

Deliberation Across the Curriculum

A Project of the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

Introduction

In our many classrooms, students collectively address problems, issues, and questions that we set before them. Many courses (especially those fashioned as seminars) provide opportunities for students to respond to such questions by way of class discussion. But such discussions, especially those where disagreements emerge, can be challenging both for students and instructors. Rarely these days have our students witnessed or experienced disagreement as a constructive event. Often disagreements in the public sphere become contests of wills and words, agonistic in spirit, a battle rather than a negotiation. One's "opponent" is to be vanquished rather than understood.

Yet, disagreements regarding, for example, how best to interpret conflicting data, or which of several possible analyses of a phenomenon should be embraced, or which of many differing claims anchor the best argument, lie at the heart of intellectual life. Scholarly and creative endeavors are energized through differences of approach, style, calculation, and thought. It is difficult to envision an area of professional or public life unmarked by diverse perspectives and arguments. Democracy itself tends to thrive when citizens address their different points of view together. Many of us wish for class discussions to be scenes of productive, charitable, and respectful disagreement. And many of us wish for theories and associated techniques that would sharpen class discussions to become occasions for our students to practice such activities as close listening, judicious and empathetic response, the avoidance of hasty conclusions, a review of implicit foundational assumptions, and the careful examination of evidence and counter-evidence that supports one's own and others' reasoning.

Deliberation is special kind of discussion. Valued since classical times as a key mode for social and political interaction in the face of disagreements about how best to address problems in our common world, deliberation is vital in the liberal arts as a practice for collaborative and egalitarian decision-making and inclusive inquiry into the arenas of experiential, humanistic, scientific, artistic, and sociologic knowledge.

The Challenges of Class Discussion

College classes are typically anchored in either lecture or discussion. At times, classes embrace hybrid modalities, with small-group conversation interspersed with lectures, or with flipped classrooms that cycle between multiple modes of instruction (digitally mediated, community involved, student generated, experiential, etc.). Laboratory or studio arrangements punctuate many courses, each attentive to various kinds of learning. Each modality has its distinct advantages for promoting intellectual life. Most faculty and students would agree that even formal lectures require critical, reflective work. In any course, Davidson students cannot succeed as passive consumers of information.

Though many of our classes are arranged as seminars, robust, goal-driven discussion is difficult to orchestrate. With success unpredictable, the fragile affair is often invaded by a bedeviling anxiety felt by all participants. Yet, we know that students are at their critical and reflective best when they are fully involved in conversation with others. Conversation with others who are inquiring into the same or similar issues widens one's perspective, adds diverse richness and multiplies detail, solidifying the act of learning itself. Since active, purpose-driven, multi-perspectival dialogue is welcomed in every Davidson classroom, it is important that we reflect on its possibilities, its promise, and the dynamics of its practices. In an era of abbreviated conversation in the public sphere, and non-dialogic communication in most political venues, good models for robust public conversation are scarce. We cannot assume that satisfying classroom discussion will flourish on its own.

Though lecturing is an important and complex art, many faculty (and many more students) may find class discussion more challenging to enact. Good discussions are difficult to define in the abstract. As lived experiences, they assume multiple shapes and structures, and unfold in context-specific ways so as to thwart easy description. Though it may be tempting to think so, lots of talk does not a good discussion necessarily make. At times, class discussions may resemble free-for-all competitions or bull sessions, enjoyable or even illuminating to some but likely not fulfilling the goals for discussion-based learning for the majority. Instead, cross talk can be mistaken for robustness, as discussions tend to veer toward the edges of the question at hand, with constructive momentum easily derailed. Unfortunately, once such meandering exhausts itself, the conversation falls flat, deflated by disinterest or perhaps even disaffection since participants are uncertain about next steps in the face of a wide range of seemingly unrelated comments. This is not to say that every class discussion is problematic. Rather, it is to suggest that practices that promote productive discussion, compared to those that facilitate good lecturing, tend to be neglected in our teacher training. For whatever reason, discussion, though highly valued, is less codified than lecturing.

In the parlance of higher education, the term *discussion* is a general typology, a shorthand for various discursive interactions involving students and instructors responding to one another as a regular feature of classroom life. It is therefore useful to differentiate discussion from *deliberation*, the focus of this proposal.

