Deliberative Dialogue to Expand Civic Engagement: What Kind of Talk Does Democracy Need?

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The need to expand and deepen civic engagement is a central theme of a loosely defined and growing civic movement. A strong civic life and a flourishing democracy presume the active involvement of many people across society. Civic engagement is thus both a barometer of our public life and a focal point for action when we want to improve it. While regular citizen-to-citizen communication has always been a central part of democracy, public deliberation is just starting to be defined as a field of thought and practice. In this article we focus on face-to-face democratic deliberation as a means of enhancing civic engagement.

We bring ideas and insights from our work in communities to answer the question, "What kind of public talk is most likely to expand civic engagement and make it meaningful to all sorts of people?" This emerging field has a rich and growing set of perspectives and practices; unfortunately, we don't have the space to catalogue and detail all the promising approaches and what they have taught us. But we can describe what we have been learning in communities where community-wide deliberation for action and change is being used as a process for widespread, meaningful civic engagement. In doing this we make a case for two powerful but unusual marriages that are frequently missing when public talk is used to strengthen civic engagement.

The first union is between two strains of public talk—dialogue and deliberation. The process of *dialogue,* as it is usually understood, can bring many benefits to civic life—an orientation toward constructive communication, the dispelling of stereotypes, honesty in relaying ideas, and the intention to listen to and understand the other.[1] A related process, *deliberation,* brings a different benefit—the use of critical thinking and reasoned argument as a way for citizens to make decisions on public policy. We will describe what we have learned about how the combination of deliberation and dialogue can be used

to create mutual understanding and connect personal with public concerns. People use this type of public conversation, what we term deliberative dialogue,[2] to build relationships, solve public problems, and address policy issues.

The second critical marriage is between community organizing and deliberative dialogue. Frequently, those who use some form of public talk focus only on the characteristics of the talk itself. When they speak about effectiveness, they describe the quality of the dialogue or the deliberation "inside the circle." While that is important, it isn't enough. Whenever public talk is being used for civic engagement—that is, to involve people in addressing public problems— it is critical to create a wider context for the conversation. In addition to focusing on how people will be brought into the conversation, it is essential to address how the community context of the conversation will be structured so that the conversation can have an impact on public life. In this article we also describe what we have learned about the kind of community-wide organizing that makes deliberative dialogue effective for community building and public problem solving.[3]

We hope that our description of this kind of public talk and its connection to community organizing will be useful not only to anyone using deliberation and dialogue for civic engagement but also to those using other kinds of civic engagement processes. Our goal is to make transparent our assumptions and working principles for effective civic engagement. By describing what we are learning, we hope to spark a larger and more comprehensive conversation among theorists and practitioners about the connection of deliberative dialogue to some of the key goals and questions of the civic movement.

Making and Strengthening Civic Connections: The Search for Effective Processes

Most people do not enter community life or politics through doors marked "civic life" or "engagement." Instead, they find themselves inside after they start working on an issue about which they care deeply. Once they try to make progress on the issue, they realize that they need to engage other people in finding and implementing solutions.

Civic engagement implies meaningful connections among citizens and among citizens, issues, institutions, and the political system. It implies voice and agency, a feeling of power and effectiveness, with real opportunities to have a say. It implies active participation, with real opportunities to make a difference.

Good communication is key to making and strengthening connections and working relationships. That is why a growing number of civic engagement processes feature some form of public talk or conversation. These processes go by different names—dialogue, deliberation, or public conversation—but the common denominator is face-to-face communication among citizens on issues of common concern.

A Vision of Democracy at Its Best

Implicit in every civic engagement process is a vision of how democracy and civic life ought to work. For us, the most compelling vision of an ideal democracy is one in which there are ongoing, structured opportunities for everyone to meet as citizens, across different backgrounds and affiliations, and not just as members of a group with similar interests and ideas. In these face-to-face settings, not only does everyone have a voice, but each person also has a way to use that voice in inclusive, diverse, problem-solving conversations that connect directly to action and change.

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), for which we work, was created by the Topsfield Foundation in 1989 to advance deliberative democracy and improve the quality of public life in the United States. Our founder charged us to develop tools that communities can use to involve large numbers of people, from every background and way of life, in face-to-face dialogue and action on critical issues.

In the model SCRC developed to meet this charge, small, diverse groups—*study circles*—meet simultaneously all across a community to address an issue of common concern. In each group, people share their concerns and their personal connections to the issue. They share honestly, listen to each other, form relationships, and build trust. The groups include people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, men and women, public officials and ordinary citizens, people of all educational backgrounds, and people of all income levels and ages.

These community members determine what is important about the issue facing them. They consider each other's views, find some common ground, and agree to disagree on some things. After meeting several times, they find ways to address the issue; they decide how they want to get involved and make a difference. In addition to meeting in small groups, they also come together, from time to time, as a whole community. That way, the experience of the small group can connect to whole-community processes. People can learn how others are working to make a difference and how their own contribution fits into the larger picture. Some of the people will decide to work together. Some community institutions will decide to work together. Public officials and other community members will engage in a give-and-take of ideas about public policy and find ways to collaborate.

