

Public Deliberation, Communication across Difference, and Issues-Based Service Learning

Heather M. Voke
Indiana University

Recently, there has been an explosion of interest in deliberative democracy.¹ While many variations have been proposed, deliberative democracy can be understood as a form of democracy in which citizens come together in public forums to deliberate about shared problems as a means of developing mutually acceptable and collectively binding solutions to those problems. Deliberative democrats contrast deliberative democracy with the interest-driven form of democracy that underlies the current practice of United States politics, in which citizens individually and privately formulate their interests and register them through the electoral process. They argue that public policies developed through deliberative forums are better than policies developed through the current practice because the process of public deliberation brings about a transformation of each person's perspective such that the resulting policies are more public and intelligent. When citizens participate in deliberative forums, they are presented with perspectives of all other participants, and they must present and justify their own positions to those participants. Policies developed through this process are more *public* than those developed under interest-based politics, for while policy developed through interest-based politics is founded on an aggregation of private interests, policy developed through public deliberation is founded on public justification. In deliberative forums, participants must justify their views by appealing to reasons that are convincing to the other participants if they are to convince them of the validity of their views.² Policies generated through deliberative forums are also more public for, as they participate in deliberative forums, citizens learn about and respond to the perspectives of other citizens and the possible effects of particular policies on them. Deliberative democrats argue that policies developed through a deliberative process are also more *intelligent* than policies developed through the aggregation of interests because in deliberative forums, public policies are formulated after citizens have considered the views of all other citizens, and they must be justified by appealing to reasons that all citizens find convincing or compelling.

Although the literature of deliberative of deliberative democracy is extensive, some important problems remain unresolved. Perhaps most problematic is whether deliberative democracy can cope with issues related to difference. Deliberative democrats have recognized that American society is pluralistic, that ethnic, cultural, and gender differences have a profound effect on the context within which public deliberation takes place. Deliberative democrats recognize that in order to develop policy in public forums, individuals with vastly different experiences and perspectives will need to be able to communicate with one another across these differences. However, although deliberative democrats acknowledge the complicated context within which deliberation would take place, they maintain that public deliberation as a means of addressing public problems is both possible and desirable. To

understand some of the difficulties associated with communication across difference, as well as the argument that public deliberation is possible and desirable despite these differences, this essay will examine two essays by Iris Marion Young.³

First, how does difference complicate public deliberation? According to Young, there are different speech cultures related to gender, class, and ethnicity. For example,

The speech culture of white middle-class men tends to be more controlled, without significant gesture and expression of emotion. The speech culture of women and racial minorities, on the other, tends to be more excited and embodied, more valuing the expression of emotion, the use of figurative language, modulation in tone of voice, and wide gesture (*CO*, 124).

Young asserts that we must be aware of the danger of privileging a particular speech culture within the deliberative forum. According to Young, the ideal deliberative procedures as proposed by Cohen and other deliberative democrats assume that “deliberation is both culturally neutral and universal,” however, “the norms of deliberation are culturally specific and often operate as forms of power that silence or devalue the speech of some people.” The domination of public forums by these norms effectively devalues and silences the views of those who do not share that speech culture, effectively excluding them from equal participation (*CO*, 123). The existence of different speech cultures creates another complication for public deliberation. Public deliberation requires communication between different speech cultures; that is, participants in the deliberative process must somehow speak across these differences if they are to engage in the communication necessary to address public problems.

Young identifies another problem that difference raises for public deliberation. According to Young, some deliberative democrats assume that there are sufficient common understandings that can be appealed to as people come together to address public problems. Young argues that in “contemporary pluralist societies we cannot assume that there are sufficient shared understandings to appeal to in many situations of conflict and solving collective problems” (*CO*, 125). Each one of us, she states, is positioned with respect to our class, race, gender, nationality, religion and so forth (*DDC*, 390; *CO*, 127). This position determines, in part, how we see the world; that is, our position determines our social perspective. We cannot put aside our perspective; we bring it with us into our deliberations and it frames those deliberations. The existence of different perspectives problematizes our capacity to refer to shared understandings as a means of explaining and justifying the claims that we, as participants in public forums, make to one another.

