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RETHINKING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON CAMPUS: THE OVERARCHING POTENTIAL OF DELIBERATIVE PRACTICE

By Martín Carcasson

In recent years there has been a growing call from multiple sources for a revitalization of democracy. Colleges and universities are often asked to play a central role in such a revitalization, particularly in terms of how college students are prepared to serve as democratic citizens. The growing civic engagement movement was recently highlighted in the 2012 report entitled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future* by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU). It is clear that civic education and civic engagement programs have traditionally been envisioned as a critical preventative or antidote to the problems of democracy. Ideally, students are adequately prepared for the responsibilities of democracy with the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The question, however, is whether these programs are properly geared to the nature of the problems we face. *In this essay, I argue that current civic engagement programs often fall short because they misdiagnose the nature of problems in the 21st century and thus leave citizens and communities insufficiently equipped.*

Whereas the recent calls have certainly raised the profile of critical issues and added important insights into the need for improved democratic engagement, they too often provide a somewhat disconnected list of skills and programs that often further muddy what is already muddied terrain. I contend that due to the inherently “wicked” nature of problems in our diverse democracies, our communities must develop and sustain their capacity for inquiry and collaborative problem solving through the perspectives fostered by deliberative democracy. As a result, civic engagement programs in particular should be tapping into those resources and activities in order to prepare students as well as to help build local civic capacity.

Wicked Problems

In a 1973 article, engineers Rittel and Webber introduced the term “wicked problems,” which they contrasted to tame problems. The authors argued that their engineering education was very well suited to help them handle tame problems, but in their work in communities they were being asked more and more often to address wicked problems, which to them seemed to require a completely different skill set.

Tame problems are problems that may very well be extremely complicated and difficult to solve but are nonetheless solvable. They are particularly data-dependent and essentially can be solved by experts armed with good information. As experts engage tame problems, perspectives tend to naturally converge. Wicked problems, on the other hand, have several characteristics that distinguish them.

- Wicked problems are systemic, thus require systems-level thinking due to the inherent interconnections between issues. They cannot be split into component parts to be studied separately, which is particularly problematic for universities that tend to compartmentalize data into narrow subfields.
- Wicked problems inherently involve competing underlying values and paradoxes that can be informed, but not resolved, by science. Such paradoxes require individuals and communities to make tough choices that involve tradeoffs.
- Wicked problems often require adaptive changes from key audiences. Solutions cannot simply be handed down from on high but ideally should be developed and owned by those impacted.
- Addressing wicked problems demands effective collaboration and communication across multiple perspectives.
- Wicked problems often require creativity, innovation, and imagination. They cannot be solved through the accumulation and application of knowledge, but rather are addressed or “tackled” through the cultivation of collective wisdom and application of sound judgment.

In sum, wicked problems cannot be “solved.” The tensions inherent in wicked problems can certainly be addressed in ways that are better

or worse; indeed this is exactly what deliberative engagement seeks. *Wicked problems thus represent a basic reality of diverse democracies that attempt to involve a broad range of people and perspectives in decision making, and that must constantly address problems that are value-laden.* Such a perspective clearly connects with John Dewey's democratic philosophy. Democracy is not simply a mechanism for voting, but a way of associated living, an ongoing conversation. Our communities must be in constant conversation concerning how to best negotiate these inherent tensions and make various adjustments along the way. The better that conversation, the stronger the community likely will be.

Most social problems are wicked problems. Health care, for example, can clearly be understood as a wicked problem. Some people focus on the need for more access, others on lower costs; but all want to maintain high quality health care, support continued innovation and research, and preserve patient choice and convenience. The problem is that many of these goals work against each other. More access likely leads to higher costs or the sacrifice of quality, research, or patient choice. The wickedness is that no amount of information can tell us exactly how to maximize all of these values at the same time. Once we take action to minimize costs or increase patient choices, we necessarily impact the entire system, often in unexpected ways.

Notice how the wicked problem can be framed in such a way that multiple perspectives focus on positive values. The essence of wicked problems is not that some people hold "bad values," but that issues inherently involve competing underlying values to the point that communities cannot have more of one value without sacrificing another. Consider, for example, the dominant American values of freedom, equality, justice, and security. Multiple tensions exist between these values that require constant communication, mutual understanding, and adjustment. Similarly, balancing the social, economic, and environmental goals of sustainability—the "triple bottom line"—also compels tough choices and the recognition of inherent tradeoffs.

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Unfortunately, few communities or organizations—much less individuals—currently have the necessary capacity.

