

Phi Beta Kappa Project
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Deliberation About Things That Matter 2007-2008

Deliberation: How and Why?

What is deliberation? What happens when it is taking place? What are its preconditions? What are its prospects for success? Can it be taught and learned?

These questions became part of the culture at the national headquarters of Phi Beta Kappa, a few years ago, when we assessed the results of a series of conversations with old members. We had convened seventeen discussions, around the country, inviting people inducted into Phi Beta Kappa over a span of many years to discuss the question, "What is the lasting value of liberal arts education?" It turned out that the lasting value of liberal arts education, in the eyes of these members of Phi Beta Kappa, lay in their having acquired skills of deliberation. They talked about making and understanding arguments, offering and weighing evidence, drawing conclusions, and coping with uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity.

This raised new questions about teaching and learning in the liberal arts and sciences. Clearly there is nothing magical about simply being exposed to these topics or those that makes people deliberative. Yet if the testimony of these old members was to be believed, Phi Beta Kappa's mission of advocating for

excellence in the liberal arts and sciences could be given new depth and texture if we could gain some insight into the teaching and learning of deliberative skills and their place in the work of liberal education.

Consequently, we asked the Teagle Foundation to sponsor a set of campus-based activities concerning the teaching and learning of deliberative skills. Those activities were investigations of major issues of meaning or value, big issues that lent themselves, through their importance and complexity, to the characteristic exploratory, argumentative pedagogy of the liberal arts.

We asked the participants not only to stage events for the exercise of deliberative skills, but also to observe those events with the aim of raising implicit or unarticulated practices to a conscious level where they could become objects of reflection.

Through this process Phi Beta Kappa has aimed to clarify its own institutional mission, and to prepare for a broader project of similar purpose in the years ahead. We have aimed to produce results that clarify both the nature and the ends of liberal arts education, in order to empower our chapters to play stronger roles on their campuses as champions of that enterprise.

Most of the campus reports contained some accounting of the skills to be undertaken—learned, if necessary—by those who would deliberate. A compilation of those skills can usefully be sorted into two categories: one comprises skills pertaining to the individual person's own thinking ability:

- The inclination to indulge curiosity, to think critically, and to solve problems reflectively;
- The disposition to examine an issue open-mindedly from all sides;
- The habit of asking questions and becoming well-informed before forming an opinion;
- The practice of analyzing and synthesizing materials well in both reading and writing assignments;
- The acceptance of responsibility for examining and forming one's own opinions;

The other comprises skills that are irreducibly social and interpersonal:

- The capacity to express oneself verbally and to be comfortable speaking up in a group discussion, waiting one's turn and taking it when it comes;
- The habit of listening carefully;
- The willingness to appreciate and respect the opinions of others by explicating them;
- The maintenance of civility in debate;
- The willingness to give criticism constructively and to receive it without defensiveness.

These, observed various ones of our participants, are features of a conversation that amounts to a deliberation going well.

The reports from our campus activities confirmed much that is well known about deliberation. Some of the points were obvious. You need a comfortable setting. Food and drink can be important. Some of our participants noted differences in degree of success depending on the continuity of the group from session to session. A shared base of information about the topic helped, whether due to attendance at a lecture, or having shared a common text. One report isolated a

good size range for the discussant group. Fewer than twelve makes the discussion gappy, while more than twenty loses coherence. It helps if discussants know each other's names. All this seems largely confirmation of common sense and received opinion.

But there were some somewhat subtler results. For example, we saw repeatedly that the role of the moderator of a deliberative session is laden with dualities and multiple purposes. Within the actor/director duality is the tension between managing a discussion productively by offering direction and insisting on focus, on the one hand, and nurturing spontaneity and genuineness, on the other. Too much direction stifles; too little risks forfeiting the occasion to whim. Clearly, there is no simple answer to the question about the right touch; it depends on so many things. Finding it in a given case would seem to require experience, good will, and practical wisdom.

It is also the case that the presence or absence of "experts" on the topics shapes the experience. Some project directors found that "The students most appreciated discussions in which the panelists disagreed or came from different backgrounds and so offered different perspectives." On another campus, they "found that it was not at all necessary to have an 'expert' present," and that in fact specialist expertise could dampen discussion. A couple of project directors noted that students are energized by faculty disagreement.

On one campus an aim of the project was "having students explore the differences between on-line or web-based discussion versus face-to-face discussion." The principal reported utility of the on-line exchanges was to improve the format of the face-to-face sessions in response to posted comments.

For example, “experts” came to be distributed through the group, rather than clustered behind a table.

The coordinators at Hope College reported that discussion leaders named “the temperaments and dispositions of students in the group” most frequently as a factor in the success of the discussions. “What temperaments and dispositions?” might be a good next question. The answer might be “patience.” One significant source of student frustration with deliberation—both as a skill and as a pedagogical technique--was the persistent lack of clear, final answers to the topics taken up. One set of project leaders reported that “at least one of our students . . . thought that we had never approached ‘real deliberation’ because we never decided anything as a body.”

