

# CONNECTIONS

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# From Skepticism to Engagement: Building Deliberative Faith among Israeli College Students

By Idit Manosevitch

One of the spaces that seems appropriate for educating people for citizenship is academia. As an educational arena with a public mission and young citizens as key players, it may—and some would argue ought—to be a hub of civic education for deliberative public skills and values. This captures the essence of *deliberative pedagogy*, an area of ongoing research at the Kettering Foundation.

In what follows, I tell the story of what inspired me to get involved in deliberative pedagogy and share some insights from experimentation with Israeli students in recent years.

On January 16, 2013, six days prior to the Israeli general elections, I initiated the first student-led deliberative issue conference at the School of Communication in Netanya



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Academic College in Israel. The event was tagged “Students say NO to the horse race: Elections Conference 2013.”

The conference was a peak event in an intensive three-month process with my undergraduate seminar students, which combined theory and practice. Theoretical readings and discussions served as a baseline for understanding the essence of deliberative theory and the role of public deliberation in democratic societies. The hands-on process of preparing for and facilitating a deliberative, student-led issue conference complemented the theory and helped students internalize the idea of public deliberation, the norms and values associated with it, and the challenges of pursuing such ideals in practice.

Faculty had cautioned me not to expect more than 50 participants because students—as I should well know—are uninterested, unengaged, and unwilling to make extra efforts beyond the mandatory degree requirements. My students were also wary, and rightly so. A week prior to our deliberative election conference, a political panel took place in the same conference hall, with representatives from 12 different parties running for office. The event was stopped in the middle due to a political dispute, in which the audi-



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ence began shouting and booing one of the representatives. It was a very disappointing and embarrassing experience for the college community. My students were concerned about moderating group discussions—What if participants don’t talk? What if they get violent and we cannot control them? Some suggested we hire security guards.

But the concerns turned out to be unwarranted. The conference outcomes exceeded everyone’s expectations—students and faculty alike. We had an unexpected turnout of 127 student participants, which surpassed my goal of 100 students. After the opening plenary, students broke up into 10 groups that engaged in lively discussions of the selected election issues. Faculty members were startled to see students actively



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participating in civilized discussions led by their fellow classmates. So were the student-moderators. I cannot help smiling when I recall that beautiful moment when I stood humbled in the middle of the conference hall immediately after the end of the discussions, and numerous students approached me, excited to share their reflections. Group moderators were thrilled about their experience, and first-year students were anxious to find out how they could sign up to serve as moderators next year. Before I knew it, a new tradition was born.

What made these positive outcomes so surprising and unexpected in the views of faculty and students? And even more intriguing is why—despite the unequivocal pessimism among students and faculty—did everyone cooperate and support me throughout the long and demanding preparation process?

Surely, rapport with my students helped, as did the inestimable collegiality among our faculty members. These are essential for pursuing such a complex campus event, and I deeply appreciate and value them. However, given the context of Israeli higher education, these are by no means sufficient for explaining the attitudes and behaviors of students and faculty. Something deeper is going on.

Today, three years later, the ad-hoc experience transformed into an established course in the school's program, and student-led issue conferences have become a tradition. During this time I have collected data from students who participated in the course over the years, as well as from students who learned about public deliberation through their modest one-time experience in a deliberative issue conference. My analysis begins to unravel the initial contrast between the pessimistic expectations, on the one hand, and the unequivocal support and engagement, on the other. The key

for understanding this is the concept of deliberative faith as it relates to the context of Israeli society.

Let's start with Israeli society. Israel is a deeply divided society consisting of a Jewish majority along with a large Arab minority, with a wide array of ethnic groups and varying religious affiliations within the Jewish and Arab populations and beyond. The complex social fabric, along with the delicate political and security situation, give rise to deep controversies about core public issues, thereby posing severe challenges for pursuing deliberative public debate.

Israel's culture and norms of conversation constitute another significant challenge. In her seminal research, Tamar Katriel explains that Israeli speech culture is characterized in part as *casasch* speech, which is

verbal aggression that impinges upon the fabric of interpersonal relationships. Such a speech style may pose barriers for pursuing civilized public dialogue since it comes in direct contradiction with core values of mutual respect, reciprocity, and the fundamental norm of listening.

How do Israeli students perceive the nature of Israeli public debate? Three years of survey data reveal that students' perceptions align with Katriel's argument. The large majority of students, more than 70 percent of the survey participants, associate Israeli public debate with negative attributes, mostly in reference to the norms of conversation that govern it.