- *Discussion* refers to any discursive activity that involves more than one interlocutor in a process of sharing ideas about a topic. A discussion can, for instance, locate possible avenues of inquiry, identify various beliefs, interests, positions, and findings, or simply range freely across a host of comments about a general issue or object of collective attention. Discussions may gain an identifiable momentum as remarks accumulate, or they may become multidirectional as they proceed. They may or may not prefigure an identifiable goal. Discussion's purpose is to proliferate remarks about a subject, to accumulate thoughts rather than to solve a problem, settle a dispute, or become newly attentive to positions not one's own.

- *Deliberation* refers to discursive activity that involves more than one interlocutor in mutual speaking and listening in order to better understand, mutually address, or negotiate a disagreement. In deliberation, all participants are given the opportunity to give an account of their positions on a matter of shared interest, often a question or controversy that is put before the group. Giving an account involves identifying one's position, revealing its genesis and evolution, articulating the formative assumptions that undergird it—in essence, sharing with the group the important features of one's position using reasons based in evidence, articulated in descriptions and concepts understandable to all. Though many deliberations aim for the resolution of a controversy, the purpose of some deliberations is to provide an occasion for careful, empathetic listening, to come to understand why and how the dimensions a disagreement matter to other persons in ways perhaps not one's own. In deliberation, participants therefore aim to achieve a mutual regard for one another as sentient persons interested in addressing aspects of their common world.

Human interaction proceeds in talk, but robust deliberation doesn't just occur "naturally." Instead, it is supported by culture-specific learned behaviors, by agreed-upon terms of engagement, by a measure of structure, and—above all—by a fulsome attention to the progress or yield of the conversation. Participants in good conversation maintain a Janus-like vigilance of a discussion's past, present, and future directions as they contextualize their incipient participation according to this evolving context. In productive conversation, each participant works to keep the discussion progressive, and, when needed, redistributes rhetorical energy, accelerating the pace of interchange, or slowing it down so remarks can deepen and take root. Given the complexities of the event, most of us would agree that classroom discussion calls for us to codify, define, and describe (for ourselves and for our students) the many roles and responsibilities that attend to productive conversation, conversation that has a yield identifiable to all participants.

This is especially urgent given the dearth of deliberative models currently available in the public sphere. We are flooded instead with contests. Though its reasoning may be limited and its purpose unclear, many of us happily tune into media to witness competitive debate in the face of political, cultural, and social disagreements. But such conversations often proceed as little more than opinion-swapping and aggression. More troubling, victory in debate is often falsely equated with powerful leadership, an unhelpful stance in egalitarian contexts of learning. Even though practiced instructors may be able to differentiate good deliberation from bad debate, our students may not immediately be able to do so, a consequence of attenuated cultural examples.

Deliberation in the Liberal Arts

Deliberation has a lengthy history as a key term for the liberal arts. Broadly, it refers to collaborative weighing of competing claims in the face of some disagreement. A group deliberates in order to determine the best policy or course of action, but deliberation can also support the formulation of new ideas, illuminate competing values underlying a controversy, or lead to the discovery of a shared ethic or political ideal. Deliberation also names the broad-

based activity of judging the quality of certain data, or defining next steps in a process, or framing a diagnosis by a cadre of professionals. In each such site, a group assembles to analyze, to evaluate, or simply to better understand a dispute or controversy.¹ Disagreements come in many shapes and sizes. Some are deep, present across many generations; others are temporary and exigent. When diverse persons assemble, disagreements are inevitable, a vital trait of human community. They should be expected—perhaps even welcomed—rather than feared.

Intellectual life across the humanities, sciences, and social sciences is marked by disagreements. In fact, some epistemologists have gone so far as to suggest that disagreements are what makes intellectual work possible, necessary to moving knowledge forward. As scholars, we have learned how to respond to disagreements in our fields. We know the ground rules of our discipline-specific arenas and we have established venues for entering scholarly conversations verbally, with writing, data production, and artistic creations, and so we weigh in. But sometimes those conversations aren't as constructive as they might be. Experts often talk past one another. At other times, what outsiders may characterize as a battle of elites ensues, often a fascinating spectacle for insiders but usually not an example of democratic talk.

