

# **Group Discussion and Democracy: The Status of our Attempts to Teach Productive Participation in Public Policy Decision-Making**

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Some thirty years ago I witnessed the newly elected board members of a local school district in action. It was not an example of effective public policy communication. The new members had all been elected by the local “taxpayer’s” association, a political action group that hoped to thwart many of the initiatives of the school district’s administration. Acrimony prevailed at all meetings of the board. Name-calling, personal attacks, and character assassination were the orders of the day. The silliest moment followed the board’s decision to hear the case of a teacher who was accused of being drunk in class. The teacher had requested that the matter be settled publicly. So, gavel held high, the chairman presided over a hearing that lasted until two o’clock in the morning. The board had not discussed a procedure, and the result was anything but orderly. In frustration, one board member, the President of a local electronics company, began interrogating witnesses, moving from one witness to another, in what seemed to be an entirely random manner. Most of us in the audience simply looked on in amazement. One consultant hired by the district had previously been a communication professor. As we talked after the meeting, he reminisced about an earlier era, and suggested that the board, and the public in general, needed instruction in the fine art of discussion. Thinking back on that conversation, I realize now that he had experienced discussion education in US colleges and universities when it was at its apex in purpose and popularity. The school board in question in the late 1970s had demonstrated little understanding of the communicational knowledge, values, and behaviors that can be useful in setting public policy.

As we consider “Communication and Public Policy” in this colloquium, we might well address the prospects for improving students’ ability to resolve policy questions through discussion. In doing so, we are fortunate to be able to draw upon a recently published (2007) comprehensive history of the

attempts to teach discussion in the US written by William Keith, Professor of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. We will first summarize the history of the discussion course by referring to Keith and others, and then propose an assessment of the extent to which our contemporary group communication courses succeed at, and fall short of, addressing public policy concerns. Our conclusion is that the communication field needs to re-consider the content of the course usually referred to as Discussion or Small Group Communication.

## **The Progressive Era and Discussion Instruction**

Most of us who teach or study group communication in the twenty-first century may not realize that the course in discussion was first designed to meet the needs of a particular time and place in US history, the Progressive era. The Progressive movement generally dominated US politics in the early part of the twentieth century, from approximately 1890 to 1920, although its influences were felt for decades after. It was a middle class movement urging social reforms such as equality, worker’s rights, universal education, and more democratic participation. Prominent politicians from both major parties such as Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, and Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, are identified as Progressives. Social reformers like Jane Addams, Upton Sinclair, Margaret Sanger, and Ida Tarbell are also so identified. In describing the “Historical Roots of Discussion” Bormann (1969) explains it as follows:

A new urban value system developed gradually but inevitably. The Progressive movement in politics and the Social Gospel in religion gave voice to the new value system. The primary targets were the practice of competition and individualism. Proponents dramatized these issues as a question of the masses against the

classes and pointed to the unsavory conditions that developed from unregulated competition and the exploitation of the masses by a few ruthless predators. The Progressive orators and Social Gospel preachers expressed the new values in terms of cooperation and brotherly love. (p. 8)

Keith (2007) traces the educational and intellectual influences of Progressivism on the speech communication field to New York City and Columbia University where such luminaries as philosopher John Dewey and historian Charles Beard lived and worked. Prominent speech scholars James McBurney, A. Craig Baird, and Alfred Sheffield were students or close associates of Dewey. They all wrote articles and textbooks promoting the study of discussion. Discussion was seen as a way to both educate the citizenry and increase participation in public affairs, particularly when practiced through public forums.

Other fields besides speech and communication were interested in the possibilities of discussion approaches to participation. Philosopher Dewey explicitly addressed this work (Pellegrini & Sterling, 1936, iii; Philipsen, 1994, 100; Keith, 2007, 103). Historian Beard wrote a book connecting historiography and the discussion of public affairs (1936). Organizational theorist and public intellectual, Mary Parker Follett (1924) acknowledged Sheffield's influence (Philipsen, 1994, 99). As Philipsen notes, "Here the communication theorist joined in intimate association with political scientists and psychologists, to invent a social form and communicative practice which has come to be understood as a sine qua non of democratic life" (p. 101).

