

Why Political Science Should Teach Democratic Facilitation—and How

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Democratic discussion is a pervasive and useful aspect of social life: in the economy, in social groups, in civic associations, and, increasingly in education itself. Yet discussion facilitation—nearly always a prerequisite of useful discussion, is only rarely taught. This paper explains why teaching discussion facilitation might be worth doing—and how.

The paper's first section discusses the three interactive considerations that point to the need for teaching facilitation. The first consideration is that democratic discussion (or "deliberation" as it is usually called) is a good thing—not least because, to use the terminology of this conference's call for papers, it "empowers" citizens. The second consideration is that democratic discussion is almost always enhanced by skillful facilitation, and very often depends upon it. Facilitation, in short, can be viewed as an indispensable means to productive democratic discussion, itself a defining characteristic of democratic vitality. The third consideration—amply validated by our own experience—is that, given instruction and practice, students can develop facilitation skills.

The remaining sections of the paper assume that readers are open to the possibility of teaching facilitation and are looking for a good way to do it.

The course we describe in the paper is based on the perhaps unusual view that the skills requisite to citizenship in general—and to facilitation in particular—resemble those of other "performing" arts in that they are: (1) practical; and (2) exercised with and in front of other people. But the course is also compatible with a variety of other perspectives on the purpose and process of democratic deliberation as well, and has the additional advantage of being ready for immediate use, especially if supplemented with the additional materials we reference, all of which are available at little or no cost.

Why Teach Democratic Facilitation?

Our rationale for teaching democratic facilitation is straightforward:

- (1) democratic discussion can be useful
- (2) the usefulness of democratic discussion is to an important extent a function of skillful facilitation
- (3) skillful facilitation is an art that can be learned.

None of these propositions is particularly controversial. Still, for reasons we will now describe, they are more than just plausible. Hence they suggest that teaching democratic facilitation is a robust curricular possibility.

Democratic Discussion Can Be Useful

Though the occasional dissenter remains, few democratic theorists now challenge the usefulness of democratic discussion. Indeed, for democratic theory as a whole, deliberation has become a standard of democratic legitimacy. In a recent and comprehensive work on the subject, John Dryzek notes that “the final decade of the second millennium saw the theory of democracy take a strong deliberative turn” and goes on to note that “The essence of democracy itself is now widely taken to be deliberation, as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights, or even self-government” (Dryzek, 2000: 1). Democratic theorists argue that deliberation contributes either to citizens’ “preference formation” (learning) or to citizens’ “will formation” (choice)—or both. Discussion or deliberation is useful, in short, because it enables citizens to think through the choices they face and exercise their capacity for choice more rationally and autonomously.

Before moving on to our rationale’s second proposition, it is important to note that “democratic discussion” can be useful not only in spheres that are conventionally thought of as “political,” whether these be civic groups, governmental institutions and processes, or part of what democratic theorists call “the public sphere.” “Democratic discussion” occurs in many other places as well. To begin with, we are all, as Charles Anderson has suggested, “citizens” of the larger political community *and* many overlapping “enterprises” such as health care delivery, communications, and air travel, as well—and have opportunities to take part in democratic discussion in all of them (Anderson, 1990: 52-54). Meanwhile, firms of all sizes are increasingly incorporating discussion into the workplace. While it is true that workplace discussion is ultimately subject to the veto of higher management, it, too, tends to be more “democratic” than not. Indeed, many (if not most) college graduates will spend more time during their careers participating in—and facilitating—small group discussions than producing even short written communications. Even the US Army, an ideal-typical hierarchy until recently, has begun to institutionalize discursive feedback mechanisms it calls “collaborative management” that are apparently genuinely open and inclusive (Jordan, 2002).

