

DELIBERATION

& the Work of Higher Education



Innovations for
the Classroom,
the Campus,
and the
Community

Cristina Alfaro
David D. Cooper
Allison N. Crawford
Michael D'Innocenzo
Joni Doherty
Larkin S. Dudley and Ricardo S. Morse
Maria Farland
Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan
Lee Ingham
Dennis C. Roberts and Matthew R. Johnson
Douglas J. Walters

Edited by **John R. Dedrick,**
Laura Grattan, and Harris Dienstfrey

© 2008 by the Kettering Foundation

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Deliberation & the Work of Higher Education: Innovations for the Classroom, the Campus, and the Community is published by Kettering Foundation Press. The interpretations and conclusions contained in this book represent the views of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, its directors, or its officers.

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to:

Permissions
Kettering Foundation Press
200 Commons Road
Dayton, Ohio 45459

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

First edition, 2008

Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN Number: 978-0-923993-25-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007939255

Chapter Five

Four Seasons of Deliberative Learning in a Department of Rhetoric and American Studies: From General Education to the Senior Capstone

David D. Cooper

This essay describes a multiyear effort to infuse deliberative democracy and deliberative learning practices into three new humanities courses that the author developed and taught at Michigan State University. The courses range from a general-education writing requirement to an elective upper division American studies seminar. Each of the experimental classes is distinguished by a pedagogy that combines active-learning techniques—principally service learning—and deliberative democratic practices, including public forums, study circles, and civic engagement opportunities for students. Taken as a whole, the author’s journey shows that the synergy between democratic deliberation and engaged learning can energize the undergraduate humanities classroom at all levels, even the senior capstone. The experience also reaffirms for the author Thomas Jefferson’s important and enduring message to future teachers: a strong democracy requires nothing less than a diligent and purposeful education for citizenship.

From 2002 to 2005, I set out on a systematic journey to incorporate deliberative democracy and deliberative learning practices into a sequence of three new courses I developed and taught at Michigan State University (MSU) in an interdisciplinary Department of Rhetoric and American Studies. The courses covered a full gamut of undergraduate teaching assignments, from a general-education requirement to a senior capstone project. This essay is partly a description of some of the techniques I tried out

along the way, partly a lab report on the outcomes of the experiments I conducted, and partly a travelogue about the highs and lows of the journey—the exhilarating discoveries I made, the company I kept, as well as the wrong turns I took and jams I got into.

Each of the experimental classes along that journey is distinguished by a pedagogy that cross-fertilizes active-learning techniques, principally service learning, and deliberative democratic practices, such as public forums, study circles, and civic engagement opportunities for students. Taken as a whole, my journey shows, I hope, that the synergy between deliberation and active learning can energize the undergraduate humanities classroom at all levels, even the senior capstone. Moreover, I bring away from these travels two key, but by no means original, insights into the value of deliberation and the challenge, as Daniel Yankelovich puts it, of “making democracy work in a complex world” such as ours. Democracy itself, I rediscovered, is fundamentally a rhetorical art. And deliberation, the discursive engine of democracy, can be a powerful, compelling, even transformative pedagogy that challenges students and teachers alike to connect principles, ideas, and critical reflection—the usual and venerable fare of the humanities classroom—to the crucible of lived community problems in which ordinary citizens conduct the extraordinary work of citizenship.

Setting Out: A Toehold in General Education

In the late 1990s, several colleagues and I organized the Service Learning Writing Project, an initiative in service learning and composition studies. By yoking together rigorous classroom writing instruction, critical readings in American civic culture, and real-world writing projects in community, municipal, and non-profit agencies, we found that students developed more complex understandings of the crucial role of language and critical thinking skills in the work of social and political change. We eventually established a new writing course in 1999—“Public Life in America”

—which fulfills a general-education writing requirement at Michigan State University and currently enrolls nearly 300 students a year in 12 stand-alone sections.¹

During the last few years, inspired largely by my participation in a Kettering Foundation workgroup, my interest has turned to the relationship between rhetoric and democratic practices and, in particular, to how deliberative democracy techniques might be used for teaching, writing, and critical thinking. Through continuing conversations and alliances with the colleagues whose work also appears in this book, I learned that the best way to promote a robust democracy is to encourage public deliberation of controversial issues, foster strong communities, and help promote citizens' civic, rather than professional identities. In the case of our students and higher education, this meant that to strengthen what Harry Boyte calls America's "civic muscle" we had to practice deliberative democracy in our classrooms and on our campuses.

I began experimenting, then, with methods of connecting the rhetorical and critical-thinking requirements of MSU's general-education writing course with Kettering's traditions of deliberative democracy and with the particular methodology of public conversation and problem solving practiced in hundreds of National Issues Forums (NIF) taking place across the country.

All these strands came together in 2002 when my colleague Eric Fretz and I designed a pair of closely related experimental writing courses in the general-education sequence, which would provide students with opportunities to study techniques of deliberation and

¹ My colleague Laura Julier and I published a comprehensive curriculum development resource guide on this work, including a framing essay, detailed syllabi, student reflections, community-partner perspectives, a portfolio of community-writing projects, and a resource bibliography. *Writing in the Public Interest: Service Learning and the Writing Classroom* is available for free download at <http://writing.msu.edu/content/wipi/c&j.html>. For a more recent update, see "Public-Interest Writing Courses Help Students Connect Written Expression with Community Problem Solving" (*Muses* 18.1, Summer/Fall 2006): <http://www.cal.msu.edu>.

to practice both public dialogue and public problem solving. These two courses were not team taught in the traditional sense. Fretz was scheduled to teach a writing section with a focus on “Race and Ethnicity,” and I was assigned a “Public Life in America” class with a special emphasis on education and youth issues. We each designed our own syllabus, although there was a good deal of overlapping of required texts, learning strategies, and writing assignments.