Many of these same scholars were simultaneously involved in the adult education effort in the US. Advocates of adult education embraced the philosophy and methods of discussion and promoted the forum movement. Citizens were encouraged to attend these meetings and discuss the important issues of the day. Bormann (1969) says

By 1920, adult education programs were using the discussion group as well as the lecture as an educational tool....The increasing use of discussion groups for educational purposes was accompanied by the appearance of handbooks on the organization and conduct of discussions. Thus, when speech teachers began instructing students in public discussion, handbooks were already available. (p. 11)

Keith (2007, 15) explains that the relationship was reciprocal, and that speech textbooks and articles were included in bibliographies of the Office of Education publications on forums and discussion.

The forum movement reached its height during the 1930's when it became federally funded with Work Project Administration money (Keith, 2007, 302-303). Over a million people participated in forums in 1937-1938 with a US population of about 129M, with an average attendance of 130 per forum. The WPA money was all expended by 1941. After World War II there was an attempt to once again invigorate participative democracy through discussion, integrating the work of the speech scholars with others who had written about communication (See Lasker, 1949), but the public forum did not regain its importance in the US.

Initially, an important impetus for the college and university course was to train forum leaders (Allison, 1939, 118; Cohen, 1994, 290). The content of the course dealt primarily with public discussions. Sometimes this meant introducing a speaker and handling the question and answer period after. Sometimes it meant moderating a panel discussion in front of a group of a hundred or so and then moderating the discussion afterward. It only occasionally meant problem-solving in a small group. This led to definitional confusion later among academics used to the small group emphasis. Cohen (1994, 275), for example, expresses surprise that Sheffield's (1922) book included the term "public discussion" in the title, but that the bulk of the book dealt with public speaking and parliamentary procedure. A few pages later, Cohen (1994, 280) notes that Sheffield's 1932 QJS article was mostly about discussion, although the title included debate and forums for consideration. Baird (1937, 358) defined group discussion as "an informal session of the committee of the whole." Well, a committee of the whole is by definition the entire assembly, not a small group. Articles in 1939 by Allison and O'Brien attempted to clear up the ambiguity. O'Brien understood that it was important to classify groups by size and defined the group discussion as having between three and twenty participants and the public discussion as having from twenty to thousands (236; Cohen, 291-293). Regardless of definition and taxonomy, the early discussion course had a clear mandate to further civic education. Its first purpose was to educate the public about policy issues and to encourage them to discuss those issues cooperatively.

Thus, the Progressive era in the US gave birth to the course in group discussion, which expanded its

reach in US colleges and universities over the next several decades.

### **Participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

One hundred years after the Progressive era in US history, we find citizens attempting to re-ignite the flame of democratic participation. Participation implies communication. The term is used to refer both to public affairs and decision-making in private work settings. In all cases, an emphasis is placed on the superiority of decision-making that proceeds democratically, rather than dictatorially.

Similar to the Progressive era, in the past two decades, public forum programs have been re-invented as a way to involve citizens. Hegstrom and Spano (1997, 181-183) summarize four approaches: public journalism projects, the National Issues Forums (Kettering Foundation), The Public Conversations Project, and Kaleidoscope Projects associated with the Public Dialogue Consortium. These efforts have taken several different forms, but have yet to approach the scale of those of 80 years ago.

Many communication scholars have shown a renewed interest in the relationship of public speaking and participative decision-making to democracy. Invoking Cicero, Isocrates, and other ancients, rhetorical theorists have underlined the role of free and open communication in democratic states (Keith, 2007, 2-3). As the field re-affirms its role in democratic policy-setting, what contribution has been made by the course in group discussion?

