Narrative and Deliberation in Small Group Forums

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In a videotape analysis of five National Issues Forums, I investigate the nature of deliberative talk in small group deliberative settings. I show that deliberative talk in these forums mostly takes the form of storytelling. I argue that storytelling helps participants overcome barriers to deliberation, such as lack of knowledge and the need to manage one’s public face in a context that privileges open conflict. Moreover, I show that storytelling also plays an important collective function for groups, allowing them to build a sense of moral community around issues without much explicit conflict or argument. I conclude that greater understanding of storytelling’s role in small group deliberation is of benefit both to practitioners who initiate such forums and to the growing number of researchers who study the practice of deliberative democracy.

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In the past 20 years, communities around the globe have undertaken deliberative initiatives (Abelson, Eyles, Martin, & Martin, 2002; Button & Mattson, 1999; Dunkerly & Glassner, 1998; Fishkin, 1995; Fung, 2004; Fung & Wright, 2001; Graham & Phillips, 1998; Hendriks, 2002; Renn, Weblcr, & Wiedelmann, 1995; Ryge, 2002). These projects come in all shapes and sizes, but it is fair to say that most involve small groups (fewer than 50 participants) of relative strangers in face-to-face conversation about some issue of common concern. Of course, this kind of natural laboratory has not escaped the attention of academics, who see in it an opportunity to test the claims of deliberative democratic theory (cf. Bierle, 1999; Denver, Hands, & Jones, 1995; Gastil, 2000; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Haney, Borgida, & Farr, 2002; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2000; Kraft & Clary, 1991; Landeman, 2002; Luskin & Fishkin, 1998; Mackie, 2002; Mansbridge, 1980; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Mullen, 2000; Neblo, 2000; Simrell, 1998; Smith & Wales, 2000; Sulkin & Simon, 2001; Walsh, 2003). Surprisingly, however, little of this work has approached deliberation as a form of
communication. Using survey and experimental methods, most evaluative studies rely on a quantitative measure of opinion change across pre- and post-deliberative conditions to discern whether deliberation has taken place. In the process, what transpires between participants in the forums themselves remains something of a mystery.

In an analysis of five National Issues Forums (NIF), a deliberative method associated with the Kettering Foundation, I open this black box to investigation (see Appendix). Getting one’s arms around small group deliberation is difficult, in large part, because it is done in so many ways. However, there are good reasons to select NIFs for closer examination. The NIF process is the most pervasive model of small group deliberation in the United States, used yearly by as many as 15,000 groups (see Melville, Willingham, & Dedrick, 2005). Moreover, in its major structural characteristics, it resembles many other commonly used models of small group deliberation (Gastil & Levine, 2005; Ryfe, 2002). It therefore presents a good, if not ideal, approximation of how small group deliberation is conducted in many communities around the country. Moreover, although the data set of five forums is relatively small, the forums under investigation are particularly compelling. All were convened and videotaped for inclusion in the Kettering Foundation’s annual production, “The Public Agenda.” This is an event in which Kettering invites national opinion leaders to a one-day conference to present its findings on the public’s judgment with respect to national issues. Because of their inclusion in this program, NIF chose facilitators for these forums with deep experience of the NIF process. Each forum also includes several individuals who have participated in prior forums. In other words, while none of the participants are “experts” on the issues under discussion, many of them are something more than uninitiated members of the public. Thus, if anything, my analysis probably underestimated the dynamics at play when ordinary people engage in small group deliberation.

What I find in my analysis of these forums is simply stated: when deliberating, participants in small group forums tell stories. They tell stories about themselves, their family, and their friends. They tell stories about events in the news, people at work, and casual acquaintances. Sometimes, they use other modes of talk: they argue, debate, or lecture. But the clear pattern is that they prefer to tell stories.

I situate this observation in two contexts, one practical and one theoretical. The practical context has to do with the impact of facilitation on deliberative talk. Most models of small group deliberation include a facilitator role (cf. Gastil & Levine, 2005; Ryfe, 2002). I find that facilitation plays a crucial role in determining the extent, nature, and consequences of narrative for deliberative talk. Therefore, my study has implications for how deliberative talk might be organized and facilitated to achieve desired results.

The theoretical point has to do with an insight that is slowly becoming apparent in the broader literature on the practice of deliberative democracy, namely that deliberation is hard work: it is not easily undertaken, and once undertaken, it is not easily pursued (for a review of the literature, see Ryfe, 2005). For example, it is not at all clear how individuals who barely know one another are supposed to manage
their “public face” in a context that seems to threaten it at every turn. Nor is it clear how participants are supposed to talk intelligently about complex public issues of which they know very little. I argue that individuals tell stories to help them overcome such barriers to deliberation. Storytelling also plays an important collective role for deliberative groups. I find that, as individuals borrow from and build upon one another’s stories, groups begin to fashion moral communities around the issues under discussion, doing so with remarkably little open or explicit conflict. Put simply, storytelling is a key mode of talk through which individuals in small group forums negotiate difficulties that naturally arise in such conversations.

Understanding more about the role of narrative in small group deliberative talk will not tell us everything we want to know about how it is done and might be done better. Certainly, the relatively small sample size of this study does not merit sweeping conclusions. Moreover, I avoid making normative judgments about the value of narrative for deliberation. However, this research does deepen our understanding of the complexities involved in getting ordinary people to adopt a deliberative posture toward one another. In so doing, it benefits not only the scholarly community, but also the community of practitioners engaged in the task of creating deliberative initiatives in communities around the globe.

