A Few Things to Consider, While Trying to Promote Deliberative Democratic Discussions in Post-Truthful Educational Settings

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Democratic societies nowadays are radically changing how they approach questions of reality and truth. Providing invaluable insights into these changes is the growing literature on post-truth—a state in which, instead of mainly relying on rational thinking and reasoning, people determine what the truth is according to their feelings and emotions.[1] This phenomenon emerges in the shadow of rapid growth in the use of the internet and media technologies that generate a massive amount of information whose reliability is almost impossible to determine. At present, the media and social platforms are full of disinformation and misinformation, which spread confusion and distrust to such an extent that manipulation and deception often become unrecognizable.[2]

Consequently, instead of relying on experts and objective facts, people embrace subjective interpretations, based on emotions and beliefs. However, these "subjective truths" are directly manipulated by algorithms, echo chambers, and bubble filters that formulate people's encounters with information, preferences, and beliefs. The information people consume can be filtered to a point where they do not encounter viewpoints or arguments other than their own. These technologies hinder democratic participation since people do not interact with others whose culture, narrative, and system of beliefs are different.[3] Moreover, it is argued that in such societies, citizens constantly lose their ability to discuss, make rational decisions, and form relationships of trust, based on common truths and shared values and beliefs. Post-truth, then, undermines the common grounds for democracy and hinders democratic participation to alienation and polarization.[4]

In a reality where the shared values of truth and knowledge are undermined, and group polarization exacerbated, it becomes crucial that education will prepare its future democratic citizens to deal with an increasingly polarized

post-truthful society. The need for educational systems to develop democratic practices with students becomes more urgent than ever. So far, to strengthen democratic citizenship, many philosophers of education have turned to deliberative democratic education. However, this paper asserts that deliberative democratic educational theory, as it stands today, is insufficient for dealing with the challenges post-truth brings to educational settings. To do so, the paper will highlight deep tensions between, on the one hand, the assumptions of deliberative democracy and the educational approaches it informs and, on the other, the realities produced under post-truth. The first part reviews the basic tenants of deliberative democracy and its function in the educational field. The second part offers a synthesis of deliberative educational theory with the conditions in post-truthful societies. It also discusses three significant limitations that this synthesis surfaces. It is then argued that these limitations increase the disparity between the deliberative democratic theory and its applicability to students' civic-democratic education in the post-truth era.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Theories of deliberative democracy assert that the essence of democracy lies in the citizens' democratic participation in everyday life through communication and dialogue. Amy Gutmann and Dennis 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 conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future.[5]

Deliberative democracy aims to maintain a vibrant and prosperous society. The basic premise of this approach is that through deliberation, participants learn how to respect other opinions, give reasons, justify decisions, and deal with conflict and disagreements with mutual respect and reciprocity.[6] Deliberating

citizens of a democratic society are expected to be actively involved in political and social issues.

Deliberation is framed and builds upon the autonomy of every individual for self-governance. Overall, deliberative capabilities are seen as crucial for maintaining a democratic society, argue Gutmann and Thompson, therefore schools must serve as the main arena for practicing deliberation as part of raising future autonomous and equal democratic citizens:

> Democracy cannot thrive without a well-educated citizenry. An important part of democratic education is learning how to deliberate well enough to be able to hold representatives accountable. Without a civil society that provides rehearsal space for political deliberation, citizens are less likely to be politically effective.[7]

The deliberative democratic theory, then, has an educative aspect. Students develop their capability to give reasons, carefully listen to other justifications and reach collective decisions that reflect the common good and common will. Samuelson defines the general structure and core requirements for deliberation to occur in educational settings as follows:

1. The reason-giving requirement—participants must provide reasonable arguments based on factual truths.[8]

2. The reflective requirement—participants must listen to others' arguments and reflect upon them while "striving to reach a collective conclusion with the other participants."[9]

3. The consensus requirement—participants must achieve a consensus or a decision in every deliberative process. Therefore, most deliberations end with some form or method of voting.

