

Deliberative pedagogy: Staging grounds for democratic renewal

How is COVID-19 changing the way we teach and learn in higher education? Much of the response to this question has centered on the most visible changes taking place across education given the increase in remote and hybrid learning, rightly leading to assessments about the impact of new technologies on student learning. Yet another, more subterranean, transformation is taking place: namely, a shift toward a more collaborative, participatory, and co-creative pedagogy. This engaged method of teaching and learning—known as *deliberative pedagogy*—offers promise for educating the next generation for both careers and active citizenship in a rapidly changing world.

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Deliberative pedagogy serves as a democratic educational process and a way of thinking that encourages students to encounter and consider multiple perspectives, weigh trade-offs and tensions, and move toward action through informed judgment. It is simultaneously a way of teaching that is itself participatory, as well as a process for helping students develop the skills, behaviors, and values that contribute to civic life. Perhaps most important, the work of deliberative pedagogy is about space-making: creating and holding space for authentic and productive dialogue and civic action, practices that can ultimately be not only educational but also transformative.¹

Deliberative pedagogy comes at a vital time for American society, as alarm bells are ringing with concern about the growing crisis our democracy is facing. For higher education, especially troubling are trends among young people's views about the future of civic life. According to a recent poll of 18- to 29-year-olds from Harvard's Institute of Politics,² more than half of young Americans surveyed feel democracy in the country is under threat, with only 7% viewing the United States as a "healthy democracy." Further, the country has become so polarized that over a third of young people surveyed think they may see a civil war within their lifetimes.



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1 Timothy Shaffer, Nicholas V. Longo, Idit Manosevitch & Maxine Thomas, editors. *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*. Michigan State University Press, 2017.

2 Harvard University Kennedy School's Institute of Politics. "The Harvard Youth Poll." Fall 2021. Retrieved at <https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/fall-2021-harvard-youth-poll>.

Higher education has a responsibility to respond to this crisis. The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement called for colleges and universities “to embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed educational priority for all of higher education.” The task force’s report, *A Crucible Moment*, further argues for “constructing educational environments where education for democracy and civic responsibility is pervasive, not partial; central, not peripheral.”³

Advancing a pedagogy that undergirds this civic commitment has been the task of a learning exchange convened by the Kettering Foundation, a research foundation which studies what it takes to make democracy work as it should.⁴ For the past decade, a diverse, multinational group of scholars has been exploring “what works” to educate the next generation to be democratic citizens. A central finding is the straightforward idea that college students learn most about democracy by how it’s practiced—or, more often, not practiced—on campus. As a result, if we want to build a more democratic society, we need to create spaces in higher education where students can have genuine experiences with democracy.

Empowering students to act as producers of their educational experiences—in the classroom, as well as in campus life and in partnership with local communities—offers an alternative to the dominant paradigm of the academy. Much of the framework for teaching and learning tends to be situated within a context where the narrow technical expertise of a professor provides the sole basis for instruction. The alternative engaged pedagogy model, on the other hand, asks educators to instead act as facilitators and learning catalysts, helping students develop the agency to co-create knowledge, participate in decision making, and solve public problems.

These methods demonstrate the movement within education toward a more collaborative paradigm of learning. With this shift, colleges recognize their responsibility to “create environments and experiences that allow students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves and to become members of communities of learning that make discoveries and solve problems.”⁵ Spaces for more active educational practices—what George Kuh refers to as “high-impact practices”—have grown through curricular interventions (e.g., first-year seminars, capstone courses, global learning) and

classroom practices (intensive writing, undergraduate research, collaborative assignments), as well as through student life experiences (common intellectual experiences and learning communities) and off-campus engagement (internships, service-learning courses).⁶



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These types of educational pedagogy become especially powerful when connected with public deliberation and can serve as touchstones for learning in our adaptive and networked society, where information is no longer the exclusive purview of experts and gatekeepers. This approach recognizes that we all have potential to contribute. Learning and knowledge creation then take place within an ecosystem that extends beyond the relationship between professor and student to include those in the larger community affected by an issue. Most significantly, through these participatory processes, learning becomes the foundation for a democratic society.

What does deliberative pedagogy look like in practice?

- Colorado State University’s Center for Public Deliberation offers dedicated coursework for undergraduate “student associates” who learn the art of facilitation in deliberative techniques, and then serve as facilitators of dialogues on community-identified local issues.

3 The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012.

4 Convened by Maxine Thomas, vice president at the Kettering Foundation, the research process led to the publications of Nicholas V. Longo & Timothy Shaffer, editors. *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*. Stylus Publishing, 2019; and Timothy Shaffer, Nicholas V. Longo, Idit Manosevitch & Maxine Thomas, editors. *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*. Michigan State University Press, 2017, among other research publications.

5 Robert Barr & John Tagg. “From Teaching to Learning.” *Change*. November/December, 1995, p. 15.

6 George Kuh. *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access To Them, and Why They Matter*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2008.

- IUPUI (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) hosts a Democracy Plaza, a student-led effort that provides prominent physical spaces on campus for what are known as “democracy walls” for civil discourse and social issue programming.
- Greater Good Science Center’s Bridging Differences Community of Practice leads a learning community of faculty, administrators, staff and students, along with staff from national organizations working in higher education, to teach an evidence-based approach to “bridge differences” on college campuses using civil discourse.
- Providence College’s PC-Smith Hill Annex provides a storefront property located just outside the campus walls where campus and community can come together to build reciprocal relationships, engage in dialogue, and conduct collaborative work.
- Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue sponsors a Semester in Dialogue Program, in which a cohort of students take an immersive semester-long course that uses dialogue and community engagement on timely topics to engage in problem-solving in collaboration with local community leaders.

These examples offer new ways of educating for democracy in this time of deep uncertainty. Experiments with deliberative pedagogy need to be further developed, expanded and assessed, as they have the potential to serve as foundations for campuses to become staging grounds for democratic renewal.

Read more

Deliberative Pedagogy Lab Publications

Longo, Nicholas V. & Shaffer, Timothy, editors. *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*. Stylus Publishing, 2019.

Longo, Nicholas V. & McMillan, Janice. “Knowledge Exists in Many Spaces: Civic Possibilities through Deliberative Pedagogy.” *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*. Scholars Speak Out, March 2020.

Longo, Nicholas V. *Does Place Still Matter? The Future of Higher Education Depends on Vibrant Local Communities*. TIAA Institute, 2022.

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