Narrative and Barriers to Deliberation

When I say that narrative plays an important role in deliberative talk, I am, of course, begging an important question: what, precisely, is narrative? As one might imagine, there are many definitions from which to choose, and every one prompts vociferous debate. Because my main focus is on deliberation rather than narrative, I adopt a minimalist definition to which most scholars of narrative may agree. Since Aristotle, students of narrative generally share a sense that it involves a sequence of events organized in such a way as to have a beginning, middle, and end. This is to say, narrative stitches events together into a set of linked statements: first, this happened; then, this happened; and then, this happened. This basic form is sometimes called narrative’s “referential” aspect: stories literally refer to events. Not just any series of events conjures a story. Rather, scholars agree that stories pivot around a problem, what is sometimes referred to as a dilemmatic situation or a complicating event (see Billig, 1987; Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). This quality separates stories from mere chronologies. A story, in short, has a point, and this point—what is sometimes called its evaluative aspect—arises from the way in which it resolves the problem it poses. Put more simply, stories are always about something. In telling a story, authors intend to persuade hearers that the problems they pose, and the manner in which they resolve them, are accurate reflections of the way the world is or ought to be. To the extent, then, that the meaning of stories lies in context—in the way they are addressed by someone to others in a context of interaction—we might say that narrative is a kind of rhetorical act (Good & Roberts, 1993; Hernstein-Smith, 1980; Kearns, 1999; Phelan, 1996).
As rhetorical acts of this kind, stories play a crucial role in deliberation. Part of this role has to do with helping individuals overcome the many barriers that stand in the way of achieving a deliberative posture (on these barriers, see Ryfe, 2005). An initial barrier is simply developing the motivation to deliberate. Cognitive psychologists have shown that everyday reasoning is largely unconscious, unreflective, and unintentional. All things being equal, people prefer to rely on routine scripts to navigate their social world. Being jolted out of these scripts is, generally speaking, a disconcerting experience. This directly implicates motivation as a central issue in deliberation. In short, how can people be motivated to engage in intentional reflection? This question is of obvious concern to researchers. One review of the growing literature on the practice of deliberative democracy has found that at least three types of conditions tend to motivate individuals to adopt a deliberative frame of mind: accountability, high stakes, and cognitive diversity (Ryfe, 2005). Apparently, the idea is that feeling accountable, or that the stakes involved are great, or that a group includes diverse ways of thinking motivates people to engage in deliberation.

Regardless of the specific conditions, from a communication perspective, it is important to recognize that motivation is a discursive construction rather than a fixed state. This is to say, part of what participants in a deliberative encounter accomplish is precisely to determine for themselves whether they feel accountable, that an issue is important to them, or that the group in which they find themselves is especially diverse. They accomplish this task through storytelling. In this regard, deliberation is little different from other forms of ordinary conversation. Other work has shown that participants in natural conversations devise provisional identities that they deem appropriate to the situation in which they find themselves (cf. Bamberg, 2004; Schiffrin, 2002; Stanley & Billig, 2004). Similarly, in deliberative situations, participants tell stories to establish an identity appropriate to the situation at hand. The terms on which these identities connect participants to issues, in large measure, determine whether they feel motivated to engage in intentional reflection.

Not surprisingly, facilitators play an important role in this process because they have ultimate power to set and monitor the tacit ground rules on which talk will occur. One key decision has to do with how strongly a facilitator manages conversation. Relatively more open and relaxed methods of facilitation are likely to engender more storytelling on the part of participants because it leaves them to do much of the hard work of establishing who they are in relation to others. For example, at the beginning of Group 4’s discussion of money in politics, the facilitator asks participants to say something about themselves and how they think about the issue. This is a relatively non-directive opening that frees participants to say just about anything they wish. It also requires that participants do more work to situate themselves in the context. In this regard, it is interesting that, at the facilitator’s prompt, a gentleman tells the following story:

1 I’ll tell you a story about two men that uh who have run for office
2 and they are our mayor jerry clemens and one of his councilmen jonathan wilson
3 I took a young boy scout over to visit them uhhhh
who was working on citizenship in the community merit badge
and during the discussion in mayor clemens’ office, the young man asked them both:
“why did you decide to run for public office?”
and what they said both of them really said the same thing
number one, they weren’t too happy with the way things were going
they thought they could make a difference
and they were willing to step up to the plate
I said to this young man, “someday you’re going to be in that position yourself”

At first blush, the story does not seem to have much to do with campaign finance reform. In response to a rather general prompt by the facilitator, the gentleman has told a tangential story. However, on closer examination, it is apparent that the story does important work. It features a three-part sequence in which a boy is taken to visit two local politicians (lines 1–5); the boy scout asks the politicians a question (line 6); the politicians respond (lines 7–10); and finally, the narrator draws a moral lesson for the boy (line 11). Put another way, the story proposes a particular civic identity, one in which people want “to make a difference” and are willing to “step up to the plate.” In the context of a deliberative encounter, the moral that “someday you’re going to be in that position yourself” might be interpreted as an admonition to the group members that they have been called upon to step up to the plate. Read in this way, the story is an invitation to group members to take up a strongly civic identity in relation to the issue. As citizens, it is their obligation to participate in resolving issues of common concern. Other work has shown (Haney et al., 2002) that such identities strongly predict whether individuals will engage in civic affairs despite the many barriers that stand in their way.