As a politically prudent and ethically satisfying practice, deliberation has long been valued by philosophers, political theorists, linguists, rhetorical scholars and others who, knowing that democracy begins in talk, urge citizens to engage in conversation about difficult, at times thorny issues or what deliberation scholars have called “wicked” problems. Because this form of dialogue enacts an egalitarian approach by accounting for everyone's perspective and position through reciprocal listening, deliberation offers distinct advantages over monologic speech. As one scholar puts this,

Deliberation as dialogue, especially face-to-face dialogue, initiates a process of reason-giving that enhances the epistemic status of the outcomes. The demand for reasons brings weak arguments to light, forces interlocutors to revise indefensible claims, publicizes unacceptable premises, generally facilitates the exchange of information and knowledge, and encourages participants to be reflective. At the heart of many deliberative models is an ideal of dialogic accountability in which high levels of reasoning and reflectiveness are encouraged by the process itself.²

If we assume that reasoning begins in the process of questioning and response, the practice of productive dialogue first modeled by Plato, then we may look to deliberation as a procedure

¹¹ *Dispute, controversy*, or even the term *disagreement* may automatically signal discord, animus, or even anger. Our culture tends to figure disagreement as a nasty affair, inevitably unpleasant for participants involved. Of course, some disagreements are acted upon with hostility. Though we are conscious of this cultural tendency, we use these terms simply to name the presence of two or more contrasting positions, claims, or findings that create an ambiguity or uncertainty in how some phenomena should best be understood or acted upon. Human life is, we suggest, everywhere marked by (some would say even energized by and dependent upon) differences in assumptions and belief. Disagreements may be slight or substantial, open to negotiation or thorny and incommensurate.

² Simone Chambers, “Rhetoric and the Public Sphere: Has Deliberative Democracy Abandoned Mass Democracy?” *Political Theory* 37.3 (June 2009): 330.k

that both permits the correction of misconceptions and fuels the production of new knowledge as the interlocutors collaborate to transcend previous roadblocks to clarity, to untangle knots of flawed assumptions, and to achieve a level of mutual understanding unavailable before deliberation begins.

Deliberation: A Brief Definition

Though the processes and procedures for deliberation vary by context, nearly all deliberation begins by the interlocutors agreeing about what's at issue, the exact dimensions of the controversy to be addressed, and the uncertainty that lies before them. Once the question is set, the group describes the historical context of the disagreement: when did it emerge, under what conditions, and for what reasons? The "territory" of the disagreement is mapped in a way that is recognizable to all. Next, positions are articulated, accompanied by reasons based on evidence. Members of the group work to identify the formative assumptions and foundational premises upon which arguments rest, in order to "give an account" of one's own and others' perspectives, interests, and commitments. Participants carefully listen, temporarily suspending judgment, in order to understand and allow "the other" to gain standing. All positions emerge into the light of public recognition so that they may be judged by agreed-upon criteria. Though negotiation and resolution of a controversy are sometimes sought, deliberation need not result in full agreement. The disagreement, in whole or parts, may linger, but after discussion its form and purpose are made clearer and become more widely understood than they were before the deliberation began. As mentioned, strong deliberation operates according to egalitarian principles. Interlocutors are each given the opportunity to articulate positions and offer evidence. This is not to say that power differentials are absent. No social grouping is without such inequities. Rather, for the purposes of the deliberative activity, all participants are considered co-equals *as interlocutors*. All have the responsibility to give an account of the genesis and state of one's current thinking. Each is answerable to all.

If deliberation succeeds in academic settings, these—and other—concerns will need to be addressed. No single mode of interchange in the face of disagreement will work in every context of controversy. And, deliberation itself will precede somewhat differently across fields of study, where exactly what qualifies as evidence, what degree of certainty is anticipated, and which assumptions undergird the generation of new knowledge (including creativity and innovation) will be variously understood. We envision at least four benefits to enacting deliberation in our classrooms:

1. enhanced practice with making critical-analytic and verbal activity public;
2. increased accountability as a member of a working team;
3. immersion in the everyday ethics of cooperative exchange;
4. and access to deliberative tools and techniques that can be adapted to other contexts (civic, professional, cultural) outside of the academy.