### **Group Dynamics and Communication**

Keith (2007) informs us that the forum movement flourished after the 1930's, and that by the 1960's a burgeoning interest in group dynamics radically changed the nature of the group communication course as taught in most universities in the U.S. The social science research on group dynamics grew dramatically after World War II, and the work of the National Training Laboratories (NTL) was located in Bethel, Maine, approximately 190 miles from our conference site here on the Maine coast. The work that German émigré Kurt Lewin and his associates did there was influential throughout US academia. By the early 1950's psychology departments were offering courses in social psychology. Speech scholars were also involved at the NTL, an impetus for further study of the communicational aspects of group work. Group courses began to be renamed, a trend that has

continued to the present day. Many of them are today called Group Communication instead of Discussion. Publishers reacted accordingly as their internal studies showed that the market had shifted by the 1980's, and most textbook authors dropped the term "discussion" from their titles.

It is important to note that the works of many of the Progressive intellectuals that had been leaders in the movement to promote discussion on public policy such as John Dewey, Charles Beard, and Mary Parker Follett were read by those who were leaders in the NTL. The concept of democratic group leaders, as opposed to authoritarian or laissez faire ones, was conceptualized by Ronald Lippett who was a graduate student of Lewin. Further, there were at least two speech scholars there by 1950, John W. (Sam) Keltner and Franklin Haiman. Haiman worked on the NTL staff and was a representative to the NTL from the Speech Association of America. All of this is documented by Keith (2007, 202-204) as he explains the shift away from public policy concerns in the study of groups at the NTL. The NTL was involved in the study of different kinds of groups, but within a decade, interest in A-groups (groups working on community action) were overwhelmed by the interest in T-groups (therapy groups). Human relations became the focus of scholarship almost to the exclusion of public policy concerns. As Keith (2007) suggests

Sensitivity, diagnosis and insight took center stage here, in contrast to argument, reason, and cooperation. While it wasn't reflected in textbooks until the mid-1960s, this fundamental change of perspective dooms the discussion course as civic education. By 1961, the change, at least at the NTL, is virtually complete. (pp. 207-208)

Referring to Gouran's (1999, 3-10) summary of the empirical research in small group communication, one can note that by the end of the 1960's a similar change had occurred in the speech discipline. Empirical research on group discussion began in the speech field in the 1930's. A good number of studies in the early 1960's dealt with the positive outcomes of reflective thinking and discussion, but by the 1970's the research focus on discussion had disappeared. Gouran tells us:

Whereas the 1960s saw the beginnings of a more narrow emphasis on messages ... the sharpening focus had the almost paradoxical effect of broadening the issues and range of questions about interaction that scholars chose

to address. The result was a proliferation of inquiry but no consensus concerning what needed to be known. Hence, communication researchers went off in many directions; nevertheless, they retained the centrality of messages in groups as a primary interest. (p. 11)

So small group communication researchers moved away from research on discussion in the 1970's, and started focusing on other message-based concerns.

This all constituted a paradigm shift for the group communication sub-field. Scholars became more interested in other aspects of the small group than they were in public discussion as an inherent element of public policy decision-making in democracies. Soon after, the content of communication courses focusing on small groups began to change to reflect some of these new research interests. Yet there remains some interest in the democratic workings of the small group itself, and in effective decision-making. Some courses pertain to public policy deliberation; others do not. It might be useful to suggest how we could assess the extent to which today's group communication courses prepare students to productively participate in public policy decision-making.

### **Public Policy and the Current College Course in Group Communication**

The prospects for discussion courses dealing with public policy depend on two things, the content of the course and the nature of the contexts in which discussion skills are applied. Students have to learn how to participate, but opportunities for democratic participation must also be present, or the course lapses into irrelevancy. First, we turn to the question of course content.

*Does the group communication course actually teach public policy discussion?*

Just as many a public speaking course can be turned to ends other than speaking as a member of the "public," so too can the group communication course be completely devoid of any reference to a public policy question. A so-called "public" speaking course might be comprised largely of demonstrations, business presentations, oral reading, and stand-up comedy, having little bearing on training citizens to speak on the great deliberative, forensic, or epideictic topics of the day. The group discussion course can similarly be distracted from its

original purpose. In other words, the sociological, psychological, or the conversational might completely displace the rhetorical. So, one obvious question to be asked is, "Do the students actually discuss public policy issues in the course?" Doing so in class will probably make them better able to do so as citizens.

