

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

Pathways to Deliberation in the Classroom

Why Include Deliberation in the Curriculum?

Students should understand **deliberation as a necessary component of scholarly activity**, a process that (like research itself) enhances the production of reports, analyses, and arguments in nearly all academic disciplines. Deliberation is at root a collaborative social activity whereby participants attempt mutually and respectfully to identify and understand the contrasting perspectives, positions, and claims that have been offered, or might reasonably appear, in response to a contestable matter. Every participant in scholarly activity enters a field of contrasting perspectives and multiple findings regarding some shared object of study. Indeed, disagreements of interpretation and analysis lie at the heart of intellectual and scholarly life. Knowledge evolves in response to how such disagreements are navigated or negotiated over time. **The epistemic vitality of a field of study is tied to how fairly, robustly, and creatively its practitioners deliberate about its competing findings.**

In order to model such intellectual conversations and to involve our students in the direct exchange of contrasting analyses and arguments found in academic life, we have fashioned some classes to involve discussion as a key component of teaching and learning. Many educators view such **class discussion as a necessary prelude to their students' written and spoken presentations**. Most educators believe that discussion enhances or solidifies learning itself. Yet, **discussion remains an elusive activity**, with students often unsure of its efficacy and professors—with all good intentions—bedeviled by its variable and exigent forms. **Facilitated deliberation aims for a more cogent conversation**, driven by specific roles and responsibilities that students bring “to the table.” Approaching a controversy as a rich field of potentiality, the group probes past and present findings with an eye toward a future of new understandings which may transcend previous conclusions, negotiate a middle ground, or revalue prior commitments and interests.

Students “earn their conclusions” by first **learning to listen carefully** to those with whom they disagree. Recognizing an arena of contrasting arguments allows students to **contextualize their findings, to compare data, to contrast evidence, and to situate their own work** within a continuum of inquiry. Perhaps most importantly, in-class deliberation enacts the **productive disagreement** characteristic of scholarly activity. Teaching our students how to deliberate enhances their curiosity, boosts their intellectual confidence, and equips them with a skill to carry into their civic and professional lives.

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We envision three types of courses that engage in this pedagogical work and incorporate some element of deliberation. The first are **courses that include a deliberation module or component**. While not deeply engaging with the literature on deliberation or embedding deliberation through the course, these courses expose students to deliberative approaches and begin to teach them specific deliberative skills. For example, **a science course** might dedicate a few classes to deliberating about a controversy that is related to the subject matter of the course. It might engage with an intellectual debate within the discipline or with the policy implications of a particular scientific topic covered in the course.

The second type of course has deliberation more deeply embedded in its syllabus. Such **deliberation-involved courses** dedicate a significant amount of time and focus on the pedagogical work described above. These deliberation-involved courses include the following five elements:

- **Significant Time for Deliberation:** A significant portion of class time (and at least 25%) should be devoted to facilitated deliberations regarding significant political, social, aesthetic, ethical, scientific, historical, or other scholarly and public controversies made available through common texts, artifacts, or other materials. In a MWF course, for example, one class a week might be dedicated to deliberation, in a T Th course, one class every two weeks, or in a weekly seminar, a third of each class, or every third class.
- **Engagement with the Deliberation Literature:** Through at least one reading and classroom discussion and/or lecture, attention should be given to the theory and practice of deliberation, differentiated from debate and ordinary conversation, and its role in scholarly inquiry and democratic life should be made clear. The DCI can provide suggestions for readings and topics of discussion.
- **Cultivation of Deliberation-Related Skills:** Cultivate the practical skills of deliberation, including self-reflection, empathetic listening, critical thinking, intellectual collaboration across differences, and discipline-sensitive analysis and argument, and communication in both spoken and written forms – and possibly other material forms as well. The DCI can provide more specific descriptions of these skills and specific exercises or assignments to practice these skills.
- **Deliberation-Related Reflection Opportunities:** Provide robust opportunities for reflection on the process and outcomes of class deliberations. The DCI can provide a more specific description of this skill and specific exercises or assignments to practice it.
- **Learning Outcome and Graded Aspect of the Course:** Include improved deliberative skills as a learning outcome and graded component of the course, either directly or as a component of participation or other assignments. The DCI can provide examples of what this might look like.

We have articulated these components in the interest of developing some shared understanding of and commitment to what defines a deliberation-involved course. These descriptions will likely evolve over time as we experiment with different approaches and share our lessons learned with one another.

We have begun to infuse deliberation into several first-year writing courses, which depend on seminar discussions of both contestable issues and evaluations of students' work-in-progress as sites of not only disagreement but also collective decision-making. Students in these courses ask students to deliberate with one another about the arguments that they might explore in their papers for the course. In the fall of 2020, Davidson's Writing Program and the DCI will be training a cohort of **Writing Fellows** to facilitate exactly such discussions in all of the College's fall writing courses. In addition, we can supply to any course at the College DCI Deliberation Facilitators, who have been trained to assist students in deliberating on social and intellectual issues within small or seminar-sized groups.

The third type of course is dedicated to exploring the topic of deliberation and public discourse directly and in depth. These **deliberation-focused courses** engage the literature, theory, and practices of deliberative democracy and explore the challenges and opportunities associated with deliberative citizenship. The DCI hopes to support the development of at least one such course in the future.

If you are interested in adding a deliberation module or component to one of your courses or developing a deliberation-involved or deliberation-focused course, please contact dci@davidson.edu and we will be happy to support your efforts. We recognize that the coronavirus pandemic introduces additional challenges to planning and implementing deliberation opportunities in the classroom. We can help you think through these challenges and adapt your approach to the current conditions.