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CAS 138T

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Spring 2013

Deliberating Sustainability, A Sustainable Practice in Itself

*Introduction:*

Compared to running and biking, talking is an action verb that many people get more “exercise” in. As humans, we talk all the time. In order to communicate with others we use body language, voice inflection, word choice etc. In fact, according to the ABC news article by Ashley Phillips, women and men average about 16,000 words a day. However, in all of this talking, in all of these words, how many conversations are deliberate? How many conversations urge people to consider other ideas, see the bigger picture, or examine the pros and cons of situations? In looking at talking as an action verb, how many conversations actually lead people to action?

Deliberations, unlike debates, are conversations where the goal is to learn all different perspectives regarding a topic. In a debate, there is a winner and loser, but in a deliberation, everyone wins by listening, thinking carefully, and voicing opinions in a safe environment. John Gastil, from the University of Washington states, “[w]hen people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view.” (Gastil, pg. 8) I believe that deliberation is sorely lacking in American society, and needs to be emphasized more in schools and communities across the country. In deliberating sustainability in our CAS class, I believe the deliberation was effective in truly going through different options and examining different perspectives, but not effective in always finding solutions that could be agreed upon by all.

*Deliberation:*

According to John Gastil in his book, Political Communication and Deliberation, there are many facets to an effective deliberation. In order to be a deliberation in the true analytical sense, Gastil suggests five things, “create a solid information base, prioritize the key values at stake, identify a broad range of solutions, weigh the pros and cons, and trade-offs among solutions,” and finally to “make the best decision possible.” (pg. 20) The second facet, which really sets deliberation apart from say debates, or normal conversations, is the social processes. The goals socially in any deliberation are to “adequately distribute speaking opportunities, ensure mutual comprehension, consider other ideas and experiences, and respect other participants.” (Gastil, pg. 20) Deliberation demands a maturity and patience level that some vocal people may wholeheartedly try to respect, but ultimately fail. I truly enjoy the idea of a safe conversation where everyone has the chance and right to speak their opinions, and on the other hand, everyone listens closely to differing views. So many times, in this opinionated society we live in, people simply surround themselves with others whom have the same views, and therefore are constantly justifying their own opinion as being right. In fact, Americans rarely discuss politics outside of their friend or family circles unless it is an election year. (Gastil, pg. 224) However, “deliberation is powerful because we can use its different components to organize research across the diversity of settings…” (Gastil, pg. 11) Deliberation has the power to halt these somewhat close-minded or similarly-minded views that people share with each other. In fact, the most ideal deliberations include a random sample of people. It is always optimal to have as many voices as possible in the room. Oftentimes, when many people are discussing controversial topics, however, it is not ideal. Adrenaline is rushing, personal stakes are high, people’s views need to be heard, but no one really listens. People say what they want to say, and then continue ion their day thinking to themselves, I’m right, your wrong. No one takes the time to really listen and consider other views. I personally think it is refreshing to think of people talking about important issues while following these standards of mutual respect and genuine interest in hearing other sides. Deliberation in itself is a sustainable practice.

*Deliberation as a Class:*

As a class, everyone was cordial respected each other’s opinions, and let everyone speak. It was also interesting to see how we mostly self-moderated each other as well. Oftentimes, someone would say, “hey I think we are getting into option two too much,” or “why don’t we go back to the issue at hand, our society’s dependence on technology,” etc. We also were not afraid to ask people “why?” Or “I really don’t understand that view at all, can you explain that again?” This goes along with some of the social processes of deliberation, as set by Gastil. (pg 20)I believe it was extremely effective to break up our class into two groups so that people could more easily hear each other, and everyone could talk. However, with smaller groups, one runs more of a risk of not having as many “voices.” I believe that as all college freshman, we were definitely not an ideal “random sample” to deliberate. All of us are at college and of the same age. While we may have different majors and backgrounds, we certainly do not represent all of the different views on sustainability.

