

Higher Education's Important Role of Ensuring Multiple Perspectives

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Nicholas Longo and Timothy J. Shaffer (Eds.) (2019). *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, LLC., 342 pages. ISBN: 978_1620369272.

There is no doubt we are living in contentious times where people seem to be more partisan and less willing to hold meaningful dialogue. In his important book, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*, Jon Meacham (2018) reminds the reader of many times throughout history where, as a nation, we have experienced difficult issues and emerged, not unscathed, but certainly resilient. While true, the presence of social media and the availability of multiple news platforms leave the consumer with the ability to choose to hear what supports their thought process, with little room for dialogue with those who have a different viewpoint.

In the book, *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*, editors Nicholas Longo and Timothy Shaffer visualize higher education involved in supplying and sustaining the work of dialogue where all participants are heard and multiple perspectives are considered. The book is divided into six distinct parts. Parts one and two discuss the theoretical background and various methods for dialogue and deliberation. Parts three through six focus on how dialogue and deliberation take place in the curriculum, on campus spaces, in communities, and through networks. Longo and Shaffer argue colleges and universities are to be a model of democracy and a place to demonstrate and practice the process of deliberative dialogue, stating that “rather than feeling powerless, we need to learn how to organize genuine dialogues that lead to productive action” (p. 13). While acknowledging the perception of the current role of higher education to be one of disseminating knowledge to a passive audience, the authors state higher education is the perfect place to help students deliberate “wicked problems,” (p. 23) issues not solved easily.

The book begins by discussing the theories, definitions, and the reasons for higher education to take on the role of creating spaces for dialogue

and deliberation. Thomas discusses the readiness for dialogue given the extreme partisanship and distrust between the two major political parties. Scrutiny of higher education in the arena of public discourse is leading to policy changes involving free speech on campus. Prohibiting the cancellation of controversial speakers, changing free speech zones, and encouraging universities to remain neutral serve as examples. Thomas' solution is for instructors to anticipate inevitable difficult discussion and to make small pedagogical changes encouraging clear questioning, listening, and the assumption of good will. Derek Barker defines deliberative democracy as one recognizing people have multiple differences but are capable of meaningful conversation and calls for deliberative civic engagement to include constructive discussions on difficult topics.

Part two of the book explores methods for dialogue and deliberation and offers examples of tools and institutions putting theoretical processes into practice. The following seven chapters demonstrate bringing diverse cultures together to discuss an issue. Marth L. McCoy and Sandy Heierbacher examine discussions between native and non-native participants within the Yankton Indian Reservation in South Dakota, exploring poverty enabling participants to hear viewpoints not considered before. *Reflective structured dialogue* is a structured format to bridge differences and long-held beliefs by helping participants move from judgmental to genuine conversation just by changing the way of asking questions. Purdue University, when addressing difficult race relations employed *sustained dialogue*, which distinguishes itself as a long-term commitment where groups agree to meet over an extended period of time to work on the issue. The University of Michigan uses *intergroup dialogue* as a pedagogy to discuss prominent issues. Employing small groups made up of various identity groups, students navigate through the process of listening, affirming, and

adding to the conversation. Lizzy Cooper Davis describes Story Circle Process placing participants in small circles with conversational guidelines teaching “us that it is through listening to our stories, rather than arguing our points, that we discover who we are” (p. 128). National Issues Forums are guides or videos requiring participants to produce several valid solutions to a problem and the impact on various sectors of the community. This section delivers multiple tools and structures for effective dialogue, which all require extensive training and preparation.

