Learning to deliberate across deep divisions

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We live in a world with increasing deep divisions including the United States and the European Union, not to speak of war torn countries like Syria, Ukraine and South Sudan. Schools can play an important role to teach students of how to overcome such deep divisions. The key is that students learn to listen with respect to arguments of the other side and to be willing to yield to the force of the better argument. Based on our research in deeply divided societies, we propose and begin to implement devises of how students can learn such behaviour. We work within the deliberate model of democracy, which goes back to philosophers like Aristotle and Immanuel Kant.[1] Jürgen Habermas is the most prominent contemporary philosopher who has worked on this model.[2] Its main feature is the assumption that human beings are sometimes able and willing to consider not only their self-interest but also the wellbeing of others. This deliberate model contrasts with a model that goes back to philosophers like Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, who assumed that human beings always pursue their self-interest. These two models are based on different assumptions of human nature. They are heuristic models that ultimately cannot be proved one way or the other. How we *perceive* human nature, however, is malleable. Thereby, schools play an important role, from Kindergarten to universities. If we constantly tell students that human beings are by nature egotistical, many are likely to believe it. If, by contrast, we tell them that human beings have the potential to be altruistic, they will likely look at human nature from a different perspective.

There is much research showing that schools play indeed an important role of how students look at egoism and altruism. The Lab for Experimental Economics & Decision Research at Cornell University is particularly fruitful in this respect. In one study, students in a large class in economics were randomly divided in two groups. In one group, classical macro and micro economics were taught, in the other group the emphasis was on topics like hunger in the third world and climate change. At the beginning and the end of the semester, questionnaires about egoism and altruism were administered, and significant differences between the two groups emerged. In the group on micro and macroeconomics, the lectures were based on the classical assumption that economic activities are driven by the motive of individual profit maximization, and the students became more egotistical in the course of the semester. In the other group, students became more altruistic having heard about the impact of climate change on future generations and that so many people suffer in the third world.

It is a hard test for the deliberate model to apply it to deeply divided societies. We were interested to see whether each side in such societies always just looks for its own interest or whether there are sometimes instances where efforts are made to reach over to the other side to find common ground. To answer this question we investigated Colombia, Brazil and Bosnia. In each of these three countries, we organized discussion groups, which had to address the question of how to arrive at a more peaceful culture. In Colombia, we brought together ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries, in Brazil police officers and locals in the favelas (slums), in Bosnia Serbs and Bosnjaks in Srebrenica. We found that there were indeed sequences in the discussions with quite a high level of deliberation, of course with many sequences where deliberation was at a low level or not existent at all. On the cover of the book on this research, there are two abstract figures, who hold up their hands to reach over to the other side.[3] This cover should symbolize some hope that even in deeply divided societies differences may be overcome. We bring

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[1] For an overview of the deliberate model see Jürg Steiner, *The Foundations of Deliberate Democracy. Empirical Research and Normative Implication*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983.

[3] See Jürg Steiner, Maria Clara Jaramillo, Rousiley C. M. Maia, and Simona Mameli, Deliberation across Deeply Divided Societies. Transformative Moments, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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this hope to the classrooms of these countries in making available the tapes and transcripts of all the discussions on the website *www.ipw.unibe,ch/content/research/deliberation*. Since the website also contains the English translations, other countries, too, may profit from our research material. Before we present how this works in the classrooms, we need to explain the specifics of our research, so that the reader gets an impression of what the students will be confronted with.