Despite the problems that public deliberation raises in a pluralistic society, Young maintains that it is *possible* to develop solutions to shared problems through a process of collective decision-making; communication across differences is possible and we need not discard deliberative democracy just because these differences exist. However, these differences require that we modify standard conceptions of deliberative democracy. Young argues that we should replace these conceptions with what she calls “communicative democracy” (*CO*, 120). Young

also argues that, given the existence of differences within our society, communicative democracy is a desirable form of public decision-making. Let us examine these claims more closely.

Young appears to believe communication across differences in speech culture and social perspective is possible. This is, perhaps, the most essential part of her argument; unfortunately, it is also the weakest. Consider her treatment of communication across different speech cultures. Young asserts that there are differences in speech cultures and she claims that current models of deliberative democracy privilege one speech culture over another. However, she makes no argument that communication across speech cultures is possible; she essentially assumes that this communication is possible.

Young devotes more attention to the possibility of communication across social perspective. She asserts that the existence of differences in social perspective does not necessarily imply that we cannot communicate with one another, or that each participant's views cannot become more intelligent and public by engaging in communication with others. She asserts that the existence of difference need not imply "total otherness," that it does not necessarily mean that we have "no similarities" or that our understandings are incommensurable (*CO*, 127). Young believes that people are multiply positioned and that we can shift perspectives depending upon who we are interacting with and the particular issue we are attending to at a given time (*DDC*, 397). For example, Young would argue that I am white and female and that, depending on who I am interacting with or which aspect of my perspective I choose to emphasize, I may be able to communicate with people who do not share all of my perspectives. Perspective, she asserts, is not "fixed, closed, and bounded" (*DDC*, 398). People have the ability to interpret society from a "multiplicity of social group perspectives" and they are able to situate and re-situate themselves in such a way that they may be able to find commonalities sufficient to communicate with others. Young's argument allows us to see how it might be possible to communicate across difference; at the same time, however, I think she overestimates the degree of choice that we have over our perspectives and the extent to which we can leave behind aspects of our perspective. It is questionable, for example, whether I can choose to extricate my perspective as a white person from my perspective as a female person.

While Young maintains that communication across difference is possible and therefore we need not discard deliberative democracy, she does argue that the existence of difference requires that we modify standard expressions of deliberative democracy. For example, she asserts that the privileging of a particular speech culture that the current model of deliberative democracy supports requires that we broaden our conception of what counts as a legitimate contribution to discussions of public problems. We must, she writes, "propose a more inclusive model of communication" (*CO*, 123). She proposes that we broaden our conception of the forms and styles of speaking, that in addition to dispassionate, disembodied arguments typical of deliberation, we also admit storytelling, rhetoric, and the use of metaphor as modes of communication that contribute to the process of public problem-solving.

For while argument is necessary, it “is not the only mode of political communication, and argument can be expressed in a plurality of ways, interspersed with or alongside other communicative forms” (*CO*, 125). Thus, Young proposes that we modify deliberative democracy, which requires that participants express their ideas through one speech culture, and replace it with communicative democracy, a form of public problem-solving that would allow participants to express their ideas through multiple speech cultures.

She also argues that the existence of different social perspectives requires that we modify current conceptions of deliberative democracy. Many expressions of deliberative democracy assert that participants can and should leave behind their social perspectives within public forums and appeal to and seek the common good. Young argues that when participants are supposed to “leave behind their particular experience and interests, the perspectives of the privileged are likely to dominate the definition of [the] common good.” Individuals *are* differentiated by social perspective and some individuals and groups are positioned to have greater privilege than others in our society. Even as we try to bracket differences, these facts make it likely that appeals to the common good can and will “privilege certain cultural styles and values” (*DDC*, 126).

