

Hope for Deliberative Democratic Education in a Post-Truth Society

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Liat Ariel's paper does a great service by highlighting several challenges to using deliberative democracy in educational settings, particularly in a post-truth society.¹ Teachers face significant challenges if they look to implement deliberative practices in the classroom. Students are swimming (or drowning) in an ocean of information. There are often psychological and structural barriers that limit students' opportunities and capacities to critically evaluate this information. I may be naïve or overly hopeful or both, but I am optimistic that deliberative democracy can thrive in the classroom and may play an important role in the continual evolution of democracy.

First, I should note that this optimism is grounded in the idea that classrooms can be transformative spaces. I recognize that classrooms as part of the educational system often perpetuate class and social inequalities that are present in society, and that there are various theories about how cultures interact with educational systems and classrooms, from Dewey to Bourdieu and beyond.² However, classrooms can also be transformative spaces that challenge society and its cultural norms. Challenging societal norms does involve risk on the part of teachers and others in the educational system, and that risk has been made abundantly clear as teachers who desire to have transformative classrooms today may find themselves challenging policies and being controversial.³ However, I hope to illustrate ways in which classrooms which strive to engage students in deliberative democracy can be transformative spaces that challenge societal norms and support the idea that deliberative democratic classrooms are possible in spite of the challenges of a post-truth society.

The first challenge noted by Ariel is that there is a disconnect between deliberative democratic theory and research on pedagogy related to deliberative democracies in classrooms. However, I do not see this as a significant issue. The disconnect reflects the complexities of educational research and the current context it is being conducted in.

There are several reasons for the disconnect which do not relate to a post-truth society. The field of deliberative democratic theory continues to develop, largely in political science, and that is positive. The theory itself, like any good theory, should be subject to deliberation and change based on new knowledge and ideas. It is true that much theorizing around deliberative democracy focuses on how the theory functions on an abstract political level or by conducting experiments with political institutions and structures. The closest ties between theory and research in the political science realm seem to occur when deliberative democratic theory is put into action in political contexts, through mechanisms such as deliberative polling, deliberative budgeting processes and the like.⁴

Because deliberative democratic theory does not always consider the type of education that is necessary to produce deliberative citizens, educational researchers cull from deliberative democracy, and other theories about civic virtue, those qualities that citizens must possess to engage in deliberation and consider how those might be cultivated in an educational context. While theory and research may not match up perfectly, they probably should not match up exactly. It is necessary that research and theory speak to one another and each one change in response to the other. There is an argument to be made that there needs to be greater dialogue (ironically); however, it is not fatal to deliberative democracy as an educational aim.

The second challenge highlighted by Ariel is meeting the deliberative preconditions of reciprocity and trust. This is a challenge, but it is perhaps part of a challenge that educators have long been working on. So much in the field of education points to the importance of relational learning—that there are many things that are learned best when they are learned when working with others. This is why teachers work to develop classroom community and provide opportunities for students to get to know each other and for students and teachers to develop a relationship as well.⁵ Also, this is why group work requires not just putting students into groups, but developing the norms and habits that allow students to work together well. Teachers work to establish these conditions for learning which in turn require reciprocity and trust among students.

I recognize that deliberative democracy requires more as it asks students

to engage in relational learning about issues that require exposure and examination of one's core values. In a post-truth society, opposing views are often dismissed rather than being reflected on in a self-examination of one's core values while also considering what values might undergird the opposing view. The lack of examination may reflect the shortcuts people use when encountering claims in a post-truth virtual setting. However, I think there is value in the premise of Robert Talisse's account of folk epistemology, which posits that when people believe a proposition, they hold that the proposition is true and that when people hold a proposition to be true, they hold that the best reasons support the proposition.⁶ If this is true, then beliefs are assertable and reasons can be exchanged about beliefs. And that premise provides an important jumping off point for the deliberative democratic classroom.

In the deliberative classroom, we can provide students with the opportunity to slow down and think about the reasons behind what they hold to be true. We can ask them to contemplate where their beliefs and values originated and why they hold them to be true. They can consider whether there are reasons that could change their perspective. For example, they can examine sources which have contributed to their beliefs that something is truth in a post-truth society, and they can be encouraged to learn the same about others in the classroom.

In fact, teachers are already engaging in work around helping students determine validity of claims in a post-truth society. Media literacy asks students to slow down and consider the claims that they are encountering. This is a growing field, and many states, including my own, Colorado, have incorporated media literacy as part of their state standards.⁷ Using this as a jumping off point, teachers can encourage students to engage in these types of reflections about what they believe and why, and this can also spur conversations between people about what they find persuasive, which can ultimately support deliberative democracy.

Also, much of the media literacy work transcends the virtual and in-person worlds, which can provide students a way to step back and examine the way truths are represented and supported in the virtual world and how they respond to those truth representations. They can also be provided with opportunities to examine the digital tools that they use to evaluate the ways in which they either support or do not facilitate their understandings of truth.

Finally, if deliberative democracy is not used in our classrooms, we are left to consider what alternative visions of civic education might look like. Perhaps it is a failure of my democratic imagination, but I have difficulty picturing a quality alternative. I also think that using deliberative democracy opens the door to students developing a democratic imagination, where they not only learn about our current democratic machinery, but can engage in critical thought and deliberation to imagine new alternatives. Perhaps, if they learn to deliberate, they can lead us to new ways for the public to be engaged in democracy. I, for one, am willing to see where they might lead.

REFERENCES

- 1 Liat Ariel, "A Few Things to Consider, While Trying to Promote Deliberative Democratic Discussions in Post-Truthful Educational Settings," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 1.
- 2 Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). I recognize that social reproduction theory by Bowles and Gintis relates to reproduction of economic societal structure, and it has its share of critics. However, it does illustrate how schools can reproduce societal structures and the conditions that support them.
- 3 See for example, Martin Pengelly, "Nikki Haley says Florida's 'don't say gay' Law Does Not Go Far Enough," *The Guardian*. February 17, 2023.
- 4 There are many examples of this. See Hollie Gilman and Brian Wampler, "The Difference in Design: Participatory Budgeting in Brazil and the United States," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 15, no. 1 (2019).
- 5 For a good overview of the importance of building relationship and trust, particularly in culturally diverse spaces, see Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, (Thousand Oaks: Corwin, 2015).
- 6 Robert Talisse, *Democracy and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

7 Colorado Department of Education, *Colorado Academic Standards: Social Studies* <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cosocialstudies/cas-ss-p12-2022> (Accessed February 21, 2023).