Listening to Strangers: Classroom Discussion in Democratic Education

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Background/Context: *The literature on classroom discussion often undercuts itself by treating discussion only as an instructional method, confining its role to the instrumental. Although discussion does serve as an effective means to other curricular ends (teaching with discussion), the capable practice of discussion can also be considered a curriculum objective in its own right (teaching for discussion). The latter is justified on the grounds that listening and speaking to what Danielle Allen called "strangers" about powerful ideas and public problems is crucial to democratic citizen formation; indeed, it defines democracy, signaling a citizen's coming of age while at the same time creating the public sphere that democracy requires—a space where political argument and action flourish.*

Purpose /Focus of Study: *The author outlines a discursive approach to the cultivation of enlightened political engagement in schools. He argues that schools are the best available sites for this project because they have the key assets: diverse schoolmates (more or less), problems (both academic and social), "strangers" (schoolmates who are not friends or family), and curriculum and instruction (schools are intentionally educative places). Ambitious classroom discussion models—for example, seminars and deliberations—can mobilize these assets; but new habits, especially those that build equity and trust, are needed.*

Setting: *Two empirical cases of classroom discussion ground the argument in classroom practice. In one, high school students deliberate whether physician-assisted suicide should be legalized in their state. In the other, suburban middle school students conduct a seminar on Howard Fast's novel of the American revolution,* April Morning.

Research Design: *This is an analytic essay/argument.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *Schools in societies with democratic ideals are obligated to cultivate enlightened and engaged citizens. Helping young people form the habits of listening to strangers, at that very public place called school, should advance this work.*

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Citizens have powers.... Strangers are the best source.
(Allen, 2004, pp. 167–168)

Eighth-grade students in a suburban Denver public middle school are reading Howard Fast's *April Morning*, a novel about the American Revolution and the early skirmish at Lexington. Beyond reading it, they are having a series of seminars on the book. In this one, they are comparing developmental passages: the coming-of-age of the book's young protagonist, 15-year-old Adam Cooper, and the coming-of-age of the young American nation. A disagreement emerges on the question of the transition from teenager to adult. Does that happen when teens rebel against their parents/England or when they have to decide how to govern themselves following the struggle for independence—whether the United States' or their own? The argument is revealing. The discussants are the same age as Adam. They are growing, experiencing their own skirmishes, and more.

At another public school, a high school in downtown Denver, a different sort of argument is orchestrated. Students in Grades 11 and 12 are discussing not a story, but a policy question facing the people of Colorado: Should physician-assisted suicide be legal? They have read a thick packet of background reports on the controversy and are holding their first discussion on the policy question before them: Not is physician-assisted suicide right or wrong, but should the practice be legal in Colorado for those who choose it? A good disagreement develops in this setting, too. The first student to speak doubts that doctors can be trusted with such a law. Won't they "kill off" people they don't like, she asks?

The literature on classroom discussion, with some exceptions, has not cared much about purpose. This may be due to its habitual treatment of classroom discussion as an instructional method—a means—thereby confining discussion's role to the strategic and instrumental. On this account, discussion is a lively method by which curriculum objectives such as literary interpretation, historical understanding, and mathematical problem-solving might be achieved. Although discussion does serve as a means to other ends (teaching *with* discussion), the capable practice of discussion can be considered a curriculum objective in its own right (teaching *for* discussion).

Considering the multiple purposes of classroom discussion, we can draw three distinctions. The first is the one just now introduced between discussion as an instructional strategy and a curriculum objective (Parker & Hess, 2001). This distinction has us ask not only how discussion can enable the learning of other things but also how the ability and disposition to discuss are themselves legitimate things to learn. The second is

between two purposes, both political: discussion for the purpose of democratic enlightenment (knowing) and discussion for the purpose of democratic engagement (doing). Both are directly tied to public will formation and self-government (Parker, 2008). The third distinction is between two classroom discussion models: *seminar*, in which the purpose is democratic enlightenment, and *deliberation*, in which the purpose is democratic engagement. The middle-school discussion is a seminar, the high-school discussion a deliberation. The two discursive forms in tandem can fertilize the mind and cultivate democratic political community—at least this is their potential and what makes them interesting and worth the trouble (Parker, 2006).

