

# **Towards a Democratic Education for E-Government**

## *A Study of Deliberative Decision-Making via Information and Communications Technology*

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**Abstract:** It has been argued that the widespread use of information and communications technology has contributed to a crisis in traditional systems of representative democracy and that a new form of informational or digital democracy is emerging. Hence a key claim made in current discussions of ‘electronic’ or ‘digital’ democracy is that information and communications technologies have a role to play in providing opportunities for government and citizens to engage in direct rather than representative forms of democracy. Using a deliberative democratic framework this paper presents results from a case study of decision-making on a professional development workshop in information and communications technology skills. The discussion highlights some of the problems of engaging in a democratic process that places a premium on deliberation and negotiation. These problems include different conceptions of democracy and of the public good, time constraints, education for democracy; and the relationship between decision-making and action. The paper concludes that if information and communications technology are to help democracy to expand beyond its current representative model and incorporate more direct and deliberative forms then both government and citizens may need to learn procedures as to how to engage in this deliberative process.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

A distinction commonly made in discussing models of democracy is that between classical and modern models (Carr and Hartnett, 1996; Held, 1993, 1987). In the classical model democracy and democratic procedure are based on the direct involvement and participation of the state’s citizens in political decisions relevant to the affairs of state. In the modern liberal democratic model a state’s citizens

temporarily elect professional politicians to take the decisions which help to govern and to regulate the lives of a nation's citizens.

It has been argued that the widespread use of information and communications technology (ICTs) has contributed to a crisis in traditional systems of representative democracy (Castells, 1996) and that a new form of informational (Castells, 1996) or digital democracy (Hague and Loader, 1999) is emerging. Hence, a key claim made during current discussions of 'electronic' or 'digital' democracy is that ICTs have a role to play in providing opportunities for government and citizens to engage in direct rather than representative forms of democracy (Ågren, 2001; Hague and Loader, 1999).

Electronic networks clearly provide potential opportunities for the establishment of civic networks (Tsagarousianou et al., 1998), electronic citizen access and digital government (Dutton, 1999). Furthermore such networks can potentially support not only vertical communication between citizens and government but also horizontal communication between citizen and citizen (Laudon, 1977). Does participation in such networks however constitute a form of authentic involvement in the political process? Is the establishment of such electronic communication networks and services a cost-efficient form of information delivery and of political window-dressing or do citizens have a stake in the final outcome of deliberations? In the words of one commentator:

...no amount of high-tech wizardry will convert the pushing of a button or the dialling of a telephone number into an act of deliberation (Bryan, 1998: 162).

In a deliberative democracy it is the responsibility of governments, citizens, computer professionals and others to establish the social conditions for moving from ICT-based information delivery to ICT-based support for meaningful deliberation. This paper presents results from a case study of decision-making on a professional development workshop in ICT skills and highlights some of the problems of engaging in a democratic process that places a premium on deliberation and negotiation. It concludes that if ICTs are to help democracy expand beyond its current representative model and incorporate more direct and deliberative forms then both government and citizens may need to learn procedures as to how to engage in this deliberative process.

## **2. EDUCATION FOR DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY**

Deliberative democracy is a recent variant of modern democratic models (Bohman and Rehg, 1997). It is a form of government where the conditions under which we live and work are the outcome of a process of decision-making that involves not only the state and professional politicians but also citizens. Key aspects

of deliberative democracy include the ethical procedures governing participation in the discussion and the relationship between the discussion and the final outcome of the decision-making process. Theories of deliberative democracy contain parallels with the notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1973). The public sphere is an interactive domain of civil society occupied by newspapers, television and other media in which open debate and a free flow of information is constrained neither by the state nor by the private interests of capitalism. The establishment of ICT-based civic networks to engage in political dialogue represents a potential expansion of this public sphere into new domains. If a move into electronic services and networks is to truly represent a new form of communication between government and citizen and an expansion of the public sphere into areas outside formal government then participants may find themselves needing to learn procedures that accompany such deliberative forms of democracy. One arena in which citizens and politicians can learn about democracy is within an educational setting.

### **3. THE DEMOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY OF GROUP INVESTIGATION**

Group investigation belongs to a family of educational methods that has been called “learning through cooperative disciplined inquiry” (Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins, 1997). Dominant influences on the development of the group investigation method have been Sharan and Sharan (1994a), Thelen (1981), and Dewey (1916). Group investigation is a disciplined approach to cooperative learning that involves classroom members in the making and taking of decisions on an interdependent basis. An important aspect of the democratic nature of this ‘classroom society’ is how the process of inquiry, that forms the backbone of the group investigation, is formulated with respect to classroom members’ participation, group dynamics and the availability and construction of knowledge. Hence knowledge is developed within and accountable to a process of inquiry that involves each member of the classroom. The parallels with government-citizen and citizen-citizen relations are clear. If citizens and government are to work together more directly via the use of electronic services and networks in a manner that is underpinned by democratic principles and not only economic imperatives then procedures for a more inclusive democratic process need to be developed.

#### **4. THE PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN OF A GROUP INVESTIGATION**

The standard model of a group investigation is described in Sharan and Sharan (1994a; 1994b). Once the topic to be investigated has been selected and interest in the topic has been generated, the process of inquiry will typically proceed through the following stages.