First, let us look at the deep divisions in these three countries. *Colombia* was a particularly deeply divided society at the time of our research, in particular between leftist guerrillas and rightist paramilitaries. When we did our research in 2008, the Colombian government had a program of decommissioning under way. This program applied to combatants of both left guerrillas and paramilitary forces at the right. Would ex-combatants, who a short while ago still were shooting at each other, be willing to sit around the same table? This was the challenge of our research, and it took patience to organize 28 discussion groups with altogether 342 participants. The work in the field was done by Maria Clara Jaramillo and Juan Ugarriza. At the beginning of the discussions, the moderators stated the following topic: 'What are your recommendations so that Colombia can have a future of peace, where people from the political left and the political right, guerrillas and paramilitaries, can live peacefully together.' Moderators did not intervene to encourage deliberative behaviour. It was precisely our research interest to see to what extent ex-combatants were willing and able to behave in a deliberative way without any outside help. In *Brazil*, poor residents in the favelas have a contentious relationship with the police. The police actions are characterized by human rights violations and abusive force, particularly against minority populations. The growing power of criminal organizations and drug trafficking led to an escalating violence in the slums. This is the context in which we organized in 2014 six discussion groups. Participants were poor community residents and local police officers, altogether 76 persons. The research in the field was directed by Rousiley Maia. The organization of the discussions followed the same guidelines as in Colombia. The question to be discussed was: 'How is it possible to create a culture of peace between poor community residents and the local police?' *Bosnia-Herzegovina*, with its recent internal armed conflict, was also a difficult place to do our research. We did it in Srebrenica, where in 1995 the horrendous massacres of Bosnjak men and boys by Serbs took place. In 2010, Simona Mameli organized six discussion groups between Serbs

and Bosnjaks with altogether 40 participants. The organization of the discussion was the same as in Colombia and Brazil. Here the task for the group was to 'formulate recommendations for a better future in Bosnia-Herzegovina'.

For all these group discussions, we established the level of deliberation. What are the main features of the deliberative model of democracy? One dimension is how well arguments are justified with reasons. Personal stories also count as good justifications as long as they are linked to the issue under discussion. A second dimension refers to the respect that is paid to other actors and the arguments they present. A third dimension asks to what extent arguments are justified in terms of the public good; self-interests are compatible with good deliberation, if they come from underprivileged persons and groups in the sense of the philosophy of social justice of John Rawls that the greatest benefits shall go "to the least advantaged."[4] A fourth dimension has to do with the outcome of a group discussion; from a deliberative perspective, consensus is a good outcome, but it may be sufficient if the actors acknowledge that the other side has valid arguments. A fifth dimension asks whether all actors are free to speak up or whether they are constrained, especially by unwanted interruptions or other intimidations. The last dimension deals with the question whether actors are truthful, actually meaning what they say. In empirical reality, there are hardly any situations that reach a maximum of deliberation on all these dimensions. As Jürgen Habermas put it, the ideal form of deliberation is as rare as "islands in the ocean in everyday praxis."[5] It is not even desirable that a political system consists only of deliberation; we also need competitive elections, bargaining, administrative rulings, street demonstrations and so on.

The dynamic of group discussions is usually characterized by an up and down of the level of deliberation. To get a handle at this dynamic, we have developed the concept of Deliberative Transformative Moments (DTMs). We define them at an abstract level as a change from a low level of deliberation to a high level or vice-versa. To identify such situations, we use an approach that has much to do with linguistics, social psychology, and rhetoric. Thereby, it will not be easy to apply the abstract concept to specific situations. One and the same word may have different meanings depending on the specific situation in an ongoing discussion. We proceed in our analysis in

4 John Rawls, *A Theory of Social Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 83.
5 Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen. Studien zur politischen Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996, S. 323.

such a way that we try to put ourselves in the context in which each actor speaks up. We chose as our units of analysis the individual *speech acts*. Whenever an actor makes any kind of utterance, this counts as a speech act, however brief or long the utterance is. So a speech act has a clear beginning and a clear ending. When an actor makes another intervention later in the discussion, this counts as another speech act. We proceed step by step and consider in our analysis only the speech acts that are already uttered and not those that follow. Time and again, we go back to what was said before, checking the recordings and the transcripts making sure that we have a good feeling for the context, in which an actor intervened in the discussion. In this way, we try to follow the narrative of the discussion *quasi* life, which means as it is experienced by the participants themselves, who obviously do not know what will happen after they speak. To get an empirical handle at the concept of DTM, we see deliberation as a continuum from no deliberation to full deliberation. On this continuum, we establish a cut-off point between high and low levels of deliberation, with the latter including no deliberation at all. The basic criterion is that at a high level of deliberation the discussion *flows* in the sense that the actors listen to each other in a respectful way, while at a low level of deliberation the discussion does not flow in the sense that actors do not listen to each other or do so only without respect.