Adversarial, Expert, and Deliberative Forms of Engagement

A key construct that has been developed at the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation to situate deliberative engagement is a typology that lays out three primary ways to engage public problems: adversarial, expert, and deliberative. The adversarial and expert versions are the two dominant forms of problem solving that communities tend to rely on to address public problems, wicked or otherwise. Adversarial engagement is a perspective that relies on having opposing sides competitively make arguments and appeals to mobilize broad audiences, build strategic coalitions, and/or appeal to institutional decision makers in support of their preferred policy options. The key players in this perspective are politicians, activists, lobbyists, and other professional persuaders. It is the primary form of engagement used within partisan party politics, protest politics, social movements, and interest group politics.

Expert-dominated forms of problem solving focus on the importance of high-quality data, and therefore they foreground the role of particular forms of inquiry and the contributions of credentialed experts. They assume that there usually are technical answers to difficult questions; therefore, experts should significantly influence public decisions based on rigorous, often empirical research and analysis. The public, in other words, should defer to experts. Key players here are thus engineers, policy researchers and analysts, and scientists. In local communities, city managers and superintendents often play more of an expert role as well. Often the “public” is considered too uninformed, too uninterested, or too emotional to be involved in decision making.

Both adversarial and expert forms of engagement have strengths and weaknesses. *Unfortunately, their weaknesses are particularly exposed and consequential when dealing with wicked problems.* The zero-sum, winner-take-all nature of adversarial tactics tends to incentivize problematic communication patterns that cause polarization, misunderstanding, and cynicism, making already-wicked problems much more diabolical. Rather than helping communities uncover

and work through the competing values that underlie wicked problems, issues are often framed strategically to narrow the issue to one dominant value, supporting the assumption that those who disagree must reject strongly held values, rather than recognizing they likely support alternative values that are in tension. With adversarial engagement, most messages are designed to either mobilize the like-minded (the “choir” or the “base”) or entice the undecided, meaning productive communication *between* perspectives is oddly rare. Adversaries seek to make one side sound flawless and the other depraved, while opposing advocates make the same argument, leading to dominant communication patterns of opposing sides completely talking past each other. Communications that recognize the value of and provide respect for opposing perspectives are actually seen as weak and ineffective, rather than prudent. Admitting to tradeoffs is simply poor strategy. As a result, differences become severely exaggerated.

Expert-dominated engagement struggles with wicked problems primarily due to the privileging of particular forms of knowledge. As scholars such as Yankelovich and Boyte have argued, experts support a technocratic view of decision making that overly focuses on empirical data and being “value free,” meaning they are adept at examining what *is* or what *could* be but not what *should* be. Experts are trained to focus on specific aspects of problems, which works well with tame problems but is far too narrow for wicked problems. Wicked problems require significant engagement with both facts and values, and experts tend to only deliver on half of that equation.

Deliberative engagement, on the other hand, provides an alternative model focused on genuine interaction. Ideally, citizens come together and consider relevant facts *and* values from multiple points of view, listen and react to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them, and ultimately attempt to work through the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to wicked problems and arrive at a more nuanced public judgment. When done well, deliberative engagement tends to



foster mutual understanding across perspectives, which then fuels greater potential for the collaboration and innovation critical to tackling wicked problems.

Deliberative engagement, however, takes significant time and effort. The primary hindrance with deliberative engagement, therefore, is the need to build capacity for it, and ultimately make it a habit in our communities. In order to support all the various process points deliberative engagement requires—broad and inclusive research that identifies both tensions and common ground, issue framing, genuine engagement across perspectives, and support for the move to collaborative action—deliberative practice generally requires the assistance of individuals or organizations that take an “impartial” perspective on issues and focus primarily on improving the quality of communication. Such resources increase community capacity by fulfilling a broad range of critical roles, such as convenors, process designers, facilitators, reporters, and impartial researchers. Elsewhere I have termed those who take on these roles as key resources of “passionate impartiality.” They represent people who are passionate about their community, about democracy, and about solving problems but who nonetheless realize that serving as impartial resources focused on building deliberative capacity will fill a unique, critical void in their community. In sum, deliberative engagement requires dedicated, smart, and passionate people to serve critical impartial roles that support the process, and clearly such individuals are rare, and becoming more and more rare by the minute in our polarized political culture. This is precisely why expanding the deliberative nature of campus civic engagement programs is so critical. College students, with instruction and support from professors and staff, however, have enormous potential to fill this role in their local communities, as they have with the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation model.

Application to Civic Engagement Efforts

Shifting back to civic education and civic engagement, I would argue that, understandably, the bulk of the college experience focuses on the expert model. Simply put, higher education is primarily tied to the notion of knowledge and data playing an important role in solving various problems. There are certainly

numerous efforts to encourage institutions to engage more directly in community problem solving, and many institutions do, but the dominant model remains a detached and empirically focused model of hard science and social science working to emulate hard science.