The third part of the book focuses on how dialogue and deliberation can be implemented into the curriculum and higher education programming. A major theme of the book is captured by Martín Carcasson in discussing the reason for developing the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation, where students are immersed in a year-long course to be able to facilitate dialogue in the community. “It is based on the idea that democratic living requires high-quality communication to function well. Unfortunately, our communities rarely experience such communication” (p. 161). For example, students at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia can engage in *The Semester in Dialogue*, defined as “a form of respectful conversation, where deep listening, mutual understanding, collaborative process, and empathy act as alternatives to more adversarial approaches” (p. 169). Spoma Jovanovic considers the emphasis on how social media is affecting the ability to have meaningful dialogue as the “rise of time spent on smartphones coupled with social media analytics often pushes users toward like-minded people” (p. 176). Students attending the University of North Carolina at Greensboro can take a course called *Conversations That Matter*, arising from James Baldwin’s (1963) saying education “is a moral endeavor to teach students how to change.” Students form small groups and facilitate a discussion on a major issue using many of the tools like those referenced throughout the book. Stating democracy is a way of life, *Talking Democracy* at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County, aims to help students build their knowledge base by reading multiple articles including topics such as social media, interpreting the news, and recognizing bias. Creating meaningful dialogue is the goal in each of the initiatives.

The role of campus spaces to promote dialogue and deliberation is the focus of Part Four. For

example, Democracy Plaza at Indiana University–Purdue University evolved from a space developed by NBC news during the 2004 election, which utilized white board spaces to address issues and gather open public feedback and responses. The forum has provided a space for people to share their thoughts freely on a given topic. Nancy Kranich posits the academic library should be a place to engage and learn the tenets of dialogue and deliberation. Finally, Denison University completely changed residence hall structure so residential staff were trained in the importance of building community and helping residents to problem solve through dialogue.

Part Five of *Creating Space for Democracy* emphasizes the role for university engagement in the community with the goal of “greater mutual understanding and opportunities for collaboration” (p. 219). Providence College created the Smith Hall Annex, as a connection from the college to the neighborhood. Higher education and community groups alike exercise the space with the goal of learning to listen in respectful and reciprocal ways. As the history of segregation and integration at The University of Texas at Austin created a negative relationship between school and community, front-porch conversations were cultivated to provide safe spaces for dialogue. Practicing Community Engagement Dialogues, participants from the school and the community engaged in dialogue around topics such as healthcare and gentrification. Katie Kingery-Page considers how ecological democracy works within science-based fields, like landscape architecture, inviting groups to contribute in defining and designing of spatial community needs. Anthony C. Siracusa and Nan Elpers explore the use of Public Achievement at Colorado College using an international tool involving college students training middle school learners in community organization to prepare students to facilitate group-based decision-making by helping them understand the difference between individual and collective interest. This section demonstrates strategic and compassionate collaboration between community and university.

The concluding section describes dialogue and deliberation networks. New Hampshire Listens is a statewide initiative aimed at involving all voices in civic engagement around major community challenges such as the heroin epidemic. Libby Roderick defines the three parts of UAA Difficult Dialogues Initiative: “Start Talking, Stop Talking, and Toxic Talking” (p. 271). The goal of this

initiative is threefold: helping professors handle difficult conversations in the classroom, improving dialogue between university and community, and alleviating toxic environments within academic departments. Finally, Carrie B. Kisker, John J. Theis, and Alberto Olivas discuss how community colleges, what they call “Democracy’s Colleges” (p.275), must be involved in helping students with the principles of dialogue and debate in a democratic society. Albert Dzur concludes the book noting that the preceding chapters show the possibility of active practice of democratic theory on campus. He is optimistic change can happen but only when higher education becomes “more aware of the undemocratic professionalism they have routinely cultivated for many decades” (p. 286). Noting that those who do democracy learn by doing it or from others, but rarely from the theory and research produced by academia. Higher education should supply understanding of the underpinnings of democracy and tools for practicing necessary and productive dialogue.

Longo and Schaffer are correct in calling the book a primer. Successes, failures, and areas for improvement provide the reader with resources to create meaningful spaces for democracy. One

criticism is that many examples only address small populations within a university. Examples of institution-wide success would be beneficial. A central function of higher education is to produce graduates able to practice democracy in meaningful and productive ways. *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education* is a collaborative effort successfully promoting dialogue and deliberation on campus.

References

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About the Reviewer

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