Schooling and teaching contribute to political socialization, of course (Gutmann, 1999; Hahn, 1998). I argue here that classroom discussion contributes a particular kind of deliberate political socialization. This kind is democratically enlightening as well as politically engaging; it educates young people in the liberal arts of speaking and listening to other members of the democratic public—people with whom they may have little in common and whom they may not like but with whom, nonetheless, they are politically joined. This is the heterogeneous "we the people" who are citizens and comrades—not a species or an identity group, not *homo sapiens* or an *ethnos,* but a *demos.* This idea of civic partnership, introduced in ancient political theory and reconstructed in the 17th century by Hobbes, was then specified by Jefferson (1787/1954), who wrote that "the people themselves are [government's] only safe depositories" and, therefore, that "influence over government must be shared among all the people" (pp. 148–149). The upshot is that a society aspiring to political community of this kind needs an education system that inducts young people into a civic culture of speaking and listening to people they might not know or like, whose behavior and beliefs they may not warm to, with whom they may be unequally related due to histories of discrimination and servitude, and with whom they may have no occasion otherwise to be in discussion, or even in the same room, but with whom they must be involved in political discussions—governance—on the public's problems.

In this article, I concentrate on the democratic possibilities of classroom discussion itself. My thesis is that classroom seminars and deliberations can play a central role in an education that aims to prepare students for, and actually engages them in, what Danielle Allen (2004) called "talking to strangers." The key advantage that a program of classroom discussion affords, I will argue, is that these strangers are not only confined to the imagination as they are when the *polis*—the entire self-determining political community or nation—is conjured; rather, they are, to a meaningful extent, right there on site. The student body is bodily present

(Miller-Lane, 2005). By "to a meaningful extent," I mean to signal the political and pedagogical possibilities of classroom discussion in actually existing schools that are, no doubt, unequal because of segregation by race and class. This article is situated, then, in a progressive discourse of what actually existing schools might accomplish as distinct from a resigned discourse of what they cannot.

My plan is to elaborate the two examples of classroom discussion introduced in the opening paragraphs, then to follow that with three sections in which I detail Allen's contribution, interpret seminar and deliberation in light of her work, and offer suggestions for listening to strangers within seminars and deliberations. In addition to Allen, I rely on Dewey and Habermas—not their differences, but their convergence around a communicative discourse theory of democratic citizenship.

SEMINAR AND DELIBERATION

There are twenty-eight 14- and 15-year-old students in the seminar on *April Morning*. They are seated in one large circle. Their teacher reviews some of the problems and progress made in the prior two seminars on this book and then reads from the chalkboard this seminar's opening question: How does Adam's coming of age compare to that of the nation? She reminds students of the five seminar "expectations" that have been established so far: Don't raise hands, listen and build on one another's comments, invite others into the discussion, support opinions by referring to passages in the book, and tie what you know about the history of the Revolution to your interpretation of the book. Later, she reflects, "The seminar allows the opportunity for 30 individuals who have all prepared on the same essential questions to draw out deeper meaning in the text. When you have 30 minds working together, it works better than when you just have one" (Miller & Singleton, 1997, video marker 0.21). This teacher has worked with her students on seminar skills, procedures, and goals. Consequently, by this point, she can sit outside the circle and watch the students, the norms, and the opening question together do the work of seminar. Next is an excerpt at the point at which a disagreement arises over the coming-of-age question. At issue is whether rebellion or self-government marks the passage to adulthood:

> *Middle School 1 (Asian male):* I don't think they became adults until actually after or near the end of the war because *then* they had to think of how they were going to govern themselves . . . since now they were out of Britain's rule and they didn't have a government clearly established yet, and they didn't know what

they were going to do. They had to start thinking about their country.

MS2 (White female): (Agreeing) I think they really haven't become adult yet. They are working toward that and trying to think of better ways to fight. They're still rebelling against King George and the British. They won't ever become adult until they lay down the government of their country and stuff like that, later on, many years later.

MS3 (White female): (Disagreeing) But the fact that they *realized* that they were, that what the king was doing was wrong, was part of them becoming adults. Because they found out that they didn't like something and they acted on it. So I think that's part of becoming adult.