Our classes incorporated three active-learning components, which we designed to link the academic issues of the separate courses, foster a strong learning community between our classes and among our students, and practice democratic skills of deliberation, collaboration, and participation. The first component involved setting up a fairly traditional service experience for students, and the next two components required students from both of our classes to collaborate on organizing an NIF forum on youth violence open to the public and, later on, to moderate smaller deliberative study circles in class.

Students practiced public dialogue and public problem solving early in the semester by conducting in-class practice forums on topics like the future of affirmative action and the quality of public education. (In my class, students even framed and deliberated a class attendance policy.) We devised several writing assignments, often in consultation with students, that moved students away from typical arguments based on debate to arguments anchored in the looser soil of deliberation. Students also analyzed, evaluated, and presented arguments on topics of current concern to local audiences, an activity we called “grass roots democracy in action.”

Next, students gained important insights into public problems through question and answer sessions with invited guests (including a circuit court judge) and by working and learning in community settings with a number of community partners, including several Neighborhood Network Centers located in Lansing.²

² Fretz and I explore that collaboration in detail in our article “The Service Learning Writing Project: Re-Writing the Humanities Through Service Learning and Public Work.” *Reflections* 5.1/2 (Spring 2006): 133-152.

Our students then collaborated in a number of small teams to research, organize, and host the public forum on “Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?” Students designed and drafted a discussion guide for forum participants and worksheets and instructions for moderator assistants. Students also handed out and evaluated pre- and postforum questionnaires. They self-selected into committees that worked on timetables and deadlines for various stages of forum organization, communications, publicity, and background research on things like children’s television, media violence, and effects of video games.

After the forum, one of the work groups assembled and organized all of the forum work from each project team into a comprehensive portfolio. Fretz and I drafted and circulated to all of our students an extensive portfolio assessment and evaluation memo that critically addressed the contribution of each work group—all of which led to a deliberation we had not anticipated.

Our students were generally ruffled by our C+ evaluation of the portfolio. The grade was assigned to each student, and it counted for a sizable portion of their final grades. We took advantage of our students’ dissatisfaction and invited them to put together a small deliberative forum to take a closer look at the evaluation memo and to present point-by-point arguments in favor of a higher grade. A small student work group agreed to frame the issue and prepare three choices for deliberation. Another work group took responsibility for moderating the joint-class forum, another for postforum reflections, and so on.

To give a flavor of how our students thought through the issue and how well they had integrated the deliberative process into the learning ethos of the classes, here is the discussion guide they prepared:

Choice 1: The NIF forum collaborative grade of C+ is fair and equitable.

Prof. Fretz and Prof. Cooper’s evaluation memo is thorough, well argued, and reasonable. While some students may nit-pick with details, overall the judgment is sound and the

conclusions are justified. All the students in [each class] clearly knew well in advance that the forum work would be evaluated with a common grade. Sure, some students may have worked harder than others. But to insure the integrity and honesty of the forum project as an exercise in democracy and public life, students must be willing to accept the common grade.

Choice 2: Working groups that excelled deserve a better grade than C+. On the other hand, the evaluation memo suggests that other working groups may deserve less than a C+.

The working groups should be evaluated on a group-by-group basis. Prof. Fretz and Cooper should grade each group according to the arguments made in the separate committee sections of the evaluation memo. This grading procedure is ideal because it takes into consideration both collaborative work and individual effort. It is also more fair. The downside: all the work groups knew from the outset that the portfolio would be graded collaboratively. Is it ok to change that policy after the fact?

Choice 3: The common grade for the NIF forum work should be higher.

The evaluation memo grade is simply too low. Granted, the points are well argued. No one claims Prof. Fretz and Cooper are being overly unfair. However, the forum was hard work for *all* students. It took up almost a third of the course work. It was a successful public deliberation. The portfolio, measured by even the toughest standards, was an excellent piece of work. No one disputes these points. Prof. Fretz and Prof. Cooper need to raise the grade, and the class will accept without question the higher common grade.

Fretz and I were convincingly swayed by Choice 3, and we raised the common grade to a B.

After the public forum—and once the dust had settled from the mini-forum on grading—our students had an opportunity, during the last two weeks of class, to moderate study circle sessions

on “Youth Issues, Youth Voices” and “Changing Faces, Changing Communities” based on material provided by the Study Circles Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut. Study circles are smaller and more intimate than the typical public forum, so they give students more opportunities to prepare for, actively engage in, and moderate public discussions. We required each student in our classes to moderate at least one study circle discussion. We felt it was important to provide even the most reticent of our students the chance to practice habits of deliberation, such as critical listening, asking leading questions, generating and sustaining discussions, staying neutral, and leading groups toward consensus.

Afterthoughts

Reflecting on our experimental classes convinced Fretz and me that engaging in public work in higher education means including students and their interests into the work and life of the classroom—even, and perhaps most important, in decisions about the syllabus and calendar, how to use class time and space, writing assignments, and evaluations. In an organic classroom like ours, where teaching/learning techniques have to mesh with pedagogical philosophy, teaching in the traditional sense of disseminating knowledge and downloading students with information becomes transformed into a collaborative process in which professors and students work jointly toward a common goal.