Voices not represented might include adults, the elderly, as well as younger people. In talking about sustainability we did try to talk a lot about the future. The future generations that will be impacted by any decisions that we make today. I also believe, however, that it is often easier to convince someone else to see another viewpoint if you are similar to them. For example, my comments about sustainable agriculture practices were probably easier for others to hear coming from me, someone their age, than perhaps my father who is a farmer. On the other hand, other voices can carry a credibility that may be more convincing than any similarities. I think this was an interesting point also, because at many points during the deliberation, one could see someone saying something, just as a “devil’s advocate,” to get everyone else thinking about other sides. I personally hate it when people say look at both sides of the story, because in reality an issue or story rarely just has two sides. There are many considerations that should be taken in deliberations. This is perhaps the most important thing to consider, who is not being represented right now, and who would this be detrimental for? Is this the best option for everyone, or just for the people here? One of the great things about our society is all of the differences. It is important therefore to make these differences part of the solution, and not a part of the problem.

*Sustainability: Options One, Two and Three:*

Sustainability is a “buzz-word” that politicians, economists, the media, and others use all the time, but what does it really mean. Before we got to truly discussing option one, pertaining to taking immediate and urgent action to protect precious resources, we worked as a group to in a sense, define sustainability. This, along with reading pertains to the first analytical step Gastil speaks of, creating a solid information base. We talked about how sustainability really means looking to the future, and how the decisions we make now will affect later generations. It is increasing efficiencies, reducing waste and energy consumption, and taking better care of our natural resources. After all, as we destroy more land, and take more resources from the earth, this planet is not going to increase in size or grow. Other important key values were the economy, luxuries, resources, and education. With these key values in mind, we set to deliberating option one. Very quickly we found common ground in thinking that immediate and urgent action was a bad idea. Big change fast is not a good way to work with an international and also societal problem. In finding common ground, our moderator was able to redirect us into thinking about what would be good then. Discussion flowed and we discussed many different ideas including incentives, tax breaks, and a tier system or energy reduction. In finding at least one thing we all had in common, we were then able to as a group freely discuss other ideas. This is problematic only in that obviously some voices were missing (people who thought immediate intervention by the government is necessary.) After discussing this as a group, we came up with several ways that this would be ineffective.

Option two was more debatable. Some believed that we should just let the problem fix itself. Fo0r example, continue to use resources as we do, and eventually either create more technologies and higher taxes or develop another planet to live on. While this idea seemed a little far-fetched, everyone’s ideas were heard and discussed. Others believed that creating more technologies will just be “kicking the can” of the real problem down the road, and more social change should happen. Finally others advocated absolutely for more technology and innovation. This topic was personally more enjoyable to discuss simply because there was more controversy, more ideas being generated, and also more people saying “Oh I never thought of that,” and “Oh, good point.” This again, is why it is beneficial to have people with different opinions when deliberating.

The third option was interesting to see develop. At the beginning, most people were for this option, and as time and discussions progressed, more and more people, including myself, started to see some serious flaws in this idea. Sustainability at the community and personal level is definitely important and should be advocated, but seemed a little far-fetched in this pamphlet. The group really talked a lot about the reality of how our society functions, and the romantic ideals that option three doles out. I truly believe that education (as in school and also at home) should have more of an emphasis on the environment and sustainability, but this was definitely a source of tension. In examining what a sustainable community would look like, it’s also interesting to think about what a deliberative community involves. Gastil declares that a deliberative community or event aims to “promote the creative expression of different perspectives and experiences to help community members see the world through other’s eyes.” (pg. 225) In all three of the options, we carefully weighed the pros and cons, looked at the broad range of solutions (even if not included in the packet), and attempted to come up with a solution, or conversely, what we knew should not be part of the solution.

