

Chapter Three

Individual and Community: Deliberative Practices in a First-Year Seminar

Joni Doherty

Deliberative dialogue has been part of the academic experience at Franklin Pierce University for the past eight years. In this essay, the author describes her experiences with integrating deliberative democratic theory and practices in the first-year seminar as part of an initiative designed to teach students about diversity and how to communicate effectively across differences. She also reflects on her own education as a teacher.

I came to teaching somewhat later in life than most of my colleagues, propelled in part by the need for meaningful and sustained connections with other people. Before I returned to school, I had spent 12 years working as a book designer and artist in my own studio in a rural setting, a relatively solitary working life. Out of this came a deep curiosity about my relationship—or apparent lack thereof—with the community in which I lived. What was my relationship, personally and professionally, with the communities that surrounded me? Driven by a combination of social desires and intellectual curiosity, I began taking graduate-level courses in gender and cultural studies. I loved being part of an academic community and the sense of being engaged with others in a common and purposeful enterprise. Based on this experience, and with the encouragement of my academic advisors, I decided to shift my professional focus, change my profession. As the director of my program put it, “It’s clear you love being in school, so why not make a career of it?”

I Become Educated

In 1998, when I was hired at Franklin Pierce, a four-year, coeducational, liberal arts college in Rindge, New Hampshire, I knew very little about pedagogy. My approach was based on what I had observed as a student and my experiences as a teaching assistant and an adjunct. Franklin Pierce University was very attractive to me, in part because of the size of the undergraduate college (its annual enrollment is currently about 1,600 students, most of whom live on campus), and because I was intrigued by the theme of the core curriculum, “Individual and Community,” which obviously resonated with my personal and professional interests. After all, the desire to be engaged in a meaningful way with a community was what had caused me to continue my education.

According to our mission statement, the hallmark goal of Franklin Pierce education is “to prepare its students to function well as citizens and leaders of a democratic society.” All of our programs are “designed to help students achieve goals organized around three themes: tolerance and community; content literacy and integration with critical analysis; and holistic preparation for leadership and lifelong learning.” Many colleges and universities articulate similar goals. Indeed, some see these goals as characteristic of a “liberal education” designed to instill in students the capacity and resolve to exercise leadership and responsibility in multiple spheres of life.

I soon became aware that many students had educational goals that didn’t prioritize acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for leadership, citizenship, and civic engagement. Instead our students’ priorities are in sync with those of many other people their age from across the country. In 2004, a U.S. Department of Education study found that the top priorities of high-school seniors planning to attend college were getting a good job (91 percent) and a good education (89 percent) (Ingels et al. 2006). For many of the Franklin Pierce students I spoke with, the two merged. They measured the quality of their educational experience by how relevant courses were to their career objectives.

The priorities and expectations of these students corresponded with the Department of Education survey in other ways as well: only 20 percent of high-school seniors from across the country believed that working to correct social and economic inequality is important, and slightly less than half thought being an active and informed citizen was a priority (Ingels 2006). These students weren't necessarily opposed to being active in their communities, but it wasn't a priority or, oftentimes, even seen as an option. They believed that they had to become established in their careers and achieve some level of financial security first. Some students even believed that they probably wouldn't be able to become actively engaged in their communities until retirement—in other words, for another 40 or 50 years!

Given such views, it isn't surprising that it was difficult for many of them to connect in personal and specific ways with the university's mission statement, as much as they might agree with its general principles. Genuine enthusiasm for the core curriculum and its "Individual and Community" theme was too often lacking. For a time, I accepted this as an intrinsic part of the challenge of teaching. In retrospect, I wonder how I could have forgotten so quickly that the reasons that drew me back into school were deeply embedded in *my personal goals* for connection and companionship and in *my professional interests*, which were clearly affirmed by the core's theme and the university's mission. As I look back, I wonder that it took me so long to realize that for students to be deeply committed to learning, authentic connections must be made between *their interests* and course content. In some important sense, my own diversity education fundamentally began when I truly understood the need to bridge these kinds of differences.

The teacher-centered approach within which I was operating didn't stop at content. I now see that I used the same pedagogical style that had always worked for me as a student, a seminar-style approach in which most of the class period was spent discussing the assigned readings. How repetitious it must have seemed to too many of my first-year students! However, it had worked for me,

so that's what I did. Sometimes I would start by asking whether anyone had any questions about the reading. They rarely did. I am an avid reader, as are some of the students, but it quickly became clear that many did not fall into this category. Sometimes class discussions were lively, but too often they fell short of my expectations. It often seemed that I was working much harder than my students were.

It was right about this time that I came across "Contemporary Understandings of Liberal Education," an article by Carol Geary Schneider and Robert Shoenberg, which discussed a variety of "hands-on, inquiry-oriented strategies," including collaborative inquiry, experiential learning, service learning, research- or inquiry-based learning, and integrative learning (Schneider and Shoenberg 1998, 7). My own strategies suddenly seemed remarkably uninspired, but I wasn't certain how to implement what they described. In an effort to become a more effective teacher, I enrolled in a summer workshop on something called "deliberative dialogue," led by the New England Center for Civic Life, at the time a relatively new academic institute at Franklin Pierce. The workshop brochure promised that it would teach faculty ways of improving class discussions. That sentence alone was enough to get me to sign up.

