

WHEN THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

Promoting Ethical Action Through Democratic Dialogue

BY BRUCE L. MALLORY AND NANCY L. THOMAS

What would happen on your campus if, for several hours each week, members of various constituencies—students, faculty, staff, institutional leaders, parents, community partners, and trustees—discussed pressing ethical and social issues facing the campus or broader society? We are not referring to what typically occurs on college campuses: sporadic public panel discussions or lectures followed by a few minutes of polite questions. Nor are we referring to structured events such as departmental or task-force meetings, judicial processes, or professional development seminars. And we certainly are not envisioning point-counterpoint debates.

What we propose is something quite different—intentionally designed, permanent spaces on campuses for identifying, studying, deliberating, and planning action regarding pressing issues with ethical or social implications. Given that an important mission of colleges and universities is to serve as sites of open inquiry, leading to a deeper understanding of contemporary social challenges, the need for such deliberative spaces is critical. As the higher education community works to address the challenges of increasing diversity, institutional governance, curriculum reform, and constrained resources, the need for inclusive forms of sustained and civil dialogue has become paramount.

There seem to be few examples in higher education of such conversations. It is true that campuses sponsor teach-ins, interfaith services, classroom discussions, and residence hall conversations on terrorism, foreign affairs, religious pluralism and fanaticism, and attacks on humanity. But these traditional mechanisms for discussion are often framed as what David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation calls “solution wars.” Participants start with bald assertions about causes and quickly advocate for their preferred solutions, rather than asking: What are the multiple possible explanations for this situation? How do different people define and understand those causes? What kind of community do we live in? What kind of community do we want?

Fundamental questions such as these about the underlying values that guide ethical decision-making require democratic and sustained dialogue. By this we mean intergroup and interpersonal conversations in which those present are granted an equal voice at the table, regardless of their formal status within the institution. And those at the table need to be engaged for a length of time sufficient to interrogate, deliberate, and communicate. By consciously moving away from the win-lose model of traditional debate to a more equitable, safe, and sustained approach to problem-solving, we can foster both ethical principles and

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democratic governance.

In the remainder of this article we will discuss the current need for such deliberative dialogue and offer some concrete examples of ways to achieve it.

THE CURRENT CLIMATE FOR DIALOGUE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In recent years, significant concern has been expressed over the documented increase in social fragmentation and a corresponding decline in civic life and engagement, most vividly captured by Robert Putnam's metaphorical image of Americans "bowling alone." Key elements to making democracy work—voter participation, political candidacy, neighborhood gatherings, and volunteer activities such as Scouts and Parent-Teacher Organization membership—continue to decline. Simultaneously, poverty, hate crimes, school violence, and divorce rates are rising, fostering claims that our collective moral fiber is eroding as well.

Putnam's notions of bonding and bridging social capital are useful in this analysis. With the growth of identity politics—reflected on campuses, for example, in the creation of student affinity groups and conflicts over mandates for multicultural curricula—there has been more bonding among groups who see themselves as holding similar interests (or grievances) than bonding that bridges across diverse groups. Drawing on Putnam's earlier work on political structures in Italy, we could say there has been an increasing emphasis on what others have described as "amoral familism" in which "clan" interests supercede community interests.

American higher education historically has been an incubator for religious, political, and civic leaders, who are expected to be the creators and sustainers of social capital. But contemporary higher education has been criticized for abrogating its social and civic mission. As the late Ernest Boyer stated in 1996:

[W]hat I find most disturbing...is a growing feeling in this country that higher education is, in fact, part of the problem rather than the solution. Going still further, that it's become a private benefit, not a public good. Increasingly, the campus is being viewed as a place where students get credentialed and faculty get tenured, while the overall work of the academy does not seem particularly relevant to the nation's

most pressing civic, social, economic, and moral problems.