We discovered that learning strategies that promote public work through deliberative pedagogy offer teachers rewards and fresh perspectives as well as posing difficult challenges. Organizing public forums, facilitating off campus community-based learning experiences, practicing deliberative strategies, and co-designing assignments with students thrust faculty into new, sometimes uncomfortable positions. No longer the “sage on the stage,” teachers become facilitators and, in many ways, colearners with students—and co-workers, too. We no longer directed from the sidelines or articulated abstractions behind a podium. We found ourselves doing work right alongside our students.

As we became facilitators and colearners, we had to give up some expectations about what should happen in a college classroom. In the process, we found new ways of thinking about those questions that all of us in higher education ponder: Where does the learning take place? How can I ratchet up the learning curve? What do I want my students to take away with them? Through practicing democracy in the classroom, we are able to answer these questions in different and more interesting ways than we could have in a more traditional classroom setting. Students learned disciplinary knowledge (in this case, writing rhetorical arguments, thinking critically, connecting written argument to concrete public problem solving) through experience and practice. In addition, they began to experiment with ways of operating and effecting change in the public sphere.

For our part, we learned that the role of professor is both bigger and smaller than the ones articulated by the traditions and expectations of our academic disciplines. Our most challenging and prosaic role, for example, was that of project manager. We helped our students anticipate snags, identify community and university resources, solve problems, develop networking skills, and lay out efficient workflow—skills we felt were basic to the toolkit of citizenship. We also fetched envelopes and department letterhead, provided campus contacts to facilitate logistics for the forum, and arranged for the use of printers, fax machines, office phones, and computers.

For me, a striking and lasting consequence of adopting and adapting to a deliberative pedagogy was that I no longer considered myself a “teacher” in the conventional sense in which my colleagues understood, practiced, and peer reviewed the role. Rather, I became an architect of my students’ learning experiences or maybe a midwife of their practices of becoming better writers and active citizens—or, perhaps more to the point, something like a forum moderator. In a public forum, successful deliberation is often inversely related to the visibility and presence—indeed, the knowledge and issue expertise—of the moderator. The same applies to a teacher in a deliberative classroom: you spend a great deal of creative intellectual energy listening to students and learning to get out of their way so they

can take ownership of the subject, in the same way that forum participants must “own” an issue.

That fundamental role shift totally changed my experience of the writing classroom, from mundane matters like the physical arrangement of desks and the venues where learning takes place to epistemological underpinnings, ethical practices and boundaries, not to mention problematic relationships with more traditionally-minded colleagues who felt that I was cutting my students too much slack. In the annual department review, one of my colleagues criticized me, for example, for comments repeated on several narrative evaluations from students that “it was like the students were teaching the class.” In the future, obviously, I need to do a better job of articulating a philosophy of deliberative pedagogy so my colleagues can translate statements like that as observations of practice and not criticisms of my teaching style.

The deliberative pedagogy that we employed demands a great deal of preparation and planning, but at the same time requires spontaneity and flexibility—and a certain degree of uncertainty. Our students’ learning experiences encompassed complex and interlocking community groups, constituencies, organizations, and several offices and units at my university. Grounded in multiple learning partnerships, action research, and real-world contexts, learning became a dynamic social process—emergent, messy, edgy, relational, sometimes inconclusive, occasionally (though not often) painful and confused, frequently full of entanglements, and always, I hope, challenging. I found myself constantly pushing the class to a point of agitation, churning, and controlled chaos because that was where the real learning took place—at that threshold where students became present in, and took ownership of, their own learning experience.

Through the Gateway into the Professional Writing Major

Shortly after my experiments with deliberative democracy and pedagogy in the general-education writing sequence, my department expanded its mission by offering a new undergraduate degree

in Professional Writing. The major is designed to capitalize on and complement our teaching, research, and outreach strengths in rhetoric and American studies. In addition to preparing students for careers in professional writing, the major lays solid foundations for graduate work in rhetoric, writing, technical writing, the teaching of writing, and the study of culture. From the outset, the Professional Writing Program has emphasized the organizational, disciplinary, and cultural contexts for writing. Students specialize in one of three advanced writing tracks: (1) technical writing and writing in digital environments, (2) professional editing and publishing, and (3) writing in cultures and communities.

I saw the new major as a good opportunity to take what I had learned about deliberative democracy and active-learning techniques in the general-education writing sequence and apply it to upper-division courses in the major. Along with several colleagues from the Service Learning Writing Project, I served as a consultant to the curriculum planning committee for the “writing in cultures and communities” track. I later designed and taught the first gateway course for that track, appropriately titled “Writing in the Public Interest,” in which students explored various forms of public writing and their roles in democracy and public culture.

In this course, drawing on the history of civic culture in America, I used examples that highlighted the power and possibility of collaborative decision making. I saw these examples as case studies of deliberative democracy in action. They ranged from turn of the century women’s literary clubs and the 19th-century Chautauqua movement and Lyceum system, to 20th-century settlement houses, citizenship schools, and the contemporary National Issues Forums. The study of these historical foundations helped prepare students to practice rhetorical conventions for deliberating and arguing in a democratic community. One of the important goals of the new course was to understand how language shapes community and democratic practices, and how, in turn, social processes and democratic traditions influence language.

Public writing and active learning were once again intertwined. Students worked with numerous local nonprofits and public

advocacy organizations, from the Sexual Assault Crisis Intervention Center to the Ronald McDonald House, and for each practiced its particular conventions of public writing. Students compiled portfolios that were designed to get them “thinking rhetorically” about the groups with which they worked. They collected and analyzed examples of public writing. Students wrote essays about which forms of discourse were best suited to an agency or organization’s public agenda, what messages were being communicated, what positions advocated, and at which registers of the public sphere the messages were aimed (local, regional, national).

