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Democratic engagement through the ethic of passionate impartiality

Leah Sprain

University of Colorado Boulder, United States

leah.sprain@colorado.edu

Martín Carcasson

Colorado State University, United States

cpd@colostate.edu

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Abstract

Building on conceptions of democratic engagement, we explicate the epistemological and political commitments of engaged scholarship tied to deliberative democracy that responds to the neutrality challenge of doing impactful political work without advocating for a particular political position. The Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) provides a model of democratic engagement by serving as an impartial resource for its community, in part by training students to be facilitators of public processes. This type of democratic engagement can cultivate mutual benefits for students, professors, universities, community organizations, and citizens. We offer a principle of *passionate impartiality* for guiding process-design and facilitation. Passionately impartial scholars and students are passionate about their community, democracy, and solving problems but are nonetheless committed to serving a primarily impartial, process-focused role in order to improve local communication practices. Drawing on challenges from critical theory and the academy, we offer a nuanced account of what it means to negotiate the tensions between serving an impartial role while also upholding democratic values of equality and inclusion.

Introduction

The scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1996) has been performed under a variety of names, each of which highlights a particular aspect of the nature of engagement. Barker's (2004) typology—public scholarship, participatory research, community partnerships, public information networks, and civic literacy scholarship—organizes different practices by theory, problems addressed, and methods. Distinctive university-community connections are cultivated within the traditions of service learning, local economic development, community based research, and social work initiatives (Fisher,

Fabricant, & Simmons, 2011). Social justice work uses a problem-orientation to gain understanding through research and then advocate based on this understanding (Miller, 2011). In this paper, we focus on what has broadly been called the civic engagement movement, at times going under the terms community engagement, democratic education, education for democracy, and democratic engagement (Hartley, Saltmarsh, Clayton, 2010). Specifically, we explicate the epistemological and political commitments of democratic engagement tied to deliberative democracy.

A foundational tension within the civic engagement movement is how to best negotiate what has been called the “neutrality challenge” (Thomas, Ball, Carcasson, & Shaffer, 2011): how to balance the competing desires to support politically neutral processes while also working for more equitable outcomes. This challenge is often encountered in the classroom where instructors seek to present all sides of an issue (political neutrality) yet advocate for a more just, equitable society (social justice). Peter Levine (2011) connects this challenge to a larger question about the proper relationships between democratic reform and partisanship: do civic reforms have an inherent political ideology? Should democratic reforms—can they—be politically neutral?

Building on the work of John Saltmarsh, Matthew Hartley, and colleagues (Hartley et al., 2010; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009; Sturm, Eatman, Saltmarsh, & Bush, 2011), we offer a model of democratic engagement informed by a principle for responding to the neutrality challenge. In this essay we provide a model of democratic engagement: the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD).¹ We offer the CPD as a model of how a university center can serve as a catalyst that helps the community work together to address difficult public problems by helping design, convene, facilitate, and report on deliberative processes. Through reciprocal and collaborative relationships, this model cultivates mutual benefits for several key stakeholders. Student facilitators develop an increasingly valuable skill set; professors close gaps between theory and practice, improving the quality of both; the university demonstrates the value it can bring to a community; and perhaps most importantly, the community is more strongly equipped to address difficult problems. Working from the CPD as a model for democratic engagement, we develop passionate impartiality as a principle guiding the process-design and facilitation central to the CPD’s work and democratic engagement more broadly. Passionately impartial scholars and students are passionate about their communities, democracy, and solving problems, but are nonetheless committed to serving an impartial, process-focused role. Their focus is on improving the quality of public communication, particularly across perspectives that struggle to interact productively, based on the recognition that such interaction is critical to effective community problem-solving yet woefully rare. In other words, they are impartial concerning the specific issue being explored but nonetheless hold certain normative commitments about the quality and manner of interaction that situate their neutrality. Combining deliberative democracy’s commitment to legitimacy, inclusion, and reciprocity, critical theory’s concerns about hegemony and the abuse of power, and the academy’s interest in research and high quality data, passionate impartiality assumes deliberative practitioners must struggle with these often competing goals and strive toward building trust locally in order to help increase capacity for a robust deliberative democracy in their local communities. We conclude by suggesting how passionate impartiality might guide other forms of democratic engagement.

Democratic engagement

Democratic engagement differs from related terms for the scholarship of engagement in several regards. Civic engagement can be defined by curricular or co-curricular activities (e.g. courses, projects, internships, volunteerism) occurring in a particular place (e.g. “the community”) (Hartley et al., 2010). By focusing on place, some discussions of community engagement can downplay the complexity of community, assuming unity and ignoring important divisions (Dempsey, 2009). Conversely, democratic engagement is defined by *how* engagement is enacted and the *reasons* for it (Hartley et al., 2010). This orientation to process and purpose reorients attention from a focus on university-community boundaries to developing a more robust theory of the *political processes* of engagement. For democratic engagement, the desired means and ends of engagement are defined by democratic values —“inclusiveness, participation, task sharing, lay participation, reciprocity in public problem solving, and an equality of respect for the knowledge and experience that everyone contributes to education and community building” (Hartley et al., 2010, p. 397).