As I participated in my first deliberative forum, I immediately realized it was rich with concepts and practices that I could integrate into my teaching. The storytelling that occurred during the "personal stake" period at the beginning of a forum creates a bridge between each individual's life experiences and the subject-at-hand. The inclusion of beliefs and priorities along with the analysis of factual information created more entry points for participants. I was also intrigued by the unexpected intersections between deliberation and the theoretical approaches of deconstruction and feminism, which are important in my own scholarly pursuits. In all three, acknowledging the value of multiple perspectives, some of which may be competing or even contradictory, serves to create a rich array of interpretive possibilities. All of these theoretical approaches recognize the inherent value of diversity and resist the

impulse to define difference solely in terms of conflict. For example, Jacques Derrida once simply described deconstruction as “openness to the other” (Derrida 1998, 124). Both feminism and deliberative democracy depend on inclusive practices so that the various and sometimes competing concerns of all stakeholders can be considered. Furthermore, as a feminist, I appreciated the value placed on finding a balance between subjectivity and objectivity in deliberative practices. Rita Gross, a religious studies scholar and a feminist, has written that after genuine objectivity, empathy is “the most central and critical value.” Empathy, she wrote, is “mentally entering into the spirit of a person or thing and developing appreciative understanding.” Gross has identified four essential values that are required for the development of this perspective: objectivity; empathy; finding, fostering, and promoting genuine pluralism; and a critical stance (Gross 1993, 313). I have found the same qualities are essential for any successful deliberation. (I note for the record that Gross does not promote cultural relativism, nor do the practices I describe in this essay eliminate the necessity of making and abiding by well-informed and ethical judgments.)

Deliberative practices contain a range of practical pedagogical approaches that offer concrete means of involving students in active and engaged learning situations in and out of the classroom. I began to realize that creating a learning-centered environment was much more complex than simply moving from lecture to discussion. Deeply impressed by what I had learned at the workshop, I was ready to begin relinquishing my newly acquired “sage on the stage” status for that of “guide on the side.” (I am still learning how to get out of the way.) In this essay, I reflect on my deliberative experiences in the classroom and my work with colleagues in the Diversity and Community Project, an initiative of the Center for Civic Life, which seeks to integrate deliberative practices into the higher-education environment. I am committed to assisting students to develop a sense of agency and the capacity to articulate their ideas in a manner that has intellectual integrity and compassion. I do not want them to be silenced by the fear that speaking openly will create conflict, but instead to understand that appreciation for diversity and the

ability to communicate across differences are essential for realizing our democratic ideals.

The Diversity and Community Project

The Center for Civic Life developed the Diversity and Community Project to reduce tensions that arose after several racial conflicts on campus and to foster an awareness of and respect for diversity. Using deliberative practices patterned on those developed by the National Issues Forums (NIF), we held forums on topics related to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. We also used the Sustained Dialogue model developed by Harold H. Saunders, director of international affairs at the Kettering Foundation. As a result of these activities, a continuing place for deliberation on our campus in academic and student life has been developed and sustained. Since 1999, the Diversity and Community Project has been part of Franklin Pierce's first-year program.¹

The basic challenge we faced was how to develop ways of engaging the predominantly-white campus community in meaningful discussions about diversity. Today, the project has three interrelated components:

*First-Year Seminar Deliberative Dialogue Initiative:*² This integrates deliberative theory and practices (which include participating in deliberative forums and exploring content related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class in course readings) into the Individual and Community Seminar, which is required for all first-year

¹ The project was adapted on other campuses in northern New England through the Northern New England Diversity and Community Project, a collaboration between the New England Center for Civic Life and Vermont Campus Compact. Both were funded in part by grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services and received substantial support from Franklin Pierce University.

² At Franklin Pierce, we use *deliberative dialogue* to refer both to forum-based discussions and to classroom discussions that follow the same principles of discourse as those used in the deliberative forums. (See box page 67.)

students. Instructors can decide whether and to what extent they want to incorporate this initiative into their courses.

Deliberative Forums Initiative: Throughout the academic year, the center convenes six sets of forums that address diversity topics. Three topics are presented in the fall and three in the spring. Depending on the level of interest in each topic, three to five forums will be held over a one-week period, with 18 to 20 participants at each site. Participants include students who are fulfilling course requirements and others—including faculty and staff—who are drawn because of a particular interest in the issue being addressed. In addition to the campus forums, some instructors hold forums in their classrooms during regularly scheduled class times. Each set of forums may be fulfilling curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular interests. In a typical fall semester, approximately 400 participate in the forums. These are primarily first-year students, some of whom may participate in more than one forum. All forums are comoderated by a team comprised of a faculty member and a “Civic Scholar,” the third interrelated component of the Diversity and Community Project.

