

Democratic Deliberation with Sheron Fraser-Burgess

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Coulis Coulis]

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

With us today is education scholar Sheron Fraser-Burgess. She's here to discuss democratic deliberation and how it can foster inclusivity in a classroom setting.

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: A lot of my work is about sort of thinking about democratic deliberation in a way that makes room for others, or those who were considered others or who are othered. And not taking away from the fact that these others also want to be in the space of reasons. We want to be at the deliberative table and we also want to contribute to the great sort of the great, summation or conclusion or body of knowledge, if you will, that defines democracy.

Christiane: Stay tuned for my interview on democratic deliberation on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: Deliberative democracy is a school of political thought in which conversation takes on a central role. It's different from representative democracy, which involves voting and polling, because it focuses on discussion and understanding to move forward on issues. Sheron Fraser-Burgess, professor of social foundations and multicultural education at Ball State University, explains that educators can take principles from deliberative democracy and apply them to a classroom setting. In her work, she advocates for democratic deliberation, which is a means of teaching students not only how to work through cultural differences, but also how to be better citizens in a democracy.

[interview begins]

Christiane: In a lot of your work and education studies, you write about something called democratic deliberation, and I wanted to know first of all, that was kind of an unfamiliar phrase to me. So what does that mean? What is democratic deliberation?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: Deliberation is basically codecision-making among stakeholders with the goal of consensus and maybe even unanimity. Democratic deliberation draws on that basic definition by having two criteria, at least two criteria, one is a procedural one, and the other would be a moral sort of standard. The procedural one relates to the codecision-making component and various theories are more formal about how that unfolds in terms of the consensus reaching and whether you unanimity is ultimately the goal. And then there's also the

moral piece, which is inclusiveness, that is insofar as we are dealing with citizens, then there should be political equality, which is the very essence right, of citizenship.

Christiane: And what might democratic deliberation look like in a classroom setting?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: So there are so many different subtleties among the different theories of democratic, just of democracy in general, but also on how educational theorists draw on these different philosophies of democracy to make sense of it in the classroom. The key sort of person to influence how democratic deliberation on both in the classroom would be John Dewey and Amy Gutmann. Amy Gutmann's theory draws on specific moral norms that should characterize democratic sort of spaces. And one of them is non-repression and the idea that citizens cannot be excluded from the process because of their conceptions of the good. And the other is non-discrimination, that citizens cannot be denied participation in processes on the basis of group differences. Just on the face of those two criteria for the moral norm, you can imagine how well the school setting applies to these principles across every discipline. So in the classroom setting that can look like communities of inquiry that is specifically related to John Dewey's account as well. And in communities of inquiry, which again can be implemented in any classroom setting, there is a focus on problem solving, but there are also certain preexisting guidelines about how to go about problem-solving that support non-repression and non-discrimination.

Christiane: I think some people might hear all of that and just think, well, just have a discussion. Why can't you just have a discussion, right? So why is it important to think about and theorize about democratic deliberation so much when it comes to education?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: If we would think about how important education is to a democracy, right? And broadly speaking, education, when we're thinking of informal and formal setting. But if you think of a formal space as K-12 education or K-16, if you want to go all the way up to a four-year degree, then we appreciate that because of the demands of democracy on its citizens, in being a government for the people, by the people, there is an implicit sort of knowledge component. All of that is the backdrop of what kinds of procedures do we need to master in order to participate in that process. And so schools are the places where we build civic competency and the knowledge that is needed. And of course, Social Studies does that, but also a sense that democracy rests on our shoulders and we're cultivating citizens, and that is a primary aim of education. So with that backdrop, deliberation is sort of petite democracies in the classroom, and we are practicing all of those qualities: being able to listen to views that are different than yours, identifying the basis on which we include evidence and exclude some evidence as we reach convergence. All of those qualities of learning to navigate disagreement and come to some basis of consensus. All of those qualities and traits are essential for democracy. So education has a lot at stake in cultivating that, and that was Thomas Jefferson's belief from the inception in the 1700s, when he fought so hard for education to be free and available to everyone and publicly supported. Because he also understood that we need a threshold of democratic competency. Granted he had a very limited view of who would qualify, but the idea was still a good one at the time.

Christiane: I want to talk more about the differences between Thomas Jefferson's ideal and the kind of reality of the 18th century. Are there any kind of rifts today between the ideal of democratic deliberation that John Dewey and Amy Gutmann came up with and what actually might happen in the classroom?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: Yes, there is a lot of disagreement. I think going back to the two necessary criteria for democratic deliberation, right? We need to have this procedural component and we need to have this moral component that treats everyone as citizens, grants, political equality. But the issue lies in terms of what constitutes the substantive knowledge that defines us as American citizens or citizens of the United States, and therefore there's disagreement about which ideals we can draw on to find unity. And I can only give an example of this. I would point to a longstanding agreement in this sort of philosophical community regarding whether there should be appeal to ideal theory in the moral norms, or there should be some adjustment of the facts on the ground.

And Danielle Allen, who's a well-known theorist of democracy talks about in her book "Talking to Strangers", she references the fact that Hannah Arendt, another well-known democratic theorist did not support the desegregation of schools in Arkansas. And her view was that the parents have a right, all parents have a right to send their children to whichever school they want. That choice was a universal right. And Danielle Allen mentioned, well, that's a great theory, a great idea, in reality, the parents, this universal right, given to some parents meant that black parents had rights that were abrogated because of that. And so that's an example of where appeal to universality in a practical way, raises these conflicts. And therefore means that we're fighting on the ground in schools about how to navigate this difference between the ideal and the practical.