As communication scholars, democratic engagement is needed because one of the primary problems in contemporary politics is the low quality of public discourse and inability for communities to work together collaboratively to address shared problems. These political problems are demonstrated on the national level when politicians stand on principle and refuse to work together, adopting what Guttman and Thompson (2012) call principled tenacity and mutual mistrust. On the local level, conflicts can polarize communities as groups talk past each other, ascribe negative motives to the other

side, and espouse overly simplistic framings of complex issues. The type of democratic engagement we explicate in this essay focuses on improving how communities communicate as they work to address public problems. Said differently, the work often has a dual focus of addressing both the problems *in* democracy (i.e. poverty, crime, sustainability, etc.) and the problems *of* democracy (i.e. polarization, apathy, disengagement, etc.) (Mathews, 2009). This form of democratic engagement seeks to help communities address concrete public problems by providing increased capacity for communication and engagement processes that allow for productive interaction across perspectives and lead to more inclusive, sustainable actions. Such talk, however, rarely occurs naturally, which leads to the need for community resources focused on building such capacities. The dominant “argument culture” supports the development of strong ties with like-minded groups, while encouraging the avoidance or ridiculing of opposing perspectives (Tannen, 1999). Deliberation and collaborative governance often requires individuals to put down their guard and admit to potential flaws in their perspectives as well as benefits of their adversary’s views, which simply goes against the grain in most communities. Getting past these barriers requires safe places to gather, well-framed material to engage, and skilled facilitators to help guide the discussion. We argue that engaged scholars and students can provide these resources.

Unlike social justice work and related engagement traditions, the primary mode of democratic engagement is not through research alone. Instead, we argue that democratic engagement can be achieved through deliberative inquiry (Carcasson, 2012; Carcasson & Sprain, 2012) wherein deliberative processes provide a means of collaborative learning and interaction central to addressing public problems. Unlike conceptions of the scholarship of engagement where *scholars* design and evaluate public deliberation processes (Barker, 2004), we argue that democratic engagement should be conceptualized as a networked process (Sprain, Endres, & Peterson, 2009) ideally involving scholars, students, the university, and local community partners. We provide a model, the Center for Public Deliberation (CPD), wherein engagement simultaneously consists of students and scholars working with local communities to together cultivate new opportunities for political engagement for citizens and stakeholders. The CPD is a reaction to public problems of democracy. In response to public problems of democracy, the CPD was founded to help improve political communication in the local community and help overcome common barriers to collaboration. It uses engagement between scholars, students, community partners, and citizens to build democratic capacity through improved collaborative problem solving.

A model for democratic engagement

The CPD originally started as a class on Public Deliberation designed to give students opportunities to apply theories and skills learned in various communication courses to local public issues. The Speech Communication Department (now Communication Studies Department) supported the development of this class as a partial replacement to the experiential and public aspects of the debate team that had previously been housed in the department. The first class was not successful due to the difficulty of sufficiently equipping students to understand a complex issue before designing and facilitating a public event on the issue during a single semester. Instead of teaching the course again, we identified the need to go beyond the constraints of a typical class in order to develop a program that both positively impacted the community and provided students with a significant experience.

We started by searching for other possible models of how to incorporate public deliberation into the communication curriculum. We found centers devoted to the academic design and study of deliberative models (e.g. Jim Fishkin’s Center for Democratic Deliberation), centers focused on conflict resolution (e.g. University of Denver Conflict Resolution Program), and civic centers committed to running community discussions and deliberations (e.g., organizations associated with the National Issues Forum (NIF) Network). Since our primary goal was to increase local capacity to address community problems in a collaborative way, we gravitated to the civic centers where deliberative practitioners focused on doing and supporting deliberative work. Ultimately we joined other deliberative practitioners as part of the NIF network.

Most of the centers in the NIF network rely on faculty and/or community members to develop and run events, but we wanted to tie democratic engagement more directly to students and coursework on communication. Thus in the fall of 2006 the CPD Student Associate Program was developed, wherein students apply for the program and then earn class credit with the CPD for a year (one full course their first semester and then at least one practicum credit the following semester). Since it is an application process, we are able to handpick students who have demonstrated academic success and desire to work with the community. When we have on-going projects on particular issues (e.g. agriculture or poverty), we try to recruit students working in related disciplines. Over time, many students have come from the Communication Studies Department, but students have also come from related social sciences, social work, even biology.

