

The Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) Project Impact on U.S. Students and Teachers

Patricia G. Avery, University of Minnesota

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Classroom discussions about controversial public issues have long been advocated by civic educators as vital preparation for informed and engaged citizenship. The “discussion of current events and controversial issues” is identified by researchers as one of six “proven practices” effective in equipping young people with the knowledge and skills for civic engagement.¹ Regular discussions of current issues in an open and supportive classroom climate are associated with a number of positive civic outcomes, including higher political knowledge, interest, trust, and efficacy, as well as expected and actual electoral participation.²

Despite these findings, research indicates that issues discussions are not commonplace in schools; accountability pressures, school and community norms, and lack of adequate skills often cause teachers to avoid controversial issues discussions. Additionally, students express concerns about speaking in class and expressing unpopular opinions.³

The **Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) Project**⁴ was a series of three related initiatives directed by the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago (CRFC) in partnership with the Constitutional Rights Foundation in Los Angeles (CRF) and Street Law, Inc. The purpose of DID was twofold: to provide a model for secondary teachers to learn and appreciate among themselves the power of deliberation in their classrooms; and to engage their students in substantive deliberations on significant public issues and democratic principles deliberation. Deliberation is a specific type of discussion in which participants analyze multiple perspectives on a public issue

with the goal of making a decision or arriving at a reasoned judgment (e.g., “Should voting be compulsory?”). The DID project focused on training secondary teachers to use one model of deliberation, *Structured Academic Controversy* (SAC).⁵ The SAC model requires students to present arguments for both sides of an issue, to analyze the different perspectives, and then to articulate an evidence-based position on the issue. Between 2004 and 2012,⁶ 377 teachers from 10 states (California, Colorado, Indiana, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia) participated in the project, and used the deliberation method at least three times with 14,455⁷ students.

Annual evaluations of the project typically included pre- and post-questionnaires for teachers and students, classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups. Data were gathered from one class per teacher each year. Following are some of the more important findings on the project’s impact on students and teachers.⁸

Impact on Students

In pre- and post-questionnaire comparisons, students reported **greater political knowledge** (“*I know more about politics than most people my age*”)⁹ and **understanding of political issues** (“*I am able to understand most political issues easily*”)¹⁰ after the deliberations. There were no significant changes in students’ political interest.

Students in deliberation classes demonstrated a significant increase in **perspective-taking skills**.

They were significantly more likely to identify reasons for the position that they did **not** support and were able to identify more arguments for their own positions in comparison to students in control classes.¹¹

As shown in Figure 1,¹² solid majorities of students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they **enjoyed the deliberations** and that **the deliberations helped them to:**

- **learn** a lot,
- develop a **better understanding of the issues**, and
- increase their confidence in discussing issues.

In focus groups, students frequently talked about how the deliberative process had increased their knowledge of issues, as well as their ability to consider different perspectives.

I've learned a lot about subjects that I didn't even know existed, like the deliberation today. I'd never even heard of cap and trade systems, and my opinions have been changed by the deliberations because I learned more about the subjects. (Indiana student)

Politically, [the U.S. is] so split and people can't see it from the other side and they're just like "No, I'm right, I'm right." They won't ever back down. But this [deliberation] process kind of makes you have to think from the other side. You have to give [your group] valid points. So going into politics or even other aspects of life too you'll be able to draw on this and use it in the real world. (Student from Minnesota)

In comparison to White students, **African American and Latino students** reported enjoying the deliberations slightly more; they also reported **small but consistently more positive perceptions** of the impact of the deliberations on their learning, ability to state opinions, and confidence in talking about issues (see Figure 2).¹³ There were no significant differences based on gender or language spoken at home.¹⁴