The general point is that stories convey identities which place deliberative participants in particular relationships vis-à-vis issues under discussion (on this process as a general feature of social life, see Somers, 1994). Moreover, the particular character of stories—even whether participants offer them at all—can be influenced by a facilitator’s prompts. This process is, of course, contingent and situated. The meaning of stories may shift over the course of discussion, especially in the presence of facilitator cues. Identities that seem to connect participants in one way to an issue may be cast in quite a different light at another stage in the discussion. As participants work with and through stories, their meaning may be twisted and turned to fulfill different rhetorical purposes. In the end, participants may or may not come to a shared agreement about the meaning of any particular identity. But the identities conveyed through stories are crucial for helping participants determine their obligations and commitments. What does the issue mean to me? Why should I bother? Who are these people to me? It is through stories that participants devise answers to such questions.

Assuming, for the moment, that participants in a deliberative encounter are motivated to engage in the hard work of intentional reflection, the next barrier they confront has to do with knowledge. Put simply, even if they want to deliberate, do
participants have enough information at their disposal to engage in meaningful deliberation?

Being sensitive to this dilemma, most models of small group deliberation account for it in some way. For example, NIFs provide participants with issue guides in the days and weeks before groups meet. These guides give participants basic information on the topic at hand. Moreover, facilitators are trained to provide information on matters of fact when discussions stall. Even with such measures, some kinds of issues are simply technical and complex. In the face of such issues, participants may not feel authorized to speak even if they have received information beforehand or a facilitator has picked up some of the slack.

In such situations, stories can play an important role. As an example, at one point, Group 1 found itself discussing the issue of privacy with respect to the Internet. The issue is difficult to parse, in part, because the technological characteristics of the medium are complex. In the midst of this conversation, a woman offered the following story:

1. recently I saw where a mother or woman had been charged with abandoning a child
2. had had her wages garnered
3. because some state agency determined that she had had a baby at some point
4. and the child was not hers
5. and there was absolutely no recourse
6. umm it took her years to convince the state that in fact she had not given birth
7. given birth to that child
8. and she had not abandoned that child
9. but exponential error that uhh I don’t know if it could ever be tracked down

A full mastery of the issue of privacy on the Internet would require at least some understanding of Internet technology, public policy, and constitutional law. In the absence of such expertise, this participant uses storytelling to make sense of the issue. Her story takes place in four scenes: a state agency determines that a woman has abandoned her baby; her wages are garnered; the problem is that the baby is not hers; and the woman spends several years trying to convince the state of this fact. The participant’s point is that, once the state is allowed access to personal information, “exponential errors” may occur (line 9). As Bruner (1986) suggests, such stories place complicated issues “into the particulars of experience, and . . . locate the experience in time and place” (pp. 12–13). This is to say, stories make issues amenable to human understanding.

In noting the advantages of storytelling in this regard, I do not mean to make a normative judgment about the value of storytelling for deliberative outcomes. One can easily imagine, for instance, that the woman above is simply mistaken. In fact, the situation she describes may be so uncommon as to lack relevance to the issue at hand. If such were the case, her story might have led the group far afield of more central concerns. Her story may have helped her affect a deliberative posture, but done so at the cost of leading the group astray. Obviously, such a situation can end in
unfortunate outcomes. Here, I merely wish to argue that, for better or worse, storytelling is sometimes crucial for the instigation of deliberation. Without appeal to narrative, participants might simply be unwilling to enter into a deliberative encounter. Whether the outcome of this talk is better or worse is, of course, an empirical question.

Storytelling has still other advantages for participants. For example, research has shown that claims seem more valid the more individuals appear to be sincere, trustworthy, and friendly (cf. Eder, 1988; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Grimshaw, 1990; Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998; Schiffrin, 1990; Xu, 2000). In a group of relative strangers, these matters are particularly pressing. It is no surprise, then, to learn that NIF participants disclose personal information in their stories as a way to enhance the perception that their contributions are sincere and trustworthy. Consider the following contribution during Group 2’s discussion of the Internet:

1. I have been on the Internet for at least six years because my husband and I own a computer business.
2. I’ve always been very excited by the potential of it.
3. but I have to say that for about the last year and a half.
4. I have been just confounded by all the obscene material that flashes unsolicited on the screen.
5. I go on line at night when my fam.
6. when my two young daughters and my husband are sitting in the family room.
7. and I’ve had advertising banners with video clips with sex acts pop up.
8. I feel that I’m being invaded in my home.
9. we need to police this.
10. or we need to have some kind of control.

The personal details that preface this story—the participant is an experienced user of the Internet and owns a computer business (lines 1–2)—do important work. As both Habermas (1984) and Grice (1989) argue, participants in an ordinary conversation assume, among other things, that interlocutors are being truthful and sincere in their statements. These conditions can be difficult to satisfy in a deliberative encounter, both because participants hardly know one another and because the issues are complex enough that participants may have difficulty proving the truthfulness of their claims. Offering personal details about oneself is one way of satisfying these conversational burdens. By sharing personal information about herself and her family, this participant works to build trust with other group members. She establishes a situated identity so that others may “know” her, at least in the context of the immediate interaction. Moreover, this particular identity serves as a warrant for her claim that “we need to police” the Internet (line 10). She is, after all, not only an experienced computer user who has been on-line for six years, but also owns her own computer business. “Having always been excited by the potential of it” (line 3), she has no particular ax to grind against the medium. She is, in other words, a knowledgeable and sincere person. Finally, the story itself relaxes the requirements
of truthfulness. The author of this story has no way of knowing if all Internet users feel invaded in their homes. For this reason, her contribution may, in fact, not be truthful in a global sense. Because she conveys the statement in the form of a personal story, it is likely that hearers judge the veracity of her story by more relaxed standards. In all of these ways, the disclosure of personal information helps this participant overcome the problem of establishing the sincerity and truthfulness of her claims.