The program trains students to be facilitators through exposure to deliberative theory, training on facilitation skills and strategies, and practical experience facilitating small group discussions within actual public meetings designed by the CPD faculty in collaboration with community partners. Each semester the CPD course varies depending on the specific projects that we are working on. Yet some common elements provide a core experience. The semester starts with an overview of deliberative democracy theory and how this approach compares to other methods of addressing democratic problems (Carcasson & Sprain, 2012; Carcasson, 2012). Then the course quickly focuses on facilitator training: how does a facilitator lead discussion? At an all-day workshop at a local retreat center, students learn about the basic moves facilitators make to help groups more deeply explore issues (move on, paraphrase, asking a probing question, as a reaction question, ask a new starting question) (see Kaner, 2007; Schwarz, 2002; Heron, 1999 for practical guides on facilitation). Then students practice facilitating small group discussions and reflect on this practice following the lead of senior associates who have been working with the program for at least a semester. The workshop trains students on specific skills through practice and reflection, culminating in a large group deliberation using an NIF issue guide. After the workshop, each student facilitates practice forums in class with other CPD students and practice forums in introductory argumentation courses. To support skill development and reflection, each student is assigned a senior associate as a mentor who provides written feedback of practice sessions as well as discussing other issues that may emerge for new students. They also complete an assignment in which they watch themselves facilitate on video, transcribe interaction, and reflect on several specific interventions they make as facilitators. All students also keep journals where they reflect on class discussions, practice sessions, and, eventually, share field notes from the public events. After the first month, most class periods focus on training students for upcoming public meetings where they will be serving as small group facilitators and note takers. Training often includes background information about the topic at hand (e.g. homelessness, childhood obesity, population growth) as well as the specific process that facilitators will guide participants through during events. Whenever possible, students help develop the plan for a specific meeting. Often we pilot a process with CPD students in advance and then debrief about how questions could be rephrased, how to clarify instructions, or what background materials participants might need in order to engage the issue.

CPD faculty work with community partners to design interactive meetings and then train Student Associates to facilitate specially designed small group discussions during these meetings. The Student Associate Program allows us to arrive at an event with 30 trained facilitators, enabling us to turn a meeting of up to 200 to a collection of interactive small group discussions. Initially, the CPD imagined we would host forums of topics of our own choosing, but our work has increasingly been driven by the needs of community partners that approach us and request our assistance. Each semester the CPD works with community partners who have an interest in bringing the public together on various difficult issues. Topics during the first seven years have included water conflict, changing community demographics, aging, health care, childhood obesity, poverty, homelessness, affordable childcare, student housing, smoking on campus, sustainable food production, and closing local schools. Some of these partners want to run public meetings and seek support for designing and convening these meetings; other partners have a problem or issue that they think needs to be addressed and approach the CPD after seeing deliberative meetings work well to address other community issues. The CPD has worked with the governor's office, city governments, school districts, the League of Women's Voters, the United Way, local foundations, the downtown business authority, and a range of organizations and public-private partnerships focused on healthy living, growth, transportation, water, poverty, aging issues, and more. These collaborative partnerships between the CPD and community organizations generate opportunities for a range of citizens and stakeholders to contribute to improving community conversations, making community decisions, and generating new structures for addressing shared problems. Plus these partnerships give students practical experience as they help guide democratic processes in their community.

Mutual benefits for students, community, and university

For students, the CPD provides the opportunity to both do democratic engagement themselves while also significantly increasing the capacity for others to be democratically engaged in the community. Students literally facilitate democratic processes through their role in small group discussions with interested citizens and leaders. In turn, they help increase the opportunities for their fellow citizens to engage in political participation and collaborative problem solving. One question that often gets asked in the assessment of civic engagement initiatives is how students see themselves vis-à-vis the community residents with whom they interact (Fisher et al., 2011). This question stems from a concern that civic engagement initiatives can result in students seeing themselves as helping the community without seeing community members as people with their own agency to address social problems. Working with the CPD, students see themselves has

having a vital role as facilitators, but this role is one that *supports* agents who will address their own problems rather than students seeing themselves as saviors.

Engaged experiences with democratic deliberation provide tangible benefits for students. CPD allows them the opportunity to directly apply numerous skills they have developed in the CPD course as well as other courses, particularly communication courses such as intercultural communication, small group communication, argumentation, and conflict management. After completing the program, CPD students have reported using the skills of facilitation—paraphrasing, active listening, reframing conflict, asking questions, encouraging interaction, and more—in their personal and professional lives to manage interpersonal conflicts, conduct interviews, improve meetings, and inform decision-making processes. CPD students frequently mention drawing on their CPD experiences in work after graduation, noting that in interviews for diverse jobs (from mediator to radio personality to government analyst) they kept telling and being asked to tell stories of their CPD experiences. These experiences also train students in citizenship by exposing them to how government institutions work and cultivating political efficacy, democratic attitudes, and communication skills.

Although the CPD was originally started for students and it continues to provide valuable opportunities for student learning and engagement, we quickly realized that the CPD was filling an important void in the community. Despite working on multiple projects concurrently, we still have to turn down community requests each semester. Each meeting tends to bring us additional partners for future projects that recognize both the value of high quality communication and collaboration for addressing difficult problems as well as the importance of relying on an impartial entity with process expertise and capacity. We think the demand for collaborating with the CPD suggests an existing need in our region that was not previously being met.

