

Collaborative Democracy Network

Summary of Fourth Roundtable Discussion

American Political Science Association
Saturday, September 4, 2004, 6:30 pm, Vivere (Italian Village), Chicago, IL

Participants:

Terry Amsler, Hewlett Foundation
Lisa Bingham, Indiana University
Frank Fischer, Rutgers University
Carol Gould, George Mason University
Maarten Hajer, Universiteit van Amsterdam
Ted Lascher, California State University, Sacramento
Bill Leach, Center for Collaborative Policy
John Scholz, Florida State University
Gregg Walker, Oregon State University

On September 4, 2004, nine scholars met for an informal roundtable discussion over dinner at Vivere in downtown Chicago. The conversation focused on two topics:

1. A draft of the "Call to Action" – an open letter being drafted by Lisa Bingham, Rosemary O'Leary and Tina Nabatchi – which urges university scholars and teachers to pay more attention to deliberative and participatory governance.
2. The future of the Collaborative Democracy Network including a discussion of its objectives and possible strategies to achieve them.

What follows is a partial account of some of the ideas we discussed.

Regarding the draft "Call to Action"

- We hope that college courses on collaborative democracy will become mainstream over the long term. Nonetheless, some of us are skeptical about some of the claims that are made about it. The document should begin by describing the importance of the phenomenon and then highlighting the duty of the academic community to study and evaluate it.
- Collaborative democracy is a phenomenon that is unfolding before us, and we suspect that it is positive but we just don't know. Clearly, it is using government authority in a new way, and we need to understand more about it, particularly its susceptibilities. For example, 90% of the collaborative groups in one study were run by public managers who used collaboration as a front for assembling people who supported the agency. Institutional mechanisms need to be developed to guard against such outcomes, and to promote more genuine participation.
- The document becomes more attractive to skeptics if it acknowledges that "we really don't know" and need to find out the limitations of collaborative strategies. Being open about the limits of knowledge should help attract skeptics to the cause of further scholarship.
- Can we be both strong proponents and proceed with great caution? There were lots of unsubstantiated claims in the early years, and that's the last thing we want. This is a critical time in the growth of collaborative practices, and it is important to learn from past experience.
- It is important to document the progress that collaborative democracy can achieve.
- It is important to create stronger links between the research community and practitioner community.
- Where do collaborative process enter the policy process? Do they clarify preferences? Make recommendations? Are they more effective and suitable for some purposes than others?

- Who is the audience and what do we want them to do? Is the audience department heads? Do we want them to add more courses on collaborative democracy?
- Practitioners and researchers have different standards for argument and evidence. How can collaborative processes help people communicate across those barriers?
- Is the document too restrictive in whom it addresses? Would it be more powerful to address all the social sciences? Should we bring in more luminaries?
- Should the field really strive for a unifying framework? Or is this neither feasible nor desirable?
- The most important question to raise is “Should citizens have a right to decide what’s important to them and how best to achieve their objectives?” Beyond that, there might not be any one set of principles that works in every context.
- In certain circles, people presume that deliberative democracy solves problems. On the other hand, some problems may not be resolvable through dialogue because of social inequities. But deliberative democracy can lead people to recognize those inequities, and so it has a political function as well.
- We need to expand the first section, which describes what collaborative processes are.
- The document needs to be clearer, near the end, about what it asks people to do. It would be stronger rhetorically if the proposed actions were less abstract.
- It would be stronger strategically if it gave people an email address and person to contact for further information.
- The title, “Call to Action”, sounds too old fashioned.

Regarding the Collaborative Democracy Network (CDN)

- Is it time to convene a major conference or workshop?
- With so many conferences going on, is it more useful to piggyback or pilot fish on other conferences? That’s one of the attractive things about the current strategy of the CDN. Foundations tend to want to do big showy conferences, but smaller steps may be more useful.
- Could CDN sponsor daylong pre-conferences or seminars at APSA or other associations? Could we organize panels, or highlight certain topics, or try to shape the programming of the various disciplinary conferences?
- Some possible partners and/or models for future networking or conferences are:
 - The New Political Science section of APSA
 - The Conference Group on Theory, Policy, and Society <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/tps/>
 - Deliberative Democracy Consortium
 - National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation
 - Small and focused workshops (e.g. 90-people, 4-days, remote location) conducive to productive interdisciplinary discussion
- CDN is currently facilitating two collaborative writing projects, one shepherded by Nancy Roberts, and another by Bill Leach focusing on “theories of collaborative planning.”
- There is a need for greater clarity in the goals of the CDN.
- There is a significant gap between deliberative democracy scholars and political theorists. In the past, both camps have felt they’ve had little to say to one another. Another common notion is that the extant theory is too abstract. One goal for the CDN could be to help bridge these two groups, and develop a “theory of the practice.”
- There are many people who are very sympathetic to the goals of the CDN (many more than are reflected on the Roster) and we need a strategy for networking with them.