Yet another area in which democratic discussion is useful—and prevalent—is post-secondary education itself. Discussion has long been a mainstay of certain types of courses: philosophy, law, and “great books” programs. But American higher education as a whole is evolving toward ever-greater reliance on discussion—broadly democratic in character—as colleges and universities recast education in more interactive terms. That discussion is displacing older uni-directional models in which “knowledge” is “transmitted” to students by professors and texts is evident in many trends:

- an increasing use of discussion outside of traditional “discussion-based” courses
- the spread of discussion-based teaching programs within larger universities

- the increasing emphasis on “collaborative” and “constructivist” approaches to education across the curriculum, in which learning is actively constructed through the interactivities of students, teachers, and classroom materials
- the spread of service-learning requirements
- the increasing number of schools now actively promoting civic engagement and citizenship
- the rising popularity of “First Year Interest Groups” and “residential college” options.

As a result of these and similar developments, discussion is steadily moving from the periphery to the center of undergraduates’ experience. The solitary student, studying alone in a cubicle surrounded by lecture notes and books, is increasingly a thing of the past. More and more, today’s student can expect learning to be a group effort, an effort of which discussion is almost always an important, if not essential, feature.

Democratic Discussion Is a Function of Skillful Facilitation

Although democratic theorists have increasingly come to endorse deliberation, they construe discussion or deliberation in many different ways (Dryzek, 2000). Still, despite their variety, the many theories and models of democratic deliberation currently available tend to be very long on logical and ethical abstraction, very short on the practical specifics of how deliberation actually works. Consider James Fishkin’s notion of a “logically complete debate” (borrowed from David Braybrooke [see Fishkin, 1991: 37]). This may or may not be theoretically compelling, but it tells us little about how to go about achieving “completeness.” Or, to take an even more influential example, consider Habermas’s “ideal speech situation” which clearly rules “strategic” considerations, inequality, and prior rules out of bounds, but does not—on principle cannot—tell us what happens “within bounds.” Such examples could be multiplied many times over. More normative than practical in their orientation, deliberative theorists rarely spell out the actual *process* of deliberation. Questions about how discussion originates, how it is to flow, and when and with what it is to end are almost never asked, much less addressed.

Among the most important of these questions about deliberative processes is whether a facilitator helps or hinders democratic discussion. We think the answer is that a facilitator—more particularly, a facilitator trained in the way we outline here—almost always helps rather than hinders democratic discussion. Except in rare cases, an able facilitator is almost always a key element in useful democratic discussion.

“Facilitation” means “to make easy”—not to inject something into a process that was not there to begin with. Hence a facilitator is not a participant in a democratic discussion, but rather one who helps make real discussion possible. A facilitator acts to keep the flow of the discussion going, helping participants explore and develop their thinking in a cooperative way (see Byrd, forthcoming [2006]). With a good facilitator, discussions will tend to develop their own practical rhythm, logic and direction. Without one, they can become circular, aimless, stagnant—or worse. Without skillful facilitation,

democratic discussion will tend to degenerate into aimless talk, bargaining, or manipulation. Facilitators help citizens “think together” rather than remain rooted in their own thoughts or attempt to “win” for the sake of winning.

All other things being equal, the more skilled the facilitator, the better the discussion—both in terms of its democratic quality, and in terms of its results. This is not mere speculation. Our accumulating experience with small group discussion (now numbering in the hundreds of hours) shows that a facilitator—whose facilitation and editorial work are under continual review by the group and who is therefore ultimately responsible to the group—can help ensure that discussion is not only “democratic”—but “useful” as well (see Gundersen, forthcoming: 93-97; Gundersen, 2004: 24-27).

Skillful Democratic Facilitation Can Be Learned

Our extensive experience, both as Fellows of Interactivity Foundation (whose objective is to promote and enhance democratic discussion) and as faculty make us very confident that democratic facilitation can be taught. We have learned to do it—and we have taught others to do the same.

Meanwhile, opportunities for making good on this potential by teaching democratic facilitation at the post-secondary level have never been so wide open. Colleges and universities are experiencing a surge of interest in civic education and engagement, which, according to one expert, “have become significant, if not primary educational objectives for the social sciences in general and service-learning programs in particular” (Gorham, 2005: 345).

