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Deliberative education – ideas and prospects

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Abstract

A major part of civic education at school is devoted to presenting knowledge on political and social issues with the purpose of teaching students to make informed political decisions. This idea of teaching is in line with the representative version of democracy, with the citizen playing the role of passive voter. Yet, if democracy is to sustain itself, a more active, involved and participatory conception of citizenship is required. The first section of this paper presents the idea of deliberative education as a tool for fostering advanced democratic skills of future citizens and analyses the psychological feasibility of such an education (with the use of the developmental theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky). The second section is devoted to presenting educational tools and examples that could be a part of deliberative education.

Keywords: *deliberative democracy, deliberative debate, deliberative education*

Introduction

Civic education programs are part of the teaching curriculum in all democratic countries. A major part of that teaching however, is devoted to presenting knowledge on political and social issues with the purpose of creating politically informed students. Such an idea of teaching is in line with the representative version of democracy, in which the elected representatives do most of the governing and citizens play the role of the passive voter. Yet, if democracy is to sustain itself, a richer conception of citizenship is required in which individuals participate more actively in self-governance (Barber, 1989).

One of the visions of how to improve democracy is called the deliberative democracy. It differs from the traditional model, in that it includes a unique form of group discussion (called deliberative debate) in the decision making process, as opposed to mere voting with majority rule. Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson define deliberative democracy as:

a form of government in which free and equal citizens and their representatives justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible with the aim of reaching decisions that are binding on all at present but open to challenge in the future (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 3).

Deliberative democracy can not only be practiced by decision makers, legislatures and courts but also by groups of lay citizens with the purpose of formulating a more authentic public opinion about societal issues or public will. It involves the ongoing engagement of citizens in the affairs of the civic community, undertaking a whole

spectrum of civic activities, including debate and deliberation on policy, formulating agenda, serving in NGOs, town councils, community boards, associations etc.

The core concept of deliberative democracy is the deliberative debate, which is a specially designed process of searching for an agreement through group discussion. In this type of debate, individuals participate while free of any external pressures and follow the principles of equal status and mutual respect. Disputants explain their positions on the discussed controversy and provide justification for their beliefs, which extend beyond narrow self-interest and take into account the public good. In this process, the disputants attempt to understand the essence of the discrepancy between their beliefs and try to compromise on a solution.

Advocates of the deliberative debate claim that participation in this process results in multiple positive educational effects, including: fostering democratic values; building trust and relationships between divergent social groups; promoting reflection on social identity; acquiring communication and conflict solving skills; and, encouraging participation in politics.

In order to prepare citizens for participation in such a deliberative democracy, the necessary condition seems to be an 'education that is aimed not only at participation but works through participation' (Barber, 1989, p. 355).

Genuine public judgment cannot be developed sitting in a room by oneself. It is the product of civic interaction [...] It is best taught by permitting students to interact together as a group over a question of common concern (Barber, 1989, p. 356).

Civic education programs must combine elements of practical civic experience with real participation in decision processes and include experience in political or public talk, expressing opinions and coordinating action with other individuals. Two innovative trends known as deliberative education (Claxton, 2008) and deliberative pedagogy (Roth, 2008; Alfaro, 2008) aim at educating citizens in order to create a sustainable democracy. However, before it is assumed that the deliberative education is the most appropriate direction for schooling and before specific assumptions and techniques are presented, the question of whether it is feasible from a theoretical perspective needs to be addressed.

Psychological underpinnings of deliberative education

The deliberative democracy rests on an assumption that citizens are capable of reasoning about issues both by themselves and with others. However, there is a growing body of literature which suggests that many citizens may not be capable of effective participation in deliberation due to numerous cognitive, emotional and social deficits which are a natural part of human functioning (a more detailed review can be found in Rosenberg, 2003). On the other hand, there are developmental theories that describe the psychological mechanisms necessary for creating the educational effects crucial for deliberative democracy. The theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky will be briefly presented and discussed in the following section of the paper.