Secondarily, colleges and universities also offer numerous opportunities for training in adversarial politics, generally outside of the curriculum. The most obvious examples are campus “get out the vote” campaigns, and the availability of student groups such as College Democrats and Republicans or chapters of activist groups on a wide variety of issues. Certainly the “free speech zone” of most campuses is often awash with activists seeking signatures for petitions, speakers working to mobilize their respective choirs, and activist groups seeking members. Official campus civic engagement efforts can also often connect more with adversarial versus deliberative engagement. Many civic engagement efforts as well as coursework have a particular activist/social justice focus. The degree to which such programs or courses begin with a particular political goal in mind is likely to push them into the adversarial realm.

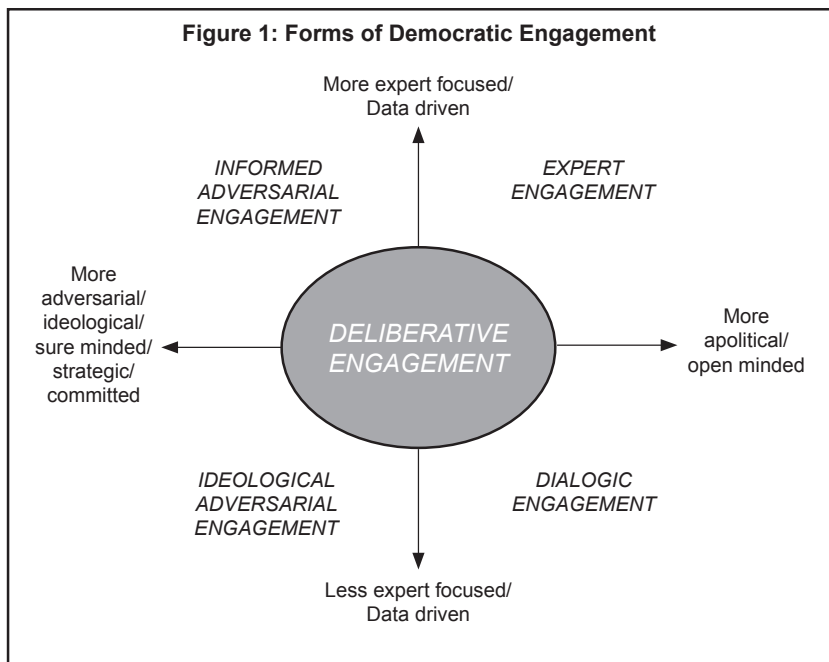


Beyond these connections to adversarial and expert forms of engagement, civic engagement programs at many colleges and universities also have come to focus on much more narrow, service-oriented aspects of civic engagement. Recent reports by scholars such as John Saltmarsh have examined the growing “apolitical” nature of many civic education programs that focus primarily on service and volunteerism. Engagement focused primarily on service tends to essentially skip over the “working through” phase so critical to deliberative engagement. While I certainly support service learning as a useful aspect of the college experience, and recognize the valuable work that is often done through service learning that can make a real impact on lives, when such programs fully substitute for democratic engagement, they are simply too limited. Said differently, civic engagement programs have come to focus more and more on addressing the problems *in* democracy, and have seemingly moved away from addressing the problems *of* democracy. In response to such shifts,

commentators in these reports are now calling for the more specific term “democratic engagement” to replace “civic engagement.” Connecting civic engagement with deliberation is a way to do just that.

Mapping the Connections Between Forms of Democratic Engagement

Building off the distinctions between the various forms of engagement explored thus far, Figure 1 is an initial attempt to graph these different perspectives in conjunction with each other. Infusing campus engagement programs with deliberative engagement



would thus work to place added emphasis on negotiating the appropriate value of data (the vertical axis) while similarly negotiating the perfect balance between the close-mindedness of strictly adversarial engagement with the open-mindedness of perspectives that believe all positions are equally valid. In the figure, expert and adversarial perspectives are now placed in relationship with each other, and dialogic processes are added as processes that are both open-minded and less focused on expertise. Utilizing Aristotle’s notion

of virtue representing the ideal mean between extremes, the far ends of each continua should be considered untenable for political decision making. Far north would represent a perspective that has such an overly narrow view of knowledge, focusing only on rigorous, empirical data as relevant to decision making, to make it too limited for public decision making. Far south, on the other hand, has too open a view of relevant knowledge, losing the ability to make judgments concerning the quality of any argument. Far west is untenable because individuals are so close-minded and entrenched in their positions that the possibility for collaboration and compromise is precluded, whereas far east is untenable because individuals are so open-minded and uncommitted that decisions are never made.