For the present paper, I give an example for each country of one upward DTM, which is most useful to introduce our research material into the classrooms. Students can learn about the situations where discussions could be transformed from a low to a high level of deliberation. I begin with the ex-combatants in Colombia. With the following personal story ex-paramilitary Ernesto helped to transform the discussion back to a high level of deliberation.

That is one of the things I used to say when I was young, I said, well, if I am Colombian, I am able to go everywhere I want to. Later, when I started to live with the conflict, I realized that there were places where people would tell you "go away from here, we don't know you". You knew that you were in danger. When I came to Bogotá, I was with a cousin and a friend of mine in one of the northern and wealthy neighbourhoods, we were kind of lost. Then the police came, at first they asked us what we were doing; as my friend couldn't respond, at the end the police said they didn't want to see us around anymore, because neighbours had called to let them know that there were some strange and suspicious people, and they didn't want you here. What I feel is what you said about stratification, it is more than levels one, two or

three of a scale; it is discrimination, that is the hard thing.

This story is relevant for a discussion among ex-combatants about the peace process in Colombia. Ernesto begins the story with his optimistic expectation that when he was young he could go anywhere in the country. He felt that as a Colombian he was not discriminated. Ernesto then continues that later in life in the context of the civil war he had to learn that unfortunately discrimination existed in Colombia and that he encountered this at a very personal level. He illustrates this claim with a story about a bad experience that he had in a wealthy neighbourhood in Bogotá. Because he, his cousin and his friend looked suspicious, wealthy neighbours called the police to chase them away. Ernesto characterizes this episode as putting them in danger, because they were anxious not knowing what the police would do with them. This story is relevant for the peace process, because Ernesto can show to the other participants that there are huge social and economic inequalities in Colombian society. More specifically, he can show how ex-combatants in particular suffer under these inequalities. Through his story, Ernesto tells the other participants that these inequalities are not just a legal concept with abstract levels of one, two and three, but something that is revealed in everyday life as real discrimination. Ernesto does not explicitly link such discrimination to the ongoing civil war, but he tells his story in such vivid terms that it is implicitly clear that such inequalities are a major obstacle on the way to peace. Discrimination of ex-combatants is particularly damaging for the peace process, because their successful reintegration into society is a key pillar of the governmental peace plan of decommissioning and reintegration. If ex-combatants are dissatisfied with their situation, they may go back to fight in the jungle, as many have already done so. All this shows that the story of Ernesto touched an important nerve in the peace process. His story helps to make the argument that discrimination of the ex-combatants and more generally of the large masses of poor people has to be overcome if there is any chance for peace. The story helped the group to take a perspective on their common discrimination as ex-combatants, irrespective whether they come from the side of the guerrillas or the side of the paramilitaries. In this way, the story helped the group to develop a common life world in the sense of Habermas.[6] Laura W. Black also sees great potential in storytelling to enhance deliberation; for her "stories encourage listeners to understand the perspective of the storyteller. In this

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6 Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1981, S. 159.

way, storytelling can provide group members with an opportunity to experience presence, openness, and a relational tension between self and other."[7]

We now turn to the discussions of Serbs and Bosnjaks in Srebrenica. Milena from the Serb side offers a good example of how a rational argument can help to transform the discussion back to a high level of deliberation. Before she spoke up, Svetlana, also from the Serb side, had expressed utter despair claiming that political parties hand out jobs only among their supporters, and as protest she will not give her vote to any party. With such despair, she keeps the discussion at a low level of deliberation. Milena picks up the election issue with the following rational argument:

If you don't vote for anyone, those votes will help the current authorities.

Milena is interactive and offers Svetlana an argument why abstention in elections is counterproductive because it helps the current authorities. This argument is based on good knowledge of how elections work, and Milena links in a rational way a cause with a conclusion, transforming the discussion back to a high level of deliberation in opening space to discuss of how to use elections in an effective way.