Such opportunities create environments that foster all forms of civic engagement—connecting citizens to each other, to community institutions, to the issues, to policymaking, and to the community as a whole. They also help create a connection between private and public concerns and between community and political concerns. They provide a way to create a strong, diverse community and to make progress on all kinds of social and political issues.

This vision builds on the work of theorists and practitioners who have argued that participatory, citizen-driven democracy is the best avenue for strengthening and reforming civic life. Almost twenty years ago, political

scientist Benjamin Barber articulated a compelling version of participatory politics in *Strong Democracy*.[4] In the past several years, civil rights lawyer and law professor Lani Guinier has emphasized the importance of inclusive conversation and deliberation for a participatory democracy that would engage and work for all people. For both Barber and Guinier, face-to-face deliberation provides a remedy to invigorate a democracy that in its current form, does not inspire the participation of its citizens. The remedy comes in creating opportunities for engagement that are meaningful to everyone.[5]

Their assumptions about why people participate in public life mirror what the civic field has begun to understand and articulate about the realities of engagement. People want to be part of community, to have a voice, to connect with all kinds of people, and to make progress on the issues that are important to them. To become engaged, people need to see that their participation will make a difference and that it will be valued. They need opportunities that allow them to make the best use of their skills and time. They need to be invited to participate by those they know and trust.[6]

The Marriage of Deliberation and Dialogue

This section describes how and why a marriage of dialogue and deliberation is ideally suited to civic efforts that strive to be inclusive, productive, and democratic. The principles we describe here are based on the work of leading thinkers concerning the power and limits of public talk[7] and on more than ten years of observing both the way people talk in civic contexts and how particular types of talk produce different results. Although many of these principles relate to the content and form of the conversation, it is the organizing process that assures a diverse participant group and provides an overarching context for these principles. It is impossible to have a productive public discussion of issues unless everyone's voice and perspective contributes to the search for solutions to public challenges.

The most successful public engagement processes embrace the following principles of talk, dialogue, and deliberation.

1. *Encourage multiple forms of speech and communication to ensure that all kinds of people have a real voice.* Once a diverse group of people comes together in a deliberative dialogue, the process should make it possible for everyone to participate on an equal basis. Political scientist Iris Marion Young believes that deliberative processes are useful to the extent that they promote the use of critical reason (better arguments) instead of raw power. Yet Young also argues that the "norms of deliberation are culturally specific and often operate as forms of power that silence or devalue the speech of some people," noting that predominant "norms of 'articulateness' . . . are culturally specific, and in actual speaking situations . . . exhibiting such speaking styles is a sign of social privilege."[8]

Public engagement processes that are too dependent on the ability of participants to communicate in a single, particular way make it more difficult for everyone to fully participate. To ensure that all kinds of people have a real voice, study circles use a variety of devices, such as ground rules, encouraging reflection on personal experiences, storytelling, brainstorming, and emphasizing the importance of listening.[9]

2. *Make listening as important as speaking.* Most people are not accustomed to having others truly listen to them. Whether we are conversing in everyday settings or participating in a structured process, most of us focus on our own concerns, or prepare our next comment, instead of trying to understand what the other person is really saying. Public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich notes that "not being heard is a conditioned response that is constantly reinforced. A typical first reaction to views that oppose your own is to assume that you are not being understood and therefore to restate your own position more insistently, in the hope that the force of your convictions will cause it to register."[10]

A strong emphasis on listening increases the likelihood that more people will participate fully in the discussion. In any group, some people will be more eloquent and comfortable speaking than will others. Processes that promote listening reduce pressure on people who may be reluctant to expose their feelings or ideas before strangers. Good listening also increases the chance that people will truly understand—and even empathize with—each other, thus increasing the odds that they will find common ground for solutions to the public issues being addressed.[11]

Public engagement processes need to go the extra mile to counter our poor listening habits. Study circles encourage respectful, empathetic listening through their use of ground rules and trained peer facilitators. The facilitation style and discussion materials encourage people to ask follow-up questions of their fellow participants to make sure they understand one another. The small size of the group and the time afforded, with a typical sequence of at least four two-hour sessions, reduces the pressure on people to speak before they are ready to do so. And people find it easier to listen when they do not have to jockey for an opportunity to stand in front of large numbers of people and get all their ideas out in one fell swoop.