Too often citizens feel alienated from institutions and either believe they cannot address public problems or that they can only make a difference through adversarial tactics that can fuel polarization. As David Matthews (1999) has argued, lack of citizen engagement is often a result of low efficacy and a sense of alienation from the political process rather than apathy about public issues. We have found that political apathy can actually be rather thin if people are given genuine opportunities to interact and make a difference on local issues. CPD-sponsored processes sometimes appeal to a wider range of people because they offer a way to contribute to efforts to address community problems directly, sometimes without even working with government institutions. Our events also provide safer places to discuss controversial issues, a welcome alternative to the unproductive yelling matches that often occur at public hearings or city council meetings. We think that our events are also successful because the CPD uniquely supports a key stage of the process Yankelovich outlined for communities to move from low quality public opinion to higher quality public judgment (Yankelovich, 1991; Yankelovich & Friedman, 2011). Yankelovich argues that there are three stages in the process: consciousness raising, working through, and resolution. Often communities have many resources for learning more about an issue (consciousness raising) and advocating particular solutions (resolution) but lack resources for working through the multiple perspectives to the issue, alternative ways of solving it, and the trade-offs between the different options. The CPD helps research key issues, develop useful background materials, and convene events that give participants opportunities to talk through local issues in more productive ways. After events, the CPD writes reports to help share the perspectives developed during meetings and identify possible common ground, key value tensions, misinformation, and additional stakeholders who may need to be involved (Carcasson, 2012). Thus the CPD provides support for working through issues with other citizens, particularly people who do not agree with or understand each other.

The CPD builds reciprocal relationships with community partners, which are sustained by mutual benefits. Since universities often have more resources, reciprocity means providing access to expertise, meeting materials, and sometimes even financial support. In turn, these relationships exemplify the land grant mission of our university and improve the quality of teaching and research. Increasingly, the land grant mission has expanded beyond providing agricultural and technical expertise to helping communities solve their own problems (Peters, Jordan, Alter, & Bridger, 2003). As Olivos (2008) has argued, providing support for deliberative democracy is a promising way to fulfill the land grant mission. Democratic engagement also fits broader university motives to respond to local problems, build more durable relationships with neighbors, fulfill obligations to the world, and practice commitments to prepare students for democracy and civic responsibility (Fisher et al., 2011).

Beyond generally affirming the university's mission, our approach uniquely allows us to engage in issues that universities might typically avoid. In our increasingly polarized political climate marked by cultural divides, Henry Giroux (2006) and others (see Foust & Lair, 2012 for review) have lamented that higher education is “under siege.”

Giroux calls for imagining new ways for higher education to invigorate democracy. Yet there can be significant disincentives to scholars engaging in the public sphere. Scholars sometimes fear engaging in public controversies lest they undermine their scientific credibility, harm the university's image, take time away from research, or even subject themselves to personal attacks. Rather than invigorating democracy by engaging in or commenting on adversarial politics, democratic engagement provides new roles for scholars. By supporting democratic processes rather than serving as advocates, we can engage controversial local issues without aligning the university with one side or the other. Our focus is firmly on the less controversial goal of improving the quality of public discourse. In turn, our processes often create the spaces for other university scholars to provide technical analysis or lay out options as a way of supporting community deliberation within an environment that is more likely to utilize their contributions with less potential for backlash.

A National Model

In our region, the CPD is increasingly recognized as a unique resource for supporting community collaboration and problem solving. Our center serves as a catalyst for helping a community come together to address difficult problems. Yet the CPD has also become a national model for how to engage students in democratic engagement. University of Houston Downtown, James Madison University, and Georgia College have developed programs modeled off of the CPD. The second author has developed training for new centers in the NIF network, particularly how NIF centers on university campuses can best work with students. Elsewhere, we have argued that centers like ours serve as local hubs of democracy (Carcasson, 2010) when they provide support for democratic processes. Overall, CPD's work helps build local capacity by providing process-expertise related to designing, facilitating, and reporting on innovative events to support collaborative problem solving. This support manifests itself in varying ways, including providing impartial issue analysis and framing (e.g. drawing on public policy analysis and rhetorical criticism), offering options for meeting design (e.g. drawing on academic theories of collaboration and communication), and providing key resources (e.g. trained facilitators, technology, or meeting space). Since the CPD draws on student time and connects to faculty research interests, we are able to offer our services as a public service, whereas equivalent consulting agencies would likely charge from \$5,000-20,000 per meeting.

More broadly, the CPD builds local capacity by helping cultivate democratic attitudes, dispositions, and skills through practice (Pateman, 1976), which citizens can draw on to address future problems. Often community partners do not have extensive experience with deliberative approaches or other democratic processes. Sometimes partners even seek us looking for public relations outreach—they have solutions to public problems in mind, and they want us to convince the public to support these solutions. In these situations, we explain democratic alternatives to public relations, particularly what the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) calls the shift from PR to P2, or the shift from public relations to public participation. Often exposure to alternative processes for engaging in problem definition and problem solving helps provide more opportunities for democratic engagement rather than simply building campaigns focused on persuasion.

To this point, we have attempted to illustrate how the CPD serves as an example of democratic engagement that can create mutual benefits for students, community partners, citizens, and universities. Democratic engagement also provides benefits to scholars, particularly when teaching, research, and service overlap, reinforce, and inform each other. For example, the CPD Student Associate Program supports our time spent on CPD projects by connecting it directly to our teaching loads. Although our model of democratic engagement does not privilege research as the primary mode of engagement, practitioner experiences—the lessons learned from actually planning deliberative processes, training student facilitators, observing meetings, and moving to community action—have helped us identify new research questions and explore under-theorized dimensions of deliberative democracy. This type of democratic engagement means that we are consistently moving between democratic theory and empirical research, from our local context to the academic literature of deliberative democracy as we design and evaluate democratic processes. We find this iterative process to be rich with benefits for us as scholars. In the next section, we put forth the principle of passionate impartiality that was generated by working between practical problems and academic literature. Our hope is that it provides an illustration of the potential benefits for scholars of democratic engagement while simultaneously contributing one response to the neutrality challenge facing deliberative practitioners and others seeking to do democratic engagement.