Civic Scholar Program: Each year up to 10 upper-class students become Civic Scholars. These students learn how to moderate deliberative forums and participate in a year-long program. Civic Scholars collaborate with the center’s faculty, who mentor them. Both the faculty and the Civic Scholars participate in planning and assessing projects and activities, in addition to convening and moderating deliberative forums.³

When we developed this project our plan seemed straightforward. We would use deliberation to bring the issue of diversity to first-year students. But we soon found that we first had to teach

³ Some Civic Scholars volunteer to be “peer leaders” for first-year students, who are divided into “peer groups” of 18 to 20 students, to ease their transition to college. Each peer group receives a peer leader—who in some cases is a Civic Scholar—and a faculty advisor.

deliberative theory and practices and develop an atmosphere of trust before we could explore diversity.

Deliberation and the Individual and Community Seminar

Integrating the project's Deliberative Dialogue Initiative into the required first-year seminar, with its Individual and Community theme seemed a natural fit. The seminar is designed to assist students to:

- Become familiar with the Individual and Community Integrated Curriculum, including the Goals of the Student Experience at Franklin Pierce;
- Develop critical-thinking skills;
- Accept the academic challenge of college-level writing and oral communication;
- Learn collaborative skills;
- Become actively involved in the community;
- Explore issues in modern America that challenge us to integrate our rights as individuals with community responsibilities; and
- Understand the evolution of concepts, such as free choice, beliefs, values, independence, and autonomy, in the context of their relationships to community standards.

In addition to typical course requirements, such as reading and writing assignments, class participation, and exams, all students are expected to complete a civic engagement project. Each student is expected to work approximately 10 hours during the semester on a community-based activity and then make an oral presentation about the experience to the class. In addition, some instructors require a written report.

The deliberative version of the seminar integrates the theory and practices of deliberative democracy with the study of diversity topics. In addition, the use of curricular and cocurricular forums extends the learning environment beyond the classroom into the surrounding community to assist students in making connections between theoretical concepts and real-world experiences. In short,

the goal was, and remains, to have students engage in experiential civic education focused on diversity.

Today, the deliberative version is used in approximately one third of the 30 or so of the first-year seminar sections taught each fall. In most cases, the faculty teaching the deliberative dialogue sections have attended at least one of the NIF workshops led by the center, at which faculty are introduced to deliberative theory and practices. Those who integrate the Deliberative Forums Initiative into the first-year seminar do so to different degrees. Some simply use the classroom ground rules for deliberation developed by faculty associated with the project. (See accompanying box.)

Ground Rules for Classroom Deliberations

This is a dialogue, not a debate.

Everyone is encouraged to participate. No one person or group should dominate.

Treat all participants as equals.

Listen to each other with empathy. Disagree respectfully.

Listening is as important as speaking.

Examine your own assumptions as well as the assumptions of others.

Explore the advantages and disadvantages of each position.

Speak from direct experience, not hearsay.

Our goal is to move toward greater mutual understanding of the issue.

Try to imagine what others who are not present might say.

Other instructors ask their students to participate in one or more forums during the semester. The forums are intended to assist students in developing two key skills: expressing themselves clearly and listening attentively (which is measured by the ability to state the viewpoints and perspectives of other speakers). Deliberation also makes explicit the ethical nature of the issues under consideration. Through participating in forums, students acquire an appreciation for diversity and a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the problem being addressed.

A handful of faculty incorporate a fully integrated approach, which includes assigning course readings that explore diversity, using the classroom ground rules for deliberation during class discussions, and asking students to participate in several forums, both in and out of the classroom. In some courses, students learn how to moderate forums or develop their own discussion briefs. Some faculty develop a single civic engagement project for the entire class, such as teaching students how to moderate forums or creating a discussion guide. In other sections, each student works individually on a community service project. The group project further develops students' ability to work collaboratively and it provides them with a common experience to reflect on. The array of interpretations that can arise out of a seemingly common experience is a surprise to many students. They begin to see that each one is based on a particular set of assumptions and experiences, that these are different for different people, and that finding common ground requires analysis and communication. Obviously, the more diverse the group, the richer the experience will be.

Assessing and Modifying the Diversity and Community Project

I need to take a step backward now and explain why, in our original conceptualization of the project, the forums did not always work according to our expectations. Initially, the forums were integrated into course requirements but never scheduled during class time. Instead, they were held at various times and locations across

the campus and open to the entire university community. Students from each class were directed to various forum locations so they would not be with their classmates. In this way, the students presumably would engage in dialogue with other members of the campus community and thus would gain a wider range of perspectives which they could share with each other when they were back together in the classroom. Sometimes there were as many as 50 participants in a single forum, ranging from first-year students to seniors. In the planning stages, this all seemed to be very well thought out. However, throughout the past six years, I have regularly had cause to reflect on a question once posed by a colleague: “This all sounds fine at 30,000 feet. What does it look like on the ground?” And the answer turned out to be, “Unpredictable!” The forum experience was—too often—intimidating and silencing for the first-year students.