Finally, we turn an example from the discussions in the Brazilian favelas between police officers and local inhabitants. A good case of an upward DTM was launched by Carolina, who at the time was only a 14 year old high school student:

The people in the community only have bad things to say about policing, which is rude, but they do not see the sacrifice the police makes every night, right? Oh, I think what is missing is for the community to communicate with the police. When they have their break, community members should come up and tell the police what they think, to communicate with them. Because I think that it is a lack of communication between them. Because if you have perfect communication, the people will become more relaxed about security.

As a teenager, Carolina shows great wisdom in making a proposal very much in a deliberative spirit. At first, she shows good will towards the police acknowledging their sacrifices. Then she identifies the reason for the lack of a culture of peace that the community does not make any effort to communicate with the police. Furthermore, Carolina makes a concrete proposal how the situation can be remedied in asking the members

of the community to come up to the police officers when the latter have their regular work breaks and to tell them what they have in mind. She concludes that such communication would relax the relations between the police and the community. This is all very well argued; the problem is clearly stated, and a specific solution is proposed how the problem can be solved. To emphasize the importance of communication is a key element in the deliberative model, and it is amazing how well Carolina is able to express it in simple terms. As the next speaker, police officer Roberto agrees with Carolina that communication is key and applauds the "interaction as we do it now" (in the discussion group). So the discussion continues with Roberto at a high level of deliberation.

Based on the analysis of all our cases from the three countries, we arrived at our conclusions. Our baseline null hypotheses was that, given the deep divisions, the group discussions would mostly be at a low level of deliberation with minor fluctuations up and down. This null hypothesis is rejected. There were many cases where the group dynamics led the discussion from a low to a high level of deliberation and vice-versa. What mechanisms helped to transform a discussion from a low to a high level of deliberation? Our initial interest focused on the comparison between the effects of rational arguments and personal stories. We tried to throw light on the controversies in the deliberative literature on the role of these two mechanisms.[8] We found that rational arguments and personal stories were about equally successful to transform discussions from a low to a high level of deliberation. When it came to transformations in the opposite direction, from a high to a low level of deliberation, the responsibility was much more often with personal stories than with rational arguments. There was indeed only a single case where a rational argument was presented with so much arrogance that the other participants were intimidated. We conclude from these findings that rational arguments keep the upper hand for their deliberative functions; they often help to transform a discussion to a higher level of deliberation and are hardly ever responsible, when a discussion drops to a lower level. Personal stories, by contrast, have about equally often a positive and a negative influence on the level of deliberation. Deliberation is most helped when an actor makes a rational argument and supports it with a relevant personal story.

Besides rational arguments and personal stories, we found other mechanisms that helped to transform discussions from a low to a high level of deliberation

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7 Laura W. Black, "Deliberation, storytelling, and dialogic moments", *Communication Theory*, 18 (2008), 109.

8 See Steiner et al., *Deliberation across Deep Divisions*, chapters 1 and 2.

or vice-versa. Good chosen humour can have a positive effect on deliberation, but when it turns to sarcasm, the effect can be negative. A mute reaction to an offensive remark can help that the discussion quickly returns to a high level of deliberation. At the individual level, we found that there were actors who played the role of deliberative leaders or deliberative spoilers. For upward DTMs it is particularly noteworthy that self-criticism and respectful criticism can have positive effects on deliberation. For downward DTMs, it is not surprising that in these war-torn countries the expression of despair and hopelessness often functioned as a deliberation killer.

Our research should be relevant for the practice of deliberation. The challenge is to up-scale the results from our group discussions to society at large. Of prime importance is that students in schools learn to deliberate. In this vein, Eamonn Callan has stressed that "moral dialogue in schools would seem necessary if we are to cultivate the respect for reasonable differences."[9] This captures well what we propose as a practical result of our research. Matthijs Bogaards and Franziska Deutsch have already shown how deliberation can be taught in schools. They did this for university students at Jacobs University Bremen.[10] Their project "was designed to combine political theory, research methods, and civil engagements."[11] There was first an eight weeks period of introduction into deliberative literature. For the second part of the class, students organized themselves a Deliberation Day on campus. The authors consider the event as a success, "the deliberative experience increased the knowledge of the participants, which resulted in opinion change and stimulated engagement."[12] From a philosophical perspective, Tomas Englund argues in the very title of his paper that schools can be "sites of deliberation."[13] He begins in a creative way telling the story of pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, who for many years brought together in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra young talented musicians from both sides of the conflict between Israel and Palestine for musical events and political dialogue.[14] According to Englund, such dialogue across deep divisions