Young’s response is to embrace difference as a resource. She argues that differences can serve as a resource that enables public communication to create public policy that is both more public and more intelligent. Young, like those who favor deliberative democracy, argues that there is a transformation of perspective that occurs as individuals come together to discuss public problems. When citizens communicate with one another in inclusive forums, they are confronted with perspectives that may be different from their own. To communicate their ideas, they must attempt to explain their own perspective to differently-situated participants. This process of attempting to understand the perspective of the other and communicate one’s own perspective to the other may lead to a transformation in each participant’s perspective.

Here, John Dewey is helpful as we try to understand how this transformation comes about. In *Democracy and Education* Dewey argues that “to be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience.”²⁴ The process of trying to communicate with the other requires that one attempt to formulate one’s own experience, to try to see the world as the other does. Dewey states, “To formulate [one’s own] experience requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning.”²⁵ While Young might argue that we cannot see the world as the other does if we do not share the same social perspective, she does argue, like Dewey, that the process of trying to communicate with others leads us to revise our own perspective. She states, for example, that while we do not abandon our own perspective, when we listen across differences, we “come to understand something about the ways that proposals and policies affect others differently situated.” We gain knowledge of how these policies affect others who are differently situated as well as knowledge about how their own perspective

connects and conflicts with our own (*DDC*, 403). Confronted with this knowledge we may find our own perspective changing; in Young's words, we "internalize a mediated understanding" (*DDC*, 403-4).

Young argues that this process of trying to communicate with the other can result in a transformation of perspective such that it becomes more intelligent and more public. Each participant brings to the deliberations a perspective that is "particular and partial with respect to the whole social field" and the insights that it carries are "partial with respect to the whole society" (*DDC*, 395). However, while each perspective is partial, from each perspective, "some aspects of the reality of social processes are more visible" than they are from others (*DDC*, 394). Thus Young believes that each person's perspective reveals a piece of or insight about social reality, and when citizens come together to engage in collective communication, they each bring this insight into the communicative forum. When we are able to communicate our insights to other participants, we may gain a more comprehensive view of this reality. In this way, Young argues, we increase the "wisdom" or intelligence of solutions when we engage in public communication (*DDC*, 404; *CO*, 128).

Young believes that the transformation of perspective that takes place through public communication also has the potential to make our perspectives more public. When we are confronted with the perspectives of those who are differently situated, and when we are questioned and challenged by them, we may find that our own perspectives change. In Young's words, public deliberation that "includes and affirms all particular social group perspectives in the society" and that "draws on their situated knowledge as a resource for enlarging the understanding of everyone" may lead us to move beyond "our own parochial interests" (*DDC*, 399). While we may not be able to occupy the positions of those who are differently situated, we can come to learn to learn more about their perspectives. We can see how particular problems and policies might affect others differently from how they might impact us and we can reformulate our own views on public issues to take the views of others into account.

Let us turn now to consider some of the educational implications of communication across differences. The literature on deliberative democracy is relatively silent about the role of education with respect to public deliberation. Clearly, however, if people are to engage in public deliberation they must possess certain skills, knowledge, and attitudes. When we consider the context within which public deliberation takes place, questions about the role of education become even more pressing: public deliberation in a pluralistic society requires that individuals with different social perspectives and speech cultures are able to communicate about and develop solutions to public problems.

This last section of the essay builds upon Young's arguments to argue that the possibility of communication across difference depends, in part, upon the education that children receive. If children are to engage in communication across difference, they must acquire certain attitudes and, while these attitudes by themselves may not be sufficient to enable children to communicate effectively across difference, they