Our reading and discussion revealed different intellectual and conceptual frameworks for “writing in the public interest.” We examined case studies of what are called “rhetorical situations” and how they are bound up in issues of public interest. A rhetorical situation is an occasion that compels constructive argument in the public sphere. Such arguments—the rhetorical basis, it should be noted, for a deliberative forum—always take place within a social or public context, and within communities that define the relationships between writers/speakers, readers/listeners, and issues of shared import and concern. We looked, for example, at the way the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado (April 20, 1990), created a rhetorical situation concerning gun control and youth violence which rippled across the country. Or how Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction” at the 2004 Super Bowl prompted a rhetorical situation about decency, moral values, and the limits and responsibilities of broadcast media—issues we are still brooding over today.

A centerpiece of the course involved a semester-long project and partnership with the Michigan Campus Compact and the Michigan House of Representatives’ Civics Commission (MHCC), a bipartisan initiative dedicated to the proposition that the best way to teach civics is to engage students in the public work of the state legislature. My students researched and designed Web-based, deliberatively framed opinion polls for the commission, aimed at providing college students throughout the state with a new venue to learn about and express their opinions on legislative proposals that had some

bearing on young adult issues—for example, public smoking bans, state control of universities, and tough new “Zero Tolerance” laws. In addition to posting polling questions, students framed alternative positions on the proposals, prepared comprehensive background information, and analyzed polling results distributed to Michigan legislators.

Students hammered out a uniform template, which they used to organize each of the 12 polls we posted to the MHCC Web site. The template called, first, for neutral, unbiased background information on the proposed legislation. “Does this information,” students asked, “help in allowing poll participants to make educated decisions?” Next, each poll was preceded by a *highlights* paragraph, which presented positions on the bill and included a discussion of trade-offs associated with each position. “Make sure,” students wrote in the poll-preparation guidelines, “to incorporate all sides—i.e., negative and positive facts [sic] because this is the last bit of information given before casting a poll vote.”

Here is a sample poll students wrote for a proposed Zero Tolerance Bill on underage drinking:

CAST YOUR VOTE. Under the Michigan Liquor Control Code, should the state give a person under the age of 21, who registers any level of bodily alcohol content (BAC), a misdemeanor with penalties that include automatic driver’s license sanctions (for second and subsequent violations) and the possibility of a fine, community service, and substance abuse screening (at the violator’s own expense) and/or substance abuse prevention or treatment services?

1. No. If an underage person is not physically seen consuming alcohol, it is unfair to enforce the same punishment as someone who was physically seen drinking.
2. Yes. Drinking underage should have the same consequences, regardless of whether people are physically seen drinking or not.
3. Yes. Underage drinking is illegal. Any Zero Tolerance law in Michigan should have no exceptions. A misdemeanor with these penalties is a very lenient punishment for underage drinking.

4. No. There should be some leeway with what a person under the age of 21 can have in their system, due to the fact that mouthwash contains alcohol, and accepting wine at church will make the BAC levels rise.

Notice the way that the polling project captures many of the basic rhetorical components of deliberation, including (1) the importance of naming issues in comprehensible public terms that my students' college-age peers could relate to, (2) recognizing that facts and information about the Zero Tolerance issue are important as a basis of deciding what is good for and valuable to the broader commonweal, (3) making choices that carry consequences, and (4) viewing individual behavior through the lens of public policy. To the extent that this poll and the others issued an invitation to college students statewide to be part of a public conversation, they became productive exercises in democratic decision making—especially for a generation of students for whom the Internet has become a dominant and accepted medium of communication, connection, and information gathering. “Deliberation,” David Mathews and Noëlle McAfee remind us, has “the power to get people to take the first step to civic involvement. Deliberation also links these people to one another, creating a public, which is a body of people joined together to deal with common problems.”

As with the general-education writing class, I wanted this course to include public creation, community action, and democratic decision making. I designed the course so my students and I, along with the MHCC, formed a purposeful learning community that *practiced* the subjects it was exploring. In fact, everything I learned in the general-education writing class about the learning practices of deliberative communities was reinforced and intensified—and often brought to my mind the well-known comment of Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander School. “When you believe in democracy,” he said, “you provide a setting for education that is democratic.”

My second season of democratizing the classroom suggested, like the first, that the sort of democratic pedagogy Horton has in mind must operate at multiple levels. It means, first and foremost, linking students' academic learning with experiences of democracy building and public work, learning that is rigorously situated in lived contexts and grounded in action. It also means trying to infuse the strategies and principles of democratic deliberation into every reach and recess of learning that takes place in the course, including, in particular, my own role as an active, engaged learner and a democratic practitioner. As a consequence, whenever I conduct a self-assessment of my courses now, I hardly ever ask, "How well am I teaching?" The critical questions for me are, what am I learning? and *am I getting out of my students' way?*

Destination: The Elective Seminar

The semester following the gateway course in the professional writing major, I was scheduled for an upper division "Special Topics" elective seminar in the American Studies Program. I saw it as another opportunity to continue experimenting with deliberative democracy and pedagogy. I also wanted to tackle some related questions that have troubled me since graduate school, questions that have roiled the field of American studies for the past 30 years, hounded the American democratic experiment since its inception, and continue to challenge our practices of deliberation and public decision making. Those questions were bluntly posed to my generation of American studies scholars/teachers by Harold Isaacs in the closing chapter of his 1975 classic *The Idols of the Tribe: Group Identity and Political Change*. Confronting the ethnic conflicts and dilemmas emerging in 1970s America, Isaacs warned, "The underlying issue is still: Can human existence be made more human, and if so, how?... How can we live with our differences without, as always heretofore, being driven by them to tear each other limb from limb?"