Each year, during our annual retreat, the center’s faculty reviews the past year and makes modifications based on what we’ve learned. We realized that the complex skills we were aiming to develop in students simply required more time and practice than initially anticipated. We learned that we needed to explicitly identify the differences between the skills necessary for deliberation and the content we hoped to introduce about diversity, and to be sure both were being properly taught and accurately evaluated. We learned that we sometimes were placing students in situations they weren’t prepared for. We learned that we needed to create and maintain an atmosphere of security to facilitate the risk taking necessary for students to develop new skills. We learned that if we were to gain and maintain faculty and administrative support, we had to be clear about the goals and expectations of the deliberative journey of the first-year seminar. We came to see that if a group of first-year students was learning how to deliberate, the quality of critical thinking and communicative skill was going to reflect just that. It takes time and practice to develop the ability to listen attentively, process what has just been heard, and respond in a thoughtful

manner. In other words, we needed to teach skills as well as content, not simply provide course content about diversity and then expect the students to be able to engage in open and thoughtful deliberation.

The rough spots were most obvious at the campuswide forums. Many students found these forums to be positive learning experiences, whether or not they actually spoke. Some first-year students always felt comfortable about speaking up in this venue; upper-class students regularly participated. Feedback from reflection papers and anonymous postforum questionnaires indicated that the first-year students were being exposed to new perspectives regarding diversity. Some indicated surprise that other students their own age had had so many different experiences and different opinions. There was general agreement that holding public discussions was beneficial because it got everyone thinking about important issues. All this was on the positive side. However, too often, too many would sit quietly and listen to the handful of the more outgoing—or courageous—voices, who ended up dominating the forums. We were exposing our students to new ideas, but it was not at all clear that those who did not already feel comfortable with speaking in a group setting were learning how to do so as a result of their deliberative experiences.

During our first few years, some faculty and administrators were fairly critical of the quality of students' contributions in terms of both content and manner of expression. The harshest comment I heard came from a faculty member who stated, "It's just a bunch of kids sharing what they don't know with each other." One forum visitor recommended that we simply replace the forums with small interactive workgroups to ensure content was mastered, completely dismissing the value of any public dialogue. And so we learned it was important to be clear about the dual, but closely integrated, goals of (1) teaching students how to deliberate with each other about (2) potentially divisive issues related to diversity. We were not simply attempting to convey information to them but to engage them in an experiential way. We believed that deliberation, in and of itself, is the practice of diversity, because it is based on the assumption that the only effective way of address-

ing persistent and difficult ethical issues is to communicate effectively across differences. Therefore, we did not want to divorce practice from content.

But even as these doubts and concerns were being voiced, it seemed that in an amazingly brief time everyone on campus had heard about deliberative dialogue, and many were familiar with what had been discussed in the forums, even if they weren't present. During a student/faculty softball game, when someone quipped that we needed to deliberate about a controversial call, it was clear that the Diversity and Community Project was becoming part of our campus culture.⁴

Developing Forums for Peer Groups

Our students helped us reorganize our program. During the classroom debriefing sessions after a forum, students often asked if we could hold class forums rather than participate in the campus-wide series. It was becoming increasingly obvious that separating students from their peer groups for the campus forums and expecting them to speak publicly about potentially divisive issues with a group of people they didn't know, was profoundly discomfoting, if not downright terrifying for them. This may seem like an exaggeration, but I believe I am not overstating the intensity of the feelings expressed by some of my students.

Possibly their sometimes-extreme discomfort was partially fueled by the transition from being seniors in high schools to being the newcomers on campus. As first-year students, they were anxious to fit in and make new friends. Terms like *clean slates* and *fresh start* were regularly used in the essays on their college goals,

⁴ This indeed has happened. We have attempted to have deliberative sessions during our faculty meetings. Although we have not yet done this in a systematic and consistent way, we are still working on it! Deliberation has been used to address a range of issues by both faculty and students over the years, including administrative challenges like core curriculum review and prioritization, and issues related to academic and campus culture.

which they all wrote at the beginning of the semester; they were focused on not making “mistakes,” either socially or academically. So, while teaching citizenship skills and diversity content were priorities for us, for many students the first priority was to find a place for themselves in a new social structure, and they weren’t about to blow it by saying what might not be well received in a public setting in front of people they had just met.

The students worried about potential teasing afterwards if they didn’t express themselves skillfully or voiced a perspective that wasn’t generally accepted by the other participants. In an essay reflecting on a forum experience, one student wrote, “I would rather talk in front of judges and teachers any day than be in front of my peers. Speaking in front of students my own age and even younger makes me nervous because I feel like they are judging me.” Another student summarized her reluctance in this way, “After you finish teaching, you go home. I live here.” Others indicated a reluctance to say anything for fear of hurting someone else’s feelings unintentionally; one student said, “Whenever it’s about race, I’m afraid to say anything.”

In response to the repeated requests from my students, I began holding forums during class time. These were comoderated by the group’s peer leader (assigned during orientation weekend at the beginning of the school year, when the peer group is formed) and me.⁵ Just as someone learning to ride a bike seeks out a quiet road rather than a busy street, so students who are learning and practicing new deliberative skills often prefer an environment that feels stable and secure—which for many means being with a small group of people who already know and accept them. Students are familiar with their peer group, and hopefully they trust their peer leader and know what to expect from me. Some of my colleagues may view this as “hand-holding” or, worse, lowering academic

⁵ I have been very fortunate that most of my peer leaders have also been Civic Scholars. However, we do not have enough peer leaders who are also Civic Scholars for the number of faculty using the deliberative versions of the Individual and Community Seminar.

expectations. However, what I am describing here is neither therapeutic nor remedial, but simply meeting students where they are to create the conditions necessary for them to excel academically.