Stories also help participants instill civility and friendliness in their conversation. Prior research (cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Mulkay, 1985; Pomerantz, 1984; Schiffrin, 1990; Sheldon, 1992) shows that these issues can be quite important for the success of natural conversations. Generally speaking, individuals go to great lengths to preserve not only their own “public face,” but also that of their interlocutors. For this reason, uncivil conversations are likely either to cease or to feature “repair work” as their participants strive to reconstruct a sense of decorum. This feature of ordinary talk presents a particularly thorny problem for deliberative encounters. Precisely because they privilege conflict and disagreement, they pose a constant threat to the public face of their participants. Storytelling helps participants manage this situation in a way that avoids a constant need for repair work.

For example, instead of disagreeing directly with the claims of others, participants express initial agreement and then use stories to imply disagreement. During Group 1’s discussion of the Internet, the moderator asks a participant if she would feel betrayed by a government agency that sold her personal information to commercial organizations. She responds:

1 that’s somewhat of an emotionally laden
2 but yes if indeed if indeed I provide this information with the understanding
3 that it will be used in a certain way for a certain purpose
4 and it’s not then obviously this is a betrayal if you will

This comment elicits the following reaction from another participant:

1 I don’t know kind of the way I look at
2 that I agree it is a feeling of betrayal
3 but umm information is sold everywhere
4 I mean birth records are sold by hospitals
5 if I give birth tomorrow at a hospital
6 that birth record is sold to companies like Grolliers
7 that says children’s books all different companies
8 that sell children’s things
9 and then they call my house that telemarket
10 and they send me fliers and they send me stuff
11 and so I think there’s a fine line

As the literature suggests, this participant prefaces her comment with an initial statement of agreement (line 2). She then goes on to offer a story that casts the
practice of selling personal information in a different light. According to this story, not only is the practice not a betrayal of trust, it may actually be of benefit to individuals, at least to the extent that they receive useful information in return. To make this point directly would have been to violate important conversational rules of politeness. Such directness would have threatened the first discussant’s public face and, to the extent that it seemed unfair, impolite, or aggressive, made the claim less persuasive. By expressing disagreement in story form, the participant avoids this consequence. Paradoxically then, stories allow participants to persuade, even to offer arguments, but to do so in a way that avoids openly arguing with one another.

In sum, storytelling plays a variety of roles to lower the structural, psychological, and social barriers to deliberation. Storytelling’s capacity to develop and sustain situated identities plays an important role in determining whether individuals feel compelled to engage in deliberate reflection at all. Stories also help individuals develop a sense of how issues play out in the real world even when they lack full information. Finally, stories allow individuals to manage politeness issues in a context that privileges disagreement.

Narrative and the Meaning of Deliberation

Thus far, we have considered the psychological, cognitive, and social roles that stories play for individuals in a deliberative encounter. As a long line of research on narrative argues, stories also have ontological and moral consequences for groups as a whole. For instance, Walter Fisher (1999) suggests that stories “give order to human experience and ... induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in communities ...” (p. 271). Repetition is key to this process of community-building. As Ricoeur (1980) observes, when such stories are repeated, they become the basis for a tradition that ties people together across time. Hayden White (1980) nicely summarizes the point of this line of argument: “Every ... narrative,” he writes, “has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats” (p. 18). Narratives tell us not only what happened, but also what ought to have happened. By providing coherence where none existed before, narratives make “the real,” or “what really happened,” desirable. “The value attached to narrativity,” White concludes, “in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (p. 27). In storytelling, participants not only convey their individual points of view, they also stake claims to, and invite others to inhabit, moral communities.

The connection between coherence and morality in narrative goes some way toward helping us understand the otherwise paradoxical finding that deliberation often produces deleterious outcomes. The meaning of deliberation—what it is that individuals in small group forums think they have (or have not) accomplished—is determined by the manner in which participants build upon one another’s stories. It is in this process of story building that groups develop a sense of what happened and, perhaps most importantly, what ought to have happened in their group discussions.
Consider a first possible outcome of a deliberative encounter: a group fails to build a shared narrative. None of the NIF groups in my sample have this outcome, probably because the participants have been primed beforehand to expect to share their concerns and work with others on the issue under discussion. But it is certainly possible for a small group of people to come together and simply be unable to create a shared account of an issue. And it is easy to see why this condition might produce frustration. Absent the acceptance of such a narrative, participants may justly feel that their energies have been wasted or that the issue is simply not amenable to understanding. The outcome is a feeling of powerlessness translated into frustration and anxiety.