Christiane: While we're, while we're talking about divergences, do you have an idea or have you come up with an idea about democratic deliberation, that kind of diverges from the original thinking about it?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: I do. I've thought about how to hold on to the best of democratic deliberation, which is its procedural kind of rationality and its commitment to equality, by granting sort of epistemic or knowledge status to more individuals. The way that this appeal to idealism works out, it means that in the case of Arendt, it will be difficult for black parents to say, "accommodate my contexts on the basis of my identity and the fact that I'm a member of a political class that's been historically oppressed."

One would say that the ideal theory allows individuals to be part of, of humanity on the basis of those traits, but not on the basis of their identity group membership. What I argue is that once membership in a group, an identity group, can provide reasons, and by reasons, I mean, evidence-informed reasons for one's claims in deliberation. So I could draw on my experience as a woman of color, by which to make claims for certain sort of recognition or acknowledgement. And actually there's a recent theory that's come up or it's not recent it's been pretty widely known, called, which takes the opposite view. It says that there could be epistemic

injustice, meaning that in a deliberative situation, the dominant group could not take me seriously as a knower because of my membership in this protected class. I make a more positive claim that it's possible for me to be advantaged as a knower, because I have these experiences that give me a different knowledge base on which to draw, but which I could offer to the group to consider in granting me my claim, or coming to consensus around my claim.

Christiane Wisehart: I love that spin on it, you are adding to the epistemic store of, or you're adding to this shared pool of knowledge, right?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: An example of that, because it's good to talk in sort of abstract terms, is womanism. Which draws on Alice Walker's work, "In Search of Our Mother's Garden", but "The Color Purple" is an example of how womanism works. One can think of African-American women sort of as being in this class of oppressed individuals historically, but there is a sense in womanism that oppression is not the whole story. That even though it is not desirable to be oppressed, out of that oppression, there is a human response that is capable and modeled in the lives of many American descendants of slaves. That could be, I would say, an epistemic source of knowledge for others and on which others could draw by virtue of seeing it modeled.

It would add to the whole epistemic store that we have as a nation, despite the regrettable past that led to it. There is a difficulty with reconciling the pain of the past and sort of saying who's blameworthy, and who's not. And acknowledging that regardless of that, there are multiple examples of individuals who have transformed that experience without bitterness into a mindset, certain dispositions that they model for individuals who may not have come from that background, but have the advantage then of saying, well, I can see this citizen was able to acquire extraite of sort of radical self love. And also a sort of, I wouldn't say resilience because that's kind of an overused term, but a sense of that themselves as a person in the divine gaze, for example, that is what they're drawing on as they navigate the challenges in life. That's an example of how there can be a knowledge base that one brings to a deliberative table that others who don't come from that identity and may even be in the majority can then begin to recognize and acknowledge.

Christiane: What's the function of trust just in general in education, but specifically in these deliberation settings that you're talking about?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: If we begin with ideal theory, trust is taken for granted in the intersubjective space of education. The teacher is the caregiver. And some even think of the teacher as the midwife of democracy, if you want to draw again on a Socratic reference. And this trust does not have to be earned, thinking again, an ideal theory, but trust does not have to be earned. The teacher is implicitly committed to the task and the students implicitly trust the teacher. In reality, that is not what happens, especially given that there is likely to be cultural differences in many spaces between the teacher and her students. And 90% of teachers are female.

This is not all about racial difference. There's also differences of socioeconomic status, and differences of gender, and sexual orientation. And so I think that we can no longer take it for granted that trust is sort of the currency of education. And also student to student as well. Again, we would want to hope that in the classroom space, trust is taken for granted when students are together, but our differences, many different forms, lead in a classroom setting, particularly as students get older. And in high school, these differences leading the interactions. So the point that I would put forward is that trust has to be generated, and it has to be intentionally generated in the classroom. It is the teacher's primary task to generate that trust in developmentally relevant ways for students from K through 12 and doing that does involve some very specific pedagogical choices that are made in the classroom.

Christiane: So my last question is a kind of personal one, which is why do you care about these issues and why is this something that you've chosen to focus on in your scholarship?

Sheron Fraser-Burgess: Thank you for that question, because that personal motivation I think is critical to the scholarly task. My work really comes out of my experience as an academically trained philosopher and loving Western academic philosophy. But bemoaning the fact that my experience, my lived experience, was not reflected or even theorized in much of the literature. So basically deliberative democracy did not take into account my lived experience. And so my initial task, once I passed all my courses and comprehensive exams and could not be kicked out of the program, was to figure out how to theorize my experience in a way that would make it a competitive, not competitive, but on par or interlocutor, if you will, with the preexisting philosophical theories.

And so a lot of my work is about thinking about democratic deliberation in a way that makes room for others, or those who were considered others or who are othered. And not taking away from the fact that these others also want to be in the space of reasons. We want to be at the deliberative table and offer claims that are rationally weighed in just as everyone else. We also want to contribute to the great sort of the great, summation or conclusion or body of knowledge, if you will, that defines democracy. And to have others gain from our experiences as much as we gained from theirs. There needs to be true mutuality and reciprocity if you will. And so much of my philosophical work has been thinking about that and then filtering it down to the classroom level. As I think about students, certainly students of African descent, but a multicultural democracy is one in which everyone benefits from predicates from difference, and difference is contributing to the quality of life for society. That's what I've always been striving to do, is to think more about how that's possible.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Game Hens]

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