Figure 1. Student Report of Impact of Deliberations

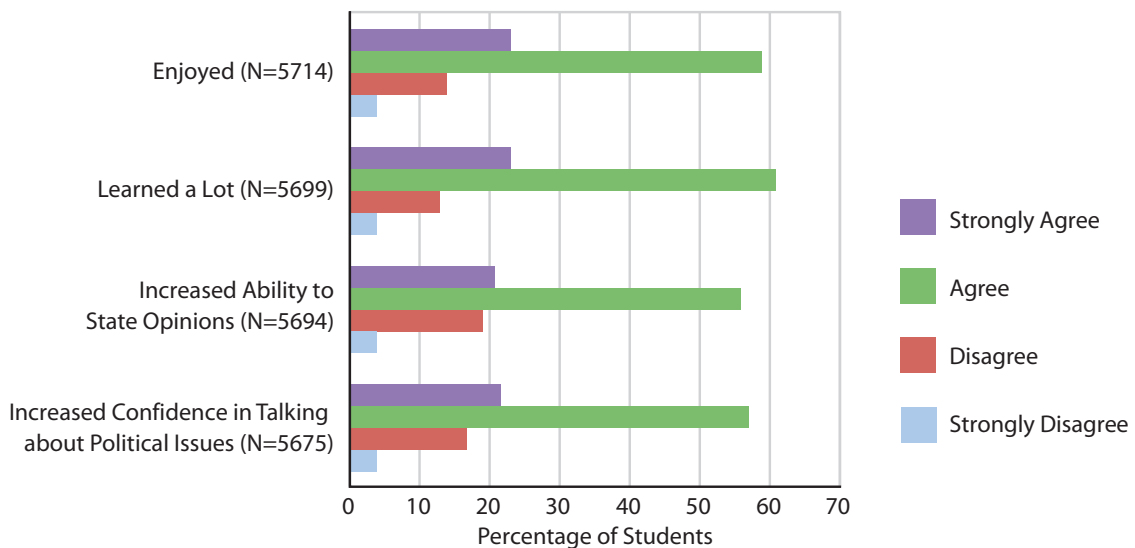
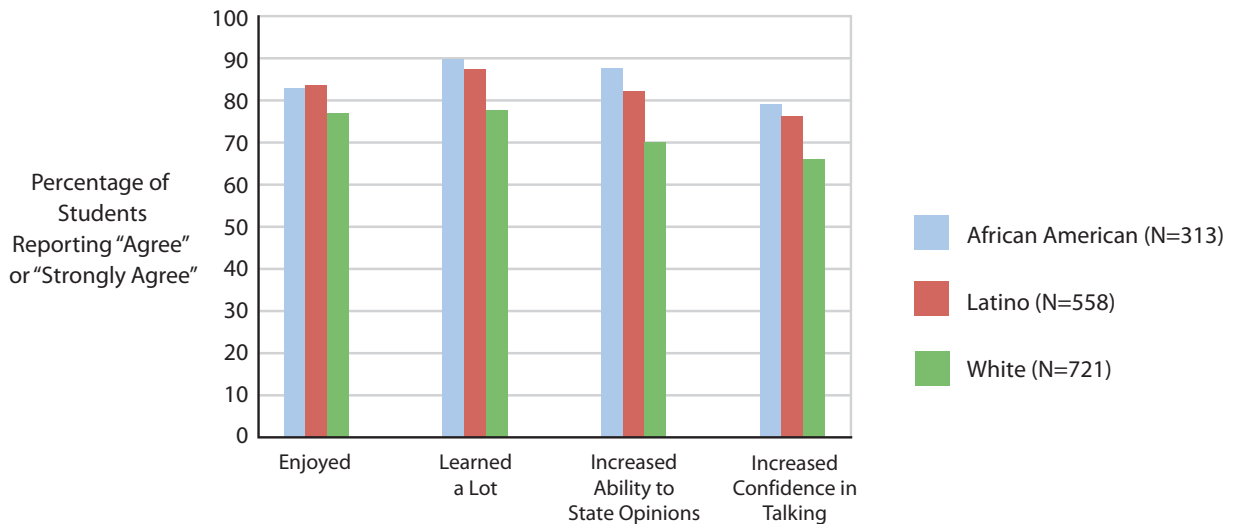


Figure 2. Student Report of Impact of Deliberations by Race/Ethnicity

Impact on Teachers

Across the years, almost all teachers reported that, as a result of the teacher workshops, they had “enough **skill to conduct effective deliberations**” (95-98%) and that they would “**continue to use deliberation**” as a teaching methodology after the project (94-100%).

In interviews, teachers frequently reported that their participation in the project had changed their approach to teaching. The following teachers’ comments are representative.

I am more likely to use cooperative learning and have students discuss in groups. So my classroom is much more student-centered than it was previously. (Illinois teacher)

I try to do a better job of presenting multiple perspectives on issues and I try to encourage kids to develop a stance with evidence to support that particular stance. (Teacher from North Carolina)

I am more interested in talking about controversial issues and teaching students how to respect and acknowledge others’ opinions, while still forming an educated opinion of their own. (Maryland teacher)

Teachers often found that their greater pedagogical skills impacted their teaching in all of their classes, and regardless of whether they were conducting deliberations.

Summary

Results suggest that the deliberative process may have a positive impact on secondary students in areas important to the development of thoughtful and engaged citizenship:

- Political knowledge
- Understanding of political issues
- Perspective-taking
- Ability to state opinions
- Confidence in stating opinions

Additionally, students appeared to enjoy and learn from the process. Future studies should examine the possibility of a slightly differential impact on students from different ethnic/racial backgrounds.