Most public issues are neither so complex nor impervious to reason as to lie outside the bounds of narrative. Moreover, as Habermas (1984) and Grice (1989) argue, ordinary conversations contain strong incentives for individuals to work together toward common understanding. Thus, a second outcome—groups fashioning two or more narratives, none of which gains universal assent—is much more likely. A moment’s reflection shows that it will be especially common when facilitators do not push participants toward closure. In other words, given little direction from a facilitator, participants in small group deliberation are most likely to produce a set of competing narratives. Indeed, this is the most common result in the forums under review here. For example, Group 3 develops two competing stories with regard to the issue of public education. Both are announced at the outset of the proceedings. A businessman named Stan initiates the first story:

1 the thing that’s missing from public education and to me it’s so obvious
2 is one of the things that absolutely made this country what it is
3 and that is that spirit of entrepreneurship
4 and I don’t see anywhere on here
5 attracting and rewarding teachers based on performance and accountability
6 and to me that putting an excellent teacher in front of every classroom is one of the
7 absolute keys to improving education and that’s going to mean
8 you know breaking up what to me is an antiquated system
9 and then part of that entrepreneurship to me is giving parents a choice of schools
10 I live in Durham and if we’ve got a 6’4” 240 pound strapping boy who can run like
11 deer we don’t have a football team in this town
12 shouldn’t that boy be able to choose to go to Portsmouth High School
13 or Dover High School where they do?
14 And if the answer to that logically is yes
15 then what about that scrawny 120 lb computer whiz
16 that looks at his you know at the offerings at his school
17 and says “this is not what I need” but the school you know down the street
18 or in the next town that has the kind of environment that would be great for me”

The characters that populate this narrative include talented students, parents seeking choices for their kids, and teachers/administrators who (at least implicitly) are not
accountable. Its plot involves a fundamental problem (an “antiquated system” rewards mediocrity) and offers a resolution that stresses “entrepreneurship.” The point of the story seems to be that schools ought to operate more like businesses—to be more consumer-oriented, entrepreneurial, and accountable to fixed, quantifiable standards.

The facilitator does not identify the central claim in Stan’s story. Indeed, he does not comment on the story at all. Instead, two turns later, a former teacher responds directly to Stan’s narrative. Of course, she does so in the form of a story:

1 umm I’m I’m certainly concerned about this problem
2 and um Stan when he said that he wants to get us to a starting point
3 where we’re willing to work at this struck me because I I agree
4 what worries me is that it looks like the public
5 it looks like there’s action being taken
6 that a lot of what’s going on that concerns is our politicians
7 who are trying to put band aids on problems
8 umm in the state of California for example they’re trying to raise standards
9 and umm but then there are teachers who aren’t supported to be able to do that
10 there are tests being given to kids to weed them out and keep them back
11 and yet the schools are underfunded
12 they don’t have the time to do to do the regular
13 the real teaching umm inquiry-based learning
14 and then prepare the students to take these multiple choice tests
15 that are created by whom?
16 a variety of people who may not understand the particular needs and experience of
17 that population of students

In typical fashion, she begins her comment with an expression of agreement with Stan (line 3). In fact, however, her narrative contradicts Stan’s in important ways. In contrast to Stan’s account, teachers in her story make do with limited resources; politicians mindlessly impose new standards (in the form of standardized tests) to serve their short-term political interests; and communities refuse to provide sufficient resources to schools. Where Stan encourages others to see the problem in terms of scene (an “antiquated system”) and, to a lesser extent, the motivations of teachers (who support this system), the second participant narrativizes the issue wholly in terms of motivation—of politicians and of the public at large. On the latter view, quality education is less a matter of “entrepreneurship” than of “inquiry-based” learning that gives teachers the time and resources to respond to students’ individual needs.

With little interference from the facilitator, the characters, plots, motives, terms, and categories of these stories become the scaffolding on which the participants make sense of the issue. The result looks like a back and forth exchange. One participant advocates more “marketing” and testing, and the next stresses the need for communities (and parents) to give teachers adequate resources. For the most part,
participants prefer to express agreement with one of these accounts rather than to risk open conflict. Indeed, one gets the sense that only time constraints prevent participants from an endless elaboration of these stories. At the end of the proceedings, a participant suggests that he

1. sometimes wake[s] up at night and think[s]
2. “what do we have to do to get Bill Gates to market education?”
3. and I think we have a marketing problem
4. we have a marketing problem because every one of these points
5. and we could be here for another 8 hours and address more points in more detail
6. in more specifics but in the final analysis so what? what do we accomplish?
7. Where do we go?
8. You need a strategy you need a marketing plan

This prompts another participant to interject:

1. I can't leave it on this [laughter from the group]
2. to have marketing be the last answer
3. it's just you pushed my button
4. because and maybe it's just how we interpret the word
5. but my vision of marketing is image and manipulation and lies
6. it's sort of creating it's selling but maybe not based in the truth

He goes on to tell a personal story of his own experience in education that confirms the view that learning is rooted in the classroom; that the relationship between teachers and students ought to be sacrosanct; and that the problem of public schools lies in the apathy of the public and the self-interest of politicians, not in schools themselves.

In part because the facilitator allows the stories to develop and contest one another, neither of these views achieves dominance in this forum. To the very end, participants “push one another’s buttons” by invoking the terms of the competing stories. This competition sustains the “deliberative mindset” of the group. Discussion is never forestalled. Participants offer comments, opinions, experiences, and facts throughout. As participants struggle with and against the alternative account, their discussion at times becomes quite animated. The result is a vibrant conversation. In post-deliberation surveys, researchers often find that participants in such a conversation express a feeling of having “learned a great deal” from their deliberations, principally because they have been exposed to alternative views (cf. Cook, Lomax, & Jacobs, 1999; Delli Carpini, 1997). Although I did not have the opportunity to conduct such a survey with this group, I get the sense that participants would probably confirm this finding.