MS2: Well, I think that's *part* of becoming adult. But that's like what a teenager would do. If a teenager thought their curfew was too early, they would rebel against their parents. That's kind of what the country was doing. And then later on they'll become more mature and adult like.

MS3: So you're saying that it's right in between?

MS2: Yeah, it's during the teenage years. (Miller & Singleton, 0.27–0.28)

This short excerpt reveals a disagreement on the meaning of adulthood. One interpretation is set alongside another, and students bring criteria to bear from both the text and from their own experience. The skirmish at Lexington did not qualify as adult behavior for the boy and first girl because "they are still rebelling." Not until the colonists begin the task of building a postrebellion government (a constitution, a social contract) do they cross the line from teenager to adult. Indeed, this interpretation sits well with many adults (teachers and student-teachers) with whom I have examined this excerpt. They believe, from their own experience and that of their friends, and from their reading of history, that rebellions may end one relationship but do not constitute another.

Also, we see that the disagreement between the two girls is one that their relationship seems barely able to contain, as revealed in the final two statements: "So you're saying that it's right in between [being a teenager and an adult]?" asks MS3, perhaps hoping for, and suggesting,

more common ground than actually exists. "No" is what MS2 means to say in response. It's not "in between" teenager and adult. "It's during the teenage years." She had made her position clear a few moments earlier: Like teenagers, the colonists were rebelling. They hadn't become adults yet, and they wouldn't "until they lay down the government of their country . . . many years later." "Yeah," she demurs, instead of "No." But then she restates clearly: "It's during the teenage years."

Let's turn to the deliberative example, in which students are trying to decide on a policy for a public controversy. Like a seminar, a deliberation is a discussion in which several viewpoints are set alongside one another so that, as Bridges (1979) said, "our own view of things is challenged by those of others" (p. 50). Unlike the seminar, however, the deliberative discussion is geared toward making a decision about what to do—about which alternative or hybrid of two or three is the fairest and most workable as a policy that will be binding on all. In the case of physician-assisted suicide (PAS), the question in this class is whether it should be permitted by law. This experienced discussion leader, like the seminar leader, has prepared students for the discussion. They have read a good deal of background material, including data from countries that allow PAS, and she painstakingly clarifies norms for the discussion. The task before them, she explains, is to reach a "deeper understanding of the issue," and the method is to have a "best-case fair hearing of competing or differing points of view" (Miller & Singleton, 1997, 1.7). In this way, she slows the movement toward decision, directing students in a more careful consideration of the problem and a "fair hearing" of alternative solutions. The aim of the discussion, however, remains decision-making, not enriched understanding for its own sake. Accordingly, the discussion is a deliberation, not a seminar. This is a distinction, despite all the overlap, that rests on the *purpose* of speaking and listening. I return to this point later.

The norms, which she elicits from students as she asks them to reflect on prior discussions, are posted on the chalkboard: Hear all sides equally, listen well enough to respond and build off one another's ideas, back up opinions with reasons, and speak one at a time. During the discussion, the teacher takes special care to help participants weigh each alternative thoroughly. "Let's think about this reason some more," she says often. "Who has a different reason why this might or might not be a good thing to do?" To get the discussion started, she asks for someone to state a good reason for or against legalizing PAS in Colorado. A Latina girl volunteers that she is against it because it could lead to abuses.

> *High School 1 (Latina female):* I for one am against PAS because I believe it could lead to abuses. And I think it's not fair to society

> to say that some terminally ill people can take their life when doctors could just go unplug some people from life support because it costs too much to keep them in hospitals or whatever. I don't think it's right to do that to society. . . . I think that doctors can take advantage of the fact that they can do this, that they can kill off people, and I think that they'll turn around and say we don't want these people because they don't look right or whatever and just go off and kill them off, and I just don't think that's fair.
>
> *HS2 (African American female):* What do you mean that they'll try to get rid of someone by pulling the plug. Isn't that up to the person who is terminally ill?
>
> *HS1:* It should be, but not always. It could lead to the fact that doctors could just do what they wanted.
>
> *HS3 (White female):* The right to decide that you want PAS is a right for *you* to decide. The doctor doesn't decide that and say, you know, you're costing too much money and we're going to pull the plug. It's a right for you to decide.
>
> *HS1:* I understand. But it could lead to that. I'm sure now it's not that way, but in the future it could . . .
>
> *HS4 (African American male):* I don't believe in it. . . . Life is precious and it is given to us by God and no one should decide when to end your suffering. . . . [The physician] would be helping them murder themselves. . . . Why take life when life is given to us? (Miller & Singleton, 1997, 1.16–17, 1.24–25).