This critique was one stimulus for the re-examination of the academy's commitments to civic society over the past decade. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, in its 2001 report on "Returning to Our Roots," called for a "renewed covenant" that emphasizes engagement and coherent (and, we would add, ethical) campus cultures necessary for the 21st century. Similar calls have been articulated in both the liberal arts college community and the Ivy League. Thus, the need for concrete strategies to achieve civic and civil engagement has become paramount.

Our students mirror the unsettling trends evident in American public life. Results from college freshman surveys carried out by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA show a steady decline in student political and civic engagement, as well as *academic* engagement. Simultaneously, there has been a dramatic increase in students' materialistic values.

Twenty years ago, the majority of students reported that they attended college for two basic reasons: Principally, they attended to expand their commitment to a meaningful philosophy of life and to strengthen a just and civil society, and secondarily, to develop their own intellectual and professional capacities. Today, "being very well-off financially" is the objective preferred two-to-one to "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" (Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA).

Leaders in higher education, seeking to meet the intellectual, professional, and ethical needs of today's students, must reconcile sometimes-competing goals. While we want our students to *know* a lot, we also want them to be people of integrity who value diversity, are passionate about social justice, and have a sense of civic responsibility. That is, we want them to be able to draw upon multiple ways of knowing in which the relational and ethical are as valued and accessible as the discursive and instrumental. We want our civil society to be, well, civil...and ethical. Our colleges and universities are now being called upon to do their part in achieving this vision.

Much can be said about the powerful movements in higher education that advance this vision: diversity education, learning communities, community-based service learning, ethics-across-the-curriculum,

global studies, interdisciplinary programs, and spirituality, to name a few. All of these initiatives, if done well, dig deep into student values and institutional mores and show what those values look like in action.

Yet as David Schoem pointed out in the November/December 2002 issue of *Change*, these programs are usually marginalized, with little connection to the core academic mission. Those initiatives that are part of academic curricula are often relegated to “minor” status or defined as “tracks.” Aligning these programs with the institution’s mission and identity and to each other can be accomplished through practices that simultaneously advance the core civic competencies of democratic dialogue and collaborative action.

When we promote democratic dialogue as a foundation for higher education’s work, we are not simply suggesting *more* talk, but what Peter Levine at the University of Maryland’s Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) describes as “improved talk.” In *The Magic of Dialogue* (1999), Daniel Yankelovich, president of Public Agenda, writes:

Until recently, most people made the assumption that no particular skill is required to do dialogue. They assumed that dialogue is just another form of conversation and that we surely know how to carry out conversations without requiring a special discipline....But in the past decade, a growing literature has demonstrated that there is something unique about dialogue when it is done well....

...Today’s diversity means not only that more people participate in decision making but that the new players bring different backgrounds and expectations to the table. Dialogue used to be simpler to do because we shared frameworks. When frameworks are held in common, there is no need to be self-conscious about doing dialogue. No special method is needed to arrive at mutual understanding. You just do it....But we can no longer “just do it.” Reaching mutual understanding through dialogue doesn’t come naturally to us anymore.

The need to engage in dialogue across differences has become especially salient in the post-September 11 era—and not only because of the conflicting ideologies that have been expressed about the war on terrorism. The potential for limitations on aca-

democratic freedom, open inquiry, and the rights of international students and scholars—embodied in the USA PATRIOT Act and the actions of the Department of Homeland Security—demands that academic leaders work to assure the preservation of fundamental democratic and constitutional values.

We will now describe some of the ways conversations can be structured on campus to both practice and teach the skills of democratic dialogue.

EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES: STUDY CIRCLES

Study circles, with origins in the late-19th-century Chautauqua adult education movement and the Scandinavian self-help projects of the early 20th century, are simple but effective ways to engage citizens in democratic dialogues. Typically, study circles involve three stages—community-wide organization to frame a relevant, provocative question and to recruit as large and diverse a set of participants as possible; the dialogues themselves; and citizen-generated action based on the findings and recommendations of the conversations.

