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## Research Note

# Deliberation by, with, and for University Students

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*This research note about a project-based course on deliberative democracy shows how political theory, research methods, and civic engagement can be fruitfully combined. The novel course format allowed students to practice and study democracy at the same time. Our undergraduate students organized a Deliberation Day on campus and then analyzed the results. As predicted in the literature, the deliberative experience increased the knowledge of the participants, which resulted in opinion change and stimulated engagement. Moreover, Deliberation Day put the issue of student community service on the university's agenda.*

**Keywords** community service, deliberation, democracy, project, students

### Introduction

The idea(l) of deliberative democracy is at the forefront of contemporary political theory and has spawned a variety of democratic innovations (Bächtiger and Wyss 2013; Ryfe 2005; Smith 2009).<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest is the “Deliberative Poll” invented and trademarked by Stanford University professor James Fishkin (2009). Deliberative Polls are designed to discover what people would think if they had access to balanced information and expert opinion and could deliberate in a supportive environment with people of diverse backgrounds and opinions (Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell 2002). By now, many Deliberative Polls have been organized around the world, from the United States to the European Union, from California to China (Fishkin et al. 2010). The polls have spanned a wide range of topics from the integration of historically disadvantaged minorities to investments in urban infrastructure and future energy use. Deliberative Polls have become, in Jane Mansbridge’s (2010) words, the “gold standard.”

In the United States, several universities have organized deliberative events as part of courses. The Citizens’ Assembly for Critical Thinking about the United

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States (CACTUS) at Eastern Kentucky University (Gershtenson, Rainey, and Rainey 2010) and the “Democracy Fellows” program at Wake Forest University (Harriger and McMillan 2008) provide inspiring examples. Carnegie Mellon University has organized a series of “Campus Conversations” since 2005 (Bridges, Dickert, and Bonfini 2011). They come in two types: Deliberative Polls, which closely follow Fishkin’s model, and the Deliberative Loop, which is shorter, involves less people and selects participants through convenience sampling.<sup>2</sup> Carnegie Mellon even developed a handbook for college-level deliberative polling.<sup>3</sup> The Campus Conversations program aims at teaching deliberative skills, promoting a commitment to civic engagement and social responsibility, and encouraging substantive interaction among members of the university community. As explained by one of the driving forces and initiators, Robert Cavalier (2008), “college campuses are uniquely positioned to play an important role” in putting deliberative democracy into practice (17).

Our course, which has been praised as “a particularly creative way of how to integrate deliberation into a [...] curriculum” (Steiner 2012, 264–265), was designed to combine political theory, research methods, and civic engagement. The most important difference with the American examples above is that our course prepared students to be the owners of the deliberative process: They set the agenda, organized Deliberation Day, wrote the information booklet, sampled the participants, designed the questionnaire, selected the experts, sent out the invitations, moderated the sessions, analyzed the results in terms of knowledge gain and opinion change and contributed to the final report.

Deliberation Day worked very much as described in the literature. The group of 20 randomly selected participants was broadly representative of the university’s undergraduate student body. The results confirmed the expectations: Knowledge increased and opinions changed. Participants greatly appreciated the experience and expressed a desire to become more active in student affairs. Finally, Deliberation Day kindled an interest on the part of students and the university administration in the issue.

The article is organized as follows. After a brief description of the course and the project, the selection of participants is explained. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the results, focusing on knowledge gain, opinion change, and the experience of the participants. The conclusion looks briefly at the promises and challenges of deliberation by, with, and for university students.

## **The Course**

The course was offered at Jacobs University Bremen as a transdisciplinary University Studies Course taught by two professors with different backgrounds—empirical democratic theory and political sociology. It was open to second- and third-year undergraduate students in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS) with no other prerequisites. Different from most universities (see Parker 2010), the core curriculum put an emphasis on statistics and methods, ensuring that all students had the requisite skills to design and conduct empirical research.

The course was divided into two parts. The first eight weeks consisted of regular classes, introducing students to the literature, and concluded with a midterm exam. The reading centered on Fishkin (2009) and Smith (2009) but also included studies of small-group dynamics. Students were asked to do a presentation on a Deliberative Poll of their choice, thereby familiarizing the class with the experience of deliberative polling around the world. The project phase started in the second half of the

semester. The 21 students in the course had three tasks, which they divided among themselves: (1) to organize, to design, and to administer two surveys (one before, one after deliberation), including sampling of participants; (2) to organize a Deliberation Day, including the provision of relevant information, moderating, and quality control of the deliberative process; (3) to evaluate the outcomes in terms of knowledge gain and opinion change and to identify the factors that affect the impact of the deliberative process. A topic for deliberation should be controversial and important to the participants (Fung 2003), and after some discussion students decided on the idea of mandatory community service by undergraduate students.