A number of other questions can be asked of the individual course to determine whether it prepares students to participate productively. Most of these issues have been raised over the decades in published scholarship on group discussion.

*Public Policy Research.* The course might present a clear mandate to be informed about public policy issues as a prelude to discussion. The Platonic and Aristotelian criticism of democracy was that the *demos* was often under-prepared and too ignorant to govern effectively. Students should not be left with the impression that their uninformed opinion is good enough. The college-educated citizen should actually have to read widely and gather evidence on policy topics before forming an opinion. She should also be taught to evaluate the evidence and data that have been gathered.

*Reasoning.* In order to apply this research to the topic under discussion, the group discussion student will need to know what constitutes a reasonable inference from the data. Some attention to reasoning and argument seems important. As a field, we have not agreed on the best model for doing so. The classical approach is to teach the syllogism, and to introduce the student to some of the inductive fallacies. The early textbooks on discussion (e.g., Baird, 1937, 130-141; McBurney and Hance, 1939, 196-203; and Pellegrini and Sterling, 1936, 32-36) taught basic syllogistic types including the categorical (Aristotelian), hypothetical and disjunctive. Black (1955) made a strong case for teaching the enthymeme in discussion, which is derivative of the syllogism. Dewey's reflective thinking method was called "The New Logic" and Keith and others argue that systemic and syllogistic logic are contradictory (Keith, 2007, 92, 134-135, 140-141), but Dewey himself used the syllogism to explain the essentials of reflective thinking and "scientific reasoning" (1910, 93-100). He clearly did not see his model as a replacement for the basic classical forms. Most current communication textbooks seem to prefer the Toulmin model (1964) to the syllogism. The model lends itself well to analysis of arguments in discourse. Whichever model is taught, the task of drawing reasonable inferences from evidence, and making reasonable

distinctions, is a challenge to some discussion students. If we want reasonable deliberations about public policy decisions, we should probably continue to teach some form of reasoning.

Discussion approaches that emphasize reasoning methods have, at times, been criticized for favoring rationality over social-emotional considerations. This criticism would only hold if rationality were taught to the exclusion of the other topics. Otherwise, the criticism seems to make the error of the 19<sup>th</sup> century faculty psychologists who thought that a clear line could be drawn between logic and emotion. In actual communication, one can be both logical and emotional, both, or neither. Surely we want to embrace the emotional in promoting citizen education.

*Discerning question types.* In addition to the analysis of data and warrant (to use Toulmin's terminology), students could learn to distinguish among types of questions and to specify the relevant issues connected with each type and topic. Early scholars distinguished questions of fact from questions of policy. Bormann (1969) suggested that there were four distinct types of questions: fact, value, policy, and conjecture (sometimes called future fact). Gouran (1974, 2003) has argued that different question types require different forms of analysis. Thus, discussion about the policy question, "What should be the United Nation's response to the war in Iraq?" might fruitfully pursue causes of the problem, but an analysis of the causes of the problem does not work as well in discussing the question of fact, "Has the incidence of terrorism in Iraq decreased in the past year?" the question of value, "Are conditions for Iraqi women worse now than under Saddam?" or the question of conjecture, "Will the Shiite opposition topple the Iraqi government after the US withdraws?" Things generally go better if students can distinguish among question types, and decide what type of question they are actually discussing.

*Issue Analysis.* Issue analysis in policy questions is greatly served by reference to Dewey's (1910, 72) reflective thinking model, which came to be known as the "standard agenda" by those who applied it to discussion.<sup>1</sup> Philipsen (1994, 102-104) refers to the period of 1934-1964 as a period of orthodoxy in the teaching of discussion characterized by a universal emphasis on reflective thinking. As he points out, there has been some criticism over the years about the model's actual utility in organizing group discussions (Ehninger, 1943; Bormann, 1969, 278-290; Gouran, 1974; Fisher, 1974; Cohen, 1994,