The teacher points out the value tension that has emerged between human life and individuals' freedom to choose. Additionally, she names and clarifies the "slippery slope" argument raised by the first speaker: A well-intentioned action taken today can have unintended negative consequences down the road. "Let's stick with this [slippery-slope argument] a little longer," she prompts after several exchanges, and asks what material from the background reading might apply. "What did you read that would support the argument that abuses will surely come and the law will be used unequally?" One boy cites statistics from the Netherlands, where PAS is legal, on the number of lives that were terminated without request.

Another adds that dying patients have sometimes felt pressured to end their lives to save money for their families.

LISTENING TO STRANGERS

What kind of political training is this? Such a question requires that we first ask who these discussants are to one another. Certainly they are classmates: students assigned to the same instructional group by school administrators and the jumble of social forces they negotiate—neighborhood schools and desegregation law, school funding inequities, immigration, racism, multiculturalism, and so forth. But although students are, as classmates, "thrown" together bureaucratically by an administrative calculus, they are acquaintances, too (more or less). They have been together in classroom and school settings (cafeterias, ball fields, bathrooms, hallways) for some time; they have some knowledge of one another, or believe they do. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), *acquaintance* is "personal knowledge; knowledge of a person or thing gained by intercourse or experience, which is more than mere recognition, and less than familiarity or intimacy." The accompanying usage example given in the OED emphasizes the definition's final clause. It is from O'Neill's 1922 play *Anna Christie*: "Are you trying to kid me? Proposing—to me—for Gawd's sake!—on such short acquaintance?" On this understanding, some students will be less than acquaintances, perhaps not even recognizing one another, and others may be more: siblings or cousins, boyfriends and girlfriends, and "best friends."

Much is to be gained, however, by noticing the *lack* of familiarity and intimacy that comes with the territory of public schooling. This is why the public school—the common school—can be seen to be the best available site for democratic political education. There are two reasons, and both stem from the fact that a school is not a private place, like our homes, but a public, civic place. First, this public arena is, by definition, a diverse congregation, or, less elegantly (and less theistically), a jumble. Some schools are more a jumble than others, but all are to some meaningful extent. (Nearly as antidemocratic as segregationist practices are those that fail to recognize whatever diversity is present.) Boys and girls are both there. Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists may be there together. There are racial and class differences, and immigrants from the world over. This buzzing variety does not exist at home, church, temple, or mosque. It exists in places where people who come from numerous private worlds and social positions are thrown together for a purpose, such as schooling.

Of course, the diversity of the student body in any school is

circumscribed by the segregated—and now resegregated (Fry, 2007)—U.S. society at large. U.S. schools are mirrors of a segregated society, not autonomous islands; they express the asymmetries that are inscribed in the social system generally—inequalities of recognition and respect, on the one hand, and of distribution of material resources on the other. Although public schools may be more diverse than most other social spaces in the student's life, the "buzzing variety" within them is not what it could be. (Imagine, for example, if they were random samples of the society at large.) Poor children do not generally go to school with affluent children, and Blacks and Whites do not typically attend together. Orfield (2001) found that Whites on average attend schools where less than 20% of the students are from all other racial and ethnic groups combined. Blacks and Latinos on average attend schools with 54% students of their own group.[1]

The second reason that schools may be the best available sites for democratic political education is that, owing to the congregation of students at school, there are inevitably "the problems of living together" at school (Dewey, 1916/1985, p. 200). These are mutual, collective concerns—not "mine" or "yours," but "ours." There are mainly two kinds of problems at school: social and academic. Social problems arise over resources, policies, classroom assignments, injustices and inequalities, and the friction of interaction itself: egos and social positions rubbing up against one another in discursive space. Academic problems are at the core of each discipline, and expertise in a subject is defined largely by one's knowledge of them. A strong curriculum plunges students into them in pedagogically measured ways.