should also be possible in schools, "namely as spaces for encounters between students from different environments exercising common interests, political dialogue and fraternization."[15] Englund wants "an interactive universalism in which schools constitute an arena for encounters between different social, cultural, ethnic and religious groups that attaches importance to developing an ability and willingness to reason on the basis of the views of others and to change perspectives."[16]

This focus of Tomas Englund for schools to overcome deep divisions fits exactly what we have in mind as practical conclusion of our research. We want students to be exposed to authentic material of our research about deliberation across deep divisions. The prime task will be to make future and current teachers familiar with the deliberative model. In listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts of our group discussions teachers get an understanding what it means to deliberate. They learn what factors help and what factors hurt deliberation. Teachers will then have to be taught of how our research material can be used as a teaching tool. Students should learn to deliberate in critically evaluating what went on in our discussion groups. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, students should listen to the recordings of the discussions of Serbs and Bosnjaks in Srebrenica and evaluate what reduced the division between the two ethnic groups and what increased the division. To be successful, teachers have to use the right pedagogy to bring our research material into the classroom. It would be in a deliberative spirit if teachers would somewhat stand back and let the students analyse for themselves the research material. This should be done in small groups, where all the students can get actively involved. In this way, students learn not only about deliberation in our discussion groups but get themselves a hand-on experience in deliberation. A good pedagogical devise would be if the small groups would then report their results to the entire class, where a discussion in a larger circle can take place. Here, students learn to speak up to a larger audience, a necessary skill for their later role as citizens. In all such activities, teachers have a delicate and important role. Without intervening too much in the discussions of the students, they still should give some deliberative guidance.

Teaching the skills of deliberation must be a long-term process beginning already at an early age in schools. Having understood deliberative lessons, students may also influence their parents leading to

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9 Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens. Political Education and Liberal Democracy*, Oxford: Clarendon 1997, section 56 of electronic version.

10 Matthijs Bogaards and Franziska Deutsch, „Deliberation, by, with, and for university students", in: *Journal of Political Science Education*, vol. 11 (2015), 221-32.

11 Bogaards and Deutsch, "Deliberation, by, with, and for university students", p. 222.

12 Bogaards and Deutsch, "Deliberation, by, with, and for university students", p. 221.

13 Tomas Englund, "Potential of Education for Creating Mutual Trust. Schools as Sites for Deliberation", *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 43 (3), 2011, 236-48.

14 Englund, "Potential of Education for Creating Mutual Trust. Schools as Sites for Deliberation", p. 236.

15 Englund, "Potential of Education for Creating Mutual Trust. Schools as Sites for Deliberation", p. 237.

16 Englund, "Potential of Education for Creating Mutual Trust. Schools as Sites for Deliberation", p. 244-45.

a snowball effect up the generations. It would also be helpful if the media, in particular social media, report about such new teaching experiences. When students become later citizens, they should have learned to respect people with whom they differ with regard to ideology, ethnicity, race, religion, social class and other such aspects. A culture of peace and tolerance may develop. Our practical argument is that deliberation is a skill that can be learned like any other skill. It would be gratifying for our research team if our research material could help in this learning process of deliberation. We are aware, however, that even when students have learned to deliberate in schools, these countries may have so much power inequalities that effective deliberation in political practice may be difficult. Perhaps efforts to engage in deliberation by young people may help to reduce existing power inequalities. Deeply divided societies are most in need of deliberation but encounter also the greatest obstacles to deliberation. Our research has shown that these obstacles make deliberation difficult but not impossible. Teaching deliberation in schools may help to make deliberation more prevalent in such deeply divided societies. ∎