In his famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Karl Marx wrote that “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (emphasis in original; in Feuer, ed., 1959: 245). We have a similar attitude toward democratic discussion. Democratic theorists have only interpreted deliberation in various ways; the point, however, it to bring it about. One way of doing so is by teaching democratic facilitation. The remainder of this paper provides a relatively detailed sketch of how to go about acting on that belief. The course outline begins with separate descriptive sections on:

- the conceptual underpinnings of a course in democratic facilitation
- course objectives and design elements
- a typical day in the classroom
- assessment of student performance
- what students are likely to learn in the course.

Following these descriptive sections are materials intended to help instructors plan and carry out a course in democratic facilitation. These include:

- a list of possible facilitation development topics
- a worksheet for evaluating student facilitation
- a worksheet for evaluating group facilitation
- a list of supplementary texts.

Conceptual Underpinnings for a University Course in Democratic Facilitation

Facilitation is increasingly becoming a valuable skill for persons who work with groups. The need for facilitators can be found in nearly every type of organization. While many organizations have trained their own facilitators, the development of a highly skilled facilitator requires much more mentoring than can be provided in the typical one-week training session. What passes for facilitation training is often a canned set of techniques. What is needed is a more humanistic approach that is more about personal growth and social interaction.

While universities can provide a mentoring environment for students, the subject of facilitation is not one that is commonly taught in a university setting. The conceptual underpinnings described below may be useful in thinking about how facilitation might be taught.

A. Conceptual Underpinning – Integration of Thought and Performance

Teaching facilitation involves the integration of thought and performance in such areas as anticipatory planning, real time strategic thinking, discussion leadership, and synthesis of seemingly disparate ideas into a meaningful framework for further use. This integration of thought and performance suggests a teaching model that is more familiar in the performing arts than is found in the social sciences (Anderson, 2002: 174). The instructor in such a course needs to be a presenter of facilitation concepts, a skilled demonstrator of facilitation skills, an evaluator of students' facilitation performance, and, finally, a mentor to students as they develop their performance skills.

B. Conceptual Underpinning – The Role of Social Interaction

The second conceptual underpinning is the role that social interaction plays in the learning of facilitation skills. Students in such a course need to experience the dynamics of sustained and purposeful social interaction as a key element in facilitation. The social interaction experiences should have consequences to students that mirror those they may encounter in later career and civic situations.

C. Conceptual Underpinnings – The Personal Dimension of Facilitation

The third conceptual underpinning is the discovery of the personal dimension of facilitation. Facilitation, like other performance abilities, is a deeply personal skill that reflects who the person is. Students need to learn what works for them and develop their skills within the context of their own personal style.

D. Conceptual Underpinnings – Performance Improvement Is Continuous

The final conceptual underpinning is that the evaluation of student performance is based more on improvement than comparison to a standard. In a performance driven class, the role of the evaluation system should focus on personal development in a mentoring sense. Since effective facilitation is ultimately guided by self awareness and self improvement,

the ability to improve should be the basis for the course evaluation rather than some predefined rubric.

The course overview that follows will reflect these conceptual underpinnings. It is based upon an actual course, but the concepts presented here could be used in a variety of courses. At the end of this paper, you will find a listing of course materials which are available through the Interactivity Foundation.

An Overview of the Course

The course has three interrelated objectives:

- Explore the role of group discussion, issue exploration, and possibilities development in democratic organizations
- Develop the skills to become a successful facilitator of group discussions
- Experience the planning, facilitation, and support for group discussions.

These objectives are achieved through several course design elements.

Discussion Groups – Students are placed in discussion groups from the outset of the course. Typically 5-6 students are in a group. These groups work together throughout the course and provide a laboratory for experiencing and understanding the social interaction of discussion groups. Part of the grade in the course is based upon the performance of the students as a group where the lowest level of performance of any individual impacts the performance of the entire group.

Content Instruction/Demonstration – A typical class session consists of instructions related to a specific facilitation topic. (See Exhibit A, pages 14-15, for a list of topics.) The instruction is supported by short written descriptions. After a short instructional period, the student groups are given a discussion challenge which will require a demonstration of the instructional content just presented. Each student group then meets as a group to demonstrate its ability to incorporate the instructional content into its facilitation repertoire.