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When asked what associations come to mind when they think of Israeli public debate, most of them used poignant negative descriptions such as “problematic,” “verbal battles,” “a dialogue of the deaf,” and “screaming, threatening, offensive.” Only a handful of students used positive or neutral terms to describe the discourse.

Interestingly, students’ characterization of the existing Israeli public discourse does not seem to translate into normative conclusions. When asked how they would shape public debate in Israel if they could shape it in the best way possible, they indicate that public debate ought to be conducted “with respect, giving others an opportunity to speak,” “we should listen more to each other,” and the

like. Differently put, although students emphasized the aggressive and nondeliberative nature of *existing* public debate, their notion of the *desired* public debate adheres to normative conceptualizations of public deliberation.

This leads me to the concept of deliberative faith, what Katherine Knobloch and John Gastil define as confidence in deliberation as a means of resolving public controversies. This definition implicitly captures two dimensions of deliberative faith—a belief in the intrinsic value of deliberation, and a belief in the applicability of deliberation as a means of solving problems in a given sociopolitical context.

My experience with Israeli students suggests that there is a wide



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gap between the two dimensions. Students' descriptions of the desired public debate align with the essence of normative definitions of deliberation. At the same time, their strong negative descriptions of existing public debate may imply little faith in the potential of pursuing deliberative norms of conversation in Israeli society.

Many of the students that participated in the semester-long course during these three years expressed this gap explicitly. In response to my question, "what do you personally take from your experience in the course?" many students indicated that the process made them believe in the capacity of Israelis to pursue deliberative public discussions. Notably, students expressed this effect while contrasting it with their negative perception of the nature of existing Israeli public debate. For example, one student wrote, "It is possible to conduct a conversation—not yelling and fighting—about important issues," thus implicitly suggesting that although yelling and fighting is the common characterization of Israeli public discourse, the course experience demonstrated that deliberative conversation is a realistic possibility. Another student echoed the same theme: "It is an important course, and it proves that communication students can facilitate a deliberative conference and



**Despite the deeply conflicted social makeup and the verbal aggression often found in Israeli public discourse, and perhaps because of those, many Israeli students seem to aspire to public discourse that manifests deliberative norms of conversation.**

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even participate in round tables." The use of the words *it proves* and *even* suggests that the idea that communication students can deliberate is not a given; empirical proof is needed in order to make one believe in it.

Several students went further and explicitly used the terms *hope* and *faith*. For example:

On the personal level, the conference gave me a little hope, by showing that there are people who are interested in sitting and talking in a serious and respectful manner about issues on the public agenda. Offering an alternative [to the existing nature of public debate], even if it is preliminary, is extremely important.

Finally, the following quote provides the earnest and detailed expression at the gist of my argument:

One of the most significant things that I take from the course is the idea that we can actually—not just in theory—conduct an educated and meaningful [public] discussion. It seems that oftentimes the social reality and the public sphere cut our wings, and paralyze us, and in doing so they stop us from dreaming and pursuing our dreams. There is no doubt that this conference helped create a sense of success in pursuing a different kind of discussion, even if it is merely a small sense. Many of us shared this feeling, and perhaps this will eventually lead us to a much better society, and I say this with no cynicism.

This student begins with a straightforward statement that the most significant contribution of the course was creating deliberative faith. The words *we can actually—not just in theory* implicitly suggest that deliberation is commonly perceived to be merely a theoretical normative idea. By contrast, the deliberative pedagogy experience constitutes an unambiguous refutation of the common perception of the “real-world” applicability of public deliberation. The student also notes that she is

expressing a feeling shared by many classmates—not merely a personal, subjective impression, but a shared, collective one—thus further emphasizing the importance and scope of this effect. Finally, the student concludes with the sense of hope expressed at the outset: “Perhaps this will eventually lead us to a much better society.” This sentiment is reinforced by “and I say this with no cynicism,” thus again reminding us of the Israeli context, in which public discourse is dominated by nondeliberative talk, and people are oftentimes cynical about the potential for pursuing civil public debate.

Despite the deeply conflicted social makeup and the verbal aggression often found in Israeli public discourse, and perhaps because of those, many Israeli students seem to aspire to public discourse that manifests deliberative norms of conversation. I believe that this explains my students’ willingness to immerse themselves in what seemed at the time as a risky endeavor. Notably, enthusiasm about deliberative pedagogy experiences did not decline over time. Year after year, the process continues to spur passion, excitement, and inspiration among students and faculty. ■

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