During class discussions, we sit in a circle so each person can see the face of everyone else in the room. Although this may seem like an insignificant detail, I have always been struck by how it ensures that the quality and tone of the conversation remains respectful, even if there is strong disagreement. Since my seminar meets twice a week and each session is 75 minutes long, I set aside two class meetings for the forum to allow plenty of time for the story telling, which is a particularly important part of the deliberative experience for first-year students. Then we spend a third class meeting debriefing, being sure to cover both process and content. Depending on how the class has progressed in learning the practices of deliberation, about one half to two thirds of the way into the semester, I will ask students to participate in a campus forum, presenting it as a challenge for which they are well prepared. The focus on teaching deliberative skills in an environment that builds confidence has resulted in both higher participation rates and more thoughtful deliberations in the public forums.

In retrospect, all this seems amazingly obvious, but it took us some time to learn that breaking up peer groups was not the most effective way to teach first-year students how to develop deliberative and critical thinking skills and to cultivate the habit of public deliberation. Today, the students remain in their own peer group for the first forum—that is, they have their own forum on the chosen topic in their own classroom. The group is then split in half for the second and any subsequent forums they participate in outside of class. We also make a great effort to limit the forum size to 18 to 20 participants, the same number of students in a typical peer group. Half of the participants in a forum will come from one peer group, ensuring plenty of familiar faces. In addition, the familiar size of the group will encourage repeated participation by everyone present, thereby reducing the intimidation factor caused by a large group of unfamiliar participants. The other 50 percent of forum participants may be from another section of the first-year

seminar a course offered by a major or minor program (most typically, American studies, criminal justice, English, history, mass communication, philosophy, sociology, or women's studies), or the general campus population.⁶

Preparing to Deliberate

As we were restructuring the Diversity and Community Project, we were also adjusting the way deliberative practices were integrated into the course. Initially, we had put a tremendous amount of energy into developing good moderators in the belief that this would result in good deliberations. But, we discovered that although a forum might have a successful outcome in terms of increased understanding of the topic, this wasn't our only goal. Remember, we were trying to teach students how to communicate across differences and be active participants and leaders in their communities. Clearly, achieving this was going to require much more than simply asking them to attend a forum. And so we began to consider how we could develop a set of practices designed specifically for teaching the theory and practices of deliberative democracy to first-year students.

I began to spend more time in class identifying and practicing the skills needed for deliberation, and asking students to look at how it differed from discussion and debate. My intention was not to promote one over another, but to get students to begin thinking about different modes of communication, and how one might use a particular style depending on the situation. To use a rudimentary comparison, just as some projects require a hammer and others a screwdriver, there are times when debate may be the best choice while at other times deliberation may be needed. To develop more awareness about these different modes, we now spend one class

⁶ Careful coordination is required between the Center for Civic Life and the faculty using the Deliberative Dialogue Initiative to ensure that we have sufficient locations and moderating teams lined up and that students are directed to the correct location for their peer group.

session on an exercise adapted from NIF moderator training. Pairs of students are recruited to discuss, debate, or deliberate about the same question. Between each role-play, the entire group reflects on the differences in body language, tone of voice, and the style and content of each exchange, and how that affects the relationship between the two people and the outcome.

I also ask students to keep a log that lists all the different styles of communication each utilizes during the course of one day and to note how these shifted depending on the context. When students report back on their observations, the whole class explores the various situations they encountered. During this reflection period, we consider questions such as:

- When did you feel comfortable expressing your ideas and opinions?
- When did you feel constrained?
- What was the relationship between content and style of communication?
- Did whom you were speaking with influence what you said and how you said it?
- What were the differences between content and style depending on the context (the dorm, the classroom, a student club meeting)?

Not only have these experiences provided a foundation for understanding the theory and practices of deliberative democracy, they have led into an examination of more abstract concepts such as power relationships and the conditions necessary to exercise the right of free speech. All of this is solidly grounded in the students' own personal experiences, not only in the classroom but everywhere on campus.

During class discussions, sometimes I asked students to “say back” what the previous speaker had said before making the next contribution. To do this successfully requires comprehension, interpretation, and integration into the next comment in fairly rapid succession, so initially the pace of the discussion slows down. The content, however, immediately becomes more substantial, especially

with regard to relevancy and more in-depth commentary. At other times, each person is asked to explicitly integrate some aspect of what had been said by the previous speaker into the following contribution to the discussion. (The goal is to confirm that the current speaker heard and understood the previous comment, not to foster consensus or agreement.) Both exercises demand attentive listening, a skill that is not emphasized enough in education, or in our culture overall. As one colleague pointed out during one of the center's retreats, "Listening should be recognized as one of the liberal arts." These exercises foster the consideration of other perspectives, sharpen critical thinking, and assist in the development of the skills needed for thoughtful public deliberations.