3. *Connect personal experience with public issues.* The single most effective way to overcome people's initial hesitancy to discuss public issues is to ask them to share their experiences and talk about how the issue at hand affects their daily lives. However, all too often public engagement processes ask people to leap into a discussion of policy options without giving them adequate opportunity to reflect on the relevance of the issue to their own personal experience. If you hope to engage people, you need to "begin where they are" by helping them address public concerns in their own language and on their own terms.[12]

Research conducted by the Harwood Group for the Kettering Foundation looked at the patterns of people's everyday, informal conversations about public issues. The research revealed that most people are not looking for quick answers or decisions on a course of action when they initiate conversations about public issues with family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. "Rather, they are striving to better understand what is happening around them and to be understood by others."[13] That is, by engaging in conversation, people are trying to make sense of issues that can be complex and confusing. At the same time, they are strengthening their personal relationships by exploring how others see the issue. Typically, these conversations begin with people venting their frustration about an issue. They also tell personal stories that illustrate how and why they feel the way they do.[14]

At one time or another, all of us have engaged in the type of informal, everyday conversations about public concerns described in the Harwood Group research. Public engagement processes should attempt to take advantage of these habits. For example, study circles focusing on how to build strong neighborhoods begin by asking participants to tell a story about the neighborhoods where they grew up. This is followed by an exercise that asks people to talk about an experience that made them feel connected to their neighborhood.[15] Grounding the discussion in personal experience makes it easier for people who are not accustomed to talking about politics in public to participate fully. It sends the message that everyone's perspective is equally important. This is crucial in situations where some participants may have greater technical knowledge or professional experience than do others. A discussion of personal experience also helps people develop ownership of the issues. While some people may be comfortable discussing concepts or intellectual constructs, others work best when they talk about public issues in concrete terms. Regardless of people's inclinations, beginning a deliberative dialogue by talking about personal experience helps everyone develop greater ownership and understanding of the issue.

4. *Build trust and create a foundation for working relationships.* For deliberative dialogue to lead to meaningful action and change, it must encourage the building of trust and working relationships. Without making an explicit effort to build trust, it is difficult for people to examine publicly the basic assumptions and values that underlie their own views, let alone understand others' perspectives. Moreover, if one of the goals is to help people find ways to create change in a collaborative hands-on way, they need to form working relationships with their fellow participants. As Lani Guinier notes, people are looking for opportunities to "come together to make change, not merely to make friends."[16]

When people consider whether they are willing to work together—to give up or share some of their time, resources, and power—they inevitably ask themselves whether they can trust others to act in good faith. This deep level of trust does not come easily. As noted above, two of the best ways to build

trust and mutual understanding are to encourage reflection on personal experience and to emphasize the importance of listening. For some public issues it is important to provide exercises that are intentionally designed to build trust. The initial session of study circles addressing community-police relationships and racial profiling begins by giving mixed groups of residents and police officers the opportunity to discuss questions such as "what did you learn about the police when you were young?" and "if you are a police officer, how do you talk with your family and friends about your job?" This lays the groundwork for a subsequent session on "what do we expect from each other?" where civilians and police officers address questions such as "what makes a good police officer?" and "how does that compare with what makes a good citizen?"[17]

5. *Explore a range of views about the nature of the issue.* Before asking people to make decisions regarding solutions to complex public challenges, deliberative dialogue should help them explore a range of views about the nature of the issue. This is important because, as Richard Harwood (of the Harwood Group) notes, "decision making is not initially a natural part of people's everyday talk about common concerns." Harwood's research makes a strong case that "public engagement techniques often push people in very targeted directions, too often avoiding the natural path that people want to take when it comes to talk. Instead, [we should] think about how to provide people with *opportunities to sort out* what is going on around them."[18]

This process of sorting out what is going on and why it is happening is crucial to people's ability to develop a sense of ownership of public issues. To have this type of deliberative dialogue, participants should use discussion materials that help them explore representative points of view, including those that may be unpopular with some members of the group. Moreover, it is difficult for people to take responsibility for an issue unless the process allows and encourages them to challenge and amend the points of view presented in the materials. Communications theorist John Gastil emphasizes that this ability to "reformulate" or "reframe" an issue is essential if people are to have real power to set the public agenda.[19]

After an initial session in which people get to know one another and establish their personal connection to the issue, study circles encourage participants to explore one or more of the following lines of questioning: (1) How is this issue affecting our community (or region/state/nation)? (2) What is the nature of the problem? (3) What are the root causes of the problem? For example, study circles on immigration do not jump immediately into questions about whether we should allow more or fewer newcomers into the United States. Instead, people begin by talking about the many ways in which increasing numbers of newcomers are affecting schools, race relations, language differences, and competition for jobs. This prepares study circle participants for a subsequent session that asks, "What should we do about immigration and community change?"[20]

6. *Encourage analysis and reasoned argument.* The powerful work that occurs in dialogue—identifying the connections between personal and public concerns, creating mutual understanding, and building relationships based on trust—is necessary for solving complex public problems. But it is not enough. People also need structured opportunities to engage in "judicious argument, critical listening, and earnest decision making."[21] Most political theorists who focus on the importance of public deliberation emphasize the importance of critical thinking and reasoned argument to the creation of sound public policy. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, has been one of the most vocal and persistent promoters of this concept of public deliberation: "deliberations aren't just discussions to promote better understanding. They are the way we make the decisions that allow us to act together. People are challenged to face the unpleasant costs and consequences of various options and to 'work through' the often volatile emotions that are a part of making public decisions."[22]