321). An important concern was that the standard agenda when followed in lockstep fashion without deviation was counter-productive to creativity and did not reflect the ways in which groups actually made decisions. Sheffield warned about this possibility early on (1932, 526-527; Cohen, 1994, 283) though many classrooms failed to heed the warning. This rigid application of Dewey's model seems inconsistent with Dewey's own advice. Two pages after presenting his five step model, he says, "The essence of critical thinking is suspended judgment... (1910, 74)." Dewey was considering the individual reflective thinker and did not elaborate as to whether this model would work in group discussion. It seems, however, that the advice to "suspend judgment" is advice to think and re-think each step on the way to a decision. Three decades later Scheidel and Crowell (1964) published an important research report showing that groups tended to proceed, not linearly, but in small cycles, suggesting an idea and then later coming back to it to anchor it in place. Thus, the linear application of the reflective thinking model was doomed to failure, but it turns out that the model itself holds up fairly well in group discussions if treated as issues to be addressed. In a series of clever experiments, Hirokawa convincingly demonstrated that group decisions are better when the questions asked in the reflective thinking model are addressed in the discussion (See Hirokawa and Pace, 1983; Gouran and Hirokawa, 2003). It seems that another way to look at the research of Hirokawa and his associates is that they have shown the utility of thorough issue analysis in discussion, and that issue analysis can be enhanced with reference to the reflective thinking concerns, as long as the group leadership avoids rigidity in enforcing agendas and structuring the group's work. As noted above, question types other than policy questions might require a different kind of analysis. The key thing for the student is to learn to determine what the important points of analysis might be.

*Asking Questions.* Closely connected with the study of evidence and reasoning, is practice in asking clarificational and critical questions. Discussion has traditionally emphasized inquiry over advocacy, and if they are to inquire, students surely must be schooled in the art of asking questions of themselves and others. Such questioning, too, has been recommended as an antidote to "groupthink," the uncritical acceptance of the prevailing opinion in a group (Janis, 1972, 1989; t'Hart, 1990).

*Democratic Values.* A final criterion by which one can assess whether public policy discussion is

actually being taught, is to note whether the course addresses the values of participative democracy. Our intellectual forebears knew that this meant maintaining an open mind, resisting the hurried judgment (Cohen, 1994, 290). As we look back in our time, the enthusiasm with which the early champions of the discussion course addressed these values, it is tempting to mock this effort, as follows.

One gets the impression that Baird expected discussion participants to be model ladies and gentlemen. They were not to be abrasive, aggressive, competitive, or insensitive. Presumably persons who did not possess the desired characteristics could not participate in group discussion unless they could undergo significant personality change. (Cohen, 1994, 287)

Perhaps our efforts to be scientific have led us to emphasize description and resist prescription (Philipsen, 1994, 103), when the students actually need to address both. In class and in our research we might ask ourselves, "What group values should have normative force?" Civility is important in this respect, and early scholars were quite prescriptive in their suggestions about dealing with the socio-emotional aspects of group work, particularly those they believed would foster democratic participation (see Sheffield, 1932, 528-529). The forum experience made it clear that cooperative, reflective, problem-solving was often an elusive goal and required a competent leader. Heckling and defensiveness was seen as detrimental to open-mindedness (Keith, 2007, 136-137).

Hand in glove with the communication values of democratic participation, students may need some familiarity with the group's decision rules and accompanying apparatus. The discussion and small group literature has had much to say about the merits of consensus-seeking, but what of those situations when consensus is impossible and a vote is called for? The course in Parliamentary Procedure has almost entirely disappeared from the curricular offerings of communication departments. Yet, the most popular book in the former Soviet Union after the satellite states regained their independence was *Robert's Rules of Order*. For the first time in decades, these peoples needed to know how to govern themselves democratically. Similarly, almost every local government board or standing committee in the US names this book in its bylaws as the group's parliamentary authority.

In summary, if the group communication course is really going to prepare students to participate in public policy discussions, it might be useful to ask them to actually prepare to discuss such questions, to hone the analytical skills necessary for such discussions, and to consider the discussional behaviors that honor values of participative democracy. However, the course cannot exist in isolation; it must be relevant to the needs of policy-making in the twenty-first century. The changing nature of the public sphere requires different forms of communication. So we turn to the matter of context and consider both the historical moment or current relevance of the course, as well as the limitations of popular media as pertains to discussion.