are necessary. Young herself identifies certain attitudes as necessary for communicating across differences in social perspective. If individuals are to engage in dialogue across differences, they must first have an awareness of difference: that is, they must be aware that they “do not comprehend the perspective of the [those] who are differently located, in the sense that their [perspective] cannot be assimilated into [their] own” (*DDC*, 399). They must also have the attitude of “equal respect;” that is, all participants in public forums must demonstrate a commitment to equal respect for one another, in the formal sense of “willingness to say that all have a right to express their opinions and points of view, and all ought to listen” (*CO*, 126). Participants must also possess a spirit or attitude of openness if communication across difference is to take place, for in order to “gain knowledge of what is going on in different social locations and how social processes appear to connect and conflict from different points of view, individuals must be willing to listen to the views expressed by others and open to the possibility that one’s own point of view is partial and situated” (*DDC*, 402-3). There must be an awareness that “there is something to be learned from the other perspectives as they communicate their meanings and perspectives” (*CO*, 127). Participants should also have an attitude of “mutual accountability” (*DDC*, 402). While she doesn’t offer an explanation of this attitude, it seems to mean that each participant should be willing to attempt to explain and justify her own position to the other participants, and seek terms that are understandable to them (*DDC*, 403).

Similar attitudes are necessary if participants are to communicate across differences in speech culture. Young has argued that the possibility of communication across difference demands that we have a broad conception of what counts as a legitimate contribution to public discussions and as a legitimate justification for a position. In order to generate truly public policy, she has argued, public forums must allow the expression of views through multiple speech cultures. It is not sufficient, however, to merely allow their admission. Just as participants in public forums must demonstrate the attitudes of equal respect, openness, and mutual accountability to people from different social perspectives, they must do so for people who express themselves through different speech cultures. The existence of multiple speech cultures within the public forum demands that each participant have an awareness of and demonstrate respect for speech cultures that differ from her own. Participants must be open to the possibility that there is something to be learned through this speech culture, that legitimate views may be expressed through a speech culture that differs from their own. And accountability means that each participant should be willing to make a good faith effort to make her ideas clear to other participants, even if her speech culture differs from theirs.

Given the roles that these attitudes play in promoting communication across differences, then, how might they be acquired? Young does not address education explicitly; however, she asserts that when people are confronted with different interests, perspectives, and cultural meanings, they discover the partiality of their own interests, perspectives, and cultural meanings. And she states that when people express, question and challenge the ideas expressed by those who are differently

situated, they come to develop a better understanding how problems and policies affect those who are differently situated and how these problems and policies might be experienced differently by those who are differently situated (Ibid.). This allows participants to see how their own experiences are partial and embedded. For Young, then, as individuals come together with diverse others to discuss similar concerns, they develop some of the attitudes necessary to communication across differences. However, Young's account of how these attitudes are developed is not very detailed, and it is necessary to turn to other sources to consider how these attitudes might be acquired.

Earlier this century, John Dewey proposed that public problems should be addressed through a process of social inquiry. He argues that certain problems have extensive and enduring consequences within a society and that those individuals who are effected by those problems should come together to engage in a process of social inquiry as a means of collectively identifying and addressing those problems.⁶ He also emphasizes that certain skills, knowledge, and attitudes are necessary if children are to develop their capacities to engage in social inquiry and he attends to the types of educational experiences that might promote their acquisition.

Like Young, Dewey believes that the possibility of social inquiry requires that we be able to communicate and learn from others who may have experiences and knowledge that differ from our own. For example, Dewey states that in order to engage in public communication across difference, we must have a "sympathetic regard for the intelligence and personality of others, even if they hold views opposed to ours."⁷ We must also be open to having our ideas "corrected and changed" by the views expressed by others.⁸ Dewey also addressed the attitude of mutual accountability: each person, he stated, should be willing to subject her own views to the scrutiny of others. Although Dewey does not address the possibility of incommensurable perspectives or the existence of different speech cultures, like Young, he does argue that if people are to address public problems collectively, they must demonstrate the attitudes of equal respect, openness, and mutual accountability. Although Dewey is sometimes criticized for failing to address issues of power, he did explicitly address the role of education in forming attitudes of racism, classism, and sectarianism and how the existence of these attitudes inhibits communication across differences. He argues that "prejudices of race, nationality, class and sect" interfere with children's capacities to communicate and engage in inquiry with others different from themselves. Education, he states, should develop attitudes conducive to learning from people whose race, class, and beliefs differ from our own. And if communication across differences is to take place, education should not develop a "passive toleration that [encourages children to] put up with people of different racial birth or different colored skin," but rather develop those attitudes that will promote the "understanding and goodwill" necessary to participation in social inquiry.⁹