The need for reasoned argument raises the question of how much information people need in order to deliberate effectively. Some civic engagement processes stress the importance of exposing participants to large amounts of technical information and other relevant facts. While many theorists and promoters of public deliberation agree that civic engagement processes should provide a baseline of information about issues, they also warn against overwhelming people with too many facts.[23] Richard Harwood emphasizes that civic engagement processes should provide "a sense of coherence about how different pieces of information fit together . . . and not necessarily all available information."[24]

While critical thinking is an essential part of effective engagement on issues, too many civic reformers tend to make this approach the element of political talk that trumps all others. Benjamin Barber notes, "Philosophers and legal theorists have been particularly guilty of overrationalizing talk in their futile quest for a perfectly rational world mediated by perfectly rational forms of speech."[25] Many people are intimidated by processes that place heavy emphasis on absorbing large amounts of facts or on making closely reasoned arguments.[26] Such an approach can make it difficult to bring large and diverse numbers of people into a civic engagement process.

This is one of the most important reasons for combining the best aspects of dialogue and deliberation in a single process. A more comprehensive deliberative dialogue approach provides a place in the process for people who engage public issues in all kinds of ways. As noted above, the first few sessions of a study circle emphasize the dialogue aspects of deliberative dialogue. In most cases, it is not until the penultimate session that a study circle addresses the pros and cons of different proposals for action. By this time, people have become more comfortable with each other and with the issue, making it easier for everyone to have a voice.[27]

7. *Help people develop public judgment and create common ground for action.* Most people who organize and participate in civic engagement processes do so

because they are looking for solutions to public challenges. Social change and action that depends on people working together (as compared to change that is rooted in individual behavior and attitudes) necessitates finding agreement about appropriate courses of action. When diverse groups of people use deliberative dialogue to consider different points of view on public issues, they develop the public judgment and create the common ground that is integral to achieving workable public policy and sustainable community action.

As conceived by Daniel Yankelovich, public judgment is a more mature, considered form of public opinion. "In making a judgment, people take into account the facts as they understand them *and* their personal goals and moral values *and* their sense of what is best for others as well as themselves."[28] Deliberative dialogue is ideal for helping people come to public judgment on complex issues. Using this approach, people can connect their personal experience to an issue, develop mutual understanding, explore values and assumptions, and use reasoned argument and analysis to reach conclusions about the appropriate direction for public policy. Again, according to Yankelovich (referring to how people form a public judgment about capital punishment), "Their social values and personal morality, their interpretation of the meaning of life, and whatever statistics they happen to know about crime rates are all aspects of a single, indivisible judgment."[29] This sort of work is especially important when attempting to create civic engagement processes that inform policymaking at the state and national level.[30]

In addition to developing public judgment that enjoys broad and deep support, civic engagement processes grounded in deliberative dialogue create common ground for action. Political scientist Michael Briand warns that many public processes lead to "least common denominator" solutions in which common ground is "construed as the area of overlap between what you believe or desire and what I believe or desire."[31] This type of agreement can be more of a narrowly defined negotiation than a broad-based foundation for public action. Deliberative dialogue, on the other hand, generates new ideas and civic energy. The marriage of deliberative dialogue with large-scale, inclusive community organizing increases the odds that people will generate new ideas and creative solutions.

Moreover, common ground should not be confused with absolute consensus. When participants reach common ground, they find areas of general agreement. These agreements may lead to some group-supported action ideas and some action ideas that only a portion of the group supports. This is important because participants in a deliberative dialogue feel more at liberty to consider and generate new ideas when they are not obliged to reach total agreement.

8. *Provide a way for people to see themselves as actors and to* be *actors.* Our everyday public discourse reinforces the idea that real change happens "out there," beyond most people's reach or influence. In part, this reflects the all-too-common disconnects between citizens and elected officials and between

community members and the institutions and resources of the community. It also reflects the difficulty in seeing how individuals' efforts to create change connect to the larger issues or the larger community.

Effective deliberative dialogue processes address this in two ways. First, whole-community organizing creates opportunities for people from various neighborhoods, institutions, and agencies to work through problems, consider solutions, and share a variety of resources to solve them.[32] In essence, the process should bring "us" and "them" together in the conversation, so that the conversation is about "all of us" making a difference in the community. This takes the focus away from "this is what we hope *they* will do."

Second, the content of the deliberative dialogue process is also critical. It helps create a sense of agency for each person by leading participants in a natural progression from analysis of the issue to an exploration of specific action steps. When participants have the chance to consider a range of actions that different actors (such as individuals, small groups, nonprofits, businesses, schools, and government) can take, they are more likely to see that solutions to public problems can come in many and varied ways. They are also more likely to see themselves as actors. When a public conversation ends with analysis of the issue and does not progress to an intentional conversation about action steps, it reinforces the idea that the possibilities for addressing the issue are entirely outside the room.

The final session of a study circle gives participants a chance to follow this natural progression, consider a range of possible actions, and decide which action steps they see as most important. Then they present those action priorities at a large-group meeting (often referred to as an *action forum*) that gives all the small groups a chance to pool their ideas and move forward on a range of actions. It is also important to keep the results of the deliberative dialogue process in the public eye. This helps people see the value of their participation.[33] Some communities have developed benchmarks for change to help participants and the larger community measure the progress they are making. This recognition of change encourages sustained efforts and also inspires broader participation.

