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On moral education through deliberative communication

TOMAS ENGLUND

John Dewey’s masterpiece Democracy and Education, from 1916, is clearly far removed from the dominant tendencies of current education policy in the western world, with their emphasis on the narrow accountability of the New Public Management. Nevertheless, his book still challenges those tendencies and sets forth criteria for citizenship and moral education for democracy as ‘a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience’. According to Dewey, the measure of the worth of activities in schools is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit, a spirit that can be actively present only when certain conditions are met. How can we understand and characterize these conditions in today’s schools, and to what extent are they desirable by different forces? I will move between these two questions using texts by Dewey and others on moral education, exploring communicative strategies that have inspired my own writing. In particular, I will present and discuss my own proposal of deliberative communication, and briefly relate it to the challenge from agonism, the ‘realities’ of educational policies and the status of moral and citizenship education in Sweden and the US today.

Keywords: moral education; deliberative communication; John Dewey; Democracy and Education; Jürgen Habermas; agonism

Introduction

There is a fact which from all the evidence is an integral part of moral action which has not received the attention it deserves in moral theory: that is the element of uncertainty and of conflict in any situation which can properly be called moral. (Dewey, 1930/1984, p. 279)

If the moral and the social quality of conduct are identical, as Dewey proposes in the final pages of Democracy and Education, in what way is it possible to achieve high moral and social quality? According to Dewey, the measure of the worth of activities in schools ‘is the extent to which they are animated by a social spirit. And the great danger which threatens school work is the absence of conditions which make possible a permeating social spirit; this is the great enemy of effective moral training. For this spirit can be actively present only when certain conditions are met’ (Dewey, 1916/1980, p. 368). How can we understand and characterize

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these conditions in today’s schools, and to what extent are they desirable from the standpoint of different social forces?

In the following, I will try to move between and integrate a discussion of these two questions using texts by Dewey, primarily Democracy and Education, but also other texts by him and others on moral and political education, exploring communicative strategies in line with Dewey that have inspired my own writing. In particular, I will present and discuss my own proposal of deliberative communication, and briefly relate it to the ‘realities’ of educational policies and the status of moral and citizenship education in Sweden and the US today.

The gap between current educational policy and Dewey’s ideas of citizenship and moral education

John Dewey’s masterpiece Democracy and Education, from 1916, is clearly far removed from the dominant tendencies of current education policy in the Western world, with their emphasis on the narrow accountability of the New Public Management. Nevertheless, his book still challenges those tendencies and sets forth criteria for citizenship and moral education for democracy as ‘a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience’ (Dewey, 1916/1980, p. 93). In the last chapter of D&E, ‘Theories of morals’, Dewey articulates how ‘the school must itself be a community life in all which that implies. Social perceptions and interests can be developed only in a genuinely social medium—one where there is give and take in the building up of a common experience’, and he concludes that ‘all education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral’ (Dewey, 1916/1980, pp. 368, 370).

If we interpret community life in which there is give and take, and relate this to Dewey’s political–philosophical vision of how ‘the public has to define itself’ (Dewey, 1927/1984), we might see school rooms as weak publics, potential public spaces in which there is a preference for pluralism. It is also through his emphasis in Democracy and Education on the relationship between education and democracy as a life form that Dewey understands education as a forum for mutual communication between people with different backgrounds and perspectives, or, as he develops on this idea:

How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? (Dewey, 1916/1980, p. 89)

The communicative criteria for democracy put forward by Dewey, of free and open communication between and within groups, provide important guidance for the development of forms of communication that strengthen the moral and social quality of conduct and, in the long run, democracy. Thus, for Dewey, the morale (within a classroom) and the morality of individuals (in that classroom) are created and grow through collective and individual experiences of interaction and communication. However, Dewey is not talking here, or anywhere else, about prescribed morals or
certain moral principles (cf. Pappas, 2008). Rather, he argues that no specific moral rules are applicable when there is constant change and plural and conflicting values. He points out how morals continue to grow and change through communication in different contexts. In developing his account of reflective morality, he stresses change, pluralism, conflict and anti-authoritarianism because authority itself corrupts people’s moral views. But, as noted in the introduction to this issue, ‘of all the themes woven into D&E, but absent from contemporary US schooling, moral life is arguably the most significant’ (Boostrom, 2014).