Dewey also addresses how these attitudes might best be acquired. Given the similarity between the attitudes he identifies and those identified by Young, his work allows us to supplement Young's account of how these attitudes might be developed.¹⁰ Dewey's asserts, like Young, that it is through participation in collective

activity that attitudes necessary to engage in inquiry with diverse individuals are acquired. He argues that children should engage in a process of collective problem-solving, both within their own schools and their communities if they are to acquire the attitudes needed to engage in social inquiry as adults. As children attempt to clarify the nature of social problems and develop and implement a solution to them, they must engage in a process of mutual consultation with others. Children engage in a process of mutual give-and-take in which each person is actively consulted as they work together to address a shared problem.¹¹ As children see that each participant has something of value to contribute from his own store of knowledge and experience, they develop an awareness of and an appreciation for the contributions that each can make to the group.¹²

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam offers some empirical support for the claim that attitudes such as openness are acquired when diverse individuals associate with one another around a shared issue or problem.¹³ Putnam makes use of the term “social capital” to describe the norms of reciprocity that can develop when individuals participate in associated activity with others who are different from themselves. According to Putnam’s research on associated activity in both Italy and the United States, “frequent interactions among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity.”¹⁴ Putnam’s findings suggest that if we want children to acquire the attitude of reciprocity necessary to engage in public deliberation with others, students should have the opportunity to engage in activities in which they must interact with individuals who are different from themselves. Putnam suggests, like Dewey, that social capital and norms of generalized reciprocity might be developed through certain types of educational experiences, particularly programs that require children to engage in community service activities in which they must work with diverse individuals and groups in their community in order to identify and address problems affecting their communities.

Building upon Dewey and Putnam’s arguments, I want to suggest that a particular type of service learning, “issues-based service learning,” offers a possible mechanism for developing the attitudes necessary to engage in public deliberation across differences. Issues-centered service learning would engage students in a process of collective inquiry about a current social problem. Students would work together to define the problem as it is experienced within their community, investigate its possible causes and its effects on various populations. They would also consider possible means of addressing the problem and evaluate the consequences of these means on the individuals and groups affected by the problem.

Issues-centered service learning would require that students engage in dialogue not only with other students in their school, but also with a variety of individuals and groups in their communities. In order to develop an understanding of the nature of the problem and to develop solutions to it, students would need to examine how different individuals and groups understand and are affected by the problem, how the problem might be experienced differently by them, and the types of solutions that different individuals and groups believe would adequately address the problem. Through their interactions, students would have the opportunity to interact with

individuals from different speech cultures and with different social perspectives, developing the social capital and the attitudes necessary to successfully communicate across difference in public forums.

-
1. See *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997); *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); *Deliberative Politics*, ed. Stephen Macedo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); James Bohman, *Public Deliberation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); and *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib.
 2. Joshua Cohen, "Procedure and Substance Deliberative Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference*, 100.
 3. Iris Marion Young, "Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication," in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Bohman and Rehg, and "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Benhabib. These essays will be cited as *DDC* and *CO* for all subsequent references.
 4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1991), 5.
 5. *Ibid.*, 5-6.
 6. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925/1988).
 7. John Dewey, *Ethics*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 7, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (1932; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 329.
 8. John Dewey, *How We Think*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (1933; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 136-37.
 9. John Dewey, "Democracy and Education in the World of Today," *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (1939; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 301.
 10. It is not possible to present a full explanation and justification of Dewey's educational prescriptions here. For a more detailed account of Dewey's educational prescriptions and their relation to his theory of social inquiry see James Campbell, *The Community Reconstructs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *Understanding John Dewey* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995); and Michael Eldridge, *Transforming Experience* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998).
 11. Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1939/1991), 176.
 12. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 353.
 13. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
 14. *Ibid.*, 21.