We have found that the marriage of community organizing to deliberative dialogue is essential for bringing this principle to life. While it is possible for people in small-scale engagement processes to consider possible action steps, a diverse, large-scale process opens up many more avenues for action that can address institutional, community-wide, and policy dimensions of issues.[34]

9. *Connect to government, policymaking, and governance.* A common practice in public talk processes is to ask participants to report the results of their deliberation to elected officials. Yet if the process does not include a way to establish trust and mutuality between citizens and government, it will fall short of helping them work together more effectively. Some engagement processes include ways to capture themes and convey them to public officials. Identifying areas of common ground among members of the public can be especially

useful to legislators who are looking for ways to reframe adversarial public policy debates. But the more effective input processes go one step further: they involve the policymakers as participants on an equal basis in the dialogue.

Democratic conversation between citizens and government has always been central to the ideal (if not practice) of democracy. A current-day example is Benjamin Barber's call for "horizontal conversations among citizens rather than the more usual vertical conversation typical of communication between citizens and elites."[35] This type of process makes it more likely that the input will be meaningful to officials, and thus acted on. It creates a context of reciprocity and relationship building that makes for a nonthreatening way for public officials to reevaluate their own perspectives on policy issues, and for citizens to have their voices heard in a more meaningful way. In Oklahoma, the League of Women Voters and several other organizations organized a statewide study circle program on criminal justice and corrections. The study circles occurred in thirteen communities across the state and included state legislators. The involvement of legislators in the deliberative dialogue helped break a long-standing deadlock on corrections policy and helped create a radical revision of the criminal justice system.[36]

The full engagement of citizens goes beyond problem solving and input to shared governance. This can happen when the process involves public officials from the outset, as full partners in the organizing process and in the dialogue, with a commitment to sharing decision making. This differs significantly from mere input. First, it provides a way for citizens and officials to work together in the day-to-day activities and decisions of governing, not just when there is a crisis or a deadlock. Second, it provides ways to envision a different practice of politics.

Political scientist Archon Fung and sociologist Erik Olin Wright have examined the use of deliberative processes that include residents and public officials in solving specific, tangible problems. They see what they call "empowered deliberative democracy" as leading to better outcomes than those that would emerge in more typical top-down situations, and to increased and more diverse citizen participation.[37] In another example, a community-wide study circle program in Decatur, Georgia, included the city commission as part of the organizing process from the very beginning. The circles produced over 400 recommendations for a range of community problems, many of which were acted on by city government. In a research study prepared for the Kettering Foundation, John Gastil and Todd Kelshaw noted that the Decatur study circle process created what they termed "collaborative deliberation," which occurs "when citizen leaders and policymakers are both familiar with the practice of deliberation, and they co-create a public space for talking about the public's problems." They hypothesized that of all the kinds of processes for bringing together citizens and officeholders, this "collaborative form of deliberation may be the most fruitful in the long run because we suspect that it tends to transform the way citizens and officeholders practice politics."[38]

10. *Create ongoing processes, not isolated events.* It seems inconceivable that any public engagement process could meet ambitious goals in a single two- or three-hour session. Nevertheless, organizers of many public engagement processes often ask people to do just that. When SCRC first began advising communities on how to organize deliberative dialogue, we encouraged local organizers of study circles to plan one-time events. We did this because a single event takes less work, time, and expense to organize than does a series of meetings. Local organizers also worried that most people would not commit to more than one meeting.

Our approach changed in 1993 when study circle organizers began calling for a more comprehensive approach to address the challenges of racism and race relations. They told us that their communities could not make significant progress on difficult public issues such as racism and race relations, education, or crime in a single, brief meeting. People who wanted to learn a little more about an issue might be content with meeting once, but those who were interested in effecting meaningful change were prepared to commit to a more thorough process. People found it difficult to move toward solutions until they had experienced many of the dynamics inherent in deliberative dialogue described here.

There is, of course, a trade-off between the time commitment a process calls for and the number of people who will participate. Lack of time is a major barrier to participation in any civic activity.[39] People are less likely to commit to taking part in long, drawn-out processes. Ideally, the time should be divided into at least three or four separate meetings over a period of several weeks. This format feels natural to participants because it mirrors the way people approach public issues in informal settings. It allows time for reflection. As Richard Harwood notes, in their everyday conversations, "people reach closure on their concerns as talk evolves over time."[40] Between weekly sessions, study circles encourage participants to talk informally about the issue with friends, family members, co-workers and others (keeping confidential the identity of who said what within the study circle), and to pay attention to how the issue is playing out in the news and in their community. A broader range of insights is thus introduced to the circle and throughout the community.

