

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



Democracy Divided

Articles

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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.

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DELIBERATION IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM

Flannery Burke with Marie Downey, Lani Frost, Sydney Johnson, Allison Mispagel, and Andrew Sweeso

What does the public need from history? Historians have a common answer to that question: More history! But the public often has another.

In this essay, I will explore the public purposes of history through my own and my students' experiences with deliberation. The closest most academic historians come to the public on a regular basis is the survey class. Most students in survey classes are not history majors or minors, but students required to take a history class for general education credit. In the pages that follow, I describe my experience incorporating deliberation into a history survey course and draw upon extensive interviews with students from that class to examine the question of what benefits nonhistorians receive from studying history. In the classroom and in later interviews, my students reflected on the experience of deliberation and the insights they gleaned about trade-offs and tensions in decision-making, perspective and bias, and contingency. I quote directly and extensively from my interviews with students so you will read their own words. As this essay demonstrates, the practice of historical deliberation can prompt deep consideration about collective decision-making and democracy.

By incorporating historical deliberations into my world history survey class (Origins of the Modern World, 1500-Present), I intended to get a stronger sense of how history informed contemporary decision-making and when students felt that they had enough

historical knowledge to weigh deliberations about past events. My students—the public—had other, less narrow expectations. Their experiences suggest that

The public needs historical thinking and historical content from historians but also opportunities to see the value of history at work.

the public needs measured consideration and an acute sense of contingency from academic historians and other history professionals. Greater historical content knowledge appears to help students in both realms, but the format of deliberation makes apparent the utility of this knowledge. The public needs historical thinking and historical content from historians but also opportunities to

see the value of history at work. As a pedagogical tool, deliberation can help students see the relevance of historical study for democratic decision-making today.

This essay grew out of a world history course I taught in the spring of 2019, which, as a part of the core curriculum, was a required class for most Saint Louis University students. Fourteen students engaged in one historical deliberation and two contemporary deliberations using materials from the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) and other Kettering Foundation partners. Two mini-deliberations of my own design occupied two class periods, and, as a final assignment, students designed deliberative issue guides of their own. Five of the students' papers wedded deliberative decision-making to historical thinking through their attention to context or contingency, and all five students agreed to talk further with me to prepare this essay about how they had conducted their work. Students reflected on the purpose and meaning of historical knowledge and the purpose and meaning of deliberation.

The five students were all part of the Saint Louis University honors program, but each had different majors and at least one was a double major. Communications, psychology, bioethics, English, accounting, and neuroscience were all represented. As a Jesuit school, Saint Louis University follows the Jesuit imperative to prepare students to be "men and women for others." In addition to the two-course Origins of the Modern World sequence, the College of Arts and Sciences required core courses in theology and philosophy. Moreover, reflection forms a key part of Jesuit education, and students encounter it as a practice in multiple classes. None of the students in the class or our conversation group were history majors or minors (despite my best efforts to recruit them to the department) and only one took history classes following the required Origins of the Modern World class(es).¹ The students' having different majors worked to the advantage of our conversations because I was unable to lapse into history education jargon.

After the conclusion of the course, I met with these students three times. The first meeting included Lani Frost, who created a deliberative issue guide focused on Japan's decision to open to outsiders in the nineteenth century; Marie Downey, whose guide tackled the effects of the Green Revolution and pesticide use; and Allison Mispagel, who proposed four options in response to a split between city and county governance in St. Louis. A second meeting included Sydney Johnson, whose guide addressed the obesity epidemic, and Andrew Sweeso, who focused on the safety and health effects of a St. Louis-area landfill that contains nuclear waste. A third meeting included all five students at the same time. I shared four questions for discussion with them in advance of each of the meetings:

1. How much contextual knowledge does the public need to deliberate effectively?
2. How do we acknowledge gaps and absences in our knowledge while deliberating?
3. When deliberating about events in the past, how do we address contingency?

These questions informed a central query posed by Kettering Foundation program officer Joni Doherty during foundation exchanges in which I participated: What does the public need from history?

