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

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

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

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THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE: AN ISRAELI EXPERIENCE WITH DELIBERATIVE PEDAGOGY

By Edith Manosevitch

This past January, two election events occurred at Netanya Academic College in Israel. Both took place in Tshuva Hall, which is the major arena reserved for important events with high visibility and prestigious guests. Both events carried the story line of the 2013 Israeli general election campaign, and both endeavored to make a contribution to democratic life by engaging the college community in campaign issues as it prepared to fulfill its civic duty of voting. Taking place a week apart and similar in so many ways, the outcomes of the two events were completely opposite. One event was cut short by contentious discourse and an outraged audience. The other ended with excitement, a sense of civic empowerment, and a consensus that the experience ought to be replicated in coming years. Why were these events so different?

In this piece I argue that the juxtaposition of the two election events demonstrates the power of deliberative pedagogy as a medium for bolstering deliberative norms and values. Just as King Arthur's round table embodied the message of equal voice and opportunity, the National Issues Forums (NIF) format for public forums embodies the message of constructive public debate. In turn, this format can bring about a dramatic change in the nature of public debate and the norms that govern it. This design, which lends itself to a core tenet of deliberative democracy, is particularly important in a culture with deep internal divides on critical issues. Such divides pose an immediate threat to society's stability and well being, impeding any attempt to convey tolerance and mutual respect. This is where the context of Israel is relevant.

Israeli Political Context and Culture

Israel is a deeply divided society with a delicate security situation and complex foreign relations. The nation is divided among several primary minority groups, each of which has further political and

religious divides within it. This includes the Arab sector, comprised of Christians, Muslims, Druze, and Bedouin minorities. The Jewish majority is also comprised of several distinct groups, which differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jewish tradition and Jewish law in Israeli democracy. Deep divides exist among the various Jewish groups, with conflicting religious and ideological values that are difficult if not impossible to reconcile.

Israel is a parliamentary democracy. The 120 members of Knesset are elected by voting for party *lists* rather than for individual candidates. The total number of seats assigned to each party is proportional to the percentage of votes that each party collects in the general elections, with a minimum requirement of two percent of the total national votes. The divisive social fabric, along with the parliamentary system of governance, results in a broad spectrum of political parties running for office during each election campaign. To illustrate, thirty-two parties competed for office in the recent elections, with twelve ultimately comprising the current Israeli Knesset.

Over the years, this social political context has brought about a culture saturated with political talk and debate. However, due to the deep social and political divides, public issues are highly controversial and public debate often comes across as heated dispute that deepens divides rather than contributing to the problem-solving process. Consequently, many Israelis associate the idea of political discussions with heated arguments rather than constructive debates that strive to meet deliberative ideals. A recent survey I conducted among communication students at my college provides support for this assertion. When asked to describe the nature of existing political debate, most students provided negative accounts of such talk. They describe it with adjectives like “disrespectful,” “ignorant,” “aggressive,” “uncivil,” “not listening,” and “stubborn.” As one student explained, “people try to be right all the time, and do not leave room for the expression of new views. They have no patience for views that contradict their own.”

These descriptions, albeit not representative of the entire population’s views, align with Tamar Katriel’s seminal work on Israeli speech culture. Katriel (1999) identifies the “*casach* speech” as one of the dominant speech styles in contemporary Israeli society.

... many Israelis associate the idea of political discussions with heated arguments rather than constructive debates that strive to meet deliberative ideals.

This speech, she argues, is rough, verbal aggression that impinges upon the fabric of constructive interpersonal relationships (1999). Applying Katriel's insights to the ideals of public deliberation highlights the challenge of pursuing deliberative democracy in Israel, since the "*casach* speech," albeit not the only type of speech in Israel, reflects social norms that undermine the core values of deliberation.

A Chaotic Political Panel

The first election event illustrates the implications that this divisive context and challenging speech culture may have when attempting to pursue informed public debate.

On January 9, 2013, two weeks prior to the Israeli general elections, a political panel was held on campus. Initiated and organized by the Student Union, the panel was designed in the form of a political debate. About 400 students attended the event, with twelve panelists representing the broad spectrum of the parties running for office. The organizers set up the panel to take up a 90-minute time slot, with each representative given five minutes to state their positions and respond to audience questions.

The event began as planned. But soon the atmosphere heated up when Yael Lerer, representing what is considered to be the extreme left wing party Balad,¹ responded to a question about her party's controversial actions on the Mavi Marmara flotilla in May of 2010.² Lerer said that she was glad that her party was there, and expressed support for parliament member Hanin Zuabi's actions on the flotilla.

¹ Balad is an Arab party that advocates turning Israel into a state of all its citizens, rather than a Jewish state.