The most unique part of the deliberation was the conclusion. The idea of all sitting down together and looking at sources of tension, common ground, and ideas that were not adopted by the group but still advocated by individuals. When looking down the list, I had not realized that we all had come to agree on a number of things. For example, in the end, the entire group agreed that any solution needs to be multi-faceted with a combination of government, innovation, and societal change. We all agreed upon a tier system and change with the government, and the ideas of incentives versus imposed laws. We also could agree on the need for a balance between innovation and caution of what new technologies are being created and if they are making us more efficient or more dependent on resources. Another common theme was the idea of education in a broad sense, that people don’t truly know or understand a lot of these problems and that this lack of knowledge is hurting sustainability. This also became a source of tension, however, for where education should take place etc. Gastil concedes that “a group will have deliberated … if it faces the trade-offs among different alternatives, recognizes that no solution is perfect, and tries to grapple with conflicting values and information.” (pg. 9) We certainly realized that no one option was perfect and a combination is more ideal.

I thought it was interesting that one individual said his mind didn’t change but he understood more clearly other viewpoints. I said this was good, and another student said, “I wonder what this means about the effectiveness per say of our deliberation.” But I think he is missing a key point here. Deliberations will not change everyone’s minds, or drastically alter a whole group of people. The goal is to not only hear other views but understand them as well. The success of a deliberation cannot be measured by the people who change their minds, but rather by the number of people afterwards who can say, “Oh, I can see your point there,” or “ I had never thought of that, but I understand where you are coming from now.”

*My Philosophy of Moderating:*

Moderating a deliberation can be difficult. People, especially college freshman, can be easily distracted, so staying at the heart of the issue is imperative. Also, if the conversation wanes or goes in an off-topic direction, it is important for the moderator to bring the group back on track. Coming prepared with questions and topics to discuss is helpful. Also, simply being patient and understanding of other ideas while not being able to discuss your own ideas can be very difficult, and demands a mature and compromising attitude. So here are 8 characteristics I believe a moderator should have.

*1. Patience*

*2. Base Knowledge*

*3. Know “when and where”*

*4. An open mind*

*5. Respect*

*6. Communication skills*

*7. Introduction and Rules*

*8. Willing*

In patience, I mean for the topic, the participants, and any opposing views than their own. A base knowledge of the topic is important, as well as topic points or questions if the deliberation slows down a bit. Something not many think about is the ability to know when to intervene, and the willingness to do so, if need be. An open mind is a necessity, as well as respect for all individuals participating. Moderators should also have a way of communicating with others that encompasses the ideals of a true deliberation, and that also demonstrates that every opinion and voice deserves to be heard. This can be highlighted in a prepared introduction that introduces what an effective deliberation is, as well as the guidelines and characteristics that participants should embody for a successful deliberation. Finally, the eighth characteristic and arguably the most important is willingness. Being willing to step up and intervene if someone is monopolizing the discussion, and also willing to try to coax a quiet person to talk are all important for an effective moderator. They also must be willing to let the discussion continue in a direction they may not have foreseen, and conversely be quiet even if they disagree with the conversation. Gastil stresses throughout the entire book that everyone’s opinion should be heard, and the moderator helps with this process. The moderator is basically the captain of a deliberation voyage, and it is important to keep all crew and passengers in mind. Good moderators promote all of the qualities that effective deliberations contain.

*Conclusion:*

Deliberation is not always easy. There are many sides to any issue, and sifting through controversial topics for a compromise that everyone can agree with at times may seem just too difficult. However, difficult does not mean impossible. Deliberations, when conducted efficiently and effectively have the power to change people’s minds and make a positive change. “In its essence, deliberation should promote tolerance among all peoples, should promote compromise, and it should increase political engagement of all involved as well as the people that they then involve.” (Gastil, pg. 26) I believe that our deliberations in class were a good first step. Now having experienced one, we may be more willing to become more civically engaged, as a class, in discussing controversial topics. In deliberating sustainability, we were in essence practicing a sustainable form of communication. Imagine if every student had the opportunity to be a part of an effective deliberation, what amazing results could come from the respectful discussions between all different types of people.

*Sources Cited:*

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Gastil, John. *Political Communication and Deliberation*. Thousand Oaks, CA [etc.: Sage Publications, 2008. Print.