The students encountered deliberation in our first class session, during which I engaged them in a deliberative discussion about a newly proposed core curriculum for the university. I asked students to consider whether we should keep the core, which required two world history courses (Origins of the Modern World to 1500 and Origins of the Modern World from 1500), adopt a new core that requires one history course on any topic, or adopt a new core that does not require a history course. Students were surprised to see a history professor consider the option of leaving her own discipline outside of required classes, which was intended to signal my openness to views and opinions different from my own. Although the mini-deliberation did not follow the full naming and framing standards used to create the National Issues Forums Institute's published deliberation guides, it had the advantages of allowing me to introduce the idea of deliberation, signal my ability to facilitate without interjecting my own preferences, and establish the students as the experts on their own values and opinions.

This last advantage proved useful during a historical deliberation about discussions that took place between 1908 and 1913 regarding whether to build a dam in Yosemite National Park. We used a deliberative issue guide from the Autry Museum of the American West developed in cooperation with the Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forums Institute.² The story is familiar to both environmental historians and historians of the American West who know that it pitted John Muir's Sierra Club against the National Forest Service's Gifford Pinchot, who sought a ready supply of water for the city of San Francisco following the earthquake and fire of 1906. Muir was devastated by Congress's ultimate decision to build the dam and subsequently pushed for a counterpart to the National Forest Service. The National Park Service was then created in 1916. Most histories address these two sides, and a common debate in American history classes contrasts Pinchot's utilitarianism and Muir's value

of nature for nature's sake. But the deliberative issue guide, like all issue guides in the NIFI model, includes more than two options: deliberators may choose to build the dam, not build the dam, or let locals decide. The guide includes a description of the Miwok, whose ancestral lands were seized by the park and flooded by the dam. Although my previous classes had tried to game the deliberation by advocating for building the dam—the actual historical outcome—the mini-deliberation at the start of the term allowed me to signal to students that they should pick the option that they thought best, even if it was not what actually occurred.

In the middle of the deliberation, Allison Mispagel exclaimed, “This is so stressful!” I reminded her that the dam had already been built—the decision had already been made—and asked her to explain. She said that it was difficult

In the middle of the deliberation, Mispagel exclaimed, “This is so stressful!” She said that it was difficult to address issues in which not all parties could be equally satisfied.

to address issues in which not all parties could be equally satisfied. Mispagel was especially frustrated that the comparative weakness of the Miwok in the Hetch Hetchy Valley would have prevented them from

gaining control of the land, even had California and the federal government chosen local control as their solution. This outcome seemed unfair to her, but she couldn't think of an arrangement that included the opinions of others without effectively silencing the Miwok. The exchange appears to have affected many of the students, and when designing their own issue guides, I saw no one trying to create an “all of the above” or “we all win” option. Mispagel's stress helped inspire this essay, and she was one of the students who discussed the final paper assignment.

Mispagel's own issue guide addressed the split between the city and the county of St. Louis, a division dating back to 1876 but with ramifications up to the present day. These divisions have received renewed attention since the Ferguson Uprising of 2014. Mispagel endeavored to create a truly deliberative guide, one that addressed, in the Kettering Foundation's terms, a “wicked problem” with no all-of-the-above solution—just like the situation that had created such stress for her when deliberating about the Hetch Hetchy Dam. Nonetheless, she described the format of her issue guide as “neutral” so as to avoid bias. She framed her paper as “a current events issue” and noted,

A lot of the information that I got, and that a lot of people might be gathering about this topic, is from the news, for example, and definitely depending on what news source you're looking at, there's a certain bias there. And so I really tried to . . . keep a nonbiased approach and then input a lot of different views into the different options so the reader would be able to make the most informed decision that he or she could, based on the information that was presented.

In short, while Mispagel recognized that any decision regarding the fragmenting of the St. Louis metropolitan area would be difficult and stressful, she saw the most neutral framing as the best path forward toward a solution. Rather than take a strong stand for her chosen option, she actually preferred to present neutral, but mutually exclusive, choices for deliberators about the future of the city.

Mispagel's concern about bias made me return to one of our class exercises in which students closely examined the bias of a primary source from the past. I asked if she was concerned about the bias of people in the present day or in the past. She acknowledged that she was "more focused on the present day" but recalled that race and racism were central to the city/county split and had influenced past decision-making that prevented the region from unifying:

It was definitely important how you brought up thinking about the biases of people in history as well because there was a lot of information having to do with African American populations. . . . There is definitely a lot of bias, a lot of conflicting views, on that issue and so I think it's definitely important to take into account the views of people back in the day . . . to make an informed decision, I guess, about what to do in the present.