Study circles consist of eight to 12 people who meet regularly over a period of time to address an issue through guided conversations. The approach is progressive. The beginning session calls for personal reflections (How does this issue affect me personally?); subsequent sessions move to broader perspectives (What is the problem? What do others say about this issue? How do we frame it? What is our shared vision regarding this particular issue?) and then to action (What can I do? What can we do?). The number of sessions depends on the complexity of the topic and the group members’ willingness to commit time to it. Generally, each study circle will meet four or five times in two-hour sessions over the course of several weeks.

Currently, there are some 200 communities nationally engaged in study circle work, with about half of the projects focused on racial and ethnic intergroup relations. The rest are concentrated on public education, community growth and planning, youth, police-citizen relationships, and similar contemporary social challenges. These projects are supported by the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) of Pomfret, Connecticut.

This model of dialogue is now being used increasingly on campuses, after over a decade of success in community settings. For example, at the University of New

Hampshire (UNH), a land-grant research university of some 13,000 students, not only have study circles been employed on two occasions over the past six years, there are plans in place to make them more regular.

In 1997, the framing question reflected the deep divisions on campus that had resulted from a student complaint against a professor for his use of sexual metaphors during classroom lectures. Encompassing issues of academic freedom, sexual harassment, students' rights, and faculty-administration relationships, the 1997 study circles addressed the following issue: "*Are freedom of speech and a non-threatening environment mutually exclusive on campus? Gender, power, and difference at UNH.*"

The dialogues, which included students, faculty members, and staff led to recommendations for changes in the university's Policy on Discriminatory Harassment and introduced a core group on campus to the study-circle approach to dialogue.

More recently, UNH completed a series of study circles focused explicitly on the challenges and opportunities associated with conflict. Here, the framing question was, "*University or Polyversity?: The Promise of Conflict in the UNH Community.*" Key conclusions that emerged from the five groups engaged in the 2003 dialogue included the following: 1) the hierarchical and classist nature of a university can foster conflict and work against the creation of shared solutions; 2) there are the few opportunities for meaningful and safe dialogue across status groups and between the university and the town; and 3) the conflicts that arise, a phenomenon, should not be managed or eliminated—rather they should be acknowledged as an inherent part of an academic environment, where critical inquiry, diverse perspectives, and multiple voices are encouraged.

In fall 2003, UNH will use study circles in a number of venues, to address the problem of post-athletic celebrations that become destructive, the role of alcohol in the community, student activism and voting in the New Hampshire presidential primaries, and understanding diversity in the post-Michigan affirmative action era.

At Manhattan College, an independent Catholic school of some 3,400 students, institutional leaders experimented with a "values audit" (see Wilcox and Ebbs's *The Leadership Compass: Values and Ethics in Higher Education* for a primer on the values audit as a way to enhance campus community and ethical climate). An audit typically

includes interviews and focus groups, and culminates in a report to the president on shared and contested values on campus. A campus leadership team studied several community-building exemplars and agreed that study circles would provide the most appropriate match for a values audit. Subsequently, the leadership team worked with the Society for Values in Higher Education to develop a discussion guide based on the central framing question, "What are our values and which ones are on the 'endangered list'?"

In discussing what students need to know, value, and master by graduation, the groups developed a shared vision statement for student learning and action strategies to achieve that vision. Most importantly, the initiative laid a foundation for both addressing challenging problems on campus and embracing them as an educational opportunity.

THE VALUE OF DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE AS A TOOL FOR ETHICAL INQUIRY AND ACTION

While these two projects remain "works-in-progress," both UNH and Manhattan College have taken important first steps toward both exploring institutional values and understanding whether and how those values are realized through their educational programs and in their respective environments. These campuses are, to a great extent, defining their institutional identities. Through these campus-wide dialogues, the sense of shared vision (defined as the image of the mission accomplished) starts to take shape.