In tandem, diversity and problems are the two key assets for democratic political education. For Dewey (1916/1985), "progress" comes "through wider relationships," and isolation stunts growth. But I want to highlight the democratic potential not only of the presence of these two assets but also of the relative lack of *acquaintance*—the OED's "familiarity or intimacy"—among students, even among those similarly positioned. This lack, I propose, can be seen as a third asset. Allen's (2004) work lends a good deal of help. What Dewey (1916/1985) named "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 93), Allen, who follows Ralph Ellison, Hannah Arendt, and Aristotle rather than Dewey, named "political friendship" (p. 165).

POLITICAL FRIENDSHIP

Politics is many things, but mainly the activity surrounding the power to govern: "getting it, keeping it, opposing it, subverting it, squandering it,

and so on" (Frazer, 2007 p. 250). Typically, it involves relating to—persuading, mobilizing—people we don't know well, if at all. Allen (2004) called these fellow citizens not acquaintances, but, sharpening the point, "strangers," and argued that "political friendship" among them is the particular "mode of citizenship" needed for our times (p. 165). Political friendship is based not on knowledge, familiarity, or intimacy, for "one doesn't even have to like one's fellow citizens in order to act toward them as a political friend" (p. 140). Were liking one another necessary, democracy would be impossible. This matters, because the kind of relationship *citizens* need, as distinct from ordinary friendship based on emotional closeness, occurs at what Allen called "the midway point between acquiescence and domination" (p.121). Equity, then, is political friendship's core, not affinity or intimacy. We arrive back at a more interesting and powerful understanding of the heterogeneous "we the people"—citizens who don't know one another but who are and must be, if shared problems are to be addressed and solved, equal before the law and one another's civic regard. They are bound together, not culturally so much as politically, by the problems they face in common.

Political friendship rests not on equity alone but also on political trust. Allen's (2004) concern is that *distrust makes impossible any serious sense of solidarity among citizens.* Distrust "paralyzes democracy," she argued, because citizens feel insecure with one another. "Trust in one's fellow citizens consists in the belief, simply, that one is safe with them" (p. xvi). There is a cognitive dimension to trust: One believes that one's own vulnerabilities won't be exploited. There is an emotional dimension, too: One feels unafraid though vulnerable before one's fellow citizens. Assuming that everyone feels vulnerable from time to time (interpersonal vulnerability) and that members of historically oppressed groups feel vulnerable nearly all the time (intergroup, subordinate-status vulnerability), then political trust is elemental, along with equity, in political friendship.

Habits of political trust are as long in formation as habits of political distrust are long enduring. Allen displays these in the vivid historical centerpiece of her work, the "battle of Little Rock," the events surrounding the desegregation of Central High School in September 1957. On her account, the events, images, and personal sacrifices of that month were a mirror held up to the American public sphere, and the consequence of that reflection was a reconstitution of the United States—figuratively, the inauguration of a second constitution. The public habits of the *ancien régime* had been exposed; White majority tyranny was revealed more viscerally to a wider audience. White women were seen cursing the 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, the sacrificial student, while White men stood

vigilant over the threatened White spaces—the school, but also the bus stop where Elizabeth waited to return home after being refused entry. With these images in mind, equity and trust become utopian goals and political friendship an unapproachable ideal.

But Allen finds an opening. Her strategy is to jettison any hope or desire for "oneness" as an aspect of, or a beacon for, "we the people." The images from Little Rock in 1957 displayed "the two-ness of citizenship" (p. 13) in the United States and put to rest the illusion of oneness (as in the Pledge's "one nation . . . indivisible"). Though Whites and Blacks were members of the same democracy, "each was expert in a different etiquette of citizenship: dominance on the one hand and acquiescence on the other" (p. 13). Allen's "talking to strangers," then, rests not on an idealization of unanimity, not even consensus, for that scheme exaggerates equality while requiring repression of emotion and suppression of facts. It "idealizes the wrong thing," she writes, "and fails to establish evaluative criteria for a crucial democratic practice—the attempt to generate trust out of distrust" (p. 85).