Mispagel's observation about how past biases, including racism, might influence present-day decision-making and even her own efforts to create a "neutral" issue guide brought us back to an ongoing point of discussion: power.

Andrew Sweeso, whose issue guide addressed the West Lake landfill, which contains nuclear waste from mid-twentieth-century weapons production, returned to the issue of power in both of our conversations about deliberation. He was skeptical of whether any guide for deliberative conversation could be truly neutral, but he saw deliberation as an opportunity to engage in "radical listening" to others. Setting aside the option to advocate for a particular position allowed participants to listen to what motivated other participants' decision-making. He noted that:

It has to do with the way a specific deliberation is structured, right? Like, Do you actually know who is participating? Do you know their background?

Do you know their relationship to each other? Because if you're not aware that a certain group is dominant [over] another or is oppressing another, that . . . almost certainly will play out in a deliberation.

Sweeso observed that the facilitator and the deliberation's designers must be aware of inequities that might be influencing deliberators' participation:

Could there be progress toward healing that oppression or undoing that? That's possible, but to mitigate that, there has to be a sort of intention. . . . There is oppression going on here. How can we make it so that this is a forum for the oppressor and the oppressed to engage in a more equal way, if that even is ethical under certain circumstances?

He added that a facilitator who rephrases a participant's statement incorrectly could actually further oppression by misrepresenting a participant's view. "And that can definitely get very, very scary when it's an imbalance of power."

His observation led me to share a feature of deliberations that I have found surprising. Like Sweeso, I was concerned that, in assuming a neutral stance, deliberations could overlook differences of power among participants. Nonetheless, in my observation, students traditionally disadvantaged in academic settings, such as students of color, women, and first-generation college students, appeared to participate *more* when I used deliberations than when we engaged in open class discussion or other classroom activities such as debates.³ Several students responded as to why that might be the case. All agreed that deliberation was less intimidating for students than debate. Marie Downey, whose issue guide addressed pesticide use and the Green Revolution, a topic about which she is quite passionate, particularly appreciated that the trade-offs offered for each option created at least six responses:

So, that really opened up the floor for people who may not have the same views and the same opinions as the majority. They may have different views, and they may feel more comfortable saying them when it's not, "Oh, I have to go up against these people." [Instead,] it's, "Oh, I'm putting this on this section of the board, not trying to compete with anything else."

Downey stressed, though, "It's always going back to [the question] Are people willing to listen? Are they willing to come in with an open mind?"

Lani Frost, whose issue guide addressed the historical question of whether Japan should open its country to outsiders in the nineteenth century, agreed with both Downey's conclusion and Sweeso's reservation. She likens deliberation to "a giant brainstorming session":

Everybody's just giving their own ideas. You're more likely to want to contribute. You might not be thinking in a certain way, but then somebody

says something, and then that makes you think of something, and you can kind of play off each other. In a debate you come in, you have your ideas, you say them, maybe you kind of argue with each other, but here you can kind of build off each other.”

Nonetheless, Frost was acutely aware of how deliberators’ preconceptions influenced them. In framing her own issue guide, she wrestled with the fact that most deliberators in the United States, including myself, her instructor, would come into the deliberation with Western values in mind. While some issues such as industrialization might have affected Japanese populations similarly to those in the United States and Europe, she also wanted deliberators to understand issues specific to Japan and how Japanese responses, even to globally shared experiences, were not the same historically as those of Americans and Europeans. She recognized, as Sweeso did, that in framing an issue for deliberation, it is necessary to “specifically make sure we focus on more marginalized groups because if you don’t focus on them, they might get just completely passed over, and that’s the issue in the first place.” Nonetheless, she also acknowledged that, even with such considerations, deliberators who entered an issue with strong views might be reluctant to revise them.

It depends on how much of an open mind you have. Because if you’re coming in and this impacts you so much, you really know which option you favor the most because it’s the option that maybe has the most benefit for you. So, you might come in and people are sharing all these ideas, but you’re like, “This impacts me a great deal. I know I like the option that works best for me.”