The moral dimension of teaching and the ethical nature of teachers’ professional responsibility

The heritage of Dewey on the moral dimension of education was revitalized in the early 1990s by two projects in particular, which were compiled in two edited works (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; cf. Englund, 1994). In these two volumes, we can see a renewal and a starting point for deeper analyses in the area of the moral dimension of teaching, an area without clear boundaries, but at the same time one that places the moral dimension of schooling centre stage. ‘The emergence of shared morality in a classroom’ by Hansen (1992), from one of these projects, pointed out moral ‘qualities such as patience with others, attentiveness toward their doings, and respectfulness for differences in perspective, capacity, and interest’ (Hansen, 1992, p. 357).

The Moral Base for Teacher Professionalism by Sockett (1993) was a central catalyst for seeing professionalism as distinct from professionalization, and for a view of teachers as professionals with specific responsibilities (cf. Englund, 1996; Englund & Solbrekke, 2011).

As Campbell (2008) points out in her informative review of the research area of ‘The ethics of teaching as a moral profession’, many different philosophical orientations are used, such as Aristotelian virtue ethics (Fenstermacher, 1990; Sockett, 1993, 2012) or an orientation to principles, rights and duties (Strike, 1990), and there are also different uses of a Deweyan inspiration (Hansen, 2001; Noddings, 1994/2002). Among these approaches, the researchers inspired by Dewey, as we shall see, have been central to my work on and development of the idea of deliberative communication as a way of dealing with the moral dimension of teaching and the role of the teacher acting with professional responsibility.

Before presenting and discussing the idea of deliberative communication, I will briefly sketch the Swedish context in which the idea was developed, and later in the article, using the modernity frame developed by Habermas (1985/1990, 1992/1996), I will underscore the potential of deliberative communication for moral education anywhere in the modern Western world of democracies, demonstrating its place in an ongoing debate about what schooling might be.
The example of Sweden: from prescribed morals to open deliberative communication

There are not many historically penetrating analyses of moral education in Swedish schools over extended periods. Eminent exceptions are Landahl (2006) and Linné (2001). What stands out from these studies is how schools have for a long time had the task of inculcating prescribed morals, earlier with a religious value base and in the 20th century characterized increasingly by secularization in compulsory school education, with a balance of scientific and democratic values (Englund, 1986, 2009; cf. the national curricula of 1962/Lgr 62, 1969/Lgr 69, and 1980/Lgr 80).

In the curriculum of 1994 (Lpo 94), influenced by the international restructuring of education towards more traditional schooling, religious values enjoyed a renaissance, but there was also a manifest and strong introduction of the idea that schools had to convey a democratic value base. In the last two decades, there has developed a tension between an interpretation of this value base as coupled to specific substantive values, such as religious values, tolerance, individual freedom and integrity, and solidarity, and an interpretation of it as a kind of intersubjective proceduralism concretized as deliberative communication. This Dewey-inspired idea of deliberative communication was advocated in authoritative texts from the Ministry of Education and the National Agency for Education, and developed in a commissioned work by Englund, all in the same year (2000). It may be noted how, some years later, the idea of open deliberative communication was successively and partly overruled by various character-oriented programmes aimed at promoting mental health, discipline and good character through methods like pseudopsychotherapy, behavioural modification and other psychologically based ideas (cf. Bergh & Englund, 2014). In the last few years, these programmes have been severely criticized and forms of open communication and education in human rights have been revitalized and reauthorized (National Agency for Education, 2011), but in a changed context, where school choice and parental rights to educational authority have created very different, but more homogeneous school classes, compared with the earlier, heterogeneous classes of the comprehensive schools. In addition, ideas of school knowledge as ‘narrow facts’ are dominant, as in the recent national curriculum of 2011 (Lgr 11), a curriculum which, basically, is traditional in its view of knowledge formation and relations between teachers and students, but vague in its views on the proposal of deliberative communication.

The idea of deliberative communication

Dewey’s Democracy and Education and The Public and its Problem from 1927, together with works by Jürgen Habermas, were my basic sources of inspiration for the idea of deliberative communication, presented in Englund (2000a) and revised and explored at greater length, in English, in Englund (2006). The main concern here is to look at the central endeavour of education ‘to develop the capacity of every individual for
intelligent deliberation through mutual communication … [and] to create preconditions for students to engage in moral deliberation and to adopt positions in relation to the world, society, and each other’ (Englund, 2006, p. 508). Consequently, in the following, I will investigate the potential of deliberative communication for what I call ‘moral education’ in the spirit of Dewey since deliberative communication implies interaction and encounters between human experiences.

