students.

Because "women and girls have suffered most frequently from the subordination of emotion to formal conceptions of rationality," as Green has argued (quoted in Boler, 1999, p. vii), agonistic deliberation can also help foster gender equity in negotiations by including more female perspectives. Moreover, because students from historically marginalized and oppressed social groups may be more likely to express their views through emotive passions and seek political action to address controversial issues, agonism can potentially foster a more inclusive deliberative process.

Thus, rather than seek a "feel good" environment in which "everyone is a winner," agonistic deliberation creates public spaces in classrooms for disagreement and conflict that can help level the political playing field for marginalized students (Lo, 2017, p. 5). While some models of deliberative dialogue seek to avoid or subsume the political, agonistic deliberation accepts the inevitability of disagreement and conflict in diverse pluralistic societies marked by competing ideologies and interests. To facilitate more inclusive classroom dialogue, agonistic deliberation does not require students to "give up their comprehensive doctrines" or "set aside their emotive passions" in negotiations, but aims to help them "learn how to negotiate and develop the capacity for renegotiation" (Lo, 2017, p. 6).

Restoring the Political

Whereas Rawls (2005) and Habermas (1984, 1990, & 1993) have relegated issues of power to determining the preconditions for rationality and conciliation in deliberations, Schmitt (2007) and Arendt (1958) have viewed the political as a site of conflict where issues of power, ideology, and identity are continually negotiated. Following Arendt, Lo (2017) argued that the purpose of agonistic deliberation is not only to create a public space for disagreement and conflict but to use the unpredictability of conflict as an opportunity to act upon others, to make one's thoughts and feelings known. However, there is no expectation that deliberations will ultimately lead to agreement or mutual understanding, only the *possibility* that a deeper understanding of "one another's existences" may emerge in conversations (p. 6).

While this is certainly a worthwhile endeavor, what is the point of understanding the situation of adversaries better, if the ultimate aim, or at least hope, is not to develop the mutual trust that can lead to agreement about how to resolve controversial issues, at least temporarily? Of course, the possibility of reaching agreement is greater in some cases than in others. However, Lo's (2017) notion of agonistic deliberation does not acknowledge varying degrees of intractability regarding different controversial issues. While students need to understand the "conflicts behind incommensurable beliefs" and accept the hard truth that some political conflicts cannot be resolved, they should also know that difficult and time-consuming negotiations can sometimes lead to tentative agreements (p. 6).

There is a danger that students will conflate protracted negotiations with irreconcilable beliefs and prematurely short-circuit dialogue when agreement does not appear to be at hand. Given this possibility, it is incumbent upon teachers to encourage students to persist despite seemingly fruitless negotiations and to develop the capability to distinguish between irreconcilable and potentially negotiable differences.

Unexamined Complexities

In my view, Lo (2017) did not adequately examine issues related to creating and sustaining the conditions needed for productive agonistic deliberation in classrooms, which requires that students develop certain dispositions, which include a willingness to listen; an openness to the perspectives of others and the possibility of changing one's mind; a desire to seek mutual understanding; and as Lo discussed, the ability to forgive others for the unknown and unknowable consequences of their actions.

As Lo (2017) suggested, fostering productive deliberations in classrooms will be a daunting task in the current political climate in the U.S., where a kind of tribal mentality has emerged in relation to politics and identity, fueled by social media, which often portrays controversial issues in terms of irreconcilable differences rooted in fundamentally opposing worldviews and realities. While this may be true in cases of extreme political conflict, less fraught issues may offer a greater possibility of reaching an agreement. However, because political conflicts are increasingly framed in moral terms, as a struggle between good and evil, teaching students to view opponents as "political friends" (Lo, 2017, p. 4) or "valuable adversaries" (Lo, 2017, p. 6), instead of enemies who must be defeated, will be a major challenge in the deeply polarized context of contemporary U.S. society.

Everyday Practice

The primary aim of Lo's (2017) article was to develop a notion of agonistic deliberation and argue for its inclusion in classrooms. However, it is not clear what the deliberative process would look like in everyday practice. Her conception of agonistic deliberation validates *all* perspectives, "no matter how bizarre, jarring, or irrational they may seem," so that students can "express their underlining [sic] ideas, emotions, and perspectives on controversial issues more openly" (p. 7). While this is certainly a laudable goal, her "anything goes" approach does not address the possibility that students may express biased or hateful views or engage in defensive anger to protect their identities. Thus, while Lo (2017) noted the deep divisions in U.S. society, she did not acknowledge the potential for extreme political conflict in agonistic deliberations.