Student Roles – During each class period, students take on different roles. Each day, one of the students will serve as a facilitator for the discussion. Another student will serve as the note taker. The other students in the group will serve as discussion group members. The note taker also participates in the discussion. Both the facilitator and the group are assessed each class by the instructor.

Demonstration Assessments – As the student groups demonstrate their understanding of each day's instructional content, the instructor observes each group's discussion and makes mentoring comments to the group and the group's facilitator for the day.

Assignments – Students have a variety of out-of-class assignments. These include:

- The completion of papers that relate their experiences to their major area of interest.
- Development of reflections on the public discussion facilitation experience leading to personal skill building as facilitators.
- Sanctuary Discussion Experience - In this assignment, students are given an area of concern to explore. This area of concern is one in which they have direct,

personal knowledge so that they have a frame of reference for their discussions. Typically this experience is one that continues throughout the semester. Each group typically has a different assignment. An example of a semester long project might include: “The Changing Concept of Citizenship in the 21st Century.”

Course Logistics – The course works best in a two day week (75 minutes/class) format. The maximum enrollment in the class is roughly 20-25 students.

A Typical Day in the Facilitation Class

A typical day in the class would go something like this:

The faculty mentor begins the class by reviewing quickly the focus of the day's facilitation demonstration. Students will have already prepared for the class by reading background material on the subjects that are to be the focus of the demonstration. The first of the Facilitation Guidebooks referenced at the end of this paper offers many different readings. For this illustration, let's say the focus is on three facilitation skills:

- Managing time
- Limiting facilitator bias
- Maintaining the discussion at the right level

The mentor asks students questions about their reading to reinforce some of the key points of these topics. This part of the class would go for about 10 minutes.

Next the mentor instructs the discussion topic for the demonstration. The discussion topic needs to be specific enough for students to handle during the class time period. But the topic also needs to have a conceptual aspect to it so the discussion doesn't get bogged down into details. Finally the topics need to have some relevance for students. An example of such a topic might be "Students' Rights to Privacy on a College Campus". In this case, students would be asked to discuss some specific aspect of such a topic (e.g., what are the various dimensions to privacy as it relates to students?) On some days, the students may discuss their semester long project.

The students would break up into pre-assigned groups to discuss the issue. The facilitator and note taker would also be selected in advance. The discussion would last for approximately 50 minutes.

While the students are discussing the topic, the faculty mentor would be doing an evaluation of the facilitator and the group. These evaluations are done on feedback documents. (See Assessment of Student Performance, pages 11-12.) The faculty mentor is positioned in the classroom so that all three groups are visible.

With the last 15 minutes of the class, the faculty mentor reviews the feedback with a special emphasis on the focus topics of the day. The key points of these focus topics are reinforced. Time permitting, the faculty mentor would also touch on other subjects.

At the conclusion of the class, the faculty mentor meets with each of the student facilitators for the day and gives them feedback on their performance as well as that of their team. The faculty member's assessment will have an improvement focus for both the student facilitator and the team.

Assessment of Student Performance

Student performance has two major components:

- Performance in class as a facilitator and discussion participant
- Performance on other assignments from the class.

Of these two, the performance as a facilitator is the most significant.

Performance in Class – The evaluation of the student’s performance as a facilitator is done by the faculty mentor using the evaluation form shown in Exhibit B, page 16. The faculty mentor sits in a place in the room where all of the discussion groups are visible. The evaluation form is filled out beginning 15 minutes into the discussion. After 15 minutes, the faculty mentor can begin to see trends in the student’s performance. By the end of class, the evaluation is completed. Whenever possible, the faculty mentor reviews the evaluation with the student at the conclusion of class.

The group evaluation is done in the same way. The evaluation form that is used in this case is shown in Exhibit C (page 17). All students in the group get the same grade. The group evaluation is reviewed with the group’s facilitator and the facilitator is asked to review the group’s evaluation with the group at the beginning of the next class.

At the conclusion of the class, the faculty mentor provides feedback to the entire class. Special attention is given to discussion situations that arose during class.