   In practice, education for deliberative democracy can vary in form and objectives. Teachers and educators use the deliberative method to teach their students how to "state a claim, give reasons, listen to and reflect on others' arguments and

strive towards finding a solution in collaboration with other participants."[10] Students learn effective communication skills, collaborative decision-making skills, research skills, and the ability to construct shared knowledge.[11] By using the deliberative method, educational systems prepare youth to become informed citizens who can critically analyze and assess evidence and construct reasonable arguments.[12]

But the condition of post-truth, I want to argue, sets limitations to the theory of education for deliberative democracy. In what follows, I will present three significant limitations to Gutmann and Thompson's deliberative theory and its educative approach as developed by Samuelson, Hanson and Howe, and McAvoy and Hess.[13] I will focus on the gap between the required preconditions of the educative approach for deliberative democracy, and the conditions that middle and high school students experience in the era of post-truth. I will discuss (1) the expanding gap between the deliberative theory and its educational approaches, (2) the preconditions of reciprocity and trust, (3) and the requirement for moral reason-giving. These limitations will be critically analyzed and synthesized with the conditions of democratic post-truthful societies.

THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN THE DELIBERATIVE THEORY AND PEDAGOGY

One difficulty with promoting deliberative education in our classrooms is that the theory and its educational application tend to "talk past each other."[14] Some scholars publish theoretical articles related to the political theory of deliberative democracy, while others publish empirical articles related to the educational pedagogy of deliberative democracy, but they fail to interact. Articles that examine the pedagogy of education for deliberative democracy are also divided between researching the aims and contributions of education for deliberative democracy and researching the different forms and methods of deliberative classroom discussions.[15] Samuelson explains that "the main reason for this discontinuity is that within education, deliberation has become a conception in its own right, in the form of deliberative pedagogy, which is not necessarily connected to deliberative democracy."[16] Consequently, neither the

theory nor the pedagogy of education for deliberative democracy is informed by the expanding empirical research. This impedes the development of practical tools for teachers to facilitate classroom deliberative discussions. The gap between the theoretical and the practical fields of education for deliberative democracy is a major impediment to the implementation of education for deliberative democracy. Both fields tend to "equip" teachers with dos and don'ts regarding what they are expected to teach, create and encourage, but this is without further explication of *how* they apply these recommendations in real classrooms. I argue that the failure to connect deliberative theory with empirical findings hinders education for democratic citizenship. In what follows, it is claimed that the educational theory of deliberative democracy is limited in its ability to educate students for democratic citizenship in a post-truth era, because it fails to incorporate different arguments and new findings from other fields of study.

THE PRECONDITIONS OF "RECIPROCITY" AND "TRUST"

Democratic deliberation assumes the willingness of the citizens to participate in deliberation, and it assumes that all citizens accept and respect some basic terms. The most important term, according to Gutmann and Thompson, is reciprocity. Deliberation depends on the willingness of the citizens to act with reciprocity to their fellow citizens throughout the deliberative process. Reciprocity demands the participants to acknowledge the autonomy and moral positions of others as equal and valid in respect (regardless of culture, identity, race, and status). Reciprocity also entails that citizens are willing to cooperate, listen and reflect, dialogue, exchange ideas with mutual respect, and adopt "a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with, the persons with whom one disagrees."[17] When it comes to education for deliberative democracy, "civics education needs to demand of its students' mutual respect . . . and must also attend to the conditions under which all can exercise autonomy."[18] Teachers need to make sure that all of the students view their classmates as equals, disagree with respect, and have the opportunity to participate in the deliberative process. By doing so, the teacher fosters an "open classroom climate" in which students can respectfully disagree with each other.[19]

