

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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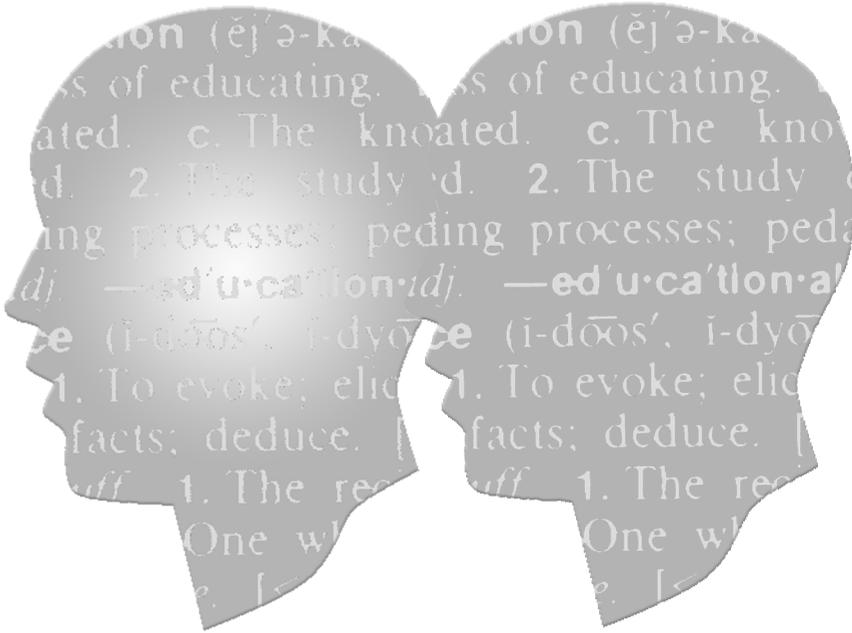
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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# DELIBERATION AND INSTITUTIONAL POLITICAL CULTURES

## A Brazilian Perspective

Telma Gimenez

For nearly twenty years, I have been involved in public deliberation, as conceptualized by the Kettering Foundation and practitioners around the world who are part of the foundation's international network. As a professor in a state-funded university in the south of Brazil, I have tried to contextualize my work as a teacher, educator, and researcher in light of the rich interactions and extensive literature produced by the foundation. My story is one of an individual academic reflecting on this convergence of institutional mission and practical experience.

In other words, my trajectory is one of a personal struggle to find meaning, and to have others join me in efforts to promote citizenship education in a higher education institution in a developing country. In 1997, when I first attended a Deliberative Democracy Workshop in Dayton, Ohio, I had some background with the idea of public deliberation. At that time, as an English teacher interested in finding meaningful ways to teach language, I wanted to learn more about how National Issues Forums issue guides could be adapted to our teaching context, where English is learned as a foreign language. From this instrumental view of deliberation (first, as encapsulated in texts, and later, as a pedagogical process) I moved to other understandings, which are still being constructed today through numerous interactions with other practitioners around the world through the network created by the foundation and nurtured by its members.

Every time we meet in Dayton, I have the opportunity to reflect on my work and the outcomes of the pedagogical choices we make every year in our undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The development of these ideas has found space in the workshops, deliberative forums, naming-and-framing sessions, newspaper articles, and research that reflect on deliberation as a way of relating to others, and ultimately, taking control of our lives.

As Blue and Dale (2016) point out in their paper "Framing and Power in Public Deliberation with Climate Change: Critical Reflections on the Role

of Deliberative Practitioners,” reflexivity should be an integral part of what we do as academics. This means constantly questioning the assumptions and commitments both at institutional and personal levels, and examining the relationship between the two. In this sense, my essay is a reflective one. Any individual trajectory is intertwined with the institutional trajectory and their intersection may provide opportunities for change. This means that one cannot understand my attempts at becoming a deliberative practitioner without considering the

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institutional and historical context where I work. Two of the key lessons I have learned are that context matters and that change takes time and is not always readily visible.

In terms of context, according to the official documents, the university where I work is a public, free-of-charge, democratic institution, with full scientific and pedagogical autonomy, committed to the development of social, economic, and political transformation of the state of Paraná and Brazil. The university guides itself by the principles of interdependence between teaching, research, and community engagement (or extension/outreach); equal conditions for student access; freedom; and respect for the plurality of ideas. Its goal is to produce and disseminate knowledge, educating citizens and professionals with technical and humanistic competences, who then adopt ethical values like freedom, equity, and social justice.

From a discourse perspective, the university is committed to educating citizens, but the meanings of this ideal are as diverse as the people who embrace this commitment. The discourse that higher education institutions have a role to play in nurturing citizenship in democratic societies is widespread, and higher education institutions all over the world have been increasingly called upon to reflect on their roles in creating more equitable and democratic societies. This is particularly the case for public universities in developing countries with missions like the one mentioned, because they have a mandate to maintain strong relationships with the communities they are supposed to serve in order to transform society.

However, I am also aware of the institutional challenges of introducing, at the practical level, initiatives that foster democratic attitudes among staff

and students in ways that challenge the predominant political culture, which may be heavily dominated by “representation” and polarization. That means that higher education needs to counter a political ethos that alienates individuals and stimulates confrontation. Politics lies at the heart of these institutions because they are funded by the state, and resources are becoming scarce. A lot of political energy is geared towards demands and protests, due to the continuing withdrawal of the state from the responsibility to provide free quality education to the public.