Passionate impartiality

Democratic engagement seeks the public good *with* the public not merely *for* the public, wherein engagement itself is a means of facilitating a more active and engaged democracy (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2010). Deliberative processes should

exemplify Hartley et al.'s (2010) characteristics of democratic engagement—problem-oriented, multidirectional flows of knowledge, relationships of reciprocity, work done with the public, and inclusive knowledge production—to facilitate community change informed by the co-creation of knowledge. Yet designing and facilitating deliberative processes that achieve these characteristics requires a coherent political philosophy that accounts for how to best achieve democratic values in practice. In particular, scholars and practitioners need a coherent political philosophy to guide the practical work of deliberative process design and facilitation in response to the neutrality challenge. We argue that an ethic of what we call *passionate impartiality* should guide deliberative inquiry. Passionately impartial scholars and students are passionate about their communities, democracy, and solving problems, but are nonetheless committed to serving an impartial, process-focused role in order to improve local communication practices. Combining deliberative democracy's commitment to legitimacy and inclusion, critical theory's concerns about hegemony and the abuse of power, and the academy's interest in research and high quality data, passionate impartiality assumes deliberative practitioners must struggle with these often competing goals and strive toward building trust locally in order to help increase capacity for a robust deliberative democracy in their local communities.

Often in a democracy, citizens participate by speaking in public on issues. In the United States, there is a cultural code where speaking in public is an "essential part of being a citizen" (Carbaugh, 2005, p. 90). Democratic engagement recognizes that speech and "having a voice" is simply the first step, however, and that engagement also requires genuine interaction and mutual comprehension (Briand, 1999). Democratic engagement thus seeks to create the very conditions through which more citizens can participate in politics by both speaking and listening, often refining their opinions through the process. The CPD asks students to play a different role focused on assisting participants. Instead of sharing their views on a particular topic, we ask students to cultivate democratic engagement by *facilitating* the process. Sometimes this role can be difficult for students since they may have passionate beliefs about particular issues. During a conversation about poverty, for example, they may be inclined to offer their own ideas about how to best reduce homelessness or make the case for getting rid of welfare. This is, after all, how they are taught to be good citizens (and often good students too).

Rather than asking students to set aside their passions or become detached, we argue that they can and should be passionate about democracy and about their community. In other words, we expect students to *be biased* toward democracy and democratic principles, such as inclusion (Benhabib, 1996; Young, 2002), legitimacy (Dryzek, 2010), and reciprocity (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, 2004). This means that they are advocates for increasing opportunities and capacity for solving community problems. Passionate impartiality requires passion for impacting your community and cultivating needed changes. To extend the previous example, students should be passionate about addressing poverty issues in their communities; they should be advocates for democratic processes designed to enable community action and change to decrease inequity and increase opportunities for social mobility. But unlike activists who advocate for particular solutions to community problems, an ethic of passionate impartiality means that facilitators are advocates for a type of democratic process—a means of engagement best equipped to identify productive solutions and mobilize a broad range of stakeholders to implement these solutions—rather than specific outcomes. Students can be passionate about community dialogues on poverty, for example, but they should not be biased toward a particular policy solution for addressing poverty. When students are struggling with passionate impartiality, we often ask students to trust the process. If we can help the community have a better discussion about poverty, the community will be able to generate better ways of addressing poverty too. And if we fail to do this, it is our responsibility to reflect on our process and determine how it should be improved in the future. Just as we ask students to adopt this position, so too does the CPD as an organization.

Passion concerning process but impartiality regarding outcomes is necessary to maintain the legitimacy of the process and to attract participants to public meetings from broad perspectives. Too often, citizens distrust the political system, a fundamental problem of democracy. If citizens feel that an outcome is predetermined or a facilitator is telling a group what to think, they will be skeptical of organizers and refuse to engage in the process. Similarly, participants often distrust participants from opposing perspectives and are wary of opening themselves up to them as anything other than adversaries. The process and the facilitators are key to helping participants move past such concerns and engage each other in more productive ways. Building such trust and overcoming polarization calls for a facilitator who is not biased toward a particular outcome. Nonetheless, maintaining impartiality in practice is difficult. Indeed, we acknowledge that it is impossible to be completely impartial. Instead, we constantly negotiate the tensions between our commitments to impartiality, inclusion, legitimacy, and reciprocity, always striving for finding the elusive ideal mean between them.

Within the field of mediation, ethical codes often invoke neutrality or impartiality yet struggle to detail the implications of impartiality in practice (McCorkle, 2005). Field (2000) argues that mediators cannot be neutral if neutrality implies a complete lack of bias due to human nature; instead impartiality promises an even-handedness and fairness towards the process. Like passionate impartiality, it is assumed that the mediator is impartial to the content but active in controlling the process. But what principles should the mediator use to control the process? For example, do mediation techniques such as power balancing or coaching participants indicate partiality or bias (McCorkle, 2005)?