The Marriage of Community Organizing and Deliberative Dialogue

Many public talk processes concentrate on the quality of the conversation itself, but few have concentrated on finding cost-effective and sustainable ways to bring large numbers of people to the table, or have aspired to explicitly connect the talk to change in the larger community. Both of these aims are critical if a deliberative dialogue process is to lead to meaningful civic engagement. Civic engagement processes (in particular, those that rely on some form of public talk) must address two essential questions: who should be in the conversation

and how will the talk connect to action and change? Our answers to these questions are based on what we have learned from study circle organizers and participants in hundreds of communities across the United States.

The short answer to the question of *who* should be in the conversation is everyone. This comes directly from a vision of participatory democracy, in which no one's voice can take the place of—or fully represent—someone else's voice. Neither can anyone experience engagement on behalf of someone else. The fulfillment and impact that come from making connections with other community members and the community as a whole cannot be delegated or experienced vicariously. This answer also proceeds from the reality of what it takes to find lasting solutions to public problems—and to implement them. For most public issues, progress can be made only when large numbers of ordinary people bring their voices, including their ideas, their passions, and their energy, to addressing them.

Although, admittedly, no one has (yet) literally engaged an entire community, many community coalitions have involved hundreds and sometimes thousands of people from every background and way of life. Some have succeeded in building an infrastructure for engagement that continues to enlarge and diversify the circle of participation. In working with these groups, we have observed what works best in creating large-scale engagement processes, and we have documented and disseminated information about those practices.[41] While nothing this complex can be condensed into an off-the-shelf model, we have developed principles, guidelines, questions, and templates for each stage of organizing, all of which we are continuously refining.[42]

Those within the civic field increasingly recognize that individuals are more likely to take part in public life when they are recruited by people whom they know and trust.[43] It follows that successful large-scale civic engagement processes require strong, diverse coalitions of community groups and individuals dedicated to bringing community members to the table for meaningful engagement. No single organization or institution acting on its own can mobilize the whole community.

Effective recruitment is enhanced when the galvanizing issue is of concern to all kinds of people and draws the participation and sponsorship of a broad array of community institutions and individuals. About half of all communities with which we work have begun a large-scale engagement process around the issue of racism and race relations. Because racial divides and inequities underlie so many other public issues, and because effective multiracial civic networks are absent in most communities, starting with this issue helps lay the groundwork for civic engagement on a whole range of issues.[44] Education reform, criminal corrections, neighborhood issues, and community police relationships are among the other issues that communities have addressed.

The need to engage the whole community leads directly to the question: how will the talk connect to action and change? We have found that only by making explicit connections among deliberative dialogue, action, and change

is it possible to mobilize large numbers of people. When people call us to ask about study circles, most are not calling to say that they want to improve public life or enhance deliberative democracy. They are calling because they want to engage people in their community around solving or addressing a particular issue. Very few people will take the time to get engaged in a structured public conversation or any other engagement process unless they believe there is a strong possibility that their efforts will lead to tangible results. Without intentional connection to change, engagement loses its meaning.

Table 1 provides a framework for thinking about how community-wide deliberative dialogue leads to many different forms of action and change.

We have found that a process of deliberative dialogue that aspires to engage the whole community must do the following: provide opportunities to consider various kinds of action and change; provide ways for people to see themselves as actors in the community; make clear (from the outset of organizing) that the community-wide dialogue is aimed at action and change; provide explicit connections to change processes and institutions; validate action and change at individual, group, institutional, and whole-community levels; and give people a wide variety of possibilities for involvement so that they can become engaged in change processes as their interest and time allow.

Conclusion

The movement to strengthen democracy and civic life is searching for ways to expand and deepen civic engagement. A growing number of civic engagement processes include some form of public talk. In this article we have described what we have learned about public talk that is rooted in a vision of strong, participatory democracy. Our response to the key question of "Who should be in the conversation?" is *everyone.* That answer (and our literal, if ultimate, goal) has translated into a search for processes and principles that will bring large numbers of people into a diverse, democratic conversation that is an ongoing part of public life. To welcome everyone, such a conversation must be intentionally linked to all kinds and levels of action and change.

We maintain that two unique marriages are essential to creating public talk that aims to engage the whole community. First, dialogue and deliberation as usually understood need to be combined. This *deliberative dialogue* creates a more holistic form of communication that acknowledges the importance of building community connections and of collective action and shared work. Second, community organizing and deliberative dialogue must be combined in an effort to bring everyone to the table and to create a true public context for public conversation.

We believe that deliberative dialogue that engages the whole community can further the goals of the larger civic movement and hope that this article will spark a conversation among practitioners and theorists about the kind of talk that democracy needs. In concert with e.ThePeople, an Internet-based

Table 1. Action and Change in Study Circle Programs

Kind of Change	How Does It Happen?	Example
Changes in individual behavior and attitudes	Better understanding of the issues and of one another inspires people to "make a difference."	A participant in a community-wide program on racism decides never again to let racist remarks go by without a comment.
New relationships and networks	Trust and understanding develop between participants in the dialogue.	Following study circles on community-police relationships, young people and police officers hold weekly meetings.
New working collaborations	Individuals and organizations develop new relationships and new ideas for solutions.	After study circles on neighborhood issues, residents, police officers, and mental health advocates create an emergency team to help mentally ill people who wander the streets.
Institutional changes	Leaders and members of an institution gain new insights in study circles that lead to changes within the institution and in the larger community.	After doing study circles on race, leaders of several banks work with others to improve banking services to communities of color.
Changes in public policy	Public officials help organize study circles and pledge to work with citizens to implement action ideas. or Public officials take part in the organizing *and* dialogue and gain new insights that have an impact on their policymaking. or	Following study circles on education, participants develop a plan to close the gap in achievement between the races. The school board—a leading organizer of the circles—funds the plan and helps carry it out. After participating in study circles, a school superintendent creates