I place deliberative engagement in the middle area of both axes. As Aristotle argued, the ideal mean is not necessarily the middle point, but it could, depending on the situation, range along the continuum. Virtue, Aristotle argued, was thus situational, and always a moving target. The virtuous individuals built up practical wisdom or *phronesis* so that they became better and better at hitting the moving target, but judgment was not simply about applying clear rules to different situations. Deliberative engagement is therefore always about making adjustments in order to seek the right balance along these two dimensions, meaning sometimes what is most needed is to shift upward (adding more focus on quality data and expertise), sometimes to shift downward (opening up the conversation from a rigid limitation of expertise and empirical data), sometimes to shift to the left (adding more passion and stronger perspectives and challenging the status quo), and sometimes to shift to the right (opening up the conversation to broader perspectives).

I should also emphasize that each of the categories in Figure 1 have their own value, particularly depending on the situation. We need, for example, experts dedicated to working in nonideological ways, focused on discovering rigorous data about complex issues. Such work, again, is not sufficient for addressing wicked problems, but it is certainly useful and necessary. Similarly, we need advocates who take positions and work their hardest to convince people to their point of view. Even if those perspectives are more ideological and less supported by data, as John Stuart Mill argued when defending “bad speech,” they have value based on the potential of being the

best idea in the long run, having a spark of insight in them that becomes critical, or perhaps simply due to the instrumental value they earn by causing us to rise up and defend the accepted view. Finally, the dialogic processes on the bottom right can be critical to building trust, understanding, and social capital across perspectives.



In important ways, deliberative engagement seeks to bring out the value of the other forms while minimizing their defects. For example, Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) projects require the analysis of many types of talk in order for us to make sense of issues and devise processes to move the conversation forward. We rely on expert information as well as information from all sorts of advocates to understand where both potential common ground and significant tensions lie. Without the Web pages, message board posts, and various missives from

and conversations with more “close-minded” advocates, the work of the CPD would be much more difficult. The CPD, in other words, works to help the Northern Colorado marketplace of ideas work as it should, and needs a vibrant marketplace to do so.

The broad ideal of deliberative democracy is that individuals would seek these balances themselves, and indeed one way to conceptualize civic education is to build up the skills in students to do just that. Students should recognize both the importance and the limits of data (vertical axis) and should seek to have a mind that is open just the right amount (horizontal). A community of such self-motivated deliberative citizens would certainly run more smoothly than our typical polarized communities. Such an expectation, however, is a tall order, which is precisely why the deliberative democracy movement focuses so much on the importance of good process and the important contributions of “passionately impartial” analysts, issue framers, convenors, and facilitators.

Conclusion: Seeking the Win-Win-Win

The key question, however, is to what degree do colleges and universities support the deliberative perspective? To what degree do they begin with a recognition of the inherency of wicked problems and the need for individuals and communities to be in constant

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negotiation between various key values? A review of the many calls for improved civic engagement that have surfaced in the past several years often includes mention of the importance of deliberation or problem solving, but they tend to be listed alongside many other skills and needs. The perspective offered here argues that deliberative engagement can serve well as an overarching mechanism or ideal to bring a number of inherent tensions within democracy and our colleges and universities into play with each other. Unfortunately, as large institutions tend to do, it is much more common for all the various parts to be rather disconnected—expertise is done over here, dialogue over there, advocacy in other various pockets, and then perhaps deliberation within a specific program or course—leaving the students to make the connections on their own.

If colleges and universities take deliberative engagement as their overarching ideal, three broad benefits would result. First and foremost, students would gain a skill set that is very broadly relevant, and not just to civic efforts. Building skills in complex problem solving, innovation and creativity, and collaboration are among the most important skills employers seek from college graduates.

The second broad benefit of accepting the deliberative perspective as an overarching ideal goes to the community. It is clear that communities are starving for capacity for deliberative practice. In many communities, especially those with institutions of higher learning, there is an abundance of experts and advocates; what is missing is an understanding of the nature of wicked problems and the capacity to turn all the potential value of those resources into more productive engagement. Here is precisely where students can step in and fill this critical need, while at the same time gaining valuable skills for themselves. They are a perfect fit, as they are often eager to make real impacts, are bright, have time, often are not yet polarized, and can perform multiple roles while being compensated with class credit.

Lastly, the third broad benefit goes to the institution of higher learning. These are perilous times for colleges and universities. For multiple reasons, colleges and universities need to renew their connection to the community and clearly present their value. I believe increased deliberative engagement has the potential to do just that.

In closing, I simply would like to reemphasize the clear win-win-win opportunity presented by expanding deliberative engagement efforts on campuses. I would argue that some of the most important needs of both the community (help in addressing wicked problems) and the university (to help make connections across campus and clearly demonstrate their public value) can be in part fulfilled by utilizing students to support deliberative practice in service of tackling wicked problems, which in turn fulfills some of the most important needs for students (to find meaning and purpose while building critical skills for both their community and the market). As the problems *of* democracy and the problems *in* democracy continue to worsen, the time to tap into the overarching potential of deliberative practice has clearly arrived.

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