This might be challenging for today's students. Hyvönen describes

post-truth societies as careless, contrasting with Arendt's notion of reciproci-
ty—"care for the world." He describes post-truth forms of communication as
"careless speech" (an antinomy to Foucault's "fearless speech)," which "is meant
to be taken literally as being "free from care," unconcerned not only with truth
but also with the world as a common space in which things become public."[20]
Habermas, in an insightful paper, describes this phenomenon as "the further
structural transformation of the public sphere" from face-to-face communica-
tions to virtual communications.[21] In the public sphere, democratic citizens are
free to exchange knowledge and views, as long as they are reciprocal, and their
positions consider both their self-interest and the interest of the common good.
But social media has generated a new virtual public sphere for citizens to freely
"like," "post," and "share" their opinions, views, and interpretations, without
any shared "rules" of behavior, criteria, or censorship that can be excepted by,
or applied for all the participants. The fact that everyone is free to communicate
with the world without even leaving the house, has blurred the lines between
the private and the public spheres.[22] Views and positions that were used to be
told only in the private sphere, behind closed doors, are now being stated out
loud—in the virtual public sphere. The quality of arguments has been reduced
to minimal provocative sentences and the only testimony for their reliability or
truthfulness is measured through the amount of "likes" and "shares."[23]

Moreover, the students' massive use of the internet and social media
as their primary platform for exchanging knowledge and opinions, makes them
less and less aware of the public, and thus of their civil responsibility to act
reciprocally even outside the virtual world. They imitate the forms of communi-
cation they see in the virtual public sphere, which is not bound to any reciprocal
terms, but on the contrary, it proliferates under provocation, manipulation, fake
news, and populism. Because "careless speech seeks to create confusion and
bring democratic debate to a halt," it diminishes students' responsibility to act
with "care for the world" as expected of democratic citizens.[24] In this respect,
teachers can promote deliberation as a counter-education to virtual public sphere
communications. Schools today have a crucial role as one of the only places
for youngsters to develop and practice their deliberative skills and expand their

knowledge of face-to-face encounters.

However, this might be a challenging task with post-truthful students. According to Paula McAvoy and Gregory McAvoy, extreme polarization is evident in high-school classrooms, and "teachers report that students are increasingly arriving at the schoolhouse with feelings of partisan animosity, incivility, and anxiety related to the political climate," and since the discussion can get out of control, they shy away from political discussions altogether.[25] In extremely affective polarized societies, truth is undermined, and citizens become distrustful of everything around them. They feel that the democratic "institutions of truth-telling (the courts, the press, universities), no longer serve as a touchstone for a common understanding of the world," and are not offering reliable knowledge.[26] The spread of misinformation and disinformation constantly generates a clash between "conflicting knowledge" that triggers a "distrust mindset" in which individuals take every source as untrustworthy, and act suspiciously about every piece of information they encounter.[27] Despite the growing evidence about the "distrust mindset" of post-truthful students, there is no educational response for how to promote trust and reciprocity in post-truth classrooms to set the surface for deliberation. There is a need for proper interrogation of how to restore relationships of reciprocity and trust where they do not exist, so practical tools and approaches for the promotion of an open and trustful climate in the classroom will be developed in response. Otherwise, the deliberative educative approach will cease to exist in post-truthful educational settings.

THE REASON GIVING REQUIREMENT

To thoroughly understand the deliberative process, we must ask ourselves, what is considered a reasonable argument for deliberation? According to Gutmann and Thompson, deliberation expects the participants to ground their reasons in reciprocity, and to provide arguments that are accessible to all the participants and acceptable to them. An argument is accessible when all the students can access information and knowledge related to it, and acceptable when the argument relies on the students' general account of what positions are based on the beliefs, ideas, and knowledge society shares. Students understand

that every accessible and acceptable argument can change their positions and beliefs.[28]