Frost’s comment reminded me of the NIFI issue guide *Land Use Conflict: When City and Country Clash*, which includes four options, one of which is restoring city centers.⁴ I reminded students that when we deliberated using this guide, a majority of the students objected to this option because they were strongly opposed to gentrification. In part because our class sessions are only 50 minutes long, I thought that students had not had enough time to consider the trade-offs of the other options and that the majority view had held without much reflection. Sydney Johnson, whose issue guide addressed the obesity epidemic in the United States, had a similar memory of that conversation. Her family lived next to open farmland that was slated for development of a subdivision. She entered the deliberation concerned about choosing that outcome but then realized that was not the central concern for her classmates. “I am big on conserving farmland,” she explained. “Especially since they chose to make the subdivision but I didn’t want them to, I was even more, like, ‘Well,

this shouldn't happen to others.” When I said I thought that the focus had been on the downsides of gentrification, Johnson said, “Yeah, it started going that way, and I was kind of like, yeah . . . okay, we'll just go this way. But that's not really the way I was leaning at all. . . . But it was okay, you know; I heard other people's opinions. It's a learning experience.”

Johnson's equanimity provided a learning experience in the moment. As Sweeso observed, “In a deliberation done well, there is the opportunity for something that didn't seem as relevant to become more relevant insofar as you now actually have a connection to a person who may be impacted by it, if not yourself.” He turned to Johnson:

Had this issue over farmland being turned into a subdivision come up and had . . . you brought it up and [had] we given you the chance to do that, I think that would have helped a lot in terms of creating a fork in the road and creating that relevancy, but it didn't happen. So now I kind of regret that it didn't happen.

Sweeso's recognition that the deliberation had not been entirely successful because we had not fully heard a diverse range of perspectives (including Johnson's) referenced a persistent phrase in our discussions—“a fork in the road”—which we use to describe the concept of contingency.

Here, I must pause and explain a fundamental misunderstanding with which I entered our conversations. Although I thought that I had kept my bias as a historian at bay by inviting nonhistory majors into the discussions and by limiting jargon, I had actually framed our discussion almost entirely with historical thinking in mind. I was particularly interested in the issue of contingency and how present conditions result from the decisions and circumstances of the past. To me, contingency was the logical place to begin our discussion because deliberation asks its participants to consider choices and their consequences. In my view, it is that element of historical thinking that most demonstrates why history matters—the future, after all, is contingent upon what we do today and what we have done in the past.⁵ The students considered contingency equally important, but they arrived at that conclusion through the process of deliberation itself. That is, they needed to see the idea of contingency at work in each of their deliberations to, in Sweeso's words, “create that relevancy.”

All of the students had, in some way or another, addressed contingency. Sweeso and Downey explored how present-day human and environmental contamination was contingent upon past decisions to use pesticides and develop nuclear weapons. Frost and Mispagel explored how long-term health and urban

patterns had resulted in contemporary problems of obesity and inequitable governance. Frost queried what might have happened had Japan decided to remain isolated in the nineteenth century or if it had delayed its opening to trade and diplomatic exchange.

Of the five papers, Frost's seemed the most historical to me, not just because it considered one of the longest timeframes, but also because Frost was acutely aware in the issue guide itself and in conversation that the outcome might have been different had Japan's leaders chosen a different course. As she put it:

One thing I was kind of aware of when I was writing this [is that] an ideal is not just an ideal for everyone because our ideals are going to be different from what theirs were in the past and even what ours were in the past. Modern people want to be sharing cultures more, but that might not have been what they would have wanted in the past.

Had a different outcome occurred, Frost surmised, "It would have been a consequence of one of any of the different decisions or options that I had [in my issue guide]." Nonetheless, she concluded: "We're us, and they're them. And they definitely wouldn't have made the same decisions. We can do all the theorizing in the world, but it won't change what actually happened."

As a historian, my first reaction to such a conclusion would be to seek out more evidence to determine why what happened did happen, but the students saw contingency as an opportunity to embrace uncertainty. Frost explained that "Uncertainty is welcomed in the deliberation, whereas in a debate it definitely is not. It really allows you to understand more fully and without judgment, so you can come and be, like, 'I truly have no idea. These all kind of don't seem ideal for me.'" Similarly, when I asked Downey whether "finding an answer

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together" always led to finding an answer, she said, "Not always," but she was content with that outcome if everyone came with an open mind and if the importance of each option was clear to each participant in the deliberation. Sweeso agreed and observed that "Being comfortable with that uncertainty is going to be the most difficult part of getting people to address contingency."