Introducing Diversity

So far, I have concentrated on the practices and conditions that foster and support deliberation. What about diversity, the topic we want to explore through deliberation? Depending on their particular disciplinary expertise, faculty members who are teaching the seminar address the theme of Individual and Community—and diversity—in different ways. For example, diversity may be explored through socioeconomic class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, as well as on local, regional, national, and global scales. There is also a fair amount of faculty choice in selecting readings and developing writing and other course assignments, including the civic engagement projects.

Early in the semester in my classes, when students are still getting to know each other and me, I have found it productive to introduce the exploration of diversity with a forum on a subject that the group doesn't perceive as divisive. Although my choice may seem counterintuitive, one topic that I have used successfully is the NIF discussion guide *Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?* During the class forum, we explore how violence affects middle- and secondary-school children, a focus that chronologically has the advantage of being one step removed from the students' current peer group and environment, yet is filled with familiar reference

points. Another topic that has worked well, because everyone in the room has just engaged in a sustained exploration of this very issue, is *What Kind of Education Do We Need After High School?* The diversity connection becomes apparent as we examine the effects that socioeconomic class have on how one defines the issues-at-hand and how the resources of individual families and communities affect options for addressing the problem.

Not only is our campus population predominantly white, as I noted earlier, but most students have grown up in the Northeast—in New England, New York, and New Jersey. Many are the first generation in their families to attend a four-year liberal arts college. In spite of this apparent homogeneity, there are significant differences among them because of their different hometown environments (rural/suburban/urban) and their different socioeconomic classes. They tend to attribute educational and financial success—or failure—solely to individual effort, with little awareness of the impact that larger social structures, group membership, or even their family’s socioeconomic status may have had on their lives. So, this is where we begin, with the diversity that already exists in the room. Only after students have acquired some skill and comfort with their deliberative practices, and with each other and me, do we move on to additional diversity issues that may be outside of their direct experiences. Course readings, primarily autobiographical, bring additional perspectives into the classroom. Texts like *Revere Beach Elegy* by Roland Merullo, *Honky* by Dalton Conley, and essays from *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* by Jane Lazarre act as a bridge between more familiar personal experiences and new perspectives. *White Privilege*, edited by Paula Rothenberg, provides the historical and theoretical foundation. “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness,” an analytical history of structural racism in the United States by George Lipsitz, frames the central question of my seminar: What are the effects of social, cultural, and economic structures on individuals? How do these assist or block individuals from realizing their personal goals? (Indeed, how do they influence the very definition of those goals?) The dream cherished by so many—that personal effort and will power can overcome any obstacle, and

that success is the result of an individual's effort—is challenged in the following passage from Lipsitz's article:

If we believe social life is the sum of individual actions, we define racism as an individual act of hostility. Systemic and collective behavior becomes invisible and past and present systems and actions that channel rewards and resources toward one group and away from another do not appear racist, yet these systems and actions reinforce racial identity and white privilege. They give “people from different races vastly different life chances” (Lipsitz 2004, 77).

This essay challenges students to consider within a public context an issue that many of them see as personal. This lies at the very heart of the Individual and Community theme. Many students are unaware of the ways racial discrimination is integrated into our social structures. Instead, they often perceive it as a problem caused only by individuals who are either hateful or who behave badly. Racism then becomes solely a problem of appropriate personal behavior. Through a combination of course readings and forums that ask them to consider an array of personal and public approaches to addressing racism, students begin to see the deep ties that bind the personal and the public realms.

Because deliberative experiences make students aware of significantly different life experiences among their peers (who seem similar to them on so many levels), they become more open to considering the impact of cultural, economic, and political structures on the lives of even the most motivated individuals. These insights can be extended to other areas of difference, including religion, socioeconomic class, gender, social orientation, and ethnicity. Once the students become more sensitive to the wide range of human experience that exists in even an apparently homogeneous group, they recognize the consequences that differing life experiences can have on individuals or groups. Even though they may not have personally experienced discrimination, or at least may not be aware that they have, because of the stories shared during the forums, they realize that it still exists. Instead of dismissing discrimination

and social inequity as “something that was taken care of in the 60s” or “a problem for your generation, not for ours,” their engagement with these issues is more complex and dynamic. In this context, we consider questions like:

- What can be achieved by individual effort? What are the limits?
- Are there cultural, economic, and political structures that enhance an individual’s likelihood of success?
- Can the same structures that provide some with advantages present obstacles for others?
- Can you identify the factors in your life that enhance or limit your options?
- What, if any, is your responsibility to others?

Although not all my colleagues would agree with me, I see important distinctions between civic education and partisanship. For example, when we hold a forum, we are not advocating for a particular outcome or simply seeking to promote tolerance. Instead, our intention is to create an environment in which individuals who may have fundamentally different values and priorities can engage with each other in a dialogue that results in everyone having greater respect and understanding for each other and a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. If we can achieve this during the deliberation, the outcome is bound to be just. Therefore, I believe it is my responsibility to create a deliberative environment that fosters the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed to make well-reasoned judgments about ethical issues, and not to advocate for particular outcomes.