The deliberative democracy literature makes psychological assumptions that individuals are able to develop cognitive and mental functions necessary for effective participation in a deliberative debate. Piagetian cognitive constructivism is the dominant model of developmental psychology utilised by deliberation theoreticians. It shows how children gradually develop a whole range of intellectual capacities. Direct references to this theory can be found in the writings of major proponents of deliberative democracy (review in Griffin, 2011, p. 6)

Constructivism refers to an epistemological approach, which assumes that the mind is not a static container of information but a dynamic system, which develops through interactions with the surrounding world. Deliberative democracy (whose foundations developed during the 1970s alongside the development of constructivism) shares many of its foundational assumptions. Both theories assume that the child (or citizen) is the discoverer of knowledge, consider natural as well as social factors and point to the importance of human interaction in the process of gathering knowledge.

For the purpose of the present article (which is a preliminary investigation of the feasibility of deliberative education) a brief and accurate summary of Piaget's main ideas presented by Martyn Griffin (2011) can be referred to. Griffin describes the process of cognitive development in Piaget's theory as:

- 1) organic (because it involves biological schemas or structures of action, which initiate the process of adaptation to the environment and guide both mental and physical processes,)
- 2) universal (because every child naturally develops his/her capacities through the same biological process),
- 3) evolutionary or stage-centric (which means that a child can not skip a stage nor regress to an earlier one) and
- 4) best encouraged by facilitative teaching methods.

Crucial from the deliberative democracy point of view, is the idea that cognitive development happens 'naturally' if the external circumstances are not restricting it. It is the child who plays the active role interacting with the environment, the role of education is to provide environments where the child will encounter new experiences (and develop new schemes to represent these experiences). Piaget was in favour of the so-called 'facilitative technique' and explicitly ruled out the more intrusive and direct methods of teaching. The most famous example of a facilitative tool developed by Piaget is the moral dilemma. With this method, the teacher provides information, describes a situation and asks the children to discuss and decide on an answer and finally explain their choice. An example of Piagetian dilemma: who deserved to be punished more: a young child, a child who unintentionally broke ten plates while helping his mother, or a child who broke one plate while trying to steal a cookie? Attention of the researcher is focused on the argumentation provided by the child for his/her choice: whether it refers to consequences or intention.

As a result of assuming Piaget's theory of development, deliberative democrats tend to take a *laissez faire* approach towards the acquisition of deliberative skills (expecting that

they will develop them naturally through participation in deliberative debates). Assuming Piaget's theory, advocates of deliberative democracy create institutions, undertake initiatives where citizens can discuss controversial issues and articulate their opinions and coordinate them with other people's values.

According to Griffin (2011), the work of Lev Vygotsky (referred to as social constructivist) is an alternative account of development better suited for explaining the acquisition of deliberative skills. In Vygotsky's theory the development is:

- 1) primarily a cultural process (assuming that cultures and societies, both at present and over previous generations have more influence on individual development than organic mechanisms)
- 2) contextual (meaning that psychological development, the development of higher mental functions is relatively contingent upon needs of a society in a specific time and space)
- 3) revolutionary (there are breaks and turning points in development, 'ages of stability are interrupted by ages of crisis' (quoted in Griffin, 2011, p. 19)
- 4) best encouraged by direct and mediatory facilitation techniques (educators can act as active guides in developing deliberative skills, 'tools' can be created to push children towards their maximal potential).

An example of such 'tool' fostering the development of higher mental functions are Vygotsky's experiments on memory skills in young children: when children were asked to draw pictorial aids they remembered significantly more words as compared with situations when they were only asked to memorize words (without drawing). Vygotsky's theory makes sense of the empirical evidence regarding the lack of deliberative capacities among citizens of the 'new democracies' (transferred from authoritarian systems) and gives hope that it might be possible to foster deliberative skills in future generations.