How are we to understand the moral and political dimensions of deliberative communication, and what makes it work? Can deliberative communication be seen as a way to develop and flesh out moral education in the spirit of Dewey? To begin to answer these questions, I will start with a characterization of deliberative communication (cf. Englund, 2000a, 2006). The idea of deliberative communication implies communication in which (a) different views are confronted with one another and arguments for these different views are given time and space to be articulated and presented, (b) there is tolerance and respect for the concrete other and participants learn to listen to the other person’s argument, (c) elements of collective will formation are present, i.e. an endeavour to reach consensus or at least temporary agreements or to draw attention to differences, (d) authorities or traditional views (represented, for example, by teacher, parents and tradition) can be questioned, and there are opportunities to challenge one’s own tradition and (e) there is scope for students to communicate and deliberate without teacher control, i.e. for argumentative discussions between students with the aim of solving problems or shedding light on them from different points of view.

The most central and crucial link between the idea of deliberative communication and the communicative ideas of Dewey is that mutual communication is placed in the foreground: education as communication as deliberation. This means that the communicative interpretation is stressed and advocated as quite a central activity and used at appropriate opportunities (Englund, 1999, 2000b). Through communicative participation, the ability to engage in intelligent deliberation and make nuanced judgements is developed.

The communicative interpretation of Dewey—which fused with the ideas of communicative rationality developed by Jürgen Habermas, forms the background to my idea of deliberative communication—is influenced by the analytical perspectives on Dewey’s works of ‘neopragmatic’ philosophers such as Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein and Hilary Putnam. Rorty (1980, 1982) analysed how the language of Dewey was aimed at creating a sense of community, in that it established a relationship between knowledge and solidarity. In later works, Rorty (1989) made a sharp distinction between the public and the private, dissociating himself from all forms of universalism and ‘doing justice to the claims of the ironists whom Habermas distrusts: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida’ (Rorty, 1989, p. 68). However, contrasting with Rorty’s view on the private/public issue was the emphasis which Richard Bernstein and Hilary Putnam placed on the strong link between the public and the private, at the same time as they emphasized the need for a public philosophy, a view with which I strongly agree. In Bernstein’s words:
The pragmatic legacy (which Rorty constantly invokes) will only be recovered and revitalized when we try to do for our time what Dewey did in his historical context—articulate, texture and \textit{justify} a vision of a pragmatically viable ideal of communal democracy. (Bernstein, 1992, p. 68)

As I have discussed elsewhere (Englund, 2000b, pp. 308–310), it was Bernstein and Putnam who constructed a neopragmatic epistemological justification of democracy, in terms of the common deliberation of free individuals on different statements, leading to Habermas’s (1981/1984, 1981/1987) theory of communicative action, further developed into a model for deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1992/1996). There are no automatic implications for education, but Habermas places the realization of deliberative policy in the institutionalization of procedures, where an intersubjectivity on a higher level is expected to emerge; public discourses find a good response \textit{only} under circumstances of broad participation. (Habermas, 1992/1996, p. 490)

It was on the foundations laid by these American philosophers and the German sociologist and philosopher Habermas that I was able to develop a new reception of Dewey, representing an idea of education as communication as deliberation, where—as I write in the introduction to the Swedish translation of his \textit{Democracy and Education} in 1999—‘the perspective of the potential role of education as a democracy-creating instance is based in the crucial role of communication … where the communicative criteria for democracy developed by Dewey are central … and through communicative participation the capacity for intelligent deliberation and nuanced judgements between alternatives is developed’ (Englund, 1999, pp. 27–29, my tr.).

There are real differences in the styles of writing of the classical pragmatist John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas, as the pragmatist of late modernity, but both emphasize the socially integrative force and constitutive power of communication. In that sense, each of them develops a kind of social philosophy that may be seen as a general theory of education. They also offer a similar view of a deeper, deliberative democracy, believing that ‘the essential need … is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion’ (Habermas, 1992/1996, p. 304, with reference to Dewey, 1927/1984). In Dewey’s original text, the sentence Habermas quoted continues: ‘that is the problem of the public’ (Dewey, 1927/1984, p. 365), while Habermas (1992/1996, p. 304) states more precisely:

\begin{quote}
Deliberative politics acquires its legitimating force from the discursive structure of an opinion- and will-formation that can fulfil its socially integrative function only because citizens expect its result to have a reasonable \textit{quality}.\end{quote}