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Kind of Change	How Does It Happen?	Example
	Information from the study circles is collected and reported to decision makers.	new policies to involve parents in the district's schools. A report from study circles on growth and sprawl is turned over to the planning board, which uses this information to help shape the town's strategic plan.
Changes in community dynamics	Many hundreds of people take part in study circles. Once there is a "critical mass" of people who have a new understanding of issues and of one another, their capacity for community work increases.	Study circles on race relations happen in a community over years. In all kinds of settings, public meetings begin to operate according to study circle principles. People learn to work together across differences and feel a stronger sense of community.
Changes in a community's public life	Once people see the benefits to action of large-scale dialogue, they make it an ongoing part of how their community works.	After a round of study circles on education, the school district decides to use study circles routinely to involve citizens in creating and implementing its annual school-improvement plan.

public forum operated by the Democracy Project, SCRC will be hosting a Democratic Renewal eConference to explore further ways of strengthening democracy through civic engagement. More information can be found on the Web site www.studycircles.org.

Notes

1. Yankelovich, D. *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, provides a very useful overview of the many uses of dialogue.

2. Mathews, D. "Dialogue and Deliberation: 'Meaning Making' Is Essential to Decision Making." *Connections,* Dec. 1998, *9*(2), pp. 24–27.

3. We believe that when you combine these two marriages, it provides a practical set of solutions that address some of the dilemmas posed in Lynn Sanders' cogent critique of deliberation. She notes that deliberation as it is often idealized or practiced excludes many voices and perspectives. See Sanders, L. M. "Against Deliberation." *Political Theory,* 1997, *25,* 347–376.

4. Barber, B. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. In *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1998, Barber clarifies notions of civil society.

5. Guinier, L. *Lift Every Voice: Turning a Civil Rights Setback into a New Vision of Social Justice.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998. See also Guinier, L. "What Is Democracy?" Speech to the Funders' Committee on Citizen Participation, Aug. 1997. Others who have articulated this vision of democracy are Boyte, H. C., and Kari, N. N. *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996; Shumer, S. M., and Pitkin, H. F. "On Participation." *Democracy,* Fall 1982, 2(4), 43–54; Wiebe, R. H. *Self Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, especially pp. 251–252; Young, I. M. "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy." In S. Behabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 120–135.

6. In 1999, the League of Women Voters of the United States commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Tarrance Group to conduct a multiphase project on civic participation. The report on the project, based on one-on-one interviews with local activists, small-group interviews with citizens in four cities around the country, and a national survey, is available at www.lwv.org/elibrary/pub/cp_survey/cp_1.html. See also Michael X. Delli Carpini's comments in "The State of the Movement." *National Civic Review: Making Citizen Democracy Work,* Summer 2000, *89*(2), 122–126.

7. Some of the sources we found particularly helpful in considering the key elements of deliberative democratic dialogue that lead to action and change are Barber (1984), pp. 173–198; Gastil, J. *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy Through Deliberative Elections.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; Harwood, R., Perry, M., and Schmitt, W. *Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns.* Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 1993; Harwood, R., Scully, P., and Dennis, K. *Will Any Kind of Talk Do? Moving from Personal Concerns to Public Life.* Dayton: Kettering Foundation and The Harwood Group, 1996; Mathews, D. *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994; Mathews, D., and McAfee, N. *Making Choices Together: The Power of Public Deliberation.* Dayton: Kettering Foundation, 2000; Yankelovich (1999); and Young (1996).

8. Young (1996), pp. 123–124.

9. Young (1996), p. 129, calls for a "communicative democracy" that, in addition to critical argument, values "greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling." She also makes a case for "nonlinguistic gestures that bring people together warmly . . . smiles, handshakes, hugs, the giving and taking of food and drink."

10. Yankelovich (1999), p. 136.

11. Yankelovich (1999), pp. 43–44, and Barber (1984), pp. 175–176, emphasize the importance of empathetic listening.

12. Eliasoph, N. *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 10, 231, describes the extreme difficulty that people have creating "contexts for political conversation in everyday life." She also makes the case that well-designed processes and lines of questioning make it possible for hitherto inactive citizens to engage in meaningful political discussion.

13. Harwood, Scully, and Dennis (1996), p. 9.

14. Harwood, Scully, and Dennis (1996), p. 4.

15. Leighninger, M., Flavin-McDonald, C., and Ghandour, R. *Building Strong Neighborhoods: A Study Circle Guide for Public Dialogue and Community Problem Solving.* Pomfret, Conn.: Topsfield Foundation, 1998.