The Latin motto *E pluribus unum* ("One from many"), selected in 1776 for the Great Seal of the United States, has been a source

of inspiration and pride and, especially in recent decades, a cause of shattering controversy in America. A central question that has long perplexed Americans and American studies is how—and *whether*—we should reconcile our many separate, communal, ethnic, and group identities with a shared identity we hold in common as Americans.

I called the American studies elective seminar “Civic America.” In it we took a close look at concepts like pluralism, civic culture, social capital, and civil society; historical and social movements; and grassroots practices of American public life that seek to make the tension in our democracy between “the many and the one” creative and productive. Since service, public work, and citizen participation are key ingredients in nourishing civil society, interested students were invited to sign up for a volunteer placement in a local community service or municipal agency that would give them a firsthand look at the challenges of Civic America. Students who selected that option kept a separate journal in which they connected field experiences to seminar readings and discussions, and vice versa.

As I had done in the course on “Writing in the Public Interest” in the Professional Writing Program, I again embedded a strong emphasis on deliberation into themes and concepts of Civic America that could stand entirely on their own in any American studies class. We began with a groundwork of readings and case studies that vividly sketched out vocabularies and dilemmas of civic culture. We examined a series of grassroots portraits of democracy in action drawn from video vignettes produced by *The American Promise* series, including successful efforts to reintroduce wolves into Yellowstone National Park over the objections of local cattle ranchers, agitations by students at Gallaudet University to lobby for a new deaf president, and organizing efforts among largely Hispanic low-income neighborhood activists in San Antonio, Texas, for relief from chronic flooding caused by seasonal rains. We also winced through several examples of civic dysfunction, including political corruption in a small town on the Texas border

and the failure of the city council in San Jose, California, to find a way to recognize, reconcile, and appease embattled groups squabbling over the placement of heritage monuments in a public park. Additions to the intellectual fretwork of a strong and historically informed view of Civic America and the problem of the one and the many included seminar meetings on familiar synoptic formulations of civic culture, including monoculture and cultural pluralism. And we spent two meetings on the contemporary debate over multiculturalism.

I asked the 12 students in the seminar to hammer out a joint statement on what we had learned from these concepts and case studies about the problems and possibilities of Civic America. They came up with a laconic three-sentence paragraph titled “The 16 Cs of Civic America,” which could easily serve as an abstract on the hopes and perils of democracy. “Civic America,” they wrote, “is an arena or a churn of competing, complex, conflicting claims. It can lead to confrontation, controversy, commitment, and courage. It can collapse into corruption, dysfunction, cynicism, and crime. It can yield consensus, conversation, compromise, common welfare, coexistence, and community.” (My observation that the statement contained 19 Cs instead of 16 didn’t seem to matter too much to them.)

Practices of deliberation centered around two major seminar projects, which were held during the second half of the semester. Each presented a variation of the pull between the one and the many—in the first case, around the tensions that the presence of Mexican day laborers brought to a primarily white community; in the second case, around the possibility that declining public support for and rising costs of higher education might prevent many low-income youngsters from entering college and increasing their opportunities for economic success and social and political empowerment.

The first project involved the screening of and extensive discussion about *Farmingville*, a 2004 award-winning documentary by Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini, who lived and worked

for nearly a year in the Long Island town of Farmingville. “*Farmingville*,” according to the trailer, “provides a complex, emotional portrait of an American town in rapid transition from a relatively homogenous community to a 21st century village.” The documentary intimately and painfully chronicles divisions between townsfolk, a politically split city council, and an influx of Mexican day laborers, which come to a head in the brutal beatings of two day laborers.

Each student was responsible for facilitating a deliberative discussion of several questions I posed (adopting some from the *Farmingville* program guide) about the way the film treated some of the core concepts about Civic America we had been studying. The questions ranged from the specific to the global. For example: “What spurs people to cross the line from words, feelings, or beliefs to acts of violence?” And: “What new insights, features, and/or questions does *Farmingville* reveal about our subject, Civic America? Or confirm? Or, indeed, contradict?”

I was especially careful to craft our discussion of the film’s potent content around the deliberative parameters of a public forum, and I borrowed techniques of facilitation from what we know are essential skills of effective forum moderation. For example, I encouraged students to reflect carefully *before* our discussion on the questions they were to facilitate. I urged them to anticipate lines of response to their questions and consider ways to draw them out or redirect them. I also asked students to put the questions in context—by replaying, for example, a specific scene or exchange in the film that would help focus the discussion on concrete civic concerns instead of abstractions or free-floating emotional generalizations. I also gave each of the discussion leaders permission to *get personal* and to encourage us to consider a question from the vantage point of our own community experiences.

In an effort to deepen students’ reflection and analysis, I asked each facilitator to write a detailed response to his or her discussion question. I added my responses to the comments on the way a moderator would respond to a forum participant, asking only

questions that kept the students' thought processes on track, and then combed together all of the written exchanges into a document that contributed to the public work of the seminar and became part of its textual memory.³

In the second major seminar project, held during the last two weeks of the seminar, we organized and conducted six deliberative study circle sessions on the topic "Who Is College For?" Our deliberations, based on a draft of an issue book we tested for The National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good, addressed the forum's worries over fading support for higher education at a time when open access to colleges has never been more critical for career fulfillment and success and when the future of our national economy depends on high levels of educational attainment and performance.