## The Project

The Deliberation Day on “The introduction of mandatory community service at Jacobs University Bremen” took place on campus on Sunday, May 9, 2010.<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, Deliberative Polls last from one to three days and often take place on weekends. Also because of exam time, the event was planned for a single day so as not to discourage potential participants. As a consequence, the schedule was tight: 10:00–10:30 (Opening ceremony with university president), 10:30–10:45 (Breakfast), 10:45–11:45 (First group discussions), 11:45–12:00 (Coffee break), 12:00–13:30 (Q&A with expert panel), 13:30–14:30 (Lunch break), 14:30–16:00 (Second group discussions), 16:00–16:15 (Closing ceremony).

To motivate participants and to signal the importance of the event, the university president opened Deliberation Day. To allow for socializing and an informal continuation of the deliberation, food and drinks were provided at the venue.

Deliberation in Deliberative Polls takes place in small groups. As we had 20 participants, two groups of 10 were formed. For Deliberation Day, two student moderator tandems were selected. In the first group session, the moderators introduced themselves, explained the roles of the participants and moderators and clarified the expectations. After an initial round of sharing experiences and impressions of “community service,” emphasizing the open character of deliberation, groups were asked to formulate questions to prepare for the subsequent session with the expert panel.

The Q&A session with experts is an essential part in the formation of an informed opinion. As Fishkin and Luskin (2005) point out, the questions asked of the panelists should not be mere questions of fact but rather be about the consequences and costs, as well as possible tradeoffs. Therefore, the expert panel itself should be balanced in its views, perspectives, and areas of expertise. We invited four experts: (1) a representative from the local Agency for Voluntary Service; (2) the university’s vice president in charge of administration and student affairs; (3) an undergraduate student with experience with mandatory community service; and (4) a professor of gerontology from a regional university with a research focus on social work. Interestingly, although all experts were positive, to varying degrees, about community service, they were more critical about making it mandatory.

The final deliberations of the day in the second small-group session took on a more concrete character. After a short reflection on what the participants had just learned from the experts, they were asked to discuss specific issues, such as the merits and demerits of mandatory versus voluntary service and the potential forms of community service suitable for students at their university. Since there was no vote or requirement to reach consensus, the deliberations were conducted without any pressure to arrive at a conclusion.

In the closing ceremony, all participants were thanked for their efforts. Every participant received €20 in cash and participated in a raffle for an iPod Nano. These incentives are small but in line with what students get for participating in scientific experiments on campus.

## Sampling

To assure political equality, every member of a given population should have an equal chance of participation. For Fishkin (2009), this means an equal chance of participating in a Deliberative Poll. The objective of our sampling procedure was to obtain a representative sample of undergraduate students in terms of three main characteristics: gender, nationality, and school affiliation—to the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS) or the School of Engineering and Sciences (SES). Using the Mathematica for Students software, students in our course generated a random sample from the Overall Population ( $N=680$ ): all undergraduate students then enrolled, omitting the 21 students registered for the course. The Prospective Participants Group is this random sample ( $N=60$ ) of the overall population. The Participants Group consists of those students who accepted the invitation and participated in Deliberation Day ( $N=20$ ). The reduction in numbers is caused by nonresponses, declined invitations, and no shows. To isolate the effects of the event, students also drew a random sample for the Prospective Control Group ( $N=120$ ), composed of students not selected for and not participating in Deliberation Day. Of these, 51 completed the survey, thus forming the Control Group. Using the EFS Survey software, members of the Prospective Control Group and the Prospective Participants Group were contacted one week before Deliberation Day. The messages included a formal invitation, an explanation of what Deliberation Day was all about, as well as a customized link to the pre-deliberation survey.

Despite random sampling and relatively high response rates, Table 1 reveals an overrepresentation of female students, German students, and students in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS). Only the self-selection bias of SHSS students among the participants to Deliberation Day is statistically significant and mirrors the traditional overrepresentation of these students in the university's Undergraduate Student Government. In comparison, the composition of the control group is much closer to that of the overall undergraduate student population.