Results also indicate that, with some training, teachers can develop the skills to facilitate effective deliberations and that these skills may promote positive changes in their overall pedagogical approaches (e.g., more student-centered classrooms, increase in classroom dialog).

- ¹ See Civic Mission of Schools. (2011). *Guardians of democracy: The civic mission of schools*. Retrieved from: <http://carnegie.org/publications/search-publications/pub/405/>
- ² See, for example, Andolina, M. W., Jenkins, K., Zukin, C., & Keeter, S. (2003). Habits from home, lessons from school: Influences on youth civic engagement. *PS Online*, 275-280. Retrieved from: <http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/PSApr03Andolina.pdf>. Barr, D. J., Boulay, B., Selman, R. L., McCormick, R., Lowenstein, E., Garnse, B., . . . Leonard, B. (2015). A randomized controlled trial of professional development for interdisciplinary civic education: Impacts on humanities teachers and their students. *Teachers College Record*, 117(4). Campbell, D. E. (2008). Voice in the classroom: How an open classroom climate fosters political engagement among adolescents. *Political Behavior*, 30(4), 437-454. Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Kerr, D., & Losito, B. (2010). *ICSS 2009 International Report: Civic knowledge, attitudes, and engagement among lower-secondary school students in 38 countries*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H., & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.
- ³ For an overview of the factors that affect the prevalence of issues discussions, see Hess, D., & Avery, P.G. (2008). Discussion of controversial issues as a form and goal of democratic education. In J. Arthur, I. Davies, & C. L. Hahn (Eds.). *International handbook on education for citizenship* (pp. 506-518). London: SAGE Publications.
- ⁴ All three Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) initiatives were funded by the U.S. Department of Education (Awards #Q304A040003, #Q304A070005, and #Q304A100003). More information is available at www.deliberating.org.
- ⁵ The DID Project used an adapted version of Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), originally developed by David and Roger Johnson. See Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1979). Conflict in the classroom: Controversy and learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 49(1), 51-70. Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2009). Energizing learning: The instructional power of conflict. *Educational Researcher*, 38(1), 37-51. In the SAC model, the teacher typically divides students into groups of four. Within these groups, two students are assigned to each position. Pairs read source materials, prepare their reasons for supporting their position, and then the “pro” pair presents while the “con” pair listens and takes notes, and vice versa. Importantly, students then switch sides and those originally assigned the “con” position are tasked with presenting the “pro” side, and vice versa. After studying both positions, students consider the merits of the arguments, and develop individual or group opinions that they are expected to support with evidence. The SAC model differs from other models of deliberation in that students are assigned to represent positions they may not agree with. Because they are adopting assigned roles, however, students may feel freer to present unpopular positions.
- ⁶ With the exception of 2010-2011, the project was conducted on an annual basis.
- ⁷ This number is based on students who completed either the pre- or post-questionnaire. Results presented in Figure 1 are limited to students who participated in the evaluation of the project (one class per teacher in a given year) and were present for the administration of both the pre- and post-questionnaires. The difference between the numbers reflects student attrition, unusable questionnaires, students skipping questionnaire items, items excluded from questionnaires for one or more years, teachers neglecting to administer one of the questionnaires, etc.
- ⁸ The DID initiatives involved secondary teachers and their students in both the United States and thirteen countries in Eastern Europe, western Asia, and Latin America: Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, Estonia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mexico, Peru, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine. This abstract focuses on the impact of the initiatives on U.S. participants.
- ⁹ Effect sizes (r) over five years ranged from .23 to .39. Effect size refers to the magnitude of the differences between (in this case) students’ pre- and post-questionnaire responses. The standard interpretation for r is: small $\geq .10$, medium $\geq .30$, and large $\geq .50$. The magnitude of the difference is thus small to medium.
- ¹⁰ Effect sizes (r) over five years ranged from .11 to .21.
- ¹¹ See Avery, P. G., Levy, S. A., & Simmons, A. M. M. (2014). Secondary students and the deliberation of public issues. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 849-854. Deliberation students ($n=297$) were significantly more likely than Comparison students ($n=238$) to identify reasons for the position that they did not support ($p = 0.001$). Deliberation students also identified more arguments for their own positions than Comparison students ($p = 0.002$).
- ¹² These items were included five of the six years of the project.
- ¹³ Data from 2007-2008, the year the project included sufficient numbers of students in each group to make comparisons.
- ¹⁴ Data for gender based on five of the six years of the project; data for language spoken in home based on 2007-2008 data.

Patricia G. Avery is Professor of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and served as the lead evaluator for the Deliberating in a Democracy project. Her research focuses on citizenship education and political socialization.