To conclude, the review of psychological theories suggests that the development of skills essential for deliberation might be feasible and that participation in deliberative debates might have positive educational outcomes under two conditions: (1) careful arrangements of discussion and skilful facilitation and (2) repeated, frequent experience. This calls for educational programs that are specifically designed to foster the acquisition of deliberative skills. There are options for development in society that can help citizens become more skilled for deliberation and educational techniques that could accelerate the process of their acquisition. The idea of deliberative education will be presented below.

The deliberative education

The word 'deliberate' comes from the Latin word 'libra' for scale or to weigh. Deliberation means weighing alternative courses of action, alternative options or solutions. Deliberative education is a modern and innovative approach in teaching, which includes a number of educational tools meant to engage students in the subject matter, provide incentive for them to learn and to increase their ability to adopt to the

fast changing realities of the modern world. Claxton (2008, p. 7) defines deliberative education as ‘a set of methodologies that employs speech, communication, discussion, and debate to maximize students’ participation in the learning process’.

The deliberative process of teaching and learning, as Cristina Alfaro describes it:

introduces students to a diversity of perspectives in explaining and understanding events and experiences. Thus, it develops in students the habits of listening and carefully weighing the trade-offs that accompany every choice, the discipline to keep an open mind, the willingness to stand in someone else’s shoes, the capacity to change and the ability to work with others to make decisions for the common good (Alfaro, 2008, p. 147).

Deliberative education, in short, is ‘education for civic engagement and decision making citizens’ in which two processes play a major part: discussion and choice (Alfaro, 2008). The main assumptions of deliberative education and its expected results are summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Main assumptions of deliberative education and its expected results as compared to traditional instructional methods

Traditional Instructional methods	Deliberative education	Deliberative education outcomes
Top- down passage of knowledge	Democratic dialog between teachers and students, and among students	Access to different sources of knowledge, openness to new ideas
Students are passive recipients of knowledge	Personal investigation and confrontation of different (opposing ideas)	Personal engagement, incentive to learn, active learning
The value of knowledge is perceived within the parameters of exam requirements,	In-depth investigation of a complexity of issues, reaching a variety of resources	Desire to critically analyze, evaluate and respond to a variety of issues
School knowledge not applicable to real life issues	Active application of knowledge (to solving a problem, formulating recommendations or a policy)	Value of knowledge and education as a way of solving problems
Submission to the authority and perspective of the teacher	Interactions between students: coordinating common action	Preparation for a variety of roles in adult life

Source: based on Claxton (2008)

The school environment has the possibility to be a unique arena for fostering deliberative citizens, because it is formed of a diverse population (in terms of intellectual abilities, social class, family background, economic status and religious beliefs) where both social and academic problems are encountered. Additionally, for most children, school is their first real exposure to the public arena. ‘Interactions at schools can help children develop skills, habits of behaviour and character for public life: the courtesies, manners,

tolerance, respect, sense of justice and knack for forging public policy with others, whether one likes them or not' (Parker, 1997, p. 18)

The general model of deliberative education as presented by Walter Parker (1997) consists of the following key elements: (1) increasing the variety and frequency of interactions among students, (2) creating temporary and task oriented groups of students, (3) arranging deliberation about two common kinds of problems: social interactions themselves and academic controversies at the core of each discipline, and last but not least, (4) explaining the idea of deliberation. These are the unique contributions of deliberative democracy to education.

Deliberation (or deliberative debate) is not just any way of speaking. Deliberation is different from alternating monologues, where there is sequential talking but no real listening. Deliberation is rooted in knowledge and has the logic of argumentation. A detailed model of ideal deliberation was presented by Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson (1996) who stated that deliberation is a group process of searching for an agreement through discussion, characterized by the following requirements:

- 1) Individuals participate in the discussion free from external pressures and everyone has equal status in the debate.
- 2) Participants treat each other and their views with respect.
- 3) Participants collectively analyse the controversial issue and try to work towards a commonly accepted agreement.
- 4) During the analysis, participants openly express their opinions on the issue, make proposals and present their justifications.
- 5) While justifying their proposals participants must obey two principles: the reciprocity principle and the publicity principle.
 - a. The reciprocity principle means that participants should refer to reasons and regulations which the other disputants are able to understand and possibly accept.
 - b. The publicity principle assumes that the debate takes place in an open forum, meaning that speakers should employ reasons which can potentially be accepted by a pluralistic audience. It excludes the use of justifications which are discriminating or offensive.
- 6) The deliberative search for an agreement should employ the following mechanisms:
 - a. The consideration of a controversial issue from the perspective of the 'public good'. This means participants must make an effort to overcome their own personal perspective or the particular interests of the involved sides.
 - b. The disclosure of basic assumptions, convictions, values or concerns underlying the proposals. This means that the participants reveal their deepest reasons and motivations for supporting a proposal.

Let's analyse what is specific to deliberative debate as compared to other group discussions used in education such as debates, oxford style debates, spontaneous (impromptu) group discussion or mock trials. A debate takes place in situations where two people (or teams) who have diverging opinions, come together to advocate and

defend their stance. A debate usually means some competition (or contest) between two sides: each side is either in favour of or against a statement, proposition or resolution. The 'for' side must argue in support of the proposition and the 'against' side must refute these arguments sufficiently enough to prevent adoption of the proposition. Neither side is required to propose any alternative solution nor come up with a compromise that could be accepted by both. A debate is a contest that can be won by one side only, while a deliberation requires cooperation of both sides in working towards a common stance. In a debate, the idea (a proposal or resolution) is formulated in precise terms in advance and the sides have to either defend it or prove it wrong. The ideas for a deliberation are formulated in general terms, as open questions (such as 'what can be done in order to improve ...?'), and the participants are asked to come up with such a set of recommendations that all can approve of.

Oxford-style debate is a very formal and competitive format in which a clearly formulated thesis is discussed. The discussion is led by a moderator and recorded by a secretary. It starts with the presentation of the thesis. The proponents of the thesis sit on one side of the room (usually on the right side of the moderator) and their opponents sit on the opposite side. The undecided audience sits in the middle. The rules for the discussion are articulated by the moderator. The disputants take turns in presenting their arguments, while not ridiculing, insulting or offending their opponents. The final part of the debate involves voting on the original thesis: either by changing places in the room or by raising hands. Many of the speeches in an Oxford debate are well-structured, evidence based and carefully prepared in advance, often making reference to expert knowledge. In a deliberation debate, evidence can also be used, but it is not so formalised, emphasising public speaking and real-world persuasion skills over the predominant use of evidence.

Impromptu (extempore, 'off the cuff') debate is relatively informal when compared to the Oxford style debate. The topic is given to the participants (either in teams or individuals) 20 minutes before the debate starts and the format is simple: representatives of each side speak for five minutes each, alternating sides (taking turns). Then, ten minutes is allowed for open cross-examination of the issue and a five-minute break after that. Following the break, each team gives a four-minute rebuttal. In a deliberation, the precise rules of cross-examination of an issue are given. Namely, the disputants should take on the main perspective of public and common interest as their main frame of reference. While arguing, they should try to apply the reciprocity principle.

Mock trials (simulated court procedures) are meant to decide whether the defendant is guilty or not and if punishment should be ordered. It provides space for a multidimensional analysis of the problem (similarly to a deliberation), but unlike a deliberation, the final outcome is the choice between predefined alternatives. A deliberation is more future oriented, focusing on how bad things can be prevented or how a status quo can be improved and attempts to integrate different perspectives. A deliberation is similar to a mock parliamentary discussion in terms of the consideration of the public good in designing the final decision, but in parliamentary discussions cooperation in arriving at the best possible solution is sometimes replaced by the competition of political parties, or bargaining of lobby groups. The core differences between a deliberation and a debate are summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Differences between a deliberation and a debate