## Results

A central claim by Fishkin (2009) is that information and deliberation should lead to more informed decisions. Knowledge gain and opinion change are indicators of this desirable outcome.

### *Knowledge Gain*

Fishkin (2009) reports that participants of Deliberative Polls “always become significantly more informed” (121). To evaluate the knowledge gain of the participants, we asked before and after deliberation how they rated their level of knowledge (self-reported knowledge level). The answers in Table 2 show that the participants felt they had learned a great deal about the topic. While the mean level before deliberation was 2.7, very close to that of the control group, this increased to 3.4 on a 1-to-5 scale after deliberation, indicating a statistically significant change at a 5% level. Before

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the samples and overall population

Characteristic	Overall population <sup>1</sup>	Prospective participants group	Participants group	Control group
<b>SEX</b>				
Male	53%	53%	40%	49%
Female	47%	47%	60%	51%
<b>SCHOOL</b>				
SES <sup>2</sup>	66%	62% <sup>3</sup>	30%	75% <sup>3</sup>
SHSS <sup>2</sup>	34%	37% <sup>3</sup>	70%	24% <sup>3</sup>
<b>NATIONALITY</b>				
German	24%	28%	40%	20%
Romanian	15%	12%	10%	22%
Bulgarian	8%	12%	15%	8%
Others	53%	52%	35%	50%
<i>N</i>	680	60	20	51

<sup>1</sup>Overall population: number of enrolled undergraduate students at Jacobs University Bremen, 2009/2010.

<sup>2</sup>SES: School of Engineering and Sciences. SHSS: School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

<sup>3</sup>Percentages do not add up to 100% as a result of missing data for individual students.

deliberation half of the participants (50%) reported that they had “some but not sufficient knowledge” about the topic. After Deliberation Day, 85% of the participants felt that they had “just about right” or “very much” knowledge about the discussed topic.

The participants were also asked to answer seven knowledge questions about mandatory community service. The majority could answer more than half of the questions correctly even before deliberation. The potential for knowledge gain is then limited. However, for two questions where the majority of participants answered incorrectly before deliberation, the knowledge gain is statistically significant.<sup>5</sup> As with the self-reported knowledge level, the initial responses of the participants closely matched those of the control group.

### *Opinion Change*

Opinion change as an outcome of a deliberative process can be assessed at the individual level (when a participant changes an opinion) and/or the aggregate level

**Table 2.** Self-reported knowledge level

	Before deliberation	After deliberation	Control group
Mean	2.70	3.40**	2.63
<i>N</i>	20	20	51

*Note:* Question wording: “To what extent do you feel you have enough knowledge to decide on whether we should institute mandatory community service in some form at Jacobs University Bremen?” Answers on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = “Not enough knowledge at all” to 5 = “I have all the necessary knowledge.”

\*\* $p \leq .05$ . Statistical significance tested with a paired sample *t* test.

(when there is a net opinion change in the group). Following Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell (2002), we focus on change at the aggregate level, supplemented with disaggregated data.

The questionnaire began with questions about attitudes towards community service in general. Participants had to indicate their position on a 5-point Likert scale. A higher score on the scale indicates a positive response to a question, whereas a lower score indicates a negative answer. The mean scores before and after deliberation and net changes are depicted in Table 3.

The pattern emerging from Table 3 is that support for community service, which was very high to begin with, grew even further during Deliberation Day. The general appreciation of community service increased by 0.5 points on a 1-to-5 scale, a change that is statistically significant at the 10% level. In light of the high starting value (a

**Table 3.** Attitudes towards community service

Questions	Mean before deliberation	Mean after deliberation	Net change	Mean control group
In general, to what extent are you in favor of community service? (1 = <i>Not at all</i> to 5 = <i>Very much in favor</i> )	3.90	4.40	+0.50*	4.00
Would you like to be involved in community service during your time at Jacobs University Bremen? (1 = <i>Not at all</i> to 5 = <i>Definitely yes</i> )	3.75	4.20	+0.45	3.73
Do you think community service could have a positive effect on the university? (1 = <i>Not at all</i> to 5 = <i>Definitely yes</i> )	4.25	4.50	+0.25	4.22
Do you think mandatory community service could have a positive effect on the neighborhood? (1 = <i>Not at all</i> to 5 = <i>Definitely yes</i> )	4.10	4.05	-0.05	3.49
Do you think mandatory community service could have a positive effect on you? (1 = <i>Not at all</i> to 5 = <i>Definitely yes</i> )	3.75	4.35	+0.60***	3.47
<i>N</i>	20	20		51

\* $p \leq .10$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .01$ . Statistical significance tested with a paired sample *t* test.

mean of 3.9) and the small  $N$  (20 participants), such a level of significance is noteworthy. A closer look at the disaggregated data reveals a (positive) change in opinion among 9 out of 20 participants.