Participants report feeling a renewed sense of commitment to their work and their institutions. By providing "space" for campuses to act as communities, institutional leaders engender trust and willingness to buy-in. By inviting dissent, facilitators expose concerns that, when *not* addressed, frustrate and detract from meaningful resolutions.

And perhaps most importantly, the alignment between values and action that we called for at the beginning of this article is enhanced. The campuses have strengthened how they do business and created a greater congruence between what they stand for and how they address divisive issues. Next time they face a crisis or a difficult issue, these campuses will have a tested process by which to transform a conflict into an educational opportunity that also strengthens community.

Intergroup Dialogue. Taking the lead

from programs that began at the University of Michigan, several flagship state institutions (University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Maryland College Park, Arizona State University, University of Washington-Seattle) are working to promote student-focused intergroup dialogue as a way to address racial and other social inequalities.

At the University of Washington's School of Social Work, for example, faculty member Ratnesh Nagda directs the Intergroup Dialogue, Education, and Action (IDEA) Training and Resource Institute. IDEA employs a design that includes face-to-face meetings between at least two self-identified social groups. Participants engage in experiential activities, dialogues, and individual and small-group reflections. Over the course of a semester, the participants explore issues of diversity and justice, including social group membership, identity, and status in relation to societal power.

Like study circles, intergroup dialogues are guided by trained facilitators (preferably representing the social identities in the groups). Participants first get to know each other and each other's cultures. Second, they explore commonalities and differences, focusing in particular on the advantages and disadvantages of racial and ethnic group membership. Last, controversial issues and specific conflicts (such as affirmative action and hate speech) are discussed, and participants consider how to build alliances and halt the injustices they have identified.

National Issues Forums. Another approach being used increasingly in higher education is the National Issues Forums (NIF) model, designed in the early 1980s by the Kettering Foundation. Like study circles and intergroup dialogues, NIFs employ trained facilitators, who work from discussion guides framed by three or four choices. Participants review the issue booklets and deliberate the choices, emphasizing the values driving each choice. Issues forums typically are conducted as one-time discussions with large groups of stakeholders, with less emphasis on community-wide organizing as a precursor to the dialogue.

At Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire, a coalition of citizens and organizations work with college faculty to promote civic engagement through practices of deliberative democracy, primarily employing the NIF format. Since the late 1990s, Franklin Pierce's New England Center for Civic Life has worked with campus constituencies to promote conversations on di-

versity and community.

The center has also developed discussion guides on gender and sexual orientation. More recently, the center received a state grant to organize and facilitate state-wide conversations on public education, and a replication grant is expanding the work to other campuses across New Hampshire and Vermont. The center runs workshops for faculty, area teachers, community and business leaders, elected officials, and the general public. Center founder Douglas Challenger, a sociology professor, reports that the center has generated subtle yet permanent changes in forum participants and in campus culture in general.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE

Elements of some of the best programs that support dialogue and deliberation, such as those described above, include:

- **Values inquiry.** Nearly all of the programs and models of democratic dialogue start with personal, lived experiences and an exploration of values. "What are the values that drive that statement or your views?" facilitators frequently probe. If we choose to act a certain way, what values will be reinforced? Will others be abandoned? Under what conditions will participants re-examine their values and accommodate alternative perspectives?

- **Sustained conversations.** Some models, such as the NIFs, employ a format that resembles a town meeting. But even those one-time sessions are based on discussion guides that were written and framed by others engaged in dialogue on the issue over a long period. Other models, such as study circles and inter-group dialogues, require extended commitments of time, because participants have to create the questions or discussion from scratch.

- **Discussions guided by trained, neutral facilitators.** Facilitators do not need to be experts in the subject being discussed, but they do need to be skilled discussion leaders. It is important that they be able to identify session goals, help the group identify ground rules, manage the group process (direct traffic), and keep the conversation moving. They need to identify potential problems and work with the group to resolve them. The best facilitators can recap key observations and themes, which means they must be able to listen for long periods of time for understanding and relevance. In this way, facilitators help the group delineate both disagreements and common ground

while moving toward a set of shared recommendations for action.