At the same time, we also see the faint outlines of frustration developing in the group. It is apparent in the laughter precipitated by the last participant’s comment that he “can't leave it like this” (line 1). It comes through more directly in the first participant’s observation that “we could be here for another 8 hours and address
more points in more detail in more specifics but in the final analysis so what?” (lines 5–6). This comment indicates frustration. The facilitator has refused to lead the group to closure, and the participants have failed to achieve consensus on their own. Other researchers have discussed this outcome in terms of a difficulty of moving from a “deliberative” to an “implementational” mindset (Holt, 1993, 1999; Wilson, Dunn, Kraft, & Lisle, 1989; Wilson & Schooler, 1991).

Why should an inability to move from deliberation to implementation frustrate participants? Why not simply accept that people will disagree? There are at least two explanations for this feeling. The first stresses the moral payoff of reaching decisions. The absence of a singular narrative may prevent closure which, in turn, makes participants feel that they have failed in some fundamental way. The appeal of a singular narrative is that it provides individuals not only with cognitive understanding of what happened, but also with a moral sense of what ought to be done next. Psychologists have found that people appreciate the opportunity to consider choices, but that they appreciate even more the feeling of having chosen well (cf. Armor & Taylor, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Similarly, people appreciate deliberation, but appreciate even more deliberation that solves a problem in such a way that talk is no longer necessary.

Alternatively, the lack of closure may present an epistemological dilemma. Stories gain acceptance through what Fisher (1999) calls “narrative probability” and “fidelity.” On this view, the problem for Group 3 is not that its members have produced two narratives that ring true for some, but not all, members of the group. Rather, it is that participants have no way of checking which story best accords with the available data. Had they been given an opportunity to compare these stories with the available data, frustration might not have set in.

These two explanations do not necessarily contradict one another. One can imagine that an inability to check the available information leads to a moral conundrum that, in turn, causes frustration. However, at least for analytic purposes, it may be useful to keep the two explanations distinct.

A final possible result of deliberation is that it does, in fact, produce narrative cohesion. This result is especially common in two conditions: when either a facilitator or another individual is strongly motivated to achieve consensus, or when individuals in a group find common ground early in a conversation and are then able to devote the rest of their time to building on this shared perspective. Group 5’s conversation about money in politics exhibits the latter condition. Very early in the discussion, a young woman announces that she comes to this issue from the perspective of a “lower socioeconomic background” who feels the political system does not speak to her needs.

1 I think umm especially being from you know
growing up in a lower socioeconomic background
3 it makes people feel especially poor people very apathetic.
4 Like I “the only control I can have is not to participate because my interests and my
5 values aren’t represented by billionaires or by big money or whatever”
This story invites other participants to dwell within a particular imagined world. In this world, poor people are pressed by circumstances beyond their control to make choices that contradict their self-interest. Billionaires do not have the best interest of poor people at heart. People like the storyteller worry about this situation. In other words, the storyteller invests her imagined world with particular roles, values, obligations, and commitments.

Immediately after its elaboration, other participants begin to build on this account. The very next contribution comes from an African-American gentleman who says, in part, that

Notice that, although this participant’s comment is not conveyed in narrative form, it nonetheless makes an explicit connection to the initial story (line 2). Like the “poor people” of the initial story, he feels left out of the system. As in the initial story, “the system” is the active agent in this participant’s comments. The system “did not have me in mind” (line 4), did not “incorporate” him (line 5), and did not “embrace [him] now” (line 6). Although it is delivered as a declarative statement, then, the gentleman’s comment contributes to a budding narrative.

Two turns later, for example, an African-American state legislator says:

Here, the point of the narrative is distilled: the problem of money in politics comes down to the question of how to get “the Walts [i.e., disadvantaged people] . . . back into the system” (line 3). From this point forward, participants recognize common ground, and the preferred view snowballs. A woman suggests that public financing of campaigns is a good idea because it might “broaden the diversity of viewpoints that are brought to the table. . . .” Another points out that campaign finance reform might “counteract some of that disenfranchised feeling. . . .” Still another woman argues
that deregulation of the campaign finance system would likely “whack away any confidence that lower income people would have in the system . . .,” leading a participant to add, “I think the strongest proponents [of deregulation] are those who are completely blind to white privilege.” This comment yields murmurs of assent around the circle. In the midst of the conversation, several other participants reveal that they, too, feel disenfranchised because they are poor, female, or a person of color. The perspective gains such moral force that participants rarely tell stories which do not conform to its ontological and moral commitments. Put another way, as the basic story is built upon and repeated, it comes to serve as an imagined world in which this group’s participants share a sense of the proper roles, values, commitments, and obligations through which to view the problem of money in politics.