The willingness to be involved in community service grew. While only 3 participants before “definitely” wanted to become involved in community service, this increased to 10 participants after Deliberation Day. The belief that community service would have a positive effect on the university was also strengthened. We found the largest change for the question whether participants thought community service could have a positive effect on them. After the deliberative process, participants were much more likely to agree than before. The net change of 0.60 is statistically significant at the 1% level. Again, in light of the small number of participants, such a level of significance is remarkable. This opinion change is especially pronounced among those 8 participants without any prior experience with community service.

The second part of the questionnaire was concerned with the *mandatory* aspect of community service. Three quarters of the participants before and half after deliberation were against mandatory service.<sup>6</sup> To find out why, we asked the participants about their reasons. Those opposed to mandatory community service thought that the freedom to choose was important, that mandatory service was not compatible with the idea of volunteer work, and that it put too much pressure on students.

After Deliberation Day, nearly half of the participants supported the idea of mandatory community service — the number in favor rose from 5 to 9. We were also interested in their opinions on practical questions of implementation. In general, those participants who favored mandatory community service had clear preferences about when to do community service (when it is convenient to them), where (off campus), how much (a maximum of 90 hours per year), type (child care and work with disabled persons were popular), and they were emphatic about deciding for themselves how to do community service, being supported by the university administration in organizational matters.

### ***The Relationship between Knowledge and Opinion Change***

What is the relationship between knowledge and opinion change? The overall correlation coefficient of  $r = .35$  is not statistically significant. However, a disaggregated analysis reveals that knowledge and opinion change are positive correlated for the first two questions in Table 3: The more participants knew after Deliberation Day (measured as the number of correct answers to factual knowledge questions), the more they changed their opinion in favor of community service in general ( $r = .41, p \leq .10$ ) and their willingness to get involved in community service as an undergraduate student ( $r = .41, p \leq .10$ ).

In sum, our results are in line with the findings on the impact of Deliberative Polls: balanced information and deliberation lead to knowledge increase and opinion change.<sup>7</sup> Even with a small sample size, a number of our results were statistically significant. The overall tendency was for support for community service, even mandatory, to grow. It should be stressed that this outcome was neither expected nor desired: before Deliberation Day, community service had never been on the agenda.

**Table 4.** The quality of deliberation

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>BALANCED INFORMATION:</b>					
The brochure provided balanced information on the topic of community service.	0	3	0	14	3
The expert session helped me to clarify my position on the issue.	2	3	5	9	1
The experts were competent to answer our questions on the issue.	3	1	6	8	2
<b>SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSIONS:</b>					
From the beginning on there was consensus in the small group.	1	12	5	1	1
Towards the end there was consensus in the small group.	0	7	4	7	2
There was consensus in my group on the way to deliberate.	0	0	3	14	3
The members of my group participated relatively equally in the discussion.	1	4	3	10	2
The members of my small group respected each other's views.	0	0	1	12	7
Some members dominated the small-group discussion.	0	5	8	6	1
<b>ROLE OF GROUP MODERATORS:</b>					
My group moderators provided the opportunity for everyone to participate in the discussion.	0	0	2	5	13
My group moderators sometimes tried to influence the group with their opinion.	9	9	2	0	0

*Note:* Absolute number of responses,  $N = 20$ .

### *Quality of Deliberation*

Fishkin (2009) assesses the quality of deliberation through five indicators: information, substantive balance, diversity, conscientiousness, and equal consideration. Participants should have access to reasonably accurate, relevant information. The arguments they advance should reflect the major positions of the public (diversity). Arguments should be matched by counterarguments (substantive balance) and they should be weighed sincerely (conscientiousness), without regard to the person (equal consideration). To evaluate the quality of deliberation, we draw on feedback from the participants in the postdeliberation survey and observations from the moderators.

Prior to the event, our participants were provided with a nine-page information booklet, informing them about the logic of and the reasons behind Deliberation Day, general facts about the topic, and the advantages and disadvantages of introducing mandatory community service at their university. As can be seen in Table 4, 17 out of 20 students agreed the brochure provided balanced information on the topic, although the moderators had the impression that several participants had not thoroughly read the material. The session with the experts was appreciated by only half of the participants, which is relatively low.