• **A progression that starts with personal perspectives.** The progressive dialogue processes start with the participants' personal reflections and experiences. In the campus conversations on conflict, the initial questions were, "Why did you join this study circle? What has been your personal experience with conflict at UNH?" Such questions help participants realize that their lived experiences shape how they view the attitudes and actions of others and build the trust and relationships that serve as the basis for durable collaborative action.

• **A progression that includes identifying common language.** It is important to ensure that participants in a dialogue are talking about the same thing. (For example, does the term "affirmative action" hold the same meaning for each member of the group?) Clarifying language can help a group avoid getting stuck later in the process. This aspect of group dialogue exposes the taken-for-granted meanings of key terms and helps to make clear why different people react differently to the same words. This clarification simultaneously deepens understanding and advances the dialogue.

• **A progression that includes studying the facts and issues.** If a group is working from an NIF issue book, it will have at its fingertips facts and figures. Other models allow group members to contribute what they know, providing enough time for them to do some homework in between sessions. Experienced facilitators can help a group avoid pursuing a line of action that, for example, violates law or policies. But it is important for groups to determine when they do not have enough information and where they can find it.

And it is incumbent upon facilitators to find the appropriate balance between fact-driven and value-driven discussions. Mathews warns that dialogue and deliberation fail when issues are highly polarized or presented in overly technical ways. For this reason, NIFs always frame issues with several alternatives, and facilitators advise groups that they never have to select among those alternatives but can consider combinations or variations on all choices. Sometimes conversations seem to move in ways that seem hopelessly open-ended. Here, facilitators play a crucial role in identifying key themes, making connections, and getting groups to narrow their focus.

• **A progression that moves from dialogue to action.** Democratic dialogue works

best when participants retain ownership of an issue. What is being done? What can our community do? What can we do? What can I do? What barriers prevent these strategies from being realized? How do we overcome these barriers? Challenged to do more than simply calling for action from community or institutional leaders, participants consider what they as individuals and as a group can do, and then generate action strategies that will become their responsibility.

The nature of the action will depend on the problem. In conversations about terrorism, for example, groups often express feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness until they recognize their opportunity to take part in more manageable acts such as reforming the curriculum in their local schools, being vigilant in their communities, becoming more informed, or actively participating in political processes.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Building democratic institutions is a hard, complex, and never-ending task, but it is fundamental to the purposes of colleges and universities. As John Dewey noted, "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife." What we are suggesting is nothing short of a culture shift, with implications for how colleges and universities make decisions and educate students.

Democratic dialogues won't work well until they occur *across* movements (service learning, ethics, diversity programs, spirituality) and seep into parts of the campus where collective decisions need to be made. Likewise, they must occur *across* structures, such that all elements of the campus are engaged, from student affairs to academic affairs to the business office. We challenge campuses to experiment with models of democratic dialogue and collaborative leadership, and to make these experiments not only everyone's business but somebody's job.

Are colleges and universities willing to provide opportunities for this kind of culture shift? The barriers to strengthening habits of democratic dialogue are perhaps especially challenging in a university setting where often, as we are frequently reminded, administrators do not act in democratic ways, teachers are tellers, classrooms are not level playing fields, and public forums are places for airing grievances. In fact, if communities are the site for such work, the problematic notion that a university is a single community must be considered by the leaders of cam-

pus dialogues. Some might argue that universities are more like Weberian bureaucracies than they are true communities.

Given faculty reward structures, for anything to be taken seriously in academe it needs to be the subject of serious study. The first way to overcome these significant barriers is to frame this work as scholarship in the true sense. Thus, faculty might examine the concept of colleges as *communities of communities*—microcosms of our pluralistic American society—and examine the impact of the habits of democratic dialogue on those communities.