Our Academic Strategic Plan calls for us to design curricular enhancements to promote core intellectual sensibilities such as *reflection, risk-taking, and innovation*. Each is called upon in deliberative discussion as interlocutors reflect critically upon their own and others'

arguments, and, in turn, offer accounts of their own thinking and feeling, and experience. Deliberation itself is an activity that aims for innovative analyses, new understandings, and (simply put) better knowledge. Even more, deliberative activity involves core egalitarian values and the elaboration of diverse and at times previously unpopular or previously unheard (or silenced) perspectives and claims, thereby supporting goals of inclusivity.

Deliberation Across the Curriculum Cooperative

In order to establish guidelines and best practices for bringing deliberative practices into courses across the College, a group of interested faculty will form a committee, chaired by a member of the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative's Co-conveners, charged with the following tasks:

- to support colleagues who wish to bring deliberative practices into any course across the College;
- to develop shared standards and guidelines for courses that will be identified as “deliberation-involved” courses;
- to publicly list these deliberation-involved courses, to refresh that list as needed, and to make that list readily available to students through mechanisms designed by the Registrar;
- to sponsor regular faculty development opportunities supported by an online archive of course materials, pedagogic strategies, relevant theories, best practices, exemplary modules, and videos of deliberations in action;
- to organize special events, guest speakers, and consultant visits relevant to the project;
- to distribute to all Davidson faculty regular updates the curricular aspect of the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative;
- to intersect with the co-curricular aspects of the DCI in relevant and innovative ways so that the curricular and co-curricular efforts are mutually supportive and co-evolving; and
- to carry out regular assessments of deliberation-involved courses, and to make the results of these assessments public.

The Deliberation Across the Curriculum Cooperative's membership will be open to any Davidson College faculty who currently teach deliberation-involved courses or plan to do so in the future. The chair will invite two students to join the committee.

Deliberation-involved Courses

Because discussion may take place in nearly every course at the College, the potential for deliberation to be implemented is far-reaching, especially in those courses where questions that engender multiple and contrasting responses are put forward for collective consideration. Disagreement is shaped and formed differently across the disciplines, but each variety is

amendable to deliberative approaches and techniques. Courses that acquire a “D” designation will be expected to adhere to the following general guidelines:

1. The act of deliberation in the context of the course is **defined and exemplified**, with its applicable techniques codified for participants.
2. The **purpose of the deliberation is made clear** and, when needed, clarified, sharpened, or revised. The deliberation should have an identifiable yield: the eventual production of an argument, analysis, report, or creative product.
3. The deliberative event is **facilitated**, guided, or otherwise attended to so that all the participants are included as egalitarian members of an ongoing conversation. Participants treat one another with **charity and respect**, seeking to understand one another in accurate and abiding fashion.
4. The participants are **each accountable to one another** and responsible for offering mutually intelligible reasons in support of their positions, claims, and arguments.

We anticipate deliberation will be used to address two kinds of disagreements: (1) those that involve questions of public policy, the public good, and other issues that impinge on citizens’ interests and garner the attention in the wide public sphere; and (2) those that take up questions and issues of interest primarily to experts, disciplinary practitioners, and professionals within the academic sphere. Often, the wide public and professional spheres overlap or intersect, the wider public sphere at times dependent on professional knowledges and vice versa. But these two contexts—the public and the academic—may call for specific kinds of deliberative techniques and tools appropriate to the context of inquiry and collaborative adjudication of contrasting claims and positions. A deliberation in a Physics classroom will likely have a purpose that differs from the deliberative goals set in a classroom where contrasting textual interpretations are being debated. These contextual variations—in the issue explored, the status of the participants, the larger audience that may listen to or learn of the deliberation, as well as goals and motives—should be accounted for as an event is planned and carried out.