For passionate impartiality to serve as a principle to guide democratic engagement, it must guide deliberative practitioners in making choices about how to design and implement processes. Since deliberative democracy is the means and end of democratic engagement, ideally, democratic engagement is marked by legitimacy, inclusion, and reciprocity. Working to uphold these normative ideals is the hallmark of passionate impartiality. For example, in practice, deliberative practitioners often seek to increase transparency of the process in order to increase legitimacy. This can include posting all of the raw data collected at a meeting so that anyone can read through it and interpret the significance of the findings. This sort of transparency is also a way of demonstrating one type of inclusion in that it ensures that all voices expressed during a meeting are given due consideration, and no perspectives are censored because of their political stance or affiliation. We think that several traditions—particularly critical theory—can provide important challenges to what it might mean to be impartial yet uphold democratic values. In the next section, we directly engage these critics in an effort to refine our principle of passionate impartiality.

Passionate impartiality responds to deliberative critics

Simply suggesting that all voices be treated equally raises challenges from critical theorists. As the popular quote attributed to Desmond Tutu cautions, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” Critical theorists have long cautioned that, in an unequal society, creating the conditions for deliberation encounters substantial challenges. Certain marginalized groups may be less likely to hear about a public meeting or unable to attend due to confounding factors (e.g. longer work days, lack of transportation, lack of child care, language difficulties, etc.). Certain potential participants may also not attend due to doubts about the legitimacy or efficacy of the meeting. If these barriers are nevertheless overcome, normative assumptions within deliberation may raise additional concerns, such as how a focus on purely “rational” reason-giving may unduly exclude women, minorities, and other groups that may prefer other modes of argumentation (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001), or the call for “civility” can be used as a weapon to silence dissent and support the status quo (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009). Cultural norms may perpetuate other forms of inequality during deliberation. Fung (2004), for example, argues that there are “a whole set of practical norms about what ‘proper’ speaking involves that are biased against people with accents, not to mention people who don’t speak the dominant language—and biased against people who speak in a high voice or softly, biased against people who express themselves emotionally or haltingly, and so on. These biases tend to correlate with gender, race, and class” (p. 49).

Rather than dismiss these criticisms or abandon democratic engagement due to them, deliberative practitioners seek to rely on process design to minimize the effect of these inequalities upon deliberation (Fung, 2005). Recruitment, issue framing, and process structure are designed in part to help balance concerns about power inequities (see Kadlec & Friedman, 2007 for a more specific discussion). Deliberation should create the conditions for multiple styles of communicating, including stories, testimony, and non-conventional forms of argument (Barker, McAfee, & McIvor, 2012). Empirical research demonstrates that actual deliberation often includes narratives and multiple forms of argumentation (Ryfe, 2006; Black, 2008). Deliberative processes can also be designed to solicit different types of talk. For example, facilitators are trained to not only legitimize multiple forms of communication by asking about personal experiences but are also equipped to take advantage of them to spark interaction. Rather than letting a group move on after someone shares a story from a marginalized perspective, a facilitator can prompt a group to reflect on how this experience might challenge the discussion thus far. Importantly, such practices show that individual participants are not asked to bracket their identities or backgrounds in order to support deliberation, a key concern of Fraser’s (1992) critique of the Habermasian public sphere.

Moreover, passionate impartiality provides principles that a facilitator can use to account to the group for their obligation to create spaces to hear multiple perspectives, particularly perspectives that might otherwise not be heard in public discussions. Meta-communication about the importance of inclusion and equality can create a frame for interaction within the group so participants realize that deliberation values multiple perspectives and particularly seeks out perspectives that might otherwise be silenced. Indeed, a key feature of deliberative engagement is the recognition of

tensions, tradeoffs, and “tough choices” inherent to democratic decision-making, therefore a key task in process design and facilitation is to identify such tensions and provide assistance in “working through” them (Yankelovich and Friedman, 2010). Deliberative processes are at times critiqued for seeking consensus of all else, but in reality, clearly identifying key differences go hand in hand with working to build common ground. By explicitly invoking the importance of inclusion and the need for mutual comprehension, a facilitator can sensitize the group to look for opportunities to consider other perspectives rather than unconsciously relying on default power structures.

This can be accomplished in a range of ways. Facilitators can ask to hear from a new speaker who hasn’t spoken yet. Facilitators can ask the group to brainstorm what perspectives are relevant to the conversation that they haven’t yet heard and then imagine what these groups might say. Facilitators can ask for someone to voice a particular perspective that hasn’t yet been shared (e.g. “If a small business owner was here, what might they add to our discussion?”). Finally, facilitators can serve as a surrogate and bring in a specific perspective and gather reactions by saying, “I can imagine if X was here today they would say... how would you respond?” All of these facilitator moves open up the conversation and try to force consideration of non-dominant perspectives, while at the same time the facilitator never actually offered his/her own personal perspective. Notably, each move is a little less impartial as the facilitator more explicitly makes space for a particular perspective. Yet a commitment to inclusion justifies this shift away from some strict standard of impartiality. Passionate impartiality can also justify more explicit moves such as paraphrasing contributions when the facilitator senses that other group members might have disregarded a comment because of the way that it was shared or taking more time to tease out the implications of a personal experience so that the group must face the communal implications of testimony. In this situation, paraphrasing does not aim to establish how participants should speak during deliberation but rather helps ensure that perspectives receive full consideration. It should also be noted here that passionate impartiality is not just responding to critics from the left who have concerns about deliberative forums silencing progressive voices. Instead, passionate impartiality calls for bringing in any relevant voice that is underrepresented. Often this means bringing in conservative voices, business voices, and more.