My university is, at the moment, living the contradictions of an economic and political system that alienates and sidelines citizenship that is broadly defined as the horizontal relationships among citizens in order to build democratic societies. Like in so many other places, politics in the university is largely understood as what politicians do (and not very well), and being a citizen means protesting against the status quo and taking sides. While the university is not supposed to engage in party politics, many members of the academic community are critical of the government initiatives to curb its autonomy.

Although it has a clear mission to educate professionals—who are also citizens—the university does little to provide spaces for student or staff deliberation, despite giving them representative spaces in decision making. For the university, it means creating mechanisms that ensure that staff, faculty, and students are represented in various councils. Voting is considered a central feature of institutional democracy, and representative forms of participation through committee work are encouraged on campus.

In the study I carried out in 2010, I found that different discourses surround the idea that universities play a role in strengthening democracy or preparing citizens. These discourses can be roughly categorized into three types. The first essentially sees citizenship education as the preparation of professionals to meet the demands of a developing economy. The success of the relationship is based upon the university’s capacity to generate the labor required by the economy. This first discourse is exemplified by the comments of a businessman who attended one of the focus groups and emphasized the need to be more responsive to the world “out there.” The second set of ideas would argue that the university has to generate new knowledge and reflect upon its effect on society. A professor attending one of the forums stressed this perspective, acknowledging that research is funded publicly and has to incorporate accountability into its design. These two perspectives, albeit different, do not seem to address the issue of transformation. The third kind of discourse does exactly that, and is reflected also in the documents guiding the university academic activities. This

perspective is concerned with the preparation of transformative professionals who care about equity and social justice.

My own attempts at bringing a deliberative perspective to my practices contrast with the institutional culture, which is at another stage of development and focusing heavily on issues of social justice.

In societies marked by huge socioeconomic inequalities, to democratize higher education may also mean to become more easily accessible to social groups that have been historically marginalized. In this highly competitive

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context, entrance requirements have to take into account that candidates from poorer backgrounds need to have a level playing field. For this reason, one of the

main understandings of a democratic university implies the adoption of some form of affirmative action. In our case, in the last 10 years, we have introduced quotas for indigenous people, Afro-Brazilians, and students who have done their entire education in public schools. However, access is not enough and other programs have to be designed to guarantee that those successful in the entrance procedures will be able to continue through graduation.

Therefore, one way of enacting the university mission is to broaden the student body to represent the diversity of our society. However, that understanding does not necessarily lead to the nurturing of a democratic mindset; on the contrary, there is the danger of accepting that this will be enough. I had a chance to check whether framing the democratic mission of the university in terms of access and permanence was adequate. In a series of deliberative forums, I tried to collect a richer picture of what the campus community thought of this issue. Some of the participants pointed out that the knowledge produced was also relevant to the discussion, because who benefits from this knowledge tells a lot about whose interests are being served. Overall, the various contributions during those forums about deliberative democracy and the role of public universities reinforced my impression that the predominant mindset focuses on the institution and its relationship to democracy, rather than what we have been doing to educate citizens who are also professionals.

This problem has been aggravated more recently, as the university mission is being pushed more and more towards “excellence,” narrowly defined

by international rankings that favor competition rather than collaboration, and which do little to create mindsets favorable to active citizenship. As research tends to predominate in this environment, and the models come from the “developed” anglophone world, universities in developing countries face enormous challenges if they want to remain true to their locales and go beyond the “productivity race” that forces academics to concentrate their energy on research and publications. It is easy to see how this external pressure can create a sense of powerlessness and dictate what kind of research gets done. And therefore, questions of who benefits from it are rarely asked. It is important to realize that while universities exist in specific communities, with different cultures and aspirations, they are also part of a larger network of institutions that depend on external funding.

But while it is true that the above demands tend to obscure local agendas, it is possible to design participatory research that involves those who *benefit* from the research, and to adopt an ethical perspective that preserves and nurtures the relationship between the university and the community. Even in cases where research tends to be valued more than other forms of engagement, it is possible to produce knowledge collaboratively, by deciding together what gets researched and how. Projects can integrate teaching, research, and service, and over the years I have tried to establish a close connection between schoolteachers, students, and researchers in addressing issues that affect teaching in public schools. My contact with public deliberation has shown me the value of listening attentively, paying attention to the “problems behind the problems,” and trying to understand the values behind the arguments.

One such opportunity arose when we decided to contribute to policymaking at a local level by inviting schoolteachers, undergraduate students, and local authorities to work together to design a curriculum for primary schools (years 1 through 5). For two years, we met regularly and discussed ways of incorporating language-teaching practices that were contextually sensitive. A final document, jointly produced, was further deliberated in a seminar that broadened the audience; working in small groups, participants made suggestions and validated the document.



Learning opportunities at the many events organized by the Kettering Foundation also helped me guide students as a supervisor. In teaching, I found the most fertile ground for exploring the principles of a deliberative educational culture. The introduction of deliberative pedagogy into the curriculum, albeit limited to one class, has shown that it is important to “think globally but act locally.”

In my view, institutions have priorities and act in ways that do not necessarily foster a view of democracy that includes people getting together to name and frame issues. But individuals can incorporate deliberative modes of teaching and participation that can slowly produce small changes that bridge citizenship education discourse and deliberative institutional practices.



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