16. Guinier (1998), p. 307.

17. Archie, M., and Terry, H. D. *Protecting Communities, Serving the Public: Police and Residents Building Relationships to Work Together.* Pomfret, Conn.: Topsfield Foundation, 2000.

18. Harwood, Scully, and Dennis (1996), p. 6. Emphasis in the original.

19. Gastil, J. *Democracy in Small Groups: Participation, Decision Making & Communication.* Philadelphia: New Society, 1993, p. 27.

20. Scully, P., and Leighninger, M. *Changing Faces, Changing Communities: Immigration & Race, Jobs, Schools, and Language Differences* (2nd ed.). Pomfret, Conn.: Topsfield Foundation, 1998.

21. Gastil (2000), p. 22.

22. Mathews and McAfee (2000), p. 4.

23. Yankelovich (1999), p. 24, discounts the importance of giving people technical information. "The premise that the health of our democracy depends on a well-informed public is one of those unexamined pieties that professionals mouth without ever observing close-up how people really make the judgments on which our society does depend."

24. Harwood, Perry, and Schmitt (1993), p. 44.

25. Barber (1984), p. 176.

26. Harwood, Scully, and Dennis (1996), pp. 17–18.

27. Yankelovich (1999), p. 57, notes that "[e]ven when the sole purpose of a dialogue is to reach a decision, the dialogue part of the process should precede the decision-making part."

28. Yankelovich (1999), p. 179.

29. Yankelovich (1999), p. 179.

30. See Fishkin, J. S. *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991; Levine, P. *The New Progressive Era: Toward a Fair and Deliberative Democracy.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000; Lukensmeyer, C., and Goldman, J. P. *A National Townhall: Bringing Citizens Together Through Interactive Video Teleconferencing.* Washington, D.C.: The Tides Center/Americans Discuss Social Security, 1999; The Jefferson Center. *The Citizen Jury: Effective Public Participation.* Minneapolis: Jefferson Center for New Democratic Processes, 1999.

31. Briand, M. *Practical Politics: Five Principles for a Community That Works.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999, pp. 222–223, n. 2.

32. *Study Circles; Sharing Our Experiences: Engaging Residents in Family Strengthening Efforts: Des Moines, Indianapolis, and Seattle.* A report of the Technical Assistance Resource Center for the Making Connections Initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Aug. 2000.

33. Flavin-McDonald, C. *Study Circles on Racism & Race Relations: Year 1, 1997: A Report on the Focus Groups.* Pomfret, Conn.: Study Circles Resource Center/YWCA of New Castle County, 1998.

34. *Toward Competent Communities: Best Practices for Producing Community-Wide Study Circles.* Lexington, Mass.: Roberts & Kay, 2000, chap. 9.

35. Barber (1998), p. 85.

36. "Balancing Justice in Oklahoma." *Focus on Study Circles,* Winter 1997, *8*(1). See also Mutchler, S. E., and Pan, D. T. *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools: Policy Research Report.* Austin: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Sept. 2000. Statewide study circle programs in Oklahoma and Arkansas involved state legislators as part of the deliberative dialogue. Interviews with the legislators revealed that many benefited from increased access to information; a reality check on policy directions; a way to reevaluate and change their perspectives; a stronger commitment to ongoing work with the public, and a stronger commitment toward policy to support public education.

37. See Fung, A., and Wright, E. O. "Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance." *Politics and Society,* Mar. 2001, *29*(1). Fung and Wright also consider critiques and limits of deliberative democracy.

38. Gastil, J., and Kelshaw, T. "Public Meetings: A Sampler of Deliberative Forums That Bring Officeholders and Citizens Together." Draft report prepared for the Kettering Foundation, May 2000; for other examples and analysis, see Leighninger, M. "Shared Governance." *Public Organization Review* (forthcoming).

39. See note 5.

40. Harwood, Scully, and Dennis (1996), p. 25. This dynamic holds true for most public issues. Commenting on political scientist James Fishkin's 1996 National Issues Convention, Daniel Yankelovich (1999, p. 200, n. 4) argues that the theory of deliberation guiding these types of events is "too rationalistic and short term," and notes that "People rarely change strongly held positions after a few hours of calm, reasonable conversation."

41. Elliott, V., Houlé, K., Kay, S., Nagda, B., and Roberts, R. *What Works: Study Circles in the Real World.* Lexington, Mass.: Roberts & Kay, 2000.

42. Campbell, S. vL., Malick, A., and McCoy, M. L. *Organizing Community-Wide Dialogue for Action and Change.* Pomfret, Conn.: Topsfield Foundation, 2001. [www.studycircles.org/pages/hap.html].

43. In essence, this model is trying to create the new associational forms that Theda Skocpol has envisioned. Skocpol, T. "Advocates Without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life." In T. Skocpol and M. P. Fiorina (eds.), *Civic Engagement in American Democracy.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999, pp. 461–509.

44. This is demonstrated in *Toward Competent Communities* (2000), [www.studycircles.org/pages/best.html].

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