The neopragmatic interpretation of Dewey’s work, stressing the role of open deliberative communication, creates new visions for the relationship between democracy and education. The idea of deliberative communication as an educational process offers an image of a kind of communication, whereby different perspectives are brought into ongoing, meaning-creating
processes of will formation. To make curricular room for such activities, in which deliberative capabilities are developed, would be one way to realize a democratic conception of education that implies a communicative rationality. It is also important to see deliberative communication as one aspect of the broader political science movement of deliberative democracy and to understand how deliberation is viewed within that movement. It is also worth noting that Dewey’s The Public and its Problems is seen as the starting point for what has developed as deliberative democracy (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003, p. 112).

In the current literature of political and social science, deliberation—mutual and carefully balanced consideration of different alternatives—is closely coupled to democracy as communication, and hence to a specific way of understanding how democracy can and should be elaborated, i.e. deliberative democracy as a normative political project of a specific communicative character. The fundamental idea of deliberative democracy as a supplement to the majority principle, based on simple voting between alternatives, is that the legitimacy of democracy will be strengthened if different views and perspectives are communicated and discussed in detail (i.e. deliberated upon) by all the different parties and participants involved, and that the reasons for the different decisions proposed should be carefully explained (cf. Dewey, 1927/1984). In the deliberation process, participants should reach agreement on what the issue is, what the parties do not agree upon, what the alternative decisions are and what kind of procedure there is for making a decision. Deliberative democracy implies, in addition, that the decisions made are to be seen as temporary and that consensus and non-consensus are present at the same time: temporarily made decisions are respected and obeyed, while different views are also respected.

Hanson and Howe (2011) also show how deliberative democracy attends better to the moral and epistemic premises of democracy, and write that

If deliberative democracy is to impact civics education in a meaningful way, there are many issues yet to be explored. More consideration must be given to how to balance teaching for the aspirational goals of a more deliberative democracy and the realities of our current democratic system. Scholars such as Parker (2006) have done much to advance thinking about discussion in the civics classroom, but we believe that it would be fruitful to consider how an explicitly deliberative democratic theoretical perspective can add to the purposes and pedagogy related to discussion in the classroom (p. 8).

The potential force of deliberative communication is, as I see it, not only that it can contribute to the formation of values and knowledge directly related to the democratic foundation of schools and their civic education. Deliberative communication (used in an appropriate way) can also contribute to meaning creation and knowledge formation among students in most subject areas, even within traditional school subjects and areas that seem far removed from those closer to the democratic foundation of schools. In that respect, it may be noted from a recent Swedish study of vocational programmes that:
Students in vocational programs that participated in deliberative teaching increased their knowledge, thoughtful opinions, political efficacy, readiness for political participation and conversation skills more than students that had non-deliberative teaching. (Andersson, 2012, p. 192; see also Andersson, 2014)

The five characteristics of deliberative communication mentioned earlier (cf. Englund, 2006, p. 512) are thus built on a Deweyan foundation and developed with inspiration from Habermas and other philosophers of modernity. How can this perspective on deliberation, as operationalized by these characteristics, support teachers and practitioners?

**Deliberation in practice**

The first point to be understood is a substantive one, in the sense that the precondition for starting a deliberative process, deliberative communication, is the emergence of a situation of conflicting views. As argued by Englund (2006, pp. 513–514):

> The presence of different views is one of the fundamental elements in deliberative communication and in creating, in spite of the differences, a common ground for discussion. This common ground can be called a discursive situation ... The dimension of conflict and confrontation (of different views) is substantially central to, and constitutive of, deliberative communication as a procedural phenomenon. This dimension implies both openly conflicting views and a search for and attempt to expose relatively minor differences, which are seen in deliberative communication as crucial to investigate and possible to resolve.

While this first point opens the way for the crucial value of the better argument, the second point stresses, in relational terms, respect for the concrete other—i.e. the other person(s) actually present and debating—as well as the need for transactional listening. Such listening is a human gift that can be nurtured, developed and realized in and through respectful communication. Transactional listening can also be facilitated and shaped by what is going on in the educational situation, especially in the way the teacher acts, builds relationships and communicates with the students, and by the teacher encouraging different forms of communication among the students (cf. Hansen, 2001).