Gutmann and Thompson provide *the three threshold requirements* in order to determine whether a "moral position" can be considered accessible and acceptable for deliberation.[29] First, participants are required to present a "disinterested perspective that could be adopted by any member of society."[30] Put differently, it has to be generally understood and commonly accepted by all the participants and must be ungoverned and undetermined by self-interest. Second, positions and arguments that are grounded in logical reasoning or empirical evidence should be open to challenge "by the generally accepted methods of inquiry."[31] Third, positions that go against empirical evidence or logical reasoning must not be "radically implausible," and must not contradict public knowledge—beliefs, assumptions, and truths that society shares. To argue against a position that has already been empirically proved, participants must offer a position that is not anchored in implausible radical ideas that undermine "an extensive set of better-established beliefs that are widely shared in the society."[32] The reason-giving requirement, demands a scrutinized inspection of how an argument should look, how should it be articulated, and to what extent it corresponds to logic and reason. In this respect, "the three threshold requirements" for a moral position can also count for a truthful position because they also serve as a mechanism that can filter disinformation from entering the deliberative forum.

To construct accessible and acceptable arguments, then, there is preparation work that is expected from the participants, so they will come ready with a clear argument that is open to inquiry and reflection. The deliberative educational theory requires students to prepare before deliberation. The teacher instructs information or asks the students to read/write/or watch a video about the issue before deliberation. In some cases, students are asked to collect the necessary information for deliberation themselves.[33] On a more practical level, McAvoy and Hess developed a deliberative educational discussion approach that offers teachers some recommendations for promoting deliberation under extreme polarization.[34] They recommend teachers engage the students with larger questions to help students arrive at positions that could best promote

the common good instead of self-interests. McAvoy and Hess presume that the deliberative discussion should revolve around a perennial issue and "embody conflicts between fundamental values (such as security vs. freedom)."[35] This type of problem "places the discussion in its larger historical context," away from political polarization.[36] They recommend that teachers should also differentiate between issues that are supported by clear evidence, and those supported by conflicting or insufficient evidence, and avoid deliberation over irrational positions that are not based on evidence and reason. It seems that the reason-giving requirement and McAvoy and Hess' practical recommendations for classroom deliberation coincide and serve as a great example of how to put theory into practice. But the problem is that the post-truth condition interferes with students' knowledge construction, reduces their quality of arguments, and limits their ability for reasonable thinking. Let us look a little further into it.

Students today spend most of their time on social media platforms, where they share their positions wherever and however they like, aiming to receive as much attention as possible. They perceive their reality and lived experience as akin to their social media feeds and virtual communities. Students arrive at the classroom with misinformation because they "shop" for their truth as they choose "the source and partisan slant of the information" they consume.[37] Echo chambers and filter bubbles approve their subjective perceptions since they find validation for their truth through an "affective feedback loop" of others who think like them and like their shares.[38]

Deliberative democracy, however, relies on classical theories of knowledge construction and assumes that exposing students to new factual information, even contradicting their own, will necessarily lead them to relinquish their (misinformed) positions and accept the factual position. But new findings suggest that emotions and their affect interfere students' process of knowledge construction. Affect can be defined as the bodily mechanism that arises within individuals following with memories, perceptions, and emotions. Affect mediates between the external senses and the inside perception. Garrett et al. argue that today's students' emotional positions are "just as much 'facts on the matter' as are the more common notions of 'facts.'"[39] This phenomenon is defined in

the post-truth literature as "truthiness"—"that which is being felt to be true, even if it is not necessarily so."[40] It corresponds to the idea that what I feel is true (and want to be true) is true for me. Students' personal beliefs of what is true for them are directly manipulated by the new technologies of algorithms, filter bubbles, and eco-chambers, which private companies operate to maximize profit. The result is that since the students think there are no shared truths or knowledge to rely on, they turn to their subjective perceptions to evaluate new information. Confirmation bias enhances students' feelings, emotions, and perceptions of reality, whether they are true or false, as long as they correspond with their worldview.[41] Kahn and Bowyer, for example, found that youth based their position on political issues governed by "directional motivation reasoning"—their "claims were used to support perspectives that aligned with their ideological perspective."[42] Post-truth media makes it easier for students to evaluate new information favorably if it fits their perceptions, beliefs, and preexisting views. These processes of "affect," "confirmation bias," and "motivated reasoning," "undermine rational consideration of evidence."[43] Students no longer embrace well-established positions once they encounter them.