Once it is clear that the group shares this basic story, it becomes a basis on which to form collective judgments and move to issues of implementation. This is to say, the narrative’s dominance produces a feeling that the group may move from a deliberative to an implementational mindset. Midway through the discussion, for instance, a young woman interjects the following:

1 the second piece because it’s
2 I mean everybody’s brought up really great valid points
3 is how is this going to be palatable to the people outside this room
4 umm I don’t know if you know how are we going to make this to where people are
5 going to want to buy into it? You know I
6 I think if if when you start talking about anything that’s publicly funded
7 people start to shut down and say “No No No No” you know

In many ways, this statement nicely summarizes the group’s emerging view. Its contrast between “we” (line 4) and “people” (line 7) constructs the group as sharing a set of assumptions. Apparently, “we” are the kind of people who do not “shut down” when the phrase “publicly funded” is uttered (lines 6–7). Instead, precisely because we share certain values and commitments, we agree on a first piece (line 1), namely that public financing is necessary to solve the problem of money in politics. Now that “we” have reached this collective judgment, we may now move to issues of implementation, the “second piece” of our discussion: “how we are going to make this to where people are going to want to buy into it?” (lines 4–5). This question can only arise against the background of a perception that the group shares a set of prior commitments. These commitments are not articulated or identified explicitly, but rather arise out of narrative repetition: poor people have been left out of the political process because they lack adequate resources.

As this example shows, such narratives can exercise a powerful force on deliberative participants. Ironically, as some studies have discovered, it may even produce intolerance within individuals (Kuklinski, Riggle, Ottati, Schwarz, & Wyer, 1993; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000). The very fact of building a common sense in conversation may blind participants to the legitimacy of alternative views. At the same time, some kind of consensus, however provisional, seems necessary for a group
to move toward issues of implementation. Whatever the normative value of the process, here we would do well to recognize the fragility of the process. In these forums, collective judgment arises among the participants in the immediacy of their interaction. Moreover, it depends, in part, on an “us/them” distinction that, while powerful in the context of the group, can quickly wither away outside its confines. The clarity of the group’s vision, for instance, may become clouded when confronted by the complexity of the outside world. Stories embraced by other groups to which participants belong may pull at their sense of an “us” versus a “them.” The institutional environment in which they find themselves may not favor their collective judgment or offer opportunities for repetition of the narrative on which it is based. Outside groups may directly challenge the narrative on which a group has fashioned its judgment. In any or all of these ways, a group’s work, and the narrative process on which it rests, can produce more uncertainty and frustration after a deliberative encounter than before because the wider society lacks effective deliberative mechanisms.

This is the spirit in which I interpret the finding that decisions made deliberatively can sometimes produce great frustration and antagonism. Hendriks (2002), for example, observes interest group representatives expressing frustration with a deliberatively produced policy decision that they themselves had a hand in fashioning. Similarly, Button and Mattson (1999) and Kimmelman and Hall (1997) show participants in a deliberative encounter expressing great frustration after deliberation when they realize that their recommendations are not likely to influence policymaking. Such frustration is not likely to arise when groups fail to achieve narrative clarity. On those occasions when participants are able to fasten onto a common story, the very fact that it seems like “common sense” increases the risk of frustration at the outcome. Indeed, the greater the distance between an account developed within a small group deliberative process and those accepted in the wider political system, the greater the possibility that such frustration will arise.

**Practical Implications**

As I suggested at the outset, a narrative approach to small group deliberation may have its greatest practical value in the area of group facilitation. Nearly every model of small group deliberation includes a role for facilitators to initiate and manage conversations (for discussions of various models, see Gastil & Levine, 2005; Ryfe, 2002). Indeed, judged by the attention deliberative organizations devote to facilitator training, it is clear that they take the practice quite seriously. My research suggests that they are correct to do so. In the forums I have reviewed, facilitators play a very strong role in shaping whether and how participants develop and circulate stories, and therefore in the relative success of the entire enterprise.

To make sense of this role, we might think of it as on a continuum from strong to weak facilitation. On this continuum, strong facilitators moderate forums by interjecting themselves frequently into the conversation. They ask leading questions, summarize the statements of others, and otherwise place themselves at the center of
group discussions. In contrast, weak facilitators largely confine themselves to managing the clock and summarizing options discussed by participants. How does either end of this continuum impact the storytelling process of small group forums?

From my data, it is clear that strong facilitators tend to short-circuit the storytelling process. The moderator of Groups 4 and 5 (who happens to be the same person) is this kind of facilitator. From beginning to end, she controls the flow of the groups’ conversation. She moves the discussion along by asking questions like, “What bothers you about that?” and, “What is your reaction to that?” She asks participants to respond to her own personal stories and to data mentioned in the guidebook. She summarizes comments: “The comments have reflected so far that we do have this technology, that... it’s confounding....” When facilitated in this manner, small group forums tend to have a rapid-fire, scattershot quality. Participants tend to say less, to tell fewer stories, and to talk more directly to the facilitator. This makes for a fast pace to the discussions. More people talk over shorter periods of time, and there is less of the thinking-out-loud that characterizes other groups. In short, in the presence of such facilitators, participants themselves tell very few stories.

Why do strong facilitators have this effect on forum discussions? Because, I think, this kind of facilitation assumes much of the hard work of deliberation. When participants respond directly to facilitator statements, they feel less need to connect themselves personally to issues, to make claims about the issues, to manage their interactions with others, to establish their competence to speak on the issue, or even to make their utterances relevant to the conversation. It is not surprising, for instance, that in forums moderated by strong facilitators, participants utter more non sequiturs or that they make side jokes to one another in hushed voices. Facilitators in such forums take responsibility for linking statements to one another and for developing coherent lines of argument. This gives participants less rhetorical work to do. The result: participants withdraw from the work of mounting the many barriers to deliberation.