Wholeness is the metaphor that Allen substitutes for oneness. No dictionary, she noted, treats "one" as a synonym for wholeness; nowhere does "one" mean full, total, complete, all. In the social imaginary of "we the people," wholeness carves out a space for imagining a political solidarity that falls at that midway point between acquiescence and domination, where equity and trust among strangers might coexist. To mature as a citizen—to claim one's "majority"[2]—one needs to talk with the strangers with whom one has been thrown into the polity. Talk about what? About those problems of living together that actually require conjoint attention: Health, safety, education, work, and membership (e.g., immigration policy) are the classic examples. Under the United States' "first constitution," so to speak, to claim one's majority as a citizen was both culturally and politically to assimilate into and, thus, acquiesce to, another kind of majority—the White majority. But thereafter, after the illusion of "oneness" had been revealed at Little Rock, to claim one's majority was to practice standing on equal footing with strangers.

LISTENING TO STRANGERS AT SCHOOL

What kind of work can seminars and deliberations in school do for the project of cultivating political friendship among strangers? What kind of role can they play in advancing this "timely mode of citizenship?" Let's consider this from two angles: the collaborative intellectual and emotional work involved in seminar and deliberation, and its potential for engendering political trust.

Both seminar and deliberation are species of collaborative inquiry, and their desired curricular outcomes—understanding and right action respectively—rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views. They rely just as much on powerful texts. In a seminar, participants together interpret an essay, book, play, or painting, and they speak and listen to *learn*. Seminars encourage students to see the world more deeply and clearly thanks to the selection of the text, the opening question, and the multiple interpretations and experiences that are brought to bear by discussants. Deliberations encourage discussants to think together, with and across their differences, too, but now the discussion is aimed at *deciding*, and the text is a controversial public issue. Discussants are finding, studying, and weighing alternatives in order to decide a course of action—a public policy.

Seminars and deliberations display the distinction between the world-revealing (enlightening) and world-changing (engaging) functions of classroom discussion. When a group seeks understanding together, it works to create, plumb, and clarify meanings and explanations. When it forges a decision, it weighs alternatives and tries to decide among them. Seminars don't try to make material progress in the world, but deliberations do. Deliberations are concerned with action in the world under the always local and often urgent conditions of a public—a "we," a jumble of difference facing a shared problem—needing to make a decision (Parker, 2006).

The work of seminar and deliberation needs to be done *with others* for several reasons. First, the problem—whether understanding or deciding—is shared; accordingly, the decision-making should be shared (the democratic ethos). Second, inquiry is a public matter that, when vigorous, is loaded with open disputation as to who has got it right (the scientific ethos). Third, the array of alternative interpretations (in seminar) and solutions (in deliberation) that a group generates will be broader than one could accomplish working alone (the collaboration ethos). Fourth, within that broader array will be alternatives stemming from social perspectives—and these from social positions—that are more or less different from one's own, thereby developing the participants' social knowledge while contributing to a better solution (the pluralism ethos). All four aspects—democracy, inquiry, collaboration, and pluralism—rely on a decentered and discursive image of political life, what Habermas (1996) called "a decentralized self-governance" (pp. 21–30).

To summarize, seminar and deliberation are discourse platforms that emphasize and express the learning and doing sides of politics, respectively. These are only emphases, for the two overlap. Much is learned in

deliberations (the alternatives must be studied), and much is done in seminars because the work of textual interpretation is carried out in a thick soup of communicative action. Together, seminar and deliberation aim for what we could call *enlightened political engagement* (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Parker, 2003, chapter 3). The knowledge-deepening, evidence-oriented, horizon-broadening functions of seminars on well-selected texts provide an enlightened platform for public decision-making, and vice versa.

PRACTICES OF LISTENING TO STRANGERS

But can equity (political friendship's core) and political trust (its safety net) be nurtured in classroom discussion? The two discourse models in question are pertinent for reasons that by now should be clear. Additionally, both of them operate within defined normative and pedagogic space. Earlier we saw both teachers establish norms for the discussions. They ranged from "listen to and build on one another's comments" and "invite others into the discussion" to "hear all sides equally" and "speak one at a time." This *is* equity and trust education. Obstacles will arise that will frustrate discussants and the most experienced discussion facilitator. There will be both "troubling speech" and "disturbing silence" (Boler, 2004). Speakers and viewpoints will be marginalized, and the myriad difficulties of discussion pedagogy will surface. But these are the problems that require teaching for discussion—making it a curriculum objective in its own right—not abandoning the effort. Framing equity and trust as lessons to be taught and learned places them within the realm of the possible. As Dewey (1916/1985) wrote, "Since a democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education" (p. 93).