The question, who is college for? was of immediate and par-

³ Here is a sample exchange (with my responses in bold):

Question: The first public meeting in Farmingville was described primarily as a speak-out. Did this method provide people with a clear identification of the problem(s) that needed to be addressed?

Answer: While the first town meeting in Farmingville was described as a speak-out that involved differing opinions on the idea of day laborers, it didn't totally identify all the problems that were there. **Are you referring to the initial meeting in the fire station or the first meeting of the supervisors?** The obvious problems of the fear and anger of the local people was evident, but the voice of the laborers wasn't presented, and the voice of the contractors that hire these immigrants was not present. **Speculate: if those voices were present, would that have led to a more effective and equable deliberation process? A better outcome?** This meeting also didn't cover the acute problems (such as?) that were faced by the local people of Farmingville, because they didn't make an effort to fix them or suggest a proposal to a cure. So the most important thing to take from this first town meeting was the fear and anger that the locals were showing against the immigrant population, and how they were unable to come up with any solutions. **At some point in what we've called the "churn" of civic life is it important—perhaps even necessary or, indeed, inevitable—for fear and anger and passion to surface and get out in the open? Or do such passions *always* stunt civic problem solving?**

ticular interest to the students in the Civic America seminar. Many of them, along with their friends, siblings, and parents, had felt the financial pressures of skyrocketing tuition. Most of them held part-time jobs to cushion increasing costs of going to school. All of them had direct experience with larger class sizes at the university. Virtually all had vivid firsthand stories about perceived unfairness in college admission practices and decisions. Because they were seniors, an ancillary question—*what* is college for?—weighed equally heavily on them.

The study circles were a good opportunity, then, for my students to connect the ideas we had wrestled with in the seminar—egalitarianism, the social contract, self-reliance, among others—to reflections on their experience at a public university and their fears, hopes, and uncertainties about the future.

After one meeting drafting ground rules and plotting out the organizational contours of the study circles, we broke down into three moderator teams, each responsible for guiding deliberations on one of the three approaches to the question, who is college for?

Supporters of **Approach One** (“Those Willing To Work For It”) believe that any student who wants to can and should attend college, regardless of their lot in life. They may need to take a longer, more difficult path, but their hard work and motivation will pay off in the end.

Supporters of **Approach Two** (“The Most Academically Gifted”) believe that given our limited resources the best investment for the country is in those students most likely to advance society and maintain America’s competitive edge in the global marketplace.

Supporters of **Approach Three** (“Everyone”) believe that a college education doesn’t merely serve individuals; it benefits everyone by strengthening society. Educated people are more engaged citizens and contribute more to society.

After the study circles, I asked each student to draft responses to a series of by-now familiar types of questions. For example: In what ways does the issue “Who Is College For?” affect you personally? What are the costs or consequences associated with

each approach? Looking back on the deliberations, what are the conflicts in this issue that we still have to “work through”? Where can you detect any shared sense of direction or common ground, if any, for future action?

I also gave the study circle participants permission to reflect personally on the following questions: How has your own thinking about this issue changed? What do we still need to talk about? Why is that so difficult to talk about? How can you use what we learned in our study circle?

Once again, I combined the written responses into a document that would serve, I hope, as a lasting contribution to the narrative life of the Civic America seminar.⁴

The practices of civic culture and some of the public policy issues raised in the Civic America seminar found even more traction in conversations simultaneously taking place in my department and across the university. That same semester our provost launched a series of intense and searching discussions about rethinking liberal arts education at Michigan State University.

Meanwhile, my department formed a task force charged with reexamining the general-education writing sequence. Its report took several positions relevant to the discussions we were having in the Civic America seminar over “the one and the many.” The taskforce clearly favored *pluribus* over *unum* in its vision of a socially engaged writing curriculum. It strongly recommended, for example, that the required writing course emphasize readings and diverse cultural content that honored historically disenfranchised voices and heightened students’ awareness of America’s changing and diverse populations and our country’s problematic history

⁴ That document was posted on the National Issues Forums Web site on January 19, 2005, as part of a news feature on “Deliberative Study Circles Become Part of a University Course.” http://www.nifi.org/news/news_detail.aspx?itemID=2845&catID=2871.

of adapting to cultural differences. One of the “Guiding Assumptions” the task force proposed to shape our thinking about a new writing course, for example, stated:

Respond to Changing and Diverse Populations. It is imperative that a writing program be attentive and responsive to diverse populations. Academic discourse and standard written English have excluded a multiplicity of voices alive in the American discourse for centuries, and American academia now faces the challenge of addressing unprecedented global migration. In addition to addressing linguistic diversity in our students, we must also recognize the power and potential of historically excluded discourses of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and disability.

I was under the strong influence of the core question still percolating in the Civic America seminar: Should we reconcile our many separate, communal, ethnic, and group identities with a shared identity we hold in common as Americans? If so, how? After I viewed *Farmingville*, Isaacs’ warning about dismembering the body politic was no theoretical abstraction to me. Perhaps, as Robert Frost admitted about his own habit of contrariness, it was the devil in me. In any case, I drafted a sharply worded memo to my colleagues and friends on the task force, in which I sought to counter their *pluribus* with a strong dose of *unum*.