Just as passionate impartiality must respond to challenges from critical theorists concerned about equality and inclusion, it must also respond to challenges from technical experts. In our experience, when scientists or other experts observe public deliberation they can get frustrated by factual inaccuracies and misinformation during the discussion. Observing these conversations can reinforce sentiments that the public is ill equipped and incapable of discussing controversial issues. There has long been concern within political theory about whether citizens can deliberate (Bohman, 2000). Some scientists remain skeptical that the public is capable of deliberation and decision making on technical issues (see Beierle & Cayford, 2002 for extended discussion of this tension). We believe just as designers and facilitators of democratic engagement have a responsibility to minimize the impact of inequality on deliberation, they also have a corresponding responsibility to work toward factual integrity of the discussion, while recognizing the difficulty of such a task in these post-modern times. The democratic legitimacy of any process stems from respect for quality information, just as democratic theory calls for inclusion and equality.

Early theories of deliberation focused on rationality and reasoned argument (e.g. Habermas, 1998), but many theorists have since called for more diverse means of argumentation during deliberation as we suggested above. The concern for getting beyond the usual suspects and insuring space for a broad range of voices has at times trumped, often with good reason, the concern for information quality control. To adapt Tutu’s quote presented earlier, if you are neutral in the face of clear abuse of data, you have chosen the side of the manipulator. But what responsibilities do deliberative practitioners have for the quality of arguments and information during deliberation? In addition, what responsibilities do they have before and after deliberation? To be clear, the importance of a strong foundation of information within deliberation is not the same as only allowing “rational” men speaking “rationally.” Here passionate impartiality must address the need for inclusion and legitimacy from a different trajectory. Inclusion can be violated if a focus on technical arguments and knowledge is used to exclude participants from the discussion. If, for example, a participant is insisting that everyone must provide credentials and statistics to prove their points and nothing else will be considered, demands for technical information may actually limit discussion by shutting out other participants. Passionate impartiality would lead the facilitator to consider intervening. In this case, the violation of the *principle of inclusion* justifies a facilitator intervention not the preference for reason-giving or rational argument. On these grounds, a facilitator may intervene by posing questions that help the group reflect on the factual basis for the claim or explicitly ask for personal experiences that challenge that assertion that only one form of reasoning will be accepted.

At the same time, if individual participants are spreading misinformation, misrepresenting key information, or disregarding clearly established knowledge, it can decrease the overall trustworthiness of the process if participants cannot trust fellow citizens or if outside experts see deliberation skew perspectives, perpetuate bad information, or ultimately lead to bad decisions. Said differently, if the goal of these processes is to improve the quality of public discourse, then not addressing empirical concerns is counterproductive. In the case of substantial misinformation or misrepresenting established knowledge, the democratic value of legitimacy is being substantially threatened. Ideally, key misconceptions or data gaps can be identified and addressed before deliberation through background information and discussion guides. During deliberation, facilitators may elect to draw attention to misinformation during the discussion itself. For example, the facilitator could ask if anyone knew conflicting evidence or refer to background materials to question inaccurate assertions. More broadly, deliberation practitioners should identify misinformation or fact disputes occurring during discussion and solicit research on these topics for public reports. Perhaps subsequent meetings could clarify factual issues at the beginning of the event to minimize participants continuing to consider misinformation. Just as the passionately impartial practitioner must seek to limit inequalities from impacting deliberation so too must there be concern for the legitimacy of the process.

The Passionately Impartial Facilitator

In presenting good process design and “critically aware” facilitators as possible tools for responding to critical challenges to deliberation and promoting the democratic values of inclusion, legitimacy, and reciprocity, we must recognize that the role of deliberative practitioner is itself a position of power. (Honestly, it is a position of power whether we recognize this or not). As Rosenberg (2007) cautions, “important questions arise regarding the powers of those who facilitate deliberations. The potential for abuse is real, and crafting an appropriate conceptual and institutional response will be difficult” (p. 359). There are related concerns about deliberative practitioners who frame and design background materials, decide who should be recruited to attend meetings, and analyze the results of a meeting to generate reports. Following Aakhus (2001), we consider facilitators and deliberative practitioners to be process managers who need to be more reflective about their role in shaping deliberative exchanges. Developing principles like passionate impartiality is one way to help students be more reflective about their choices. Pure impartiality is impossible. Passionate impartiality helps students identify and reflect on instances where democratic commitments call for them to move away from impartiality.

Ideally passionate impartiality is an ethic that can help balance the power of deliberative practitioners. The commitment to democratic values reinforces the need for transparency of the actions of the deliberative practitioners. Deliberative practitioners should invite criticism of these choices and be open to making changes to framing or meeting design if concerns are raised. For example, background materials developed by the CPD are often specifically introduced as works in progress and not finished documents in order to maintain space for participants to push back and question assumptions within background materials. Ultimately the power of the deliberative practitioner is tempered by the incentive to be seen by community partners and citizens as passionately impartial and therefore build trust and a long-term reputation as a key community resource. That is, the deliberative practitioner has an interest in being seen as an unbiased resource for supporting local democracy. Concern for their reputations provides deliberative practitioners incentive to consistently follow ethical principles and disincentive to use power to selectively benefit certain people or perspectives.