A second challenge is one also well known to academics: preaching to the choir. If we create spaces on campus for democratic dialogue, will people come—and if so, which people? Will non-tenured professors participate? Will faculty sit with students to discuss such matters as academic freedom and sexual harassment? Again, there are certain realities at play here, including administrative and committee distractions, balancing the demands of work and family, and heavy workloads. Democratic dialogue takes time, and that is a rare commodity in American society.

An additional challenge that must be addressed is assessment. Programs that are intended to increase the quantity and quality of democratic dialogue as a means to examine ethical issues, improve governance, or solve immediate campus problems will require some expenditure of human and fiscal resources. Thus, campus leaders will want to know the value of such expenditures. Whether that value is assessed in terms of changes in student learning, changes in campus climate, or changes in public perceptions of the institution will depend on the original goals of the program.

Effective assessment strategies for this work must begin, therefore, with a clear definition of the intended outcomes and include ongoing documentation of the approaches used and the characteristics of the participants; unanticipated consequences; and continuing measures of long-term curricular, administrative, and cultural change. Like the dialogues themselves, the assessment process must be complex and continuous. It must be a way to understand and foster long-term change rather than arrive at precise conclusions about costs and benefits.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS: A MATTER OF LEADERSHIP

Meaningful social and organizational change depends upon exemplary leadership.

Campus leaders who wish to introduce or expand dialogue programs need to have a clear and compelling vision and a plan to achieve that vision. They need to employ strategies that can both generate concrete plans and build support, awareness, and buy-in. They need to focus not just on results but also on process and relationships. They need to understand the university's internal decision-making processes, identify key stakeholders and seek their buy-in, carefully plan meetings, and build the kind of bridging social capital that has been missing in recent years.

When leaders engage people in campus dialogues, they need to frame conversations in a way that ensures that people are talking about the same thing at the same time. Perhaps most important, leaders need to foster climates for conversation that are perceived as safe, respectful, and rooted in the principles of academic freedom.

Leadership for effective campus dialogue must be both from the top down and from the bottom up. Mandated dialogue is an oxymoron and clearly undemocratic. The identification of concerns and the resulting action steps must involve those who live with policy as well as those who make it. Lastly, leaders must find ways to celebrate successes and give concrete evidence over time that the recommendations for action that are generated through campus dialogues are being instituted.

These conditions for effective leadership can be created when the leaders themselves participate in democratic dialogues. The campus community must see that its leaders are willing to take risks, act as equals in deliberative processes, and both shape and implement the recommendations for action that are generated through intensive dialogue.

What we have found in the Democracy Project at the Society for Values in Higher Education is that all institutions have hot buttons. The challenge is to figure out what those might be in order to enhance participation and commitment. As in a model dialogue program, starting with the participants' lived experiences and personal interests is the best way to introduce them to a process that, if well run, will get people to come back to the table on other issues.

CONCLUSION

The vision that underlies this article is that colleges and universities are places with soul and integrity, that those associated with an institution know its distinctive values,

and that the best institutions are open and respectful learning communities, where ethical concerns and values are easily and often discussed and where the educational programs and internal decision-making processes are consistent with those values. Colleges and universities can act more proactively and imaginatively than they have to reinforce the democratic values of pluralism, social justice, and civic responsibility.

The events of September 11 and subsequent U.S. policies to eradicate terrorism (and promote democracy and freedom) add new urgency to this charge. While democratic dialogue can place significant demands on time and energy (although usually at very little cash cost), it can also invigorate a community, fostering new energy for facing difficult challenges. In fact, it has been our experience that there is considerable hunger for such initiatives on campuses with a wide range of missions and characteristics. Mobilizing a campus through the power of participation can have long-term effects, creating a climate of respect, fairness, and trust. These are the essential elements of a permanent process for addressing pressing ethical issues on campus and in society at large.

RESOURCES

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WEB SITES

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