*Is the present historical moment conducive to renewed discussion activity?*

Discussion teachers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw themselves as preparing students for participation in public forums. Keith (2007, 12) says, "without the forum movement, there would have been little purpose in teaching discussion skills." Today there is no call for forum leaders on the same scale as existed in the US in the 1930's. We have no WPA providing work for those who have been trained. However, there are more government committees and boards than ever before that require competent participants. Sometimes these deliberations are public and sometimes they take place behind closed doors. California's "Brown Act" requires that almost all decisions of government boards be made in public with ample opportunity for citizen input. Such open meeting laws would suggest that students might find themselves involved in chairing a public discussion. We wait to see whether the public and the government will encourage a more participative democracy. However, whether the discussion is public or closed-group, boards and committees that formulate public policy require discussion leaders and competent discussants. A recognition that government would increasingly occur in committees helped to propel discussion education in the first place according to Bormann (1969):

Although the lecture and the sermon were still important and political stumping was still influential in elections, by the 1920s, the style of public discourse was changing and the role of legislative debate in decision-making was on the wane. Increasingly, legislative assemblies made important decisions in committees, and the floor debate became more of a ritual (p. 11; see also Cohen, 1994, 148-149, 287-288).

Of course, this is no less true today. This need for education in committee and board participation remains. With it, the need for discussion courses dealing with policy issues is still present. However, if the shift in content of these courses is any indication, there is little urgency felt among most communication scholars.

Among the historical exigencies that encourage discussion education is the fear that the citizenry might come to favor some less desirable form of government. Discussion was justified as a kind of grass roots effort to inculcate democracy, republicanism, and the virtue of listening to dissenting opinions, in view of the perceived threat of dictatorship and totalitarianism in parts of Europe during the last century (Bormann, 1969, 13-14). Cohen (1994) notes that:

Articles and books were motivated by the perception that speech was an inherent characteristic of democracy. The profession viewed the teaching of speech as a means of providing students with the tools of democracy. The commitment to speech in the interest of a democratic society was most marked in the late 1930s and 1940s, when the totalitarian states of Europe, who suppressed speech, seemed antithetical to American ideology. Speech teachers, together, with the population in general, sensed a threat to "The American Way of Life." (p. xi)

From the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it may be difficult to understand this fear, but it was widespread. Richard Hofstadter (1968) explains it as follows.

Above all, most American liberals were convinced by the experiences of the First World War and by the subsequent political conflict of the 1930's that American democracy could not survive another such effort. The idea that democracy would collapse under the stress of a major war was one of the most pervasive clichés of the 1930's; it was held by men along a wide spectrum of political opinion from Norman Thomas to such conservative isolationists as Robert A. Taft. (p. 329).

The depression caused class strife, and the threat of another war created enough fear for democracy that the universities and adult education programs began teaching discussion, perhaps as an alternative to violence, as well as a safeguard for

representative government. A similar crisis today might make education to improve public policy deliberation a higher priority. At present, however, there is little evidence that the "great recession" is as great a threat to representative democracy as the "great depression" was.

Short of such an emergency, a change in emphasis could bring certain benefits, though perhaps not as compelling. If the public and government were to encourage a more participative democracy, discussion might replace the pro forma decision-making that accompanies so many governmental board decisions. We might help build such a public, if students were actually taught how to participate. Not universally, but very often, it seems as if the executive staff of an agency recommends a policy, and it is quickly passed without an attempt to perfect it in any way through discussion. It is as if our democratically elected leaders lack the democratic impulse. In order for democratic participation to prevail, discussion theory and skills must be taught to citizens, and democracy itself must be valued. Until this is universally accomplished, students will have to learn to be prepared for non-democratic contingencies. Some of these contingencies involve media.