Yet we understand that, at best, passionate impartiality names a gray area. We know that we violate impartiality, and we certainly acknowledge that negotiating the tensions between impartiality, inclusion, and legitimacy will be exceedingly difficult. Instead of focusing on perfection, passionate impartiality is a tool of reflection and constant refinement: how can we uphold impartiality in ways that don’t overly harm legitimacy, inclusion, or reciprocity? Just as we reflect on our practice as scholars and practitioners, we ask students to reflect by answering specific questions in their journals. These questions often probe our shortcomings and seek to identify areas for improvement. Despite putting forward the CPD as a model, we are not claiming that we are perfect. Far from it. Our aim is to improve—not perfect—the quality of communication and engagement in our community, and to that goal we are confident in our success.

Conclusion

The CPD as a model for democratic engagement and the associated principle of passionate impartiality offer several contributions to the broader discussions about the scholarship of engagement within higher education, in general, and the neutrality challenge, in particular. First, our model provides an exemplar of scholarly engagement that other universities

have started to replicate and adapt to their local conditions. Moving forward, we hope more institutions like the CPD continue to develop at colleges and universities across the country. In the United States, interested scholars can seek assistance from the NIF Network and the Kettering Foundation's Centers for Public Life program, as well as the University Network for Collaborative Governance, which provide training and in kind support for those interested in starting such centers. Second, this model builds a context for understanding and refining democratic engagement and how it differs from others modes of engagement, particularly in the ways that it focuses on democratic process rather than service or advocacy. This focus on democratic processes raises new challenges for the scholarship of engagement. We offer passionate impartiality as a principle to guide the work of democratic engagement. This principle is an attempt to respond to both practical challenges that we have faced in the work of the CPD and the ideological tensions between neutrality and advocacy.

Whereas we have developed passionate impartiality as a principle to guide democratic engagement tied primarily to centers like the CPD, we realize that not all universities who seek to do democratic engagement have or are in the position to develop a center with such a focus. Nonetheless, we think that passionate impartiality can guide related forms of democratic engagement on university campuses. Passionate impartiality suggests that we can be passionate about addressing the problems *of* democracy without advocating for particular solutions to the problems *in* democracy. Passionate impartiality urges scholars and students to work for civic reform and improved communication practices to address problems of democracy. When professors face the neutrality challenge in their classrooms, passionate impartiality guides them to advocate for democratic values without endorsing partisan beliefs. In turn, the principle of passionate impartiality can be used to teach students about other ways to be a citizen in addition to public advocacy. Classes, for example, could focus on having students research issues from an impartial perspective to identify the inherent tough choices involved in difficult issues and work to undo unnecessary polarization. Assignments that have students develop community discussion guides can be very useful and educational, even without the capacity to actually convene forums. If faculty want to teach about more deliberative forms of public decision making, they can also use nationally developed material from organizations like National Issues Forum, Public Agenda, the Interactivity Foundation, and Everyday Democracy, which are essentially ready-made "meeting in a box" resources that can be used in multiple ways to spark deliberative discussions without all the trappings of a full-fledged center or the need to develop the materials from the beginning.

University professors and students are not the only people doing democratic engagement. There is a growing set of organizations and institutions that seek to support and enable democratic engagement that are essentially working as local resources for passionate impartiality. Community organizations like the United Way, community foundations, and public libraries are increasingly trying to bring their communities together to solve problems using deliberative approaches. Likewise, public relations is shifting to public participation as companies and governmental bodies realize that they want to work with the public not just message to the public. National League of Cities' Democratic Governance program, Institute for Local Government, the, and the Policy Consensus Institute all support governments that want to do democratic engagement not just democratic decision making. Cooperative extension programs are shifting to support community decision making, transforming the role of land grant institutions. Finally, a host of resources for passionate impartiality work under the names of deliberation, dialogue, community mediation, and conflict management, many connected through the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (www.ncdd.org).

The scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1996) has supported efforts to recognize multiple different ways that scholars can craft relationships between universities and communities. Our work on democratic engagement focuses our attention on the political processes of engagement, and the role faculty and students can play to improve the ways communities discuss issues and work through the challenges of democracy. In particular, we argued that we must seek out better ways to negotiate the tensions between deliberative democracy's commitment to legitimacy and inclusion, critical theory's concerns about hegemony and the abuse of power, and the academy's interest in research and high quality data. As this work continues to flourish at centers like the CPD and at colleges and universities around the world, we hope that more and more scholars and practitioners bring together their research, teaching, and service to build the local capacity to address problems *of* and *in* democracy.

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¹ The second author is the founder and Director of the Center for Public Deliberation. The first author was the Associate Director and now serves as a

Senior Research Associate after taking a position at a different university. We draw on our personal experiences, data collected during public events, CPD student assessments, and feedback from collaborators to write about the CPD as a model for democratic engagement.