Again, we stress that deliberation is not a one-size-fits-all practice. It unfolds within contexts of practice, with their particular traditions for attending to (or, at times, resolving) disagreements and controversies. In the political sphere, deliberation is most often associated with pragmatic problem-solving or with determining policies that support collective well-being. In the academic sphere, though procedural decisions may result (Which data shall we use moving forward? What is the most useful way to read this text? How shall this piece of music be performed? How shall this incipient sculpture be formed?), often what results is a new clarity regarding the genesis and nature of the disagreement itself (What are the various ways that this passage can be interpreted, and what does this variety tell us about the nature of interpretation itself? Now that the full territory of contrasting positions has been revealed,

what claim do you find most compelling, and how will you address the relevant counterclaims? What are the strengths and limits in past arguments for prison reform?). As students deliberate across the College, they develop a set of practices and a life-long sensibility about constructive disagreement, sensitive to the complexity of deliberation's discursive demands and ethical promise.

What Does Deliberation in Classrooms Look Like in Practice?

Though disciplinary sites of instruction differ by content, style of approach, and traditions for inquiry, for the purposes of the proposal, let us envision deliberation taking place among a group of fifteen students, facilitated by the instructor. Variations may be practiced: at times, a student might act as facilitator, or a subset of students may deliberate while other students observe. In nearly every site, however, the deliberation proceeds with guidelines such as these:

1. Setting the Scene

The facilitator reminds the group of the general question or issue under discussion, perhaps provides a thumbnail context of the history of responses to the issue, may describe which—if any—portions of the issue are now beyond dispute, and clarifies which uncertainties, ambiguities, or controversies deserve present attention. If a document, or set of data, or other object of study anchors the deliberation, the facilitator makes sure that every participant has carefully reviewed these materials.

2. A Round of Position Summaries Made Public

The facilitator steps away from the group in order to allow the interlocutors both space and freedom to themselves get the conversation underway. Someone begins by offering a perspective or making a claim about the issue or object under consideration. "I" statements are encouraged: "I would like us to look at X feature, which I believe could be interpreted/analyzed in several ways. I ask us to consider Y interpretation/analysis." The facilitator (or designated note-taker) records the gist of this first intervention. The person who offered the first comment then seeks input from others: "Are there other interpretations/analysis to consider?" The gist of this position gets noted, and the process continues until the range of students' general remarks about their positions has been covered.

3. Offering Explanation, Evidence

The facilitator returns to the many position summaries and asks each student to clarify her position by explaining how she arrived at her conclusion based on what reasons connected to what evidence. Evidence can take the form of data, fact, experience, or emotion. Experiential evidence may include documenting a way of reading certain terms, phrases, and/or passages, describing a physical process, explaining a particular calculation, identifying emotions, telling a story, etc. After an initial explanation of a position, members of the group seek, when needed, further explanation, and pose questions—all in an attempt robustly to understand others: "Can you tell me more about X?" or "How would you prefer I define Y here?" or "Would it be appropriate to

say that your A is similar to my B?” When necessary or useful, the facilitator locates sticking points, may suggest the group move forward (or return to something said earlier), and ensures that each student has had time to explain her position. The facilitator might point out, for example, that two students reach the same conclusion, but base their claim on differing evidence, might point out sharp contrasts, unpredicted similarities in arguments, or other analyses.

