

Chapter 12

Deliberation With Working College Students Influencing Civic Learning, Opinion Formation and Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the results from the use of deliberation in the classroom where a majority of students are working. The course included college students from Framingham State University. They discussed the issue of the economic impact of a big-box store. This analysis includes a study of the deliberative polling literature; research of the data on civic learning; an examination of the data comprising net changes in the participants' opinions and gross changes in the participants' opinions; and finally a discussion of the implications for engagement. The results illustrate that the process of deliberation affects changes in attitude items at both the individual and aggregate level.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of citizen apathy impacts both students and the larger culture. Putnam (2000, 2004) argues that this occurrence is associated with a decline of social capital which he defines as the structures of social composition such as networks, standards, and trust that make possible coordination and teamwork for mutual value. He utilized considerable statistical evidence of the attitudes and activities of individuals in the United States, discovering that involvement in civic associations, involvement in local affairs, churches, schools and unions, time being with family, friends and neighbors, charitable donating, and belief have decreased. Putnam reasons that active citizenship is connected to social capital and continual engagement which includes lower levels of truancy and a reduced feeling of apathy. This philosophy assumes that being involved will enhance societal trust and value in citizenship which involves partici-

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pating in our representative democracy. That is why social responsibility is weakening due to a decline of social capital.

A possible change is considered by Putnam and Feldstein (2004) by creating optimistic results of leadership and engagement in the environment of social capital. The authors discuss the procedures of building social capital with developing relationships by bringing individuals together and linking the enhancement of networks across diverse populations. They have twelve case studies indicating the establishment of new social capital in our society. One of these case studies involves “Experience Corps” which brings together older citizens who volunteer fifteen hours a week tutoring kids, offering support, and building the community in urban Philadelphia schools. The specifics of the program supply a learning experience in structural advancement in this particular environment, including the foundational importance of commitment, the forming of sincere relationships amongst the volunteers, students, and the school. Putnam and Feldstein believe that what is being done in these case studies is vital to the effective construction of social capital.

The increase of social capital based on the characteristics from these case studies can be incorporated by faculty in higher education. Putnam contends that student growth is impacted by social capital and constant exposure has been linked to positive effects including lower levels of absenteeism and a reduced feeling of apathy. There is a relationship between students and faculty that is very personalized includes involvement and a direct interaction within a course. The growth of political apathy and the decline of social capital among college-level students has been an increasing concern to educators, policy makers and scholars (Flanagan and Levine 2010; Levine 2007; Noack and Jugert 2014). A number of methods for involving citizens and making their expressions valued have been advanced. These include focus groups (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014; O’heocha and Conboy 2012; Morrison, 2003); citizen juries (Street et al., 2014; Niemeyer and Blamey 2003); citizen panels (Amelung, 2012; Boogaard, Oosting, and Bock 2008), and devising seminars (Susskind and Rumore 2015).

The deliberative poll is different from these previous methods listed above because it allows for estimating informed opinion while retaining the possibility of association to the overall population through sampling (Fishkin and Luskin 2005; Olsen and Trenz 2014; Hansen and Anderson 2004; Gerber 2015). Deliberation in the classroom incorporates the importance of commitment, the forming of sincere relationships amongst the students and the faculty while allowing the class to know that their voices and opinions are being heard and matter. Allowing for deliberation in a classroom and providing both sides of an issue might reasonably anticipate that these student decisions may reflect an individual’s ‘true’ interests. Deliberation is a normative theory that assumes rational communicative actions, civic learning and involvement by its citizens. As a form of shared inquiry, deliberation involves several important elements for classroom instruction: a direct relationship, personalized and continuous contact, students’ participation as well as informed decision-making.

The discipline of Political Science is best suited to promote political efficacy, civic learning and engagement in a number of ways. The discipline courses provide instruction regarding the association between democratic practices, government institutions, and civic learning. Studies have found that enrolling in an American Politics course might be an important way to enhance civic learning and citizenship (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon 2011; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). It has been demonstrated over and over again that an increase of education makes it more likely that an individual will engage in voting (Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 2012). This study utilizes an adapted method derived from the Deliberative Polling Process (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004; Fishkin, Luskin, and Jowell 2000, 2002; Hansen and Anderson

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