Given this impact, should we prefer weak to strong facilitators? Recall that weak facilitators tend to become invisible during a group’s discussion. Since they rarely interject themselves into conversations, participants tend to make longer statements, to do more thinking out loud, to respond to one another’s utterances, and generally to develop a richer narrative texture to their talk. One finds much more storytelling in these groups. All things being equal, this is preferable to the comparably thinner interactions of strongly facilitated forums. However, things are rarely equal in forums. In fact, although weak facilitators allow for a richer narrative texture of talk, they also run a significant danger, namely that participants will gravitate toward a single narrative and spend much of their time congratulating themselves on its discovery.

The tendency of groups to end in this result has been confirmed by broader literature on small group conversations. In both experimental studies of small group decision-making and natural observations of jury deliberations, researchers have found that small groups prefer to cooperate rather than conflict, to share common rather than conflicting knowledge, to gravitate quickly to shared information, and to
discover initial points of agreement and select information on the basis of that consensus (cf. Davis, Kameda, Parks, Stasson, & Zimmerman, 1989; Gigone & Hastie, 1993, 1997; Kameda, 1991; Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994; Nemeth & Rogers, 1996; Schulz-Hardt, Frey, Luthgens, & Moscovici, 2000; Winquist & Larson, 1998). In short, the literature suggests that, left to their own devices, small groups will tend to adopt a consensus perspective, even at the cost of producing biased judgments or decisions. In the abstract, this preference seems irrational. After all, the rationale for preferring group to individual decision-making is precisely that it allows for a greater range of information and points of view to be aired. In other words, better judgments ought to emanate from group thinking. It appears, however, that social dynamics within group communication may prevent this promise from being realized. It is not clear then, that weak facilitation necessarily results in better deliberation than strong facilitation. Indeed, to the extent that we view homogeneous, biased judgments as a danger, it may produce worse outcomes than if participants had independently weighed the issue.

On the basis of these findings, one might argue on normative grounds that, as a mode of talk, narrative is inferior to other modes of democratic conversation (cf. Lewis, 1987, 1988). This is the reason that Habermas (1987) privileges argument and not narrative as the sine qua non of deliberative talk. Certainly, my analysis does not solve this normative riddle. It does, however, suggest ways in which facilitators may help groups use storytelling in productive ways. If the point of small group forums is to induce participants to overcome the barriers to deliberation, and once overcome to maintain a posture of open inquiry, then facilitators must be trained to occupy a middle ground between strong and weak moderation. On this ground, facilitators will seek to induce participants to share and engage with one another’s stories. However, once this process begins to unfold, facilitators will also be willing to call attention to emerging narrative themes, to intervene with contradictory information when a conversation threatens to devolve into self-congratulation, and generally to prod the group to remain open to alternative accounts.

Conclusion

Understanding more about the role of narrative in deliberation will not tell us everything we want to know about deliberative talk. Moreover, as I have conceded, the smallness of my sample size cautions against sweeping generalizations even about this subject. However, I have accomplished enough here to confirm that more attention in future studies to the nature of deliberative talk will likely yield greater insight into the practice of deliberative democracy. It may help practitioners think better about facilitator training. It may help academics understand more about why, even under the best conditions, deliberation is a difficult proposition. How participants in small group forums manage the many pitfalls that lie in the way of deliberation is of obvious concern to anyone who sees value in making public life more deliberative.
References


Kuklinski, J., Riggle, E., Ottati, V., Schwarz, N., & Wyer, R. (1993). Thinking about political tolerance, more or less, with more or less information. In G. Marcus & R. Hanson (Eds.), Reconsidering the democratic public (pp. 225–247). University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.


## Appendix

The data for this study include videotapes of five National Issues Forums conducted between February 1999 and January 2001. In broad form, the NIF process is a relatively structured exercise in public deliberation. At the center of the model are pamphlets that outline a policy issue and present participants with three choices. NIF produces these pamphlets in collaboration with Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization. The pamphlets are used by a wide variety of organizations, including schools, churches, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofit foundations, and government agencies. These groups arrange for the pamphlets to be used in deliberative forums that usually involve 15–20 participants. Typically, forums are advertised by local groups, and participants self-select themselves to participate. Often, moderators have been trained in group facilitation by the Kettering Foundation, a nonprofit research institute. This training teaches moderators to move through issues and choices in an ordered fashion — first inviting participants to express personal views; then asking them to weigh various choices and discuss tradeoffs; and, finally, asking the group as a whole to seek common ground. Generally, this process takes 1.5–2 hours, although, at times, it may be stretched out for groups that wish to meet over a period of weeks.

All of the forums in this data set met once for approximately two hours. Each group included between 15 and 21 participants. Three took place in Panama City, Florida; one in Durham, New Hampshire; and one in Portland, Oregon. Issues discussed include money in politics (by the Portland and one Panama City group), the Internet (the two other Panama City groups), and public schools (the Durham group). For the sake of simplicity, I have numbered these Groups 1–5, as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Issue</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Where</th>
<th>When</th>
<th># of participants</th>
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<td>February 4, 1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Internet</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Panama City, FL</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Schools</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Durham, NH</td>
<td>March 2, 2000</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money in Politics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Panama City, FL</td>
<td>January 31, 2001</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money in Politics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Portland, OR</td>
<td>January 31, 2001</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
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