In a fervor to honor historically disenfranchised voices, we don’t want to exclude cultural practices and rhetorical processes essential to making democracy work: for example, the power of public deliberation, or the rhetorical practices that diverse groups use to make hard choices together, gain clout and presence, achieve compromise, promote better understanding across lines of race, ethnicity, class, etc. Civic and public literacies, it seems to me, are far more challenging imperatives to respond to changing and diverse populations than merely opening up the canon in a required writing class and putting Frantz Fanon and Paulo Freire on our reading lists.

The key question for a socially engaged writing program, I asserted, is not how to recognize historically excluded discourses

but what enables diverse voices to find legitimate courses of public action that are consistent with what is valuable to the community as a whole. Our students, to be sure, need to know how to see through glib ideologies of common sense that cloak the trappings of abusive power and the maintenance of the political status quo. The problem, I warned, is that students might be led to the conviction that powerlessness is a virtue, or that respect for cultural diversity is inconsistent with those habits of the heart that yearn to bridge group differences. In effect, I was urging the task force to shift their center of moral gravity from the other to *one another*.

I had just finished my third season of purposeful deliberative learning, and I shared with the task force what I had learned: the communities—rhetorical and real—where our students live their lives, and many of the actual rhetorical situations in which they find themselves as public writers, call on them to search for common ground, act through compromise, make decisions among imperfect and incomplete choices, and search for ways to achieve and maintain social cohesion and harmony amid the acrid smoke of group differences that hung over divided communities, such as Farmingville.

Arriving at the Senior Capstone

One advantage of using deliberative practices and active-learning techniques is that the impact of subject matter often ripples outside the classroom and beyond the usual tidy brackets of the semester calendar. That was certainly the case for Sarah W., one of the members of the Civic America seminar. After the semester was over, she asked whether I would direct her senior capstone requirement. Sarah wasn't particularly excited over the prospect of conducting a research project and writing a senior paper. She lit up, however, when I suggested, "Why don't you do a full-blown public forum on the study circle topic 'Who Is College For?' in our Civic America seminar last semester?"

Sarah hit the ground running. All I did was help connect her to the right campus and community networks and meet with her

regularly to help keep her on track. She did everything: media liaison, letter writing, scheduling, study guide preparation, summary overhead transparencies, refreshments menu. Sarah was very nervous about moderating the forum, so I invited several colleagues and students to a practice forum at which Sarah diligently walked us through the choices, guided the conversation, and initiated reflection and next steps at the end.

“This event,” Sarah wrote in a press release, “will give participants a rare opportunity to discuss the issue and work toward a common solution. It is not going to be a debate. Rather, it will be a chance to converse about an important issue that touches all of us, work toward understanding all viewpoints, and suggest some solutions.” She was right. On April 12, 2005, Sarah held a small but successful deliberative campus forum on “Who Is College For?”

Afterward, Sarah submitted a bulging portfolio that chronicled her experience with the deliberative forum. The portfolio included several drafts of her evolving forum timelines, research and preparation materials, publicity kit (press releases, issue maps, posters), summary forum notes, participant evaluations, pre- and postforum questionnaires, and moderator materials (welcoming statement, transparencies, and so on). She also included a detailed reflection on her learning experiences. Here are some excerpts:

Embarking on the Capstone Project was one of the most challenging assignments I have ever experienced....

I went into this project blind, but I have come out feeling confident that if ever asked to do something like this again in my life, I will be able to use the skills I learned over this semester.

... I was able to take something I had learned in the Civic America seminar, and dive into it. Rather than simply participate in a forum and learn about the process, I was able to make the process available to the entire campus. The deliberative process is something that has become almost foreign to our society. People want to debate issues, not discuss them. Living in a democracy, it is so important that citizens are educated about their options when it comes to

deciding where they stand on issues.... I was able to be involved in educating the attendees on not only the topic ... but also on the deliberative process in general. The participants walked in with one or two opinions, and left having learned to both form new opinions and to change their existing opinions. More importantly, they were able to listen to the opinions of others and witness democracy at work.... This was an experience that I will look back on as being something that helped me to break out of my norm and learn new skills, while also impacting my community. I am really proud of my project, and I will always value the lessons I learned through this experience.

Some Postcards Home

I've come through these four seasons of deliberative learning with many more lessons, insights, and future challenges than I have the space to recount here. I briefly note the most important among them:

- One of the things I most admire about the NIF-style of public deliberation and its adaptability to the humanities classroom is the way it respects and elevates personal experience in the calculus of public problem solving. Whenever I have the privilege of moderating a public forum or when I participate in a forum like Sarah's organized by students, I am always amazed at how powerful personal stories can be and how essential they are to public creation. Asking participants how a particular issue impacts them personally or what personal experiences have shaped their perspectives on an issue ... these are absolutely crucial foundations for deliberation. The reciprocity between what people care about deeply and passionately and the hard work of hammering out the political will it takes to get people acting together is the greatest asset and the most daunting challenge of deliberative learning. In skillfully moderated forums, the power of personal stories—of people using their lived experience as a primary way of engaging social or political issues—is often a more fertile source of conviction and persuasion than formal modes or skills of rhetorical training and debate or perfectly framed choices.

- The same thing happens in a good personal essay. While experimenting with these seasons of deliberative pedagogy, I also edited an international journal of literary nonfiction—*Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*—which kept me in touch with good writing and the extraordinary vitality of contemporary narrative and story telling. Reading literally thousands of essays submitted to the journal during that period reminded me daily that a writer’s unique voice and the palpable sense of his or her unique presence in a piece of writing are essential hallmarks of the contemporary essay. It’s interesting to me that NIF-style public forums are another discursive arena where story, voice, and personal presence matter. In this sense, *narrative* connected my work as a literary editor and my experiments in public conversation and deliberation in the undergraduate classroom.