Performance on Other Assignments – In addition to in class performance, students have other assignments as well. Typically these include:

- The semester-long sanctuary discussion project (see also pages 8-9)
- An impressions journal in which entries are made after each class period
- Other assignments that link the classroom experience to other topics.

The semester-long project consists of the developing possibilities for an area of concern. Typically the area of concern is of relevance to students. Some example that could be used include:

- Emerging student rights and responsibilities in the 21st century
- The purpose of higher education in a credential society
- Human development and higher education’s role.

Topics could be adjusted to reflect the focus of a particular academic program. Students work on this project throughout the semester in parallel to what they are doing in class. At the end of the semester, they present a report on the possibilities they have developed.

Students are also asked to complete an impressions journal at the conclusion of each class. These journals capture their insights on what they have learned as the semester unfolds. At the end of the semester, the journal is turned in for evaluation. The evaluation is based upon how well the student was able to learn from the experiences of the class. These journals are often the first time the students have been truly reflective of what they are learning from others.

Finally, students are evaluated based upon a series of typically short (2-3 pages) papers on subjects relating the course content to other subjects in their major. Examples of these papers might include:

- An interview with a public official who has served on a public body which was formed to study a particular issue
- The possible role of facilitation in Congressional committees
- Facilitation as an essential skill in the social sciences.

In these assignments, students are encouraged to help each other. Part of their grade depends upon how well their entire group does on these assignments. Even when the assignment is an individual effort type of assignment, the group-evaluation element helps to reinforce the course objectives.

Lessons Learned

There are a number of important lessons learned from teaching such a course that might be helpful to other faculty considering such a course.

The Emergence of Talent – Faculty can expect to see some students blossom in such a course. These students are often students who rarely spoke up in traditional classes but find their calling in a course where they have a social role that is more comfortable to them. This is a consistent pattern.

The Learning from Others – Students have a natural tendency to work with other students. This is especially true of students who align themselves with other students of similar intellect and discipline. In this course, by contrast, student groups are designed for diverse student backgrounds. Students learn from each other in their interactions with each other. The academic “stars” learn how to encourage others to do well while students with lesser academic performance begin to realize how their performance affects more than themselves. There are other valuable sorts of learning that come from the prolonged social interactions that occur.

An Awareness of Real Time Performance – Unless the student is an athlete or drama major, he/she may never have realized that much of their future career will depend upon how well they perform in real time. Many students don’t have a “moment of truth” experience in their college education. Thus they graduate having faced only a limited repertoire of real time challenges. The course also brings “authenticity” to the learning experience – students will be gaining experience in the kinds of activities that more closely resemble the kinds of experiences they’ll face in the future. Many students are evaluated in college on written performance, whether by tests or papers, for which they have time to prepare. In future contexts, however, they’re more likely to face situations of social interactions that call for immediate performance of their part – for which they will be evaluated in real-time.

The Development of Confidence in the Spotlight – Students tend to dislike giving talks or being in the spotlight. As a result, few students get the sustained experience of being in front of a group. Since students in this course will get multiple opportunities to facilitate, they begin to develop confidence in such situations. This is a very evident developmental experience for both the student and the faculty mentor.

Exhibit A
Facilitation Development Topics

(Textual descriptions of these and related topics are available free of charge as a bound volume,
Facilitation Guidebook, from Interactivity Foundation at www.interactivityfoundation.org)

Topic Set A:	Facilitation in Perspective
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The essence of facilitation 2. Types of facilitation 3. Qualities of a successful facilitator 4. The facilitator's role in a discussion
Topic Set B:	Planning for the Discussion
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Selecting the discussion group 2. Minimizing the representational challenges 3. Developing the charter statement 4. Selecting the environment of the discussion 5. Frequency of meetings 6. Logistical planning for a discussion 7. Use of facts/background information
Topic Set C:	Skills of the Facilitator
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keeping the discussion focused 2. Setting the tone for the discussion 3. Limiting facilitator bias 4. Managing time 5. Providing the proper level of discussion leadership 6. Observing the non-verbal side of facilitation 7. Maintaining the discussion at the right level 8. Handling discussion challenges 9. Stimulating original ideas 10. Maintaining the proper role 11. Maintaining a high energy level
Topic Set D:	Facilitation Strategies
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stimulating thinking 2. Avoiding debates 3. Making process transitions 4. Starting the discussion 5. Generating and developing ideas 6. Evaluating ideas