*Will the nature of the old and new media support "discussion" programming?*

The forum movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fostered radio programming in which public discussion of policy questions was broadcast to the public. *America's Town Meeting of the Air* is an example (Keith, 2007, 229 ff.). In those days, the traditional values of discussion, described above, were also evident in such programs. On radio, "an illusion of spontaneity and informal conversation" in broadcast round-table discussions was more desirable than airing public speeches (Bormann, 1969, 12). Talk radio of today features the listener call-in feature, and there are some good examples of discussional behavior, especially on National Public Radio. Other talk radio programs seem rife with ignorance, polarizing positions, and incivility.

Print journalism can also either encourage or ignore opportunities to promote discussion of public affairs. Just twenty years ago, Carey (1989) suggested that it should be one role of newspapers to promote public discussion instead of attempting just to present "objective" information. In the 1990's a number of newspapers did so, and perhaps some of these programs are still operative.

Keith (2007) describes the difficulty of airing such programs when the media favors entertainment to participation. Public policy programming on television is often highly polarized, with representatives of two sides exaggeratedly and aggressively arguing, and many of our students get their public policy information from John Stewart or Stephen Colbert, whose stock in trade is ridicule and satire.

A lack of civility has also been noted in attempts to present web-based discussions of policy matters. It seems likely that some possible interlocutors do not participate in these cyberspace discussions because “flaming” is dominant over respectful consideration of other viewpoints. Papacharissi (2004) on the other hand, makes a distinction between civility and politeness and sees potential in the internet for fostering “heated discussion” and “democratic emancipation.” A content analysis of political newsgroups showed that 30% of messages were either uncivil or impolite. Yet the author maintained “that incivility and impoliteness do not dominate online political discussion” (276). A message was coded as uncivil if it “verbalized a threat to democracy,” assigned “stereotypes,” or “threatened other individuals’ rights” [e.g., free speech] (274). Respondents who were impolite sometimes apologized; those who were uncivil never did. It does not seem like too great an inferential leap to suggest that some media are friendlier to democratic forms of communication than others. Entertainment media, both old and new, has had little use for thoughtful discussion. Bombast, sarcasm, name-calling is prevalent. However, just as there are a few places in the broadcast media for meaningful policy discussion, we might find ways for it to co-exist with pornography and slander on the internet. We may find that discussion principles fit the new media as well as the small group setting.

### **One Course or Two?**

As we have seen, public policy discussion courses began in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as large group discussion, in synchrony with the forum movement during the Progressive era. Discussion shifted to a small group focus, and then small group communication largely replaced discussion. The typical academic department of communication has perhaps a single such course. We could argue that the small group course has lost its moorings and needs to return to its discussional origins. It seems just as worthy to call for two courses, one dealing solely with the nature of the small group setting and one dealing with discussion. The discussion course

could involve multiple settings: large group, small group, broadcasts, and internet communication. Its province would be the discussion of public policy. The term “discussion” implies transactional considerations, with multiple participants rather than the construction of speeches or other extended discourses, which topics could be left to other courses.

### **Conclusion**

The group communication course began as an attempt to teach productive discussion of public policy. This attempt can be traced to a particular historical moment that made discussion a priority for American Progressives. After the 1960s, it was no longer perceived as a priority and group communication scholars and teachers moved on to other concerns. Today in the US there is some interest in improving the public sphere, which is widely believed to have deteriorated, but there is not yet a sense of urgency to do so as was felt in the US in the 1930s. The media encourages discussion forums to only a modest extent, and there are serious limitations to current attempts. If communication teachers were to once again take up the cause of civic education, they might actually address public policy questions in group communication courses, require careful study of public policy questions, show how to apply tests of evidence and reasoning to discourse on public policy, give experience in analyzing question types and issues, foster the art of asking questions, and discuss open-mindedness and other values of democratic participation. The small group communication or discussion course would have to change considerably if it were to return to its original focus of public policy discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the standard agenda is explained in slightly different versions in the various textbooks, Dewey's original formulation gives the general idea: "Upon examination, each instance reveals, more or less clearly, five logically distinct steps: (i) a felt difficulty; (ii) its location and definition; (iii) suggestion of possible

solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection; that is, the conclusion of belief or disbelief” (1910, 72).