A conclusion from these first two points is

(i) that nobody who could make a relevant contribution may be excluded;
(ii) that all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions; (iii) that the participants must mean what they say; (iv) that communication must be freed from external and internal coercion so that the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ stances that participants adopt on criticizable validity claims are motivated solely by the rational force of the better reasons. (Habermas, 1998, p. 44; cf. Englund, 2010, p. 30)
The third point, the endeavour to reach consensus through rational deliberation, is one that has been stressed and questioned by many researchers. However, conflict and confrontation (of different views) are central to, and constitutive of, deliberation. Further, whether or not consensus is reached is an empirical question. While collective will formation leads to mutual agreement or at least to mutual understanding of what the conflict is about, is the ideal, it is not the only acceptable result. Another might be greater clarity about differences. It should also be noted, however, that the collective will formation process implies that the seminar room/classroom can be viewed as a weak public sphere, in which different views occurring in public debate will also be highlighted, even if they challenge the values students bring with them (cf. Fraser, 1992).

The fourth point stresses the public character of deliberative communication, in the sense that schools (and also universities) are potential public spaces in which there is a preference for pluralism of views. This implies that ‘the principle of pluralism becomes a fundamental and crucial element of deliberative communication’ (Englund, 2006, p. 514). The pluralist principle further implies that an educational institution will not ‘be a companion to the values students bring with them, rather it will be pluralistic’, and that ‘authorities and traditional views may be challenged’ in deliberations with peers and teachers, while ‘teachers’ opinions—especially if they leave no space for pluralism—may of course be questioned’ (Englund, 2006, pp. 514–515). In short, it is the task of educational institutions to elevate every individual out of his or her private life into a public world, with the possibility of making one’s own choice among different ways to the good life.

In summary, the first four points stress the pivotal role of educators (as deliberative professionals) since it is their responsibility to make use of the discursive situation of conflicts, or indeed different views on any issue, as they seek to realize the characteristics of deliberative communication. This is implied in the fifth point, concerning the need for and pursuit of a deliberative culture: that is to say, preconditions for further deliberative communication among students without the guidance or presence of the teacher. Central to this is a meaning-creating process among ‘equals’. Thus, for there to be a potential to develop continuous deliberative communicative practices, students, teachers and other professional practitioners must accept the idea of democracy and be willing to adopt a deliberative approach. To develop such learning communities requires not only the will to deliberate, but also an investment of time and humility of spirit. Building learning communities, as well as societies, that rest on the ideas of deliberative democracy is a long-term project: ‘deliberation requires equal opportunity of access to political influence’ (Knight & Johnson, 1997, p. 280; emphasis in original). Higher education institutions and the professions play a central role in such a project, which can lay the foundations for developing deliberative capacities in line with the hope expressed by Gutmann and Thompson (1996, p. 359):

In any effort to make democracy more deliberative, the single most important institution outside government is the educational system. To prepare
their students for citizenship, schools must go beyond teaching literacy and numeracy, though both are of course prerequisites for deliberating about public problems. Schools should aim to develop their students’ capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate their understandings to other people, and engage in the give-and-take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions. These goals, which entail cultivating moral character and intellectual skills at the same time, are likely to require some significant changes in traditional civic education, which has neglected teaching this kind of moral reasoning about politics.

The main area for the use of deliberative communication is, as noted, when conflicts, controversies, confrontations or different views on any issue arise or are observed and pointed out in the classroom. These situations can be distinguished along a continuum, from scarcely observable differences to highly explicit conflicts.

Drawing attention to very small differences in views on a given issue, where there is a learning potential and the possibility of developing a more nuanced analysis of what the differences imply, is one way to start and develop deliberative communication. This means that almost any kind of difference between perspectives might be constitutive of deliberation. The role of the teacher is crucial since he or she (usually) has both the real authority (in terms of the necessary knowledge and perspectives) to determine the discursive conditions for dealing with the problem in question, and the formal authority to do so, which can always be misused. Here is perhaps the crucial key to the contingency and the possible realization of the practice of deliberative communication. Creating a discursive situation in the classroom and having intuition and knowledge about whether such a situation is at hand are mainly a matter of the teacher’s judgement.

The crucial role of the teacher is of course even more apparent when sharp controversies and open conflicts over the moral and/or political dimensions of different views occur. And they will of course occur because ‘Conflict is not just “ineliminable” in democratic politics; it is essential for the achievement of social reform and justice … New conflicts will always break out. The key point is how one responds to conflict’ (Bernstein, 2010, p. 84).