There is a controversy in the literature on possible adverse dynamics in small-group deliberation, such as consensus-seeking, polarization, or domination (for conflicting viewpoints, see Fishkin 2009; Schkade, Sunstein, and Hastie 2007). The participant feedback on the dynamics of deliberation reported in Table 4 shows there was a consensus on the process of deliberation but no substantive consensus, although this grew over the course of Deliberation Day. In general, participants respected each other's opinions. One group had two dominating participants who seemed considerably opinionated before deliberation. These participants frequently based their arguments on personal experiences and insisted on their opinions.

**Table 5.** Overall evaluation

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Overall, participating in the event was a valuable experience.	0	0	5	8	7
Such events should be used more often to develop policies on issues affecting students at Jacobs University Bremen.	0	1	1	11	7
After participation in Deliberation Day, I want to become more active in student affairs at Jacobs University Bremen.	0	1	7	8	4

*Note:* Absolute number of responses,  $N = 20$ .

So, while the groups managed to avoid the problems of polarization and consensus-seeking, they did not escape completely the danger of domination.

### ***Overall Evaluation***

The overall evaluation of the event can only be described as overwhelmingly positive. Table 5 shows that three quarters of the participants saw the event as a valuable experience, and 18 out of 20 participants agreed that events like Deliberation Day should be used more often to develop policies affecting students at the university. More than half of the participants indicated an increased willingness to become engaged in student affairs after participation in the event, although we lack the data to verify whether intent was translated into action.

### **Conclusion**

Barbara Ferman (2012) has argued that “the kind of education needed to foster the knowledge, to develop the skills, and to instill the values necessary to sustain a democratic society will have to be experiential, empowering, and democratic in nature” (234). In that vein, our project-based course on deliberative democracy taught students to practice *and* study democracy and to take deliberation from the classroom to the campus. Crucially, the course prepared students to be the owners of the deliberative process. If we agree that “the skills of deliberative democracy must be learned” and that “higher education should contribute to the development of these skills or civic competencies” (Morse et al. 2005, 326), then students should be more than merely participants in the deliberative process: They should be the organizers and analysts as well. This is where the deliberative experience created by our course went beyond that at other universities.<sup>8</sup>

As the exchanges between Fishkin (2005) and Shapiro (2005) and between Gleason (2012) and Fishkin (2012) show, the idea and practice of deliberative polling are contested. One pertinent point concerns the lack of autonomy of the participants, who “do not decide when they should speak, what they should speak about, or how they should think about it” (Gleason 2012, 378). Lang (2008) likewise highlights the top-down nature of agenda-setting in the Citizen Assembly on electoral reform in British Columbia. In our case, although the participants, organizers, and analysts were all undergraduate students, the students in the course determined what the student participants in Deliberation Day would deliberate about, with whom, with what kind of information, and how. While clearly far removed from a more bottom-up approach to deliberation, this is still an improvement over the more common setup in which deliberation is organized for, not by, students.

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## Notes

1. See: <http://cdd.stanford.edu>.
2. See: [http://www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/dean/acad\\_int/conversations/index.html](http://www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/dean/acad_int/conversations/index.html).
3. At: [http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/cc/CC\\_Handbook\\_Final.pdf](http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/cc/CC_Handbook_Final.pdf).
4. In our use, the term “Deliberation Day” is closer to Fishkin’s Deliberative Poll than to the idea of a Deliberation Day that Ackerman and Fishkin (2004) promoted: a national civic holiday that Americans should spend deliberating.
5. These questions are the following: “Jacobs University Bremen will be the only university in Germany offering mandatory community service” and “What is the current (approximate) population of undergraduate students at Jacobs University Bremen?”
6. While support for voluntary community service was equally high among the control group and participants prior to Deliberation Day, the level of support for mandatory community service was much lower among the control group than among participants, both before and after Deliberation Day, revealing a self-selection bias on the side of the participants. This is not uncommon and by itself does not challenge the results (Sanders 2012, 631–633), also because we are interested in change, not absolute levels.
7. Previous research has shown that the effects of deliberation may wane (Andersen and Hansen 2007), but for organizational reasons we did not check whether opinions remained stable after Deliberation Day.
8. For other recent experiments with teaching deliberation, see List and Sliwka (2011) and Latimer and Hempson (2012).

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