Central to teaching for discussion is teaching for listening across difference. Listening deserves to be singled out for several reasons, but a key *political* reason is that democratic community based on Allen's "wholeness" principle requires it. Equitable and trustworthy conjoint living is not only a matter of being heard but also of hearing others. Agency resides in both roles—speaker and listener—and needs to be educated if the necessary habits are to be cultivated. Which habits should be educated and how?

In the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, Thich Nhat Hanh was asked what he would "say" if he had a chance to "speak" to Osama bin Laden. Hanh is the Vietnamese

Buddhist monk with whom Martin Luther King Jr. famously announced his opposition to the Vietnam War in 1966 and whom King then nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize the year after winning it himself. I bring up Hanh here because he is a leading exponent of formal meditation as a practice of relaxed (not clinging to the usual categories) and open-ended (less expectant) listening. His response to his interlocutor:

> If I were given the opportunity. . . ., the first thing I would do is listen. I would try to understand why he had acted in that cruel way. I would try to understand all of the suffering that had led him to violence. It might not be easy to listen in that way, so I would have to remain calm and lucid. I would need several friends with me who are strong in the practice of deep listening, listening without reacting, without judging and blaming. In this way, an atmosphere of support would be created for this person and those connected so that they could share completely and trust that they are really being heard. After listening for some time, we might need to take a break to allow what has been said to enter into our consciousness. Only when we felt calm and lucid would we respond. (Hanh, 2001)

The first thing the monk would do is *not talk*. Even then, listening would be difficult, he imagines, despite the depth and duration of his own training at doing precisely that. Accordingly, he would deploy strategies: remaining calm enough to increase the likelihood of being attentive to what is being said, taking a break to allow what has been heard to be absorbed, and asking friends whose listening he admires to be with him.

This example is extraordinary, but for present purposes, it serves to indicate the role of agency in listening—that a listener (a) needs actually to *do* something and (b) *can* do something to pave the way for a more capacious and genuine hearing.

This is not so much the case when we are having conversations with intimates, of course, which is precisely the point when it comes to cultivating citizenly relations among acquaintances and strangers, where intimacy is neither the bond nor the goal. "A polity will never reach a point where all its citizens have intimate friendships with each other, nor would we want it to," Allen (2004) wrote; citizenship, after all, "is understood not as an emotion but a practice" (p. 156). She then suggested "guidelines" by which a listener might "prepare the way for the generation of trust." Following are three. They may differ from Hanh's (or not); that is the subject of another paper. Hers are specifically interrogative; two are requests the listener makes of the speaker, and one is a distinction she

asks the listener to draw. Each, she said, rests on a commitment to equity and trust.

- Ask whether the speaker has spoken as a political friend.
- Separate a speaker's claims about facts from the principles on which her conclusions are based; assess both.
- Ask who is sacrificing for whom, whether the sacrifices are voluntary and honored; whether they can and will be reciprocated. (p. 158)

These are practices, not promises. Allen called them only "some new habits to try on." Displays of inequality and distrust will continue, and marginalizing speech and silence will persist. But as practices, they encourage agency over resignation and cynicism and make a seedbed in which political friendship might grow among strangers.

Inspired by Hanh's "friends" and Allen's "guidelines," I have experimented with an additional set of listening practices. My contexts are teacher education courses in which new and experienced teachers are learning to facilitate seminars and deliberations, neighborhood meetings where public problems are addressed, and faculty meetings where we are (on the seminar side) interpreting a problem or (on the deliberative side) deciding what to do about it. In the first context, I am mainly teaching these strategies to others, both by explanation and demonstration, and in the other two contexts, I am attempting to "try them on," as Allen said. This particular set of practices aim to allow more listening by reducing the listener's aggression, that is, the speed and vehemence with which the listener's interpretive categories close in on the speaker's statements. Each strategy, then, involves some sacrifice of the listener's comfortable ground. Each is a stance a listener might take in discussion. After Narayan (1988), I call them reciprocity, humility, and caution (Parker, 2006). I will describe them in the first person.