Richard Bernstein, the eminent Dewey interpreter, explores how Dewey develops a via media between extremes, and he (Bernstein) compares the deliberative approach with agonism—‘the way in which democracy requires and thrives on conflict’ (Bernstein, 2010, p. 84):

But too frequently these defenders of ‘agonistic’ politics do not face up to the dangers of agonism when it is carried to its extremes. Agonism—as Hegel reminds us—can lead to a life-and-death struggle in which one seeks not only to defeat an opponent but to annihilate him. (Bernstein, 2010, p. 85)

Bernstein refers here to Dewey, who argues:

For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence
of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts
and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free
assembly and free communication? (Dewey, 1939/1990, p. 227)

**Deliberation or agonism?**

But is deliberation always the most appropriate way to handle conflicts
and different views? I will offer some basic arguments here as to why
deliberation is to be preferred, while at the same time listening to the
challenge from agonism.²

(1) In doing so, I will refer, first, to a general critique of Habermas
developed by Chantal Mouffe, a critique that might be applied to
my idea of deliberative communication. In my view, the critique
levelled at Habermas by Mouffe (2000, 2005) and many of her fol-
lowers is often unjust, in that it ascribes to Habermas a conflict-
free, rationalist view, especially regarding the pursuit of consensus
as an unavoidable end—a view that Habermas does not have at all,
at least not in my own and many others’ reading of him. Rather, I
consider that the ‘dimension of conflict and confrontation (of dif-
ferent views) is substantially central to, and constitutive of,
deliberative communication’. (Englund, 2006, p. 514)

Deliberation, then, takes its starting point in some kind of conflict,
some kind of difference of view and/or perspective on an issue that may
in itself be hard to specify—which may also give rise to a need for
deliberation. However, what happens after that is an empirical question,
and a rational discussion, guided by Habermas’s criteria, with ‘speech-acts
oriented performatively towards validity claims … dependent on some
shared idea of what is at stake’ (Erman, 2009, p. 1047), will not neces-
sarily reach a consensus, even if that is what might be pursued. The outcome
may be a conclusion that there are different views on the conflict dis-
cussed, but hopefully the deliberation will have created a better and more
nuanced mutual understanding of those different views. Another outcome
might be a temporary agreement on how to proceed. However, this does
not necessarily imply, as Mouffe states, ‘a provisional hegemony, as a
stabilization of power’, entailing some form of exclusion (Mouffe, 1999,
p. 756), even if we must, of course, be observant of that problem.

It might also be noted that even Mouffe finds it necessary to nurture
certain values and stresses a point I entirely agree with, namely that:

Consensus is no doubt necessary, but it must be accompanied by dissent.
Consensus is needed on the institutions constitutive of democracy and on the
‘ethico-political’ values informing the political association—liberty and equal-
ity for all—but there will always be disagreement concerning their meaning
and the way they should be implemented. In a pluralist democracy such dis-
agreements are not only legitimate but also necessary. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 31)

How, then, should we understand educational institutions in relation to
deliberation and agonism?
As a second point, I believe that some of the ideals of agonism are not suitable for discussions in the classroom, or at least may need to be transformed in order to be suitable. My view, as developed under point (1), is that deliberation brings into focus the conflict, the problem, and the different views on a particular substantive issue, while agonism focuses, rather, on the different (often ethnic) identities of the persons/adversaries involved, not on the problem (whatever it is) itself. I believe that focusing on personal identities is likely to lead to struggles between individuals, and that views built into and deeply rooted in identities make rational deliberation over the problem itself, and a shared effort to define the problem, more difficult.

Thirdly, identity-based discussions, which are different from deliberation with a focus on a substantive problem, also tend to bring passion into the discussion (a point also explicitly underlined in agonism, when it says that deliberative theorists underestimate the emotions)—a passion which I think a deliberative approach would frequently be hesitant to promote. Young people often tend to exaggerate and make conflicts personal, which I think in many cases would create a risk of violence instead of talking. By that I do not mean that conflicts should be negated, not at all, because, as already noted, they are constitutive of deliberation; rather, conflicts have to be situated in the structures where they belong, a question on which there may of course also be different views, views which will need to be deliberated upon in the process of creating shared morality in the classroom.