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Structure vs. freedom in discussion 8. Decision making 9. Avoiding group think 10. Shaping possibilities 11. Creating ownership and commitment 12. Dealing with the energy level of the participants 13. Using analytical/facilitator tools 14. Matching facilitation approach to the audience 15. Managing/fostering dynamic tension 16. Use of case studies, examples, story telling 17. Ending the discussion 18. Using small groups 19. Managing the “speed” of the discussion 20. Avoiding premature judgment 21. Managing reservoirs of experience and belief
Topic Set E:	Work Products
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing work session summaries 2. Keeping a record of the discussion 3. Legacy documentation 4. Preparing and editing reports 5. Intersession work

Exhibit B
Student Facilitation Evaluation

Facilitation Evaluation Element	Evaluation Score	Comments
1. Keeping the discussion focused		
2. Setting the tone for the discussion		
3. Limiting facilitator bias		
4. Managing time		
5. Providing the proper level of discussion leadership		
6. Observing the non-verbal side of facilitation		
7. Maintaining the discussion at the right level		
8. Handling discussion challenges		
9. Stimulating original ideas		
10. Maintaining the proper role		
11. Maintaining a high energy level		
12. Displaying proper facilitation.		
13. Mechanics		
Overall Assessment Comments:		

Evaluation Score

- 9-10 High Level of performance, no problems noted
- 7-8 Strong level of performance, slight problems (see comments)
- 5-6 Good level of performance, some development needs (see comments)
- 3-4 Poor level of performance, serious development needs (see comments)
- 1-2 Unsatisfactory level of performance, needs to discuss with mentor

Exhibit C
Group Facilitation Evaluation

Facilitation Evaluation Element	Evaluation Score	Comments
1. Contribution level of each group member		
2. Quality of the discussion		
3. Focus on the discussion topic		
4. Progress made		
5. Avoiding group think		
6. Energy level		
7. Results achieved		
Overall Assessment Comments:		

Evaluation Score

- 9-10 High Level of performance, no problems noted
- 7-8 Strong level of performance, slight problems (see comments)
- 5-6 Good level of performance, some development needs (see comments)
- 3-4 Poor level of performance, serious development needs (see comments)
- 1-2 Unsatisfactory level of performance, needs to discuss with mentor

Supplementary Texts

(available from Interactivity Foundation at www.interactivityfoundation.org)

For Small Group Discussion

Health Care: The Case of Depression. Adolf Gundersen, editor. Interactivity Foundation Series of Citizen Staff Work Reports for Democratic Discussion. Number 1. Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation, 2005.

Privacy and Privacy Rights. Mark Notturmo, editor. Interactivity Foundation Series of Citizen Staff Work Reports for Democratic Discussion. Number 2. Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation, 2005.

Anticipating Human Genetic Technology. Jeff Owen Prudhomme, editor. Interactivity Foundation Series of Citizen Staff Work Reports for Democratic Discussion. Number 3. Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation, 2006.

Facilitation Guidebooks

Facilitation Guidebook. By Jack Byrd, Jr. Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation, 8-25-05.

Facilitation Guidebook for Public Discussion. By Jack Byrd, Jr. Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation, forthcoming (2006).

Facilitation Guidebook for Classroom Discussion. By Jack Byrd, Jr. Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation, forthcoming (2007).

Conclusion

We believe that the rationale for teaching facilitation is strong—and growing. As democratic discussion becomes ever more central to our understanding of a vital democracy, to graduates' needs as professionals and as citizens, and to the way institutions of higher education approach their goals, the need for opportunities to learn about and practice facilitation can only grow. We have offered here a way not only to think about but also to carry out a course in facilitation in the hopes of helping others meet this growing theoretical and practical need.

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