Nor did she examine how teachers will foster the requisite dispositions for agonistic deliberation among students, how they will help students channel their social frustrations toward productive negotiations and political action, and how, when, and under what circumstances they should intervene in the deliberative process. Moreover, in her critique of models of deliberative dialogue, Lo (2017) tended to conflate socially incommensurate perspectives with the expression of "strong emotive structures" (p. 5), which suggests that students with views that are inconsistent with societal norms will necessarily express them through emotive passions. While this may often be the case, it is certainly possible that some students may articulate their perspectives entirely on the basis of rational argumentation.

For all of the reasons discussed, I argue that Lo's (2017) conception of agonistic deliberation requires further theorization and elaboration, especially with regard to the role of teachers in deliberations, and that educating the dispositions of students to engage in productive agonistic dialogue must be a central aim of the negotiating process.

Modifying Instructional Strategies

Lo (2017) discussed two common instructional strategies that can be modified to incorporate elements of agonistic deliberation: debate and Structured Academic Controversy (SAC). In the case of debate, Lo suggested that students "draw up negotiations at the end of the debate, instead of ending on a definitive winner or loser" (p. 7). However, unlike in debate, where teams present opposing arguments and seek to defeat their opponents, in SAC students present arguments on controversial issues that are dichotomized into yes or no questions. But instead of preparing "rebuttals to directly refute each other's claims," students "come together to try and reach a consensus on the issue" (p. 7).

To incorporate principles of agonistic deliberation, Lo (2017) suggested that students engaged in SAC "drop their roles *prior* to the consensus step" and "negotiate an actionable solution . . . that everyone can get behind and participate in for the *moment*" (p. 7, emphasis in original). That is, SAC seeks temporary resolutions of controversial issues that are open to renegotiation. In this way, Lo (2017) argued, "deliberation becomes more practical, action-oriented, agonistic, and rooted in political emotions and can help students grapple with how to engage with political conflicts" (p. 8). However, SAC may be better suited to agonistic deliberation since the raison d'etre of debate is to defeat one's opponents.

In my view, these are useful modifications of instructional strategies that can potentially open up public spaces in classrooms for more inclusive and equitable deliberations. It is essential that students who feel left out of the conversation, who feel they do not have a seat at the deliberative table because their views are too far outside of prevailing societal norms or because they express political emotions in discussions, are welcomed into classroom deliberations. By giving students an opportunity to participate in negotiations *on their own terms,* without having to renounce their ideological views and emotive passions as a precondition for inclusion and legitimacy, agonistic deliberation can potentially transform classroom deliberations.

However, in my view, there need to be some rules of engagement based on shared democratic principles, such as mutual respect and equal treatment, to facilitate productive negotiations. In addition, Lo (2017) assumed that teachers already possess the dispositions needed to effectively implement these modified instructional strategies, but this may not necessarily be the case. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that some teachers may need assistance in developing these dispositions and may also need encouragement to open up their classrooms to the potential for emotionally charged disagreements and heated political conflict.

As Lo (2017) made clear, she was not suggesting that teachers do away with rationality in deliberative dialogue, only that public spaces for disagreement and conflict be incorporated into instructional practices to make them "more meaningful for marginalized students" (p. 6). In her view, this can be achieved by substituting

the objectives of defeating opponents and reaching consensus with the goal of negotiating actionable solutions. However, these modifications would fundamentally change the process and purpose of the instructional strategies.

Extending Experience

Agonistic deliberation does not seek to persuade adversaries on the basis of rational argument alone, but draws on the power of emotional experiences and feelings to inform cognition and moral judgements. In my view, we are less likely to be moved or change our minds solely on the basis of logical or abstract reasoning, than by a deep sense of human connectedness and caring for others. It is precisely this sense of belonging, of solidarity within diversity in pluralist societies, that agonistic deliberation could potentially cultivate in students. However, fostering feelings of human connectedness requires that students "extend their experience sufficiently to grasp" what may seem like a "total alien world in the person of another" as "a human possibility" (Greene, 1995, p. 4). Assuming this perspective does not mean that adversaries must accept one another's comprehensive doctrines, only that they recognize them as one possible way to make sense of our shared human existence.

Cultivating the requisite dispositions in students will be an arduous educational task as they learn new ways of seeing and interacting with adversaries. In the end, agonistic deliberation gives students an opportunity to engage in more open, honest, and ideologically wide-ranging conversations with peers with whom they may vehemently disagree. All too often, students know the acceptable narratives and simply repeat what they think teachers and others want to hear or remain silent in the face of perceived hostility to their views. By opening up discussions to the unfettered thoughts and emotions of marginalized students on controversial issues, agonistic deliberation makes it possible for all students to engage in more equitable, authentic, and substantive classroom discussions that can lead to political action.

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