² The Mavi Marmara was part of the Gaza Freedom flotilla, manned by activists and humanitarians that came from Turkey with the purpose of confronting the Israeli blockade over the Gaza Strip. While it was in international waters, flotilla members refused the request by Israeli Naval Forces to honor the blockade and approach Israel via the nearby port. A violent clash between the activists and Israeli soldiers ensued. During the clash, parliament member Hanin Zuabi joined the activists on the flotilla. Her actions caused heated public debate in Israel, with many questioning Zuabi's loyalty to Israel and her right to serve as a Knesset member.

These statements caused heated outcries from panelists. Some left the stage in protest, declaring Lerer's expressions to be incitement and treason. Others remained on stage, saying they opposed Lerer's views, but valued her right to express them. In essence two issues were simultaneously at dispute: Lerer's controversial opinions, and the debate about the limits of freedom of speech.

While this drama was taking place on stage, there was an uproar from the audience, with dozens of students standing up, singing Israel's national anthem, and clapping steadily to overpower Lerer's voice. But she insisted on her right to voice her opinion, and scolded the audience for their undemocratic behavior. The event turned chaotic. Heated arguments occurred in tandem on stage, off stage, and between the audience and the panelists. Witnesses reported that an argument between Arab and Jewish students began in the audience and turned into violent confrontation that required police intervention. The Student Union organizer tried to maintain control by requesting that everyone calm down, but he was unsuccessful and was forced to stop the panel discussion. Later, he managed to get a few of the moderate panelists to continue the debate in another room.³

This panel demonstrated how political issues in Israel are intertwined with fundamental questions about the nation's identity and legitimacy as a Jewish democracy. It also showed the deep divide between right- and left-wing ideologies, and the challenge Israelis face when seeking to embrace democratic norms such as tolerance and inclusive debate.

Citizens' behavior during the panel discussion—students and politicians included—manifested the negative characteristics that my students



³ Videotape of the event and confrontation may be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCus7ilpxXM>.

Discussion of sensitive issues in public oftentimes leads to aggressive speech and an impasse.

noted in their descriptions of existing public debate. This is indisputably an extreme occurrence. By no means does this represent all political debate in Israel; there are plenty of forums for constructive and thoughtful deliberations. But sad to say, it was not an anomaly. Discussion of sensitive issues in public oftentimes leads to aggressive speech and an impasse. This may occur in the media, in public conferences, and even in the parliament. In fact, the Israeli parliament has a reputation for disrespectful discussions—an Israeli might scold arguing friends using the expression “will you stop already, you are not in the parliament.”

My aforementioned student survey reveals two more interesting findings. First, more than 90 percent of the students surveyed agreed with the statement that it is important to have inclusive public debate about key issues in Israel. A few responded that they are not sure, and only two students (of 120 total respondents) said they disagreed. But more striking were students’ normative ideas of public debate. To gauge their concept of this, I asked, “If you could shape public debate in Israel in the best way possible, how would you shape it? How should it be conducted, and who should participate in it?” Most responses seemed to align with theoretical conceptualizations of public deliberation. For example, students wrote that public debate should manifest “tolerance, acceptance of others’ opinions” and it should be “inclusive of people from all layers of society (socioeconomic, gender, and culture).” They wrote that it should be conducted

- “in a quiet and organized manner,”
- “[where] one talks and everyone listens and then the next one talks and everyone listens,”
- “politely without yelling,”
- “with patience and tolerance,” and
- “must listen to everyone’s opinions, listen to one another, as long as the opinions do not hurt our nation and army.”

In other words, students’ negative characterization of existing Israeli political talk does not seem to detract from the importance they attribute to such debate when it adheres to normative ideas of deliberation. They believe that an inclusive and organized political debate is a necessary component for Israeli democracy. This brings me to the second election event.

The Deliberative Elections Conference

On January 16th, one week after the political panel discussion, in the same lecture hall, we implemented the first student-led deliberative elections conference. The event was timely—only six days shy of the Israeli general elections, with campaign news coverage and events at their peak. We named the conference “Students say NO to the Horse Race: Elections Conference 2013,” thereby inviting an opportunity to discuss the challenging nature of campaign coverage and its implications on informed citizenry and democracy.

The conference was a peak event of an intensive three-month process with my senior-year seminar students. This is a yearlong research seminar on public deliberation, which I have been teaching in Israel since 2009. The general elections presented an appealing opportunity to complement theory with practice. Thus I decided to integrate a deliberative conference as a class project within the seminar curriculum. To me, this was also an opportunity to experiment with deliberative pedagogy on a timely occasion.