I believe that, from a deliberative point of view, passion in the classroom should, if possible, be interactively controlled and nuanced by both the teacher and the students (or at least efforts made in that direction), while still leaving room for commitment in the argumentative process. Moreover, a key guideline for classroom discussion has to be, as Nel Noddings has remarked in her discussion and critique of Habermas, ‘to help students learn how to conduct ideal conversations’ (Noddings, 1994/2002, p. 122), even if she also notes the risk of the ideal being too rationalistic. Rational, ideal conversation might operate as an instrument of power for the teacher, and as Bernstein (2010) points out in a comment on the debate about deliberative democracy, comparing Dewey and Habermas, there may be a tendency to overemphasize the role and potential power of rational argumentation. Dewey was never happy with the way in which philosophers and political theorists characterized reason—especially when they sharply distinguished reason from emotion, desire, and passion. He preferred to speak about intelligence and intelligent action. Intelligence is not the name of a special faculty. Rather, it designates a cluster of habits and dispositions that includes attentiveness to details, imagination and passionate commitment. What is most essential for Dewey is the embodiment of intelligence in everyday practices. (Bernstein, 2010, p. 85)
There are many more aspects of the debate on deliberation versus agonism to comment upon, however. One specific question is whether we should pursue the Habermas/Mouffe debate or whether, as I would prefer, we should develop and compare ‘our’ specific models for deliberative and/or agonistic discussions within school classrooms, without losing sight of that debate, but equally without making it our main concern.\footnote{Englund, 2004}

I would argue, then, that we need to reflect upon the specific conditions prevailing in the classroom, with the teacher–student relationships and other institutional conditions to be found there (cf. Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Englund, 2004). I thus consider it very important to continue to compare, differentiate and evaluate activities such as classroom discussions on controversial questions (cf. Hess, 2009) as means of developing deliberative attitudes and deliberativeness, including transactional listening (cf. Waks, 2011), where the practical intelligence of actors needs to be nurtured by schools, as places for encounters and as a function of knowledge, education and culture.

**Agonism as a link to deliberation**

I see deliberation, in the classroom and also outside it,\footnote{Englund, 2004} as an ideal to strive for in order ‘to learn to live educationally’, but at the same time I would underline the need for deliberative theorists to listen to the challenge from agonism, especially in classrooms where different ethnic identities are brought face to face. Mouffe argues that identities are established only through an us/them distinction, and that the aim of democratic politics will be to transform the “them” from being perceived as enemies “to be destroyed” to being recognized as “friendly enemies”, which means to transform the conflictual relation from an antagonistic to an agonistic one. The latter is a relation between adversaries, i.e. between “legitimate enemies” who subscribe to the ethico-political principles of agonistic democracy’ (Erman, 2009, p. 1044, with reference to Mouffe, 2000, pp. 101–102; cf. Ruitenberg, 2009). Thus, in a way, this specific move to agonism, with antagonistic identities as its starting point, can also be regarded as a precondition for taking the next desirable step as I see it, i.e. from agonism to deliberation, by also transcending the different identities and bringing the ‘problem’ into focus.

**The application of deliberative communication**

Deliberation in which different views, conceptions and values are put forward and tested against each other can be used in a wide range of school subjects. Educational conversations of this kind may be seen as a complementary and alternative means of knowledge formation as meaning-making. This kind of knowledge formation has qualities different from those of the teaching and learning we usually associate with teaching as traditional mediation and learning as reproduction of knowledge.
In deliberative communication, everyone has to reflect upon their views and assumptions by listening, deliberating, seeking arguments and evaluating in relation to concrete others. Communication of this kind incorporates a collective search for common frames of reference, but also offers scope to analyse what you are not agreed upon and why. Deliberative communication can, for one thing, offer special possibilities in the multicultural school of today, as a framework for encounters between different cultures (cf. Englund, 2011). It thus has an important part to play in developing the democratic value base of our schools, which among other things is about the right to have different views and perspectives.

Mutual trust, then, can be created and sustained through institutions such as schools to the extent that they establish the conditions for engagement in deliberative communication. It can also be created through the development of a sense of responsibility to the concrete other. The degree to which these two dimensions are achieved informs us to what extent those concerned are being educated in a deliberative climate.

**Deliberation, transactional listening and the encounter with ‘reality’**

Consequently, I think it is necessary to stress and further qualify the second point in my earlier characterization of deliberative communication, ‘that there is tolerance and respect for the concrete other and that participants learn to listen to the other person’s argument’. As far as ‘learning to listen’ is concerned, it is important to note how ‘Dewey distinguished between negative one-way or straight-line listening and positive transactional listening-in-conversation’ (Waks, 2011, p. 194). This was a distinction which Dewey first made (as far as I know) in *The Public and its Problems* (1927/1984), and later in his *Knowing and the Known* (Dewey, 1949/1991), as well as in many of his works in the intervening years (cf. Garrison, 1996, 2005; Waks, 2011).