- When I set out on my first experiment with deliberative pedagogy for the general-education writing course, I was much concerned about my students’ anemic civic consciousness. Like many Americans, I thought it derived from their cynicism, apathy, indifference over conventional politics, or perhaps a sense of powerlessness at being left out of the political equation. Accordingly, in the course I posed such questions as: Why have we withdrawn from public association? Why have so many Americans, especially young people, lost faith in our common life?

Given the experience of doing public work alongside this generation through my seasons of deliberative learning and through the influence of my colleagues at Kettering, I’m asking different questions now. For example, how can I deepen my students’ connections to the community through the kinds of experiences that move them from an awareness of issues into pragmatic problem-solving strategies? What forms of civic engagements best fit my students’ *personal* motivations to get involved—especially their anger, their hope, and the realistic expectations they bring to the work of pursuing systemic social change? Does the university’s lofty rhetoric of public service and being a good institutional citizen mask different realities that students experience in the local community—and, indeed, on their home campuses and especially in my classes?

And what traditions in the life of our civic culture can best sustain students' political engagement?

- By helping students learn to become better interpreters of their own lives, society, and culture, my home disciplines of rhetoric and American studies—indeed, the humanities-at-large—can become durable and enduring resources for democracy. With their traditions of rigorous inquiry, analysis, conversation, critical reflection linked to action, and humane questioning of the status quo, the humanities are indispensable to social and cultural renewal. The humanities' quest to find truth and knowledge, as English professor Maria Farland has observed, often originates in problems or challenges that should rightly be considered "public business," especially when that knowledge yields moral insight and ethical clarity or purpose into such pressing issues as mapping the human genome, preserving the natural environment, cloning controversies, reining in youth violence, balancing individual rights and social responsibilities in the wake of 9/11, and resolving racial tensions in our communities and schools—all legitimate terrain of humanistic inquiry and insight. In short, humanists can serve the public interest by sharing their deep understanding of the roots of public problems in ways that speak to everyday experience.

To fulfill that legacy, the humanities professoriate must do a better job of closing the gap between the world of ideas and the theoretical reflexes that animate faculty culture, on the one hand, and our students' preference for concrete applications of knowledge and for active methods of learning, on the other. We need to find new and more effective ways of aligning pedagogical techniques and practices so they better address the disconnect between action and ideas that, for better or worse, characterizes the current generation of undergraduates' predominant learning style and their practices of citizenship. Such pedagogical techniques and practices include the use of active and interactive teaching and learning practices, especially the deliberative pedagogy I experimented with, where the learning ethos of the classroom—syllabus construction and management, assignments, assessment, heuristics, architecture, everything—is modeled after a public forum, and my role as teacher becomes that of a moderator and my students become agents and participants in the productive public work of the

course. We also need to better integrate into the curriculum active research opportunities for undergraduates—as in Sarah’s capstone—instead of using the undergraduate classroom as a site where we download our research expertise. Students need to be viewed as active producers of knowledge and agents of democracy and not primarily as passive consumers of information. Above all, we have to attend to those features and flaws of the campus culture and its disciplinary arrangements that are detrimental to civic involvement—for example, the degree to which uncontested skepticism is valued and rewarded, the absence of idealism, or the disconnect between the university’s professed “mission” and its actual relationship and behavior toward the surrounding community. The same call to urgency, consequence, responsiveness, and relevance that John Dewey issued to the discipline of philosophy 100 years ago applies even more so today to American studies, rhetoric, and the liberal arts generally. “Better it is for philosophy to err in active participation in the living struggles and issues of its own times,” Dewey insisted, “than to maintain an immune monastic impeccability without relevancy and bearing in the generating of ideas of its contemporary present.”

Four years ago, my first experiment with the “engaged classroom” was a reaction to an ache I felt to connect my scholarship in American studies and my teaching of writing to public issues outside of the academy. I invoked the voices of America’s civic conscience—Tocqueville, Whitman, Jane Addams, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Coles—in an effort to engage students in direct community service. I am still listening to those voices, and I continue to ask students to draw inspiration from them as well. As I have developed new ways of being in the classroom through upper-division courses, seminars, and capstone projects inspired by deliberative democracy, and as I continue to enter new seasons of reclaiming the public mission of the university, I also have to pay attention to the changing voices, challenges, and learning styles of students and not hold them hostage to the political instincts of my generation, the Boomer juggernaut.

The civic engagement and public work movement in the academy has allowed me to reimagine my role in the classroom and the working relationships I have with students, colleagues, and community partners. It has given me opportunities to combine the teaching of academic and public skills. It has challenged me to rethink the purposes and practices of academic scholarship in the humanities. Above all, it has renewed my hope that universities can play a dynamic role in fulfilling Jefferson's legacy and educating citizens to perform the difficult, necessary, and rewarding work demanded by a strong democracy.

David D. Cooper is professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University and University Outreach and Engagement Senior Fellow. Cooper received the Campus Compact's Thomas Ehrlich Faculty Award for Service-Learning in 1999. The editor of the journal Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, he is author/editor of several books—most recently, Trying the Ties that Bind: Service-Learning and the Moral Life of Faculty. He is founder and current director of MSU's Public Humanities Collaborative.