Sometimes, too, frustration is rooted in a lack of clarity about the process or in shortcomings in interlocutors’ efforts. There is learning to cope with frustration—frustration at the social level (“He’s not even *listening* to me!”) and epistemological frustration (“No one could ever *know* that!”). The latter is at a more profound level: there are protracted, perhaps intractable disagreements, persistent uncertainties. Part of the deliberative life is learning to live without clear resolution.

There was evidence in the reports that this tendency—to give in to epistemological frustrations—was exacerbated by the fact that neither an individual’s deliberation nor the process of a group’s working toward a collective sense things is a linear process. Part of the reason for that may be that in any discussion the different participants’ relation to the subject matter differs

in many dimensions. As one coordinator commented: “One person’s ‘old hat’ discussion may contribute to another’s enlightening transformative thought.”

On another campus, it turned out that the text selected for discussion—by all new students—engaged female students significantly more successfully than male students. Still other directors found difficulties in stimulating student interest in abstract discussion of the nature of deliberation, but keenest interest when a specific topic engaged them personally. The outstanding example was a discussion of fear. They write: “We shouldn’t have been surprised—but we were—that the things most immediate in our undergraduates’ lives are the things they most want to deliberate about.”

Much of the frustration may be rooted in four factors endemic to discussions on topics that are prone to conflicting definitions. “Are we talking about this, or about that?” That is ambiguity. “Where does this topic begin and end?” That is vagueness. “Every time we try to sort this out, it just gets more complicated.” That is complexity. “How could we ever settle this?” That is the threat of persistent, ineradicable uncertainty. The relation between the individual’s deliberation and the group’s is not linear, with one producing the other. For example, it is not right to say of the group’s opinion that it is the sum of all the individual opinions. Nor that the individuals’ opinions are simply the product what the group decides.

Every occasion of language use—even or especially one as complicated as deliberating—takes place in a supporting matrix of habits, customs, conventions, and implicit commonalities of behavior, an ante-linguistic substructure that gives shape to the iceberg’s tip that we see in the linguistic performances themselves.

Above we have distinguished between those aspects of deliberation that are matters of one's individual habits of thought and those that pertain to social practices. Among the latter, one director noted the importance of waiting and taking one's turn in discussion. Waiting one's turn is constituent of respect for others and for the public nature of the process. A person who waits her turn is conceding that the process is larger than her own train of thought. This is a nod in the direction of the public and social nature of knowledge. A person who takes her turn is acknowledging an obligation to contribute to the formation of the group's thought process, while also acknowledging that the validity of one's own private opinions is testable only in public. So we see that the orderly nature of the discussion is itself a factor in the standing of the conclusion or of the continuing irresolutions.

There is also an implicit presupposition of disinterestedness. But this is difficult. People don't deliberate about things they don't care about, as evidenced by the students at Stetson who did so much better when the topics emerged out of their own lives and concerns. So virtually *ex hypothesi*, we are interested in the topics of our deliberations. That is, we are not *uninterested*. Can we be *disinterested*? One director used the principle of "leaving baggage at the door." This may ultimately be a moral question. Are we obligated, for real deliberation to take place, to care more about the truth than about our own advantage, either materially or in seeming to win the exchange?

This project has been, for the Phi Beta Kappa Society, an affirmation of our perception that deliberating about things that matter is at the core of liberal education.

The project as a whole, we believe, confirmed much of what we think we know about how deliberation works. To quote one of the campus reports:

The quality of deliberation seems to be impacted by the context in which the deliberation takes place, the preparedness of those involved in the deliberation, the proactiveness of the facilitator, and the degree of personal connection to the issue being discussed.

So we think we have usefully coordinated a vision of deliberation as a pedagogy.

What remains unplumbed, however, is the question about the conditions that make deliberation possible at all, and the limitations those conditions place on the effectiveness of orderly, social, reason-giving processes in helping individuals and groups to form appropriate beliefs. In a strong sense, the histories of education and of philosophical thought have been the continual struggle to bring the spirit of critical, analytical, empirical processes to dominance in belief-formation. This is connected with the fact that in traditional societies, as R.R. Marett wrote, the core principles are as much danced as stated, and with Plato's famous unease about poets.

Now in addition to these issues (think of Francis Bacon's remark that human reason is "no dry light") we have the cognitive linguistics of George Lakoff, proponent of "the embodied mind," whose views raise important questions about the role of metaphors, "frames," or "pictures" in shaping the uptake people have to evidence presented in deliberative processes. Continuous in a sense with the observations about food, comfortable settings, civil social contexts, and so on, Lakoff challenges the idea that thinking something through is exhaustively characterized as the dispassionate weighing of evidence. What else

it is, and how that relates to what can be taught and learned about deliberation, is the big further question posed by the results of our project.