However, it is quite clear that ‘straight-line listening’ is still a dominant feature in today’s schools in the US and Sweden, and that it enjoys the support of strong political forces (Simon, 2005; cf. Englund, 2012). Over the recent decades of restructuration of schooling in a more traditional direction, combined with increasing privatization of schools, this support may have grown even stronger, raising the question whether deliberation is conceivable in schools dominated by standards and assessment. At the same time, more and more highly developed views of education as communication in the form of deliberation and discussion are being presented in the schools’ debate in both Sweden and the US (cf. Hess, 2009; Parker, 2006).

**Is deliberation always the solution?**

But is deliberation always a possible and fruitful way of taking care of conflict situations? In general, it is, but there are of course many situations where the historically created conditions for deliberation are
problematic in many different ways (cf. Boler, 2004) and conflicts are silenced, implying that ‘a commitment to certain groups comes at a cost in being able to serve the interests of others at the same time’ (Burbules, 2004, p. xiv). What should be done is always up to the teacher, who has to think and act contextually, and this implies a judgement of what quality of relationships exists in the classroom and what is possible and suitable. Through continual moral imagination of the contextual conditions, the teacher must find ways to act responsibly, and ‘a reflective and conscientious teacher must make considered choices about the social aims and benefits that can be achieved in specific circumstances, and at what cost’ (Burbules, 2004, p. xiv). In situations where teachers know that, in their school class, they have students who represent and are able to argue for anti-democratic and racist attitudes and values, deliberation may not be the answer in the short run. Rational arguments, as we know from experience, are not always enough. In such situations, it may be necessary for the teacher to work with a long-term aim of building relations and attempt to create the preconditions for moral deliberation, in parallel with referring to current norms, laws and rules.

Arneback (2014, p. 278), referring to Dewey, has—in situations of hate speech in education, which might be seen as representing one extreme of a continuum of different kinds of conflict—proposed the need for moral imagination, ‘where different kinds of experiences (your own and those of others) can be useful when deciding how to respond … This means that different perspectives on moral action could be useful in a process of moral imagination, where the contextual elements of the situation could be related to earlier experiences by others and oneself’. After exemplifying these perspectives, Arneback turns back to Dewey, stressing like him the ‘need for space for personal and collective deliberation’ (Arneback, 2014, p. 279). Thus, in the end, moral and political deliberation might be the solution, but it has to be used very cautiously and in a carefully considered way on different levels.

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Notes

1. What goes on in schools is of course just one part of moral socialization as a whole, a part that might proceed in close parallel or more or less in contradiction to socialization outside of schools. The weight and importance of school activities are thus also dependent on what goes on outside schools, but here and now we cannot do more than be aware of that fact, while still concentrating on the potential of schools to bring about change.

2. This field—the discussion between deliberation and agonism—is one that is growing very rapidly, and there are many aspects that could be discussed. What I am doing here is simply highlighting some of the crucial issues, at the same time as I want to stress that I see more similarities than differences between the two approaches. In my view, the differences are, in many respects, overstated by Mouffe. I also think it is necessary
to distinguish between two levels in this discussion, namely its implications on a societal level and on a classroom level; in the present text, I am mainly interested in the classroom level of discussion (although I consider my response applicable at the societal level as well).

3. Ruitenberg (2009, p. 269) goes so far as ‘to propose that a radical democratic citizenship education would be an education of political adversaries’.

4. However, this aspect has to be analysed situationally (by the teacher). There are of course occasions where passion has to be brought in, if the school class is indifferent towards touching on problems and conflicting views.

5. However, note my fourth characteristic of deliberative communication, which stresses the possibility of questioning authorities, including the teacher.

6. I have attempted to distinguish passion from commitment, but here we have an alternative. Primarily, though, it persuades me that the difference between agonism and deliberative communication (at least as I understand them) is not that great; rather, they are fairly close to each other, the main differences having to do with whether the focus is on identity or the problem considered, and the appropriateness of each approach for use in the classroom.

7. As already pointed out, I find many of Mouffe’s characterizations of Habermas flawed and unjust.

8. Cf. in particular, my fifth characteristic of deliberative communication.

References