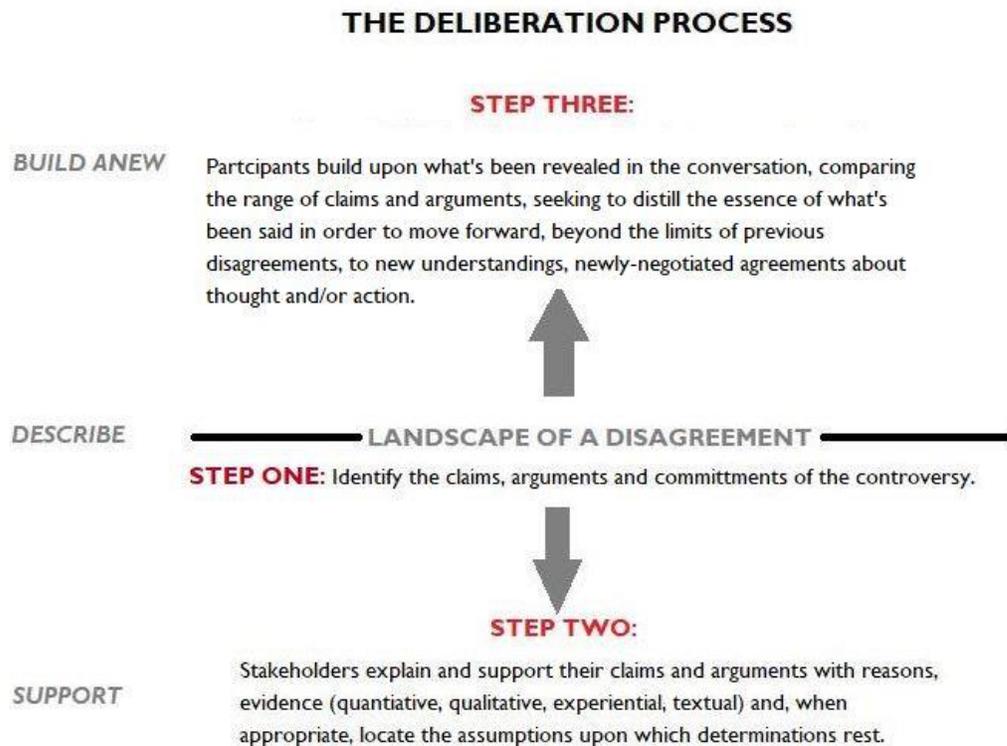
4. **Unearthing Assumptions**

One of deliberation’s hallmarks is to help make participants aware of the seminal assumptions upon which their positions rest. This is a difficult and challenging step. Facilitators may ask participants to unearth such assumptions either during or immediately following the explanation and evidence phase. The facilitator may want briefly to remind participants that assumptions, most often hidden and implicit, need to be articulated: “In cases of X, I generally assume Y” allows a participant to reveal the values or principles she typically relies on, but rarely makes explicit. (*assumption of typicality*). “I defer to authorities and experts and assume their data/analyses are correct” (*assumption of authority*) reminds a participant whose prior work, sensibilities, or theories inform her thinking, or go unquestioned. Assumptions can also be discerned from questions such as “In matters of X, what virtues, dispositions, methods should be in place in order for you to accept another’s findings?” (*methodological assumption*). The facilitator makes a list of assumptions that the whole group reviews, identifying shared values when possible. Those familiar with the articulation of *warrants* (first developed by the philosopher Stephen Toulmin) may find his language and method useful for this step.

5. **Describing the Conversation’s Yield**

After all positions and arguments have been made, the facilitator asks the group members to identify—for themselves—what they learned about positions and perspectives not their own. Sometimes, this is the moment to acknowledge new agreements about a particular matter among some or all members of the group. This may also be the moment to identify still-existing disagreements or emergent ones. The facilitator may ask the group members to review current disagreements in order to identify what contrasting data or interpretations they hinge upon. The disagreements, in other words, are accounted for. If the object of the deliberation was to negotiate a collective agreement or to reach a consensus, then the progress toward such a goal must be judged complete (or insufficient) and forthcoming deliberations planned. At times, the yield of a deliberation is simply to clarify and account for various and contrasting claims. To do so may improve the participants’ awareness of reasonable differences, enriching their understanding of the dynamics of a dispute in ways unforeseen before the deliberation began. Accounting for counter-positions will enhance one’s future argument and enhance one’s *ethos* (as, for example, fair, prudent, charitable, empathic, etc.).

The following diagram describes three key steps in the deliberative process:



Implementation

The Deliberation Across the Curriculum Cooperative (formerly the Deliberation Across the Curriculum Working Group) will continue its regular meetings organized by the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative’s Co-conveners. They will discuss relevant readings about deliberative pedagogy, comment on current and future course designs, and address implementation challenges and opportunities as these arise. In Spring 2020, three first-year writing courses and two Political Science courses will be rolled out as deliberation-involved courses. The materials used in these courses will be reviewed by the committee and will be evaluated using a trial assessment mechanism. The results of that assessment will be made available to the members of the Cooperative and to the DCI’s Co-conveners.