I would add two related points. First, most of the forums conducted on our campus and in our classrooms do not result in actions; instead, students are asked to make judgments together about the best possible approaches for addressing the problem-at-hand. Second, in an academic environment, the development of knowledge and skills can be considered very respectable outcomes for a deliberative forum.

The Civic Engagement Project: Engaging Diversity

Each fall, my class participates in a group civic engagement project (though any student who wishes to develop his or her individual project is encouraged to do so). These projects have provided students with valuable firsthand experiences regarding diversity. During the first several years, the seminar students held forums for seventh-graders and ninth-graders in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, using the *Violent Kids* discussion guide. Teams of three college students moderated forums for 16 or so younger students during an hour-and-a-half session. Each member of the team takes a turn at moderating.

Although Fitchburg is only 20 miles from our rural campus, it is quite different in its ethnic and economic diversity and its urban environment. Our college students work closely and collaboratively with these children. What up to that point was a fairly academic and abstract study of diversity topics now was suddenly embodied in the facial expressions, gestures, and voices of a very lively group of middle-school and high-school students. Convening and moderating these forums was quite demanding for the first-year students. Not only were they required to think critically, listen carefully, and facilitate a dialogue, but the energy level of the younger students was intense, and attention spans tended to be brief. The first time we visited the schools to hold forums, I feared I had gone too far—asked too much. I was wrong. Both sides loved the experience.

The college students learned that the younger students were able to propose actions for addressing problems beyond those presented in the discussion guide. For example, one Fitchburg group came up with the idea of having students keep a journal and setting aside a little time each day to express anger or frustration through writing and drawing rather than acting it out in classrooms and hallways. Another group proposed giving class credit for participating in clubs or other structured after-school activities. They believed this would help kids who have trouble with social skills or whose family

or neighborhood environments are not safe. Since most of the college students had come from much more affluent socioeconomic environments, many of the stereotypes they had about so-called “inner-city” kids were shattered. They were deeply impressed by the resilience and irrepressible energy of these younger students and by their pragmatic solutions to difficult problems. And I discovered that learning could take place in a noisy and, at times, chaotic environment.

Seminar students have also moderated forums on immigration and the quality of public school education for high-school students in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Demographically speaking, this school district is more similar to the high-school environment of many of our college students. Although the actual age difference is only one or two years, the college students marvel at how “young” the high-school students are. This “maturity gap” highlights for them how much they have already learned in one short semester at college. That they are now back in a high-school classroom in a leadership capacity is something most had never imagined they would be able to do so soon in their lives, if ever, and is a great confidence builder.

Although the student moderators often are extremely nervous during the days leading up to the forums, they are exuberant about the experience on the ride back to campus. Here are some characteristic statements:

- Every time that I have had to make a presentation in front of a class, my face would turn red.... I feared that would happen again. But I was wrong. I will admit that I was nervous at first, but then as we got to the first choice, I began to relax. Then to my own surprise, I said something.... I learned that I do have the courage and ability to speak in front of people.
- After participating in this forum, I feel more confident in myself. I get very nervous when I have no reason to be. I have always been a well-prepared person.... Once I heard their comments during the other choices, I changed my whole approach.... I threw away my note cards and asked questions that directly affected them.

After the forums, each team writes a group report summarizing the outcomes, and analyzes participant responses using quantitative data from pre- and postforum questionnaires and qualitative data from comments recorded during the forums. In addition, each team member is asked to write a personal reflection. The following are typical comments based on the students' experiences:

- I think that having to lead a discussion on the subject made me learn more.
- You want to know the topic well enough to not make a fool of yourself.
- When I approached the forum, I wanted to learn all sides of my choice and learn a lot about the other choices too. That way I could keep the discussion on my choice and not allow it to wander.

Based on this civic engagement experience, a number of students decide to become Civic Scholars, and the following year they find themselves teaming with faculty to moderate forums in Franklin Pierce classrooms and across campus. Others become active in the Student Government Association or other service-oriented clubs. In the few short months of the semester-long experience, their long-held assumptions about the need to prioritize personal success over community engagement has been reconsidered. The two are now seen interwoven.

Several years ago, the first-year seminar faculty voted to change the name of this requirement from Community Service to Civic Engagement because we wanted to emphasize the mutually-beneficial and educational nature of the exchange, rather than as one group providing a service for another. Integrating deliberation into the projects is one way to ensure that this will occur. For example, one student moderating team's report about a high-school forum described the reciprocal nature in this way:

As a civic engagement project, we were successful in raising an important issue to members of the community, even though they were younger. They had interesting opinions to share with us, and we did a good job of taking those opinions and producing an insightful discussion.

The college students here are engaged in a form of public scholarship, which has been carefully crafted to maximize opportunities for them to learn content and develop skills in addition to engaging the younger students. It is clear to me that everyone (including me) learns a great deal from these kinds of projects.