Until hearing Frost puzzle through how she had included contingency, Mispagel did not think that she had really addressed it. “I didn’t think about contingency that much,” she reflected. But upon returning to her own issue guide in light of contingency, she concluded, “Some event in the future could be contingent upon what happens with this event now.” Mispagel had learned exactly what I believe the idea of historical contingency offers, but not until she had seen it at play within her classmates’ and her own experiments with framing historical issues for deliberation.

The students’ embrace of uncertainty did not mean that they rejected the timelines and maps that I had required to establish context as part of previous assignments. They considered context necessary because it allowed the importance of different contingent decisions to emerge. As Johnson observed, “There are consequences to every action, so every action is contingent.” For all of the students, context was how they had established the importance of the issue they explored. Downey explained when responding to Mispagel’s issue guide: “Having the timeline and the map are extremely important for outside understanding. This would be for a larger audience, so it’s really important to have those elements that aid the reader.” Johnson, whose issue guide included an overlay of maps that showed a correlation between fast food restaurant locations and obesity, noted, “With the contextualization you can show that there is a problem.” She had seriously considered the question of when she had enough information for each option and whether that information met her criteria for viable evidence. For her, significance relied on evidence. Similarly, Frost concluded that one could always learn more and that any historical issue guide should invite deliberators to investigate further. She observed that later course work on Japanese history led her to reconsider the outcomes that she had first presented. Moreover, students recognized that the values at the heart of any deliberative framing exercise emerged through their research process. Sweeso described the values in tension with one another in his issue guide as freedom, safety, and justice, but he had not set out to address those. “The ethics kind of came as the knowledge came,” he concluded.

When I asked students what the public needs from history, their answers were gratifying to this historian. Mispagel and Johnson agreed that “History can be a helpful tool for figuring out what to do in the present and in the future.” Frost observed, “If you can think critically about the past, you can think critically about different issues.” And Sweeso proclaimed, “The importance of history to public knowledge—it’s immeasurable. You need more and more and more of it to have a sustainable republic.” Downey’s response, however, brought home how deliberation had made visible the value of history within the class. A

“self-professed history-not-liker,” Downey appreciated how our class and the deliberations had allowed her to “see it in a more directed way.” She said, “These are how things impacted each other, and how they impact . . . our day-to-day life today. People need to be able to read history in a way that’s not just history. By giving the greater context of things, that really will help people.”

History introduced students to a tool kit of contingency and context that allowed them to embrace uncertainty, expand their knowledge, reveal what past events shaped their values, and explore different perspectives. As students deliberated and wrote their own issue guides, they wrestled with issues of power, bias, and neutrality that made visible why the history tool kit matters. There is much that the public needs from history, but history might just need public deliberation, too.



NOTES

- ¹ The 2019 College of Arts and Sciences core requirement included both Origins of the Modern World to 1500 and Origins from 1500. Business, engineering, and nursing students, however, had different history requirements that allowed students to take just one of the Origins two-course sequence.
- ² Autry Museum of the American West, *Hetch Hetchy: How Do We Make the Best Use of Our Natural Resources? A Recommendation to Congress*, <https://theautry.org/sites/default/files/documents/education/hh-student-guide.pdf> (accessed June 30, 2020).
- ³ The gender breakdown of the group that I invited to participate in this activity was not an effort to address such inequalities. Of the fourteen students in the class, three were men. Our group was a representative sample.
- ⁴ Mark Edelman, et al., *When City and Country Clash* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1999), https://www.kettering.org/sites/default/files/product-downloads/land_use_conflict_ib.pdf (accessed June 30, 2020).
- ⁵ Thomas Andrews and I provide a definition of contingency in our article, “What Does It Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives on History* 45, no. 1 (2007) (accessed June 30, 2020).

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DAVID MATHEWS, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration and, before that, president of the University of Alabama. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His books include *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*, and *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*.

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ERIN PAYSEUR OETH is interested in exploring the public square—how we develop civic learning, skills, and practices to thrive together in community. As a research fellow with the Kettering Foundation, she serves on several national research exchanges. Payseur Oeth has presented nationally with colleagues, including recent sessions on exploring faith groups as civic actors and using public deliberation in church and community decision-making. She holds a BA in religion/philosophy from Presbyterian College and an MEd in higher education and student affairs from the University of South Carolina. Before joining the University of Mississippi as a project manager in community engagement, she held positions at Baylor University and Columbia College.

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