Dimension of the difference	Deliberation	Debate
Attitudes of the participants	Cooperative	Competitive
The kind of issue discussed	Open-ended problem	A thesis (with two alternative options)
Formal rules	Merit of presenting opinions in the discussion: justification, reciprocity rule, publicity rule, public good perspective	Procedure: length of a speech, the order of speeches (in turns), the way of making the final decision (voting with the majority rule)
Expected final result	Working out of a new quality Integration of divergent perspectives or general recommendations (or policy)	Informed choice of one alternative out of two predefined options

Practical applications of deliberative education

Theorists of deliberative democracy, scholars and social scientists have great and innovative ideas, but teachers, the everyday practitioners of deliberation at schools, might raise practical objections concerning the implementation of these ideas. Before concluding the paper, three of such practical questions must be addressed. First, what topics would be appropriate for deliberating? Second, how can we be sure that the students acquire some necessary knowledge in deliberative education? And third, how can the students' performance in deliberative debates be assessed?

Referring to the first practical question we can say that most of the topics that have more than one interpretation or explanation can be used for deliberation if their discussion should take into account a public good perspective. Walter Parker (1997) gives the following examples of lesson scenarios employing deliberative techniques designed for students' of different ages:

- Primary grade children sit in a group around the teacher to share their work, explaining to their peers what have they done and finally asking each other questions about their work
- In a science class, students work in groups to put together the biography of Galileo, attempting to decide what his major contribution was to the development of contemporary knowledge
- Elementary and middle school students could deliberate classroom and school policies
- Elementary school children can deliberate a proposed rule that would forbid a child from telling other children that they can not join in a game
- High school students could discuss complicated domestic and foreign policy questions: environmental issues, international trade and resource distribution.

Not only classrooms, but also the common areas of the school can be used for deliberative education such as after-school clubs, teams, assemblies, dances, plays and choirs, because they all need cooperative planning and coordination of action.

The second practical question - can students reveal their knowledge during deliberation? We cannot neglect that formal education is still about passing a certain amount of necessary information and facts. These facts should be used as evidence or arguments in a deliberation. Walter Parker explains:

during deliberation, a rich fund of knowledge will reveal itself in numerous ways: how a student frames a problem, searches for related information, uses reference materials and databases, seeks diverse viewpoints, judges the strength of arguments, interprets charts and primary documents, adjudicates competing interpretations, and weighs alternative courses of action (Parker, 1997, p. 21).

The third practical question refers to assessment and grading. Various forms of small group activities include working collaboratively with others, taking responsibility for one's own learning and deepening the understanding of course content. However, many existing assessment practices may undermine the goals of deliberative education (for example when students deliberate in a class but their final grade depends on individual test results). This gives a message that deliberation was either a waste of time or pure entertainment. The presence of a formal assessment is often regarded by students as an indicator of importance (Boud et al, 2002). One idea of assessing the individual participation in a deliberation can be the so called 'scored discussions' (originated by Fred Newman). While a small group of students carry on a content-related discussion, their classmates listen. The discussion is organised around an agenda given in advance. Monitoring the discussion process is the responsibility of the students in the discussion group. The teacher sits outside of the discussing group with the rest of the class and scores individual contributions to the discussion. The disputants can be awarded points for contributing relevant information, using evidence, asking clarification questions, making analogies, encouraging other group members to participate and criticising ideas, not people. Negative points can be assigned for interruptions, irrelevant comments and personal attacks. At the conclusion, the teacher and students provide feedback on the content of the discussion and on individual behaviours.

Conclusion

In light of the psychological theories of Jean Piaget and Lew Vygotsky presented in the paper, the idea of deliberative education seems feasible. We can hope that appropriately arranged activities within the framework of the formal educational system will bring about the creation of future citizens equipped with an array of skills such as critical thinking, decision making, public speaking, the ability to apply their knowledge to real world situations, to coordinate their actions with other individuals and to adapt to the fast changing realities of the modern world. Among the different forms of group discussions the deliberative debate seems to have the highest potential for fostering the psychological and social competences crucial for effective participation in deliberative debates. The implementation of the deliberative education project requires a lot of

preparatory action, including preparation of lesson scenarios with accompanying resources and training teachers to facilitate and teach through group discussion.

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