To begin, we devoted six weeks to discussions of core readings on the theory of deliberative democracy. We then turned to conference preparation. This included learning the campaign issues, preparing them for deliberation, and preparing background material about the issues for participants. The other major preparation was moderator training. As all this was happening, students also helped “get the buzz” around campus and create a sense of excitement that would encourage wide student participation. They ran a Facebook page, created a promo that was broadcast on the campus radio, and used their graphic design skills to produce an appealing logo and flyers that were posted around campus and shared virally online. The project capitalized on communication skills that students had been developing in our school’s program to enhance their experience and contribute to its success.

In total, 127 students participated in the event; 19 students were from the deliberation seminar and the rest were communication students with no prior background in public deliberation. This exceeded my goal of 100 students—and the faculty’s warning that I should not expect more than 50—since normally students are disinclined to participate in optional activities.

The conference framework followed the traditional NIF structure for public forums, with an opening plenary session,

group discussions where ten discussion groups were seated in circles in the open area surrounding the major conference hall, a coffee break, and closing session, after which participants completed feedback forms about their experience. My seminar students served

as moderators for the group discussions. While some were eager and confident in their ability to do this, others were shy or intimidated by the responsibility involved. In order to encourage all students to experience the moderator role and take an active part in the process, I suggested they work in pairs, with a lead moderator and an assistant. This option was well received.



Indeed, in the end all of the seminar

students took part in moderating the discussion (except two students that headed the film crew) and, most important, all expressed personal fulfillment and empowerment from the experience.

As students were engaging in group discussions, faculty and guests observed from afar so as not to disrupt. At this point it was a student event in its entirety. After three months of endless preparations, even I felt useless. Student moderators were leading engaged student discussions and a film crew was busy documenting the event. Nothing else was needed. There was no trace of aggressive discourse, public rage, or protest; just a simple manifestation of public deliberation.

Faculty members walking around were overwhelmed to see students actively participating in civilized group discussions led by their peers. Student moderators reported the same feeling. Prior to the event, they were concerned that no one would cooperate, or alternatively, that they would have trouble controlling an aggressive discussion. Some suggested we hire security guards for the event, which made sense given the backdrop of the aforementioned political panel. But none were needed for the ten groups in circles, who were getting to the heart of the issues, challenging each other with substantive questions and considerations, and attentively, respectfully engaging.

Analysis of participants' feedback forms complements the overall enthusiasm expressed by the seminar students and the faculty. Participants were overwhelmingly appreciative of the experience. They reported that they were happy they came, they benefited from it, and most of them wrote that they would be interested in joining this type of event in the future. Further, most participants indicated that they gained both knowledge and understanding of the issues discussed.

Group discussions were by far the most appreciated and valued component of the conference. All participants rated the discussions positively, as either "excellent" or "very good." Only a few classified the conference as "good" and none evaluated it as "poor" or "fair." In response to the question "what was the most valuable component of the event?" 81 percent of the respondents answered that it was the group discussion. Interestingly, in response to the question about "things that should be changed in future events," many indicated that the group discussions should be longer, thus providing further evidence for the attributed importance of this component.

Moderators were also highly appreciated. Most participants indicated that their group moderator was "excellent" or "very good." Here, too, open-ended comments support the positive ratings. For example, participants wrote that their moderators

- "moderated the discussion in an excellent and fascinating manner";
- "were pleasant and very clear";
- "[were] interesting and knowledgeable";
- "created an interesting atmosphere and gave an opportunity to express differing opinions."

Conclusion

Deliberative pedagogy is an emerging field of research that seeks to identify ways in which academia may develop students' deliberative values, norms, and behavior. While cultivating deliberative practices is challenging everywhere, it seems particularly difficult to achieve in deeply conflicted contexts such as Israel. Difficult, but not impossible. This case study serves as an example of the power

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of deliberative pedagogy for transforming the nature of political debate. Juxtaposing the two events illuminates the power of pedagogy and format for translating theory to practice.

The sharp contrast between students' descriptions of existing public debate versus their normative understanding of what it should be may explain the success of the deliberative conference, and highlight the importance of such endeavors in Israel.⁴ The conference manifested the attributes that students ascribed to public debate when asked how they would shape it, if only they could. It manifested mutual respect, organized discussion, and equal opportunity for everyone to listen and to be heard. The conference represented the opposite of students' subjective experience with Israeli political talk. Perhaps it provided them the deliberative experience that they aspire to have.

Further research is needed to examine how similar experiences might be developed to provide students with tools for constructive participation in public debate, and help promote a more deliberative culture in Israeli society and beyond.

⁴ Videotape of the deliberative conference may be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzLR2W5Astk>.

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