“An Education of Lasting Value”

One of my goals as a teacher is to provide access to knowledge and skills that will help my students acquire a public voice and to realize that they have valuable contributions to make to the communities in which they live. My desire to help others do the same is unquestionably informed by my own experiences as someone who, for many years, was fairly isolated from the life of my community. I did not believe I had the power to speak in a meaningful way to public issues or to be active in ways that were personally meaningful. The issues seemed unapproachable, and I felt ineffectual and disengaged.

The changes I have experienced in my life have much to do with the open exchanges, based on trust and reciprocity, that I now regularly enjoy with many colleagues and students. Trust and reciprocity, it seems to me, are essential for acquiring a public voice—or, as it is sometimes called, free speech. As Jane Tompkins writes in her powerful memoir, *Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*, “Most people work most happily when they belong to a community of people who are there to support, encourage, and appreciate them.” But these conditions, she claims, do not exist in most higher-education environments because people are often isolated through too-busy schedules, competition for resources, and the “absence of a culture of conversation” (Tompkins 1996, 188-191). Tompkins concludes her meditation on the isolation of academic life with a warning: “If the places that young people go to be educated don’t embody the ideals of community, cooperation, and harmony, then what people will learn will be the behavior these institutions do exemplify: competition, hierarchy, busyness, and isolation” (Tompkins 1996, 194). The same competitive and fast-paced environment

experienced by faculty also exists for students. As I reread her words, I am reminded of the statistics that I cited at the beginning of this essay. Numerically, they paint the same picture—a society in which each person is focused on individual success, disengaged from community life, and detached from concerns about the social and economic well-being of others.

When students are reluctant to express their views in a public forum or the classroom, they sometimes defend their behavior as “politically correct.” This understanding of political correctness—as an impulse to withdraw—is fueled by a desire to maintain group solidarity. They do not want to rock the boat. Somewhat ironically, the reluctance to speak about controversial issues springs out of caring deeply about relationships with others. Talking publicly about issues, particularly those connected with diversity, may damage one’s standing in the group, or is seen as only deepening the problem. Therefore, silence. Yet to have free speech, everyone must believe that they are free to speak. The culture of conversation—public conversation—is the foundation of community. How can we create the necessary conditions for students to exercise their right—even their obligation in a democratic society—to speak?

The answer lies in fostering an environment in which students can rely on the respect and trust of their peers, just as we faculty need to rely on the same from our colleagues. Deliberative dialogue seeks to create spaces where people can safely remain open to new perspectives, be self-reflective, and examine their underlying assumptions. The ground rules used in deliberative dialogue call for the cooperation Tompkins finds so lacking in most academic communities. At one and the same time, deliberative pedagogical practice explicitly validates the experience of each student (and each faculty member) while asking for additional perspectives. In this context, differing views are understood as an opportunity for inquiry, not conflict. Only at such a moment can we and our students begin to develop perceptive and open-ended questions and truly engage each other. This is the beginning of learning—not only to have enough trust in the group and confidence in

one's self to share ideas, but also to wonder genuinely what others are thinking.

In closing, I want to comment briefly on the relationships between deliberative democratic pedagogical practices described in this essay and the recommendations for the reorganization of undergraduate education made by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). In *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, the AAC&U urges that institutions of higher education foster learning-centered environments in which the increasingly diverse student population now attending college can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to “meet the emerging challenges in the workplace, in a diverse democracy, and in an interconnected world” (National Panel Report 2002, vii). It is clear that what the report recommends is what faculty associated with the New England Center for Civic Life at Franklin Pierce have been doing since 1998. Five of the eleven “Organizing Educational Principles” the AAC&U endorses are characteristic of deliberative pedagogical approaches:

- Values collaborative work,
- Links critical thinking to real-life problems, often involving contested values,
- Interprets education as an informed probing of ideas and values,
- Develops creativity by valuing personal experiences, and
- Celebrates practical knowledge
(National Panel Report 2002, 44).

In short, the AAC&U believes that institutions of higher education are becoming increasingly diverse and that students need the skills and knowledge to live in a diverse democracy and an interconnected world. One way of realizing these goals is to integrate deliberative democratic practices in the classroom, in institutional decision making at every level, and in civic engagement and public scholarship projects. The deliberative practices developed for first-year students at Franklin Pierce meet the challenge posed by *Greater Expectations* in affirming diverse perspectives, values, and life

experiences as essential components for “an education of lasting value” (National Panel Report 2002, vi).

Not only does the use of deliberative dialogue help to create an atmosphere of open communication that fosters inquiry and an appreciation for the value of community and diversity, but it is also an essential habit of mind for people who live in a democratic society. As Terry Tempest Williams writes in *The Open Space of Democracy*: “The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions?” (Williams 2004, 83). We must attend to the emotional as well as the intellectual life of our students by creating environments that ensure all of our students are truly free to speak and to be listened to with respect and attention. For me, as for many of my colleagues at the New England Center for Civic Life, deliberative pedagogies, such as those I have described here, help that to happen.

Joni Doherty is director of the New England Center for Civic Life and teaches in the American Studies Program at Franklin Pierce University. She is editor of the College Issues Forums, a series of discussion guides developed in collaboration with students and faculty at Franklin Pierce and directs the Diversity & Community Project, an initiative developed to foster awareness of and respect for diversity.

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