For example, a student who comes to deliberation with a misconception that she feels is truthful, accessible, and acceptable to her classmates, might realize, after a thorough interrogation, that her position is considered "non-moral" and is therefore rejected by all the other students. That is in contrast to the support and approval she received from her virtual public sphere and social environment. Under the impression that she is being indoctrinated to accept the basic terms of the deliberative discussion, will she respect the teacher's decision not to include her position on the issue discussed? Will she easily give up her position and accept and respect the collective understanding that her position is non-moral? No. Our "misinformed" student, directed by biases and negative feelings of affective polarization toward those who have different political views, is unwilling and unable to accept other arguments as more truthful and valid than hers.[44] Driven by "directional motivated reasoning," she is convinced she is right, resists factual information that contradicts her prior perspectives, and "often become[s] even more favorable to [her] prior beliefs."[45] This common

phenomenon is described in the literature as the "backfire effect."[46] Presenting the misinformed, accurate information that contradicts their position "not only often fails to reduce their misperceptions but actually intensifies their commitment to their inaccurate 'knowledge.'"[47] The more the participants will try to convince one that her position is inaccurate, and the more they will justify their positions as the accurate ones, without considering her emotional state, affective polarization will grow stronger, as the students "get tired" of listening to reasons and arguments, and become indifferent to other positions and lived experiences.

There is a growing body of research that indeed "demonstrates the limited value of knowledge and analytic abilities when it comes to making evidence-based judgments" under post-truth conditions.[48] Then why do we still require our students to come up with moral, truthful reasons, when evidence shows they cannot deliver them or reject them for affective reasons? And if we enforce a form of discussion that is bound to reciprocal terms, while knowing that such terms are no longer considered society's "common knowledge," aren't we depriving the misinformed of their freedom and equality to practice democracy? Once it is decided their position does not meet the "three threshold requirements for a moral position," we respond by excluding their positions from deliberation, even though we are aware of the fact that they will feel (perhaps with good reasons) that we exclude them. Isn't it quite the opposite behavior of being reciprocal and encouraging trust building? Under such conditions, it is questionable whether deliberative democracy still carries its own promise and purpose—to strengthen the democratic society, in a post-truth reality.

CONCLUSIONS

This article illuminated three limitations that surface from synthesizing the educational theory of deliberative democracy, and the realities highlighted by the literature on post-truthful societies. First, there is a growing gap between the deliberative theory and its empirical basis. Second, the theory assumes reciprocity and trust but provides no account for how to reconstruct them when they do not exist. Third, without shared truth and knowledge, students rely on emotional and subjective perceptions, which limit their ability for reason-giving,

and thus, their ability to meet the "three threshold requirements." As a result, they are excluded from deliberation.

Gutmann and Thompson view the principles of deliberative democracy as subjects to change over time and as a way for the theory to contain "the means of its own revision."[49] The principles of deliberative democracy are always open to changes "in response to new moral insights or empirical discoveries."[50] In responding to their invitation, I have illuminated the lack of clarity on how we engage post-truthful students in deliberation, and how we apply deliberative democratic practices in educational settings. To deeply investigate this discrepancy, I propose deliberative educational theorists, scholars, practitioners, and teachers, ought to be "systematically open to revision in an ongoing process of moral and political deliberation" of the limitations that frustrate the promotion of deliberative practices in post-truthful societies and educational settings.[51] The best way to examine these limitations is to deliberate on them and inquire about what does not work, what should be changed or revised, and what demands further explication. Democratic societies are at real risk of losing their own democracy—their basic ability to connect through dialogue and discussion. If we want to fight the decay of democracy in post-truthful societies, we must develop a deliberative democratic educational approach that is founded on the deliberative theory, is accessible and acceptable to post-truthful societies, and is applicable in today's educational settings.

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