Reciprocity is the stance that ventilates the listener's ego. Like the others, it capitalizes on the two democratic assets that schools afford: diversity and problems. It centrally involves the effort to take the perspective of an other. When I engage this practice, I intentionally privilege the speaker's vantage point and listen knowing that the speaker understands better than I his or her social position, experiences, emotions, and beliefs. This is a powerful move, for it urges me to not become attached to my initial reaction to the speaker's experience.

Humility is the stance that undermines the listener's arrogance. If I am humble while listening, I listen from the point of view that I am most likely missing something—that my understanding is incomplete and the categories that I listen with are probably faulty and, at any rate, not as

tightly woven as they seem. I remind myself that I am an outsider to the speaker's experience, always, and sometimes a cultural outsider, too. There is more that I must learn, and what appears to be a mistake on the part of the speaker would probably make more sense if I had a better grasp of the details, the emotions, the situation, and the speaker's history and social perspective.

Caution is the stance that moderates the listener's discursive speed and recklessness. If I am cautious when listening, I move slowly, taking care not to report every thought that comes to my mind. I engage carefully so that I am not denying or dismissing the validity of the speaker's point of view or manner of talking.

The point of such practices is not to avoid challenging a speaker substantively or disagreeing, for that would infantilize the speaker and prevent the productive kind of discussion for which seminar and deliberation are designed. The point, rather, is to generate a greater degree of equity and the assurance that a speaker's vulnerabilities won't be exploited.

Whether practices or habits of this sort can effectively be taught is another matter. It may well be that attempts to teach such practices inevitably trivialize the profundity of learning to make way for another.[3] It may be, too, that attempts to "try on" such habits only disguise the myriad dominations and acquiescences that are proceeding apace while easing the guilt of the more privileged discussants. On the other hand, would-be listeners require some sort of scaffold, and an education in these practices may prove helpful to that end. I am drawn to Allen's (2004) pragmatism: "We need ideals for improving things that are not yet good enough and will never be perfect" (p. 86).

CONCLUSION

I hope to have presented three ideas. First, seminar and deliberation are public discourse structures suitable to the cultivation, in schools, of political friendship among "acquaintances" and "strangers" who have little in common save shared problems. The two models emphasize distinct conjoint activities—understanding and decision-making—and together aim for democratically enlightened political engagement.

Second, diversity and problems are essential assets for such an education. Without them, there's too little conflict and no widening of relationships around things that matter; accordingly, there's not much to discuss. Public schools possess these two assets in greater amounts than most other cultural locations, and this is their key advantage for democratic education. But there is another. Public schools not only are *public* envi-

ronments; they are, unlike shopping malls and ball fields, intentionally *educative* environments in which these assets can be mobilized toward desired ends through the means of curriculum and instruction.

Finally, "citizens have powers" (Allen, 2004, p. 168), and they are obliged to deploy them. Even as liberal democracies extend the franchise and civil rights to citizens previously denied them, these empowering moves ignore the matter of exercising that power. Opportunity is not to be confused with action. Habermas (1995) is direct: Inclusion "says *nothing* about the actual use made of active citizenship" by anyone (p. 268). To actually practice citizenship for the purpose of public will formation and social betterment, citizens must claim their majority. This mode of living together is one that takes shape not in a founding moment tucked neatly into history textbooks but in the circulating flows of public discourse. On this account, listening and speaking to strangers about powerful ideas and public problems—that is, *governing*—signals a citizen's coming-of-age. Simultaneously, it works to reclaim and reconstitute the democratic public sphere as a fertile site for political critique and action.

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Notes

1. It follows that affluent White students may be at the greatest risk of miseducation because of the growth-stunting effect of their isolation. The consequences are serious because affluent Whites are (still) the most likely to become high government officials. (See Parker, 2003, chapter 8.)
2. In law, the "age of majority" is the age at which a citizen can vote and otherwise claim full legal rights as adults in the polity.
3. See Leonard Waks's article in this issue.

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