- Stage 1—Class determines subtopics and organises into research groups
- Stage 2—Groups plan their investigations
- Stage 3—Groups carry out their investigations
- Stage 4—Groups plan their presentations
- Stage 5—Groups make their presentations
- Stage 6—Teacher and students evaluate their projects

As part of an Online Short Course for Staff Developers in ICTs the present writer tutored on a three-week unit on “Collaborative Design” based on the group investigation method. Participants were in the main drawn from university staff across the United Kingdom and abroad who had an organisational role in promoting the use of ICTs within their institutions. The unit was designed such that, for a successful outcome from the process to occur, participants would need to engage in two interconnected activities. Firstly, that the task set be achieved i.e. developing a course design and secondly, that the accomplishment of the task be achieved not unilaterally but through the democratic joint effort of each of the participants. Participants communicated both asynchronously and synchronously via an online text-based conferencing system called *Web Course Tools* (<http://www.webct.com>). The asynchronous facility consisted of an online conferencing tool or bulletin board that provided opportunities for participants to contribute at different times from different geographical locations. The synchronous facility consisted of a chat tool that provided facilities for participants to contribute at the same time from different geographical locations. The typical process of a group investigation was adapted into a three-week program organised around the following task:

You are present at the inaugural meeting of an inter-institutional course design team. The meeting’s agenda is to draw up a design for an online workshop on “Organisational Issues in Networked Learning for Staff Developers”. It is intended that this will be an inter-institutional workshop run via the Internet, aimed primarily but not exclusively at professional staff developers. The length of the workshop has not yet been decided. Four aspects to the design have so far been proposed: the aims and objectives of the workshop; workshop structure and content; teaching strategies; and assessment.

## 5. THE DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORK

In this paper analysis of the data is conducted in the context of a deliberative democratic framework focused on the formation and following through of joint intentions (Richardson, 1998). Contrary to an “aggregative” conception of democracy, in which the emphasis is placed on individual beliefs or preferences prior to any decision-taking or voting process, deliberative democratic models focus on the decision-making process itself. The joint formation of intentions and the obligation to follow through these intentions lies, according to Richardson, at the heart of what it means to act in accordance with a deliberatively democratic procedure. A decision making process guided by deliberative democratic procedures has the following stages:

**Putting forward proposals:** “a view that sees deliberative democracy in terms of practical reasoning will naturally start with proposals that individuals, or their representatives, make about what the polity ought to do” (Richardson, 1998: 367).

**Discussion of proposals:** “the second stage of deliberative democracy is for the proposals to be discussed on their merits. This means to assess them in terms of the public good” (Richardson, 1998: 368).

**Informal agreement:** “the third stage...is to arrive at some informal agreement about what we ought to do” (Richardson, 1998: 368). It is worth noting that on Richardson’s account what is central to the idea of mutual agreement is that such agreements are normatively binding through giving rise to obligations.

**Explicit collective decision:** “the fourth stage of the democratic process is to move from the level of informal mutual agreement to an explicit collective decision” (Richardson, 1998: 374).

**Partially joint intention:** “this process of explicit, joint acknowledgement and endorsement of an agreement via the procedure of majority rule provides all that is needed to yield a proper, partially joint intention as the outcome, and fifth stage, of the democratic process” (Richardson, 1998: 375).

The integrity of a deliberatively democratic decision hinges on the fact that there exists an intrinsic link between discussion and action. Key components of the process then are the conceptions of the public good which inform the framework within which the worth of proposals are evaluated and the obligations that participants are placed under as the participants’ proposals are discussed and a course of action decided upon. The focus of the framework on intention and obligation has similarities with the theory of speech acts (Searle, 1975; Searle, 1969). In the present analysis particular importance is attached to the class of speech acts called “commissives”. Attention is given to commissives because their non-defective performance places speakers under an obligation to carry out the action that speakers have committed themselves to; they “commit the speaker...to some future course of action” (Searle, 1975: 356). The non-defective performance of such

acts is, for Richardson, a key source of evidence for confirming the existence of deliberative democratic intentions.

In this paper analysis of the data generated by the inquiry is focused on the points during the investigation at which collective deliberation, rather the carrying out of individual tasks, is required. In particular data is drawn from two of the synchronous discussions that took place during the course of the investigation. The first of these discussions took place at the end of the first week, the second at the end of the investigation at the close of the third week. The first discussion has been chosen because it provides data on participants' deliberations as to the tasks that need to be accomplished during the course of their investigation and because the way their deliberations proceed can be seen to relate to the stages of the deliberative democratic process (Richardson, 1998). The second discussion has been chosen because it provides data on the meaning of the group investigation process and its deliberative processes for the participants concerned.

## **6. ANALYSIS OF THE GROUP INVESTIGATION**

After participants had had an opportunity to provide an initial response to the task a synchronous chat session was scheduled for the end of the first week. A number of proposals had been made with different emphases as how to proceed to develop the course design. These proposals included beginning with a discussion of the purposes of the course: "what are we trying to achieve?", the aims and objectives of the course, and the content of the course e.g. understanding a range of issues, conducting institutional research and being informed of research evidence.

Participants arrived at the chat session with proposals then but with as yet no in-depth group discussion as to the worth of those proposals. Once again, purpose plays an important role in the discussions: "Perhaps the question of 'what are we trying to achieve' would be a good place to start?" [Participant 1 (P1)]. The first substantive contribution by Participant 2 (P2) is "if we can decide on aims and objectives and the audience". This is a commissive speech act intended to commit the group to some future action. During the subsequent dialogue further aims as well as objectives of the course are considered. P2 suggests the following aim: "inform staff developers of networked learning as a strategy for staff development" and in response to a prompt from the tutor P1 replies that: "sounds like a broad general [aim] [...] yep, sounds like we're going in the right direction". P2 proposes a further aim before P1 begins to enumerate some of the objectives that are part of the aim to "inform staff developers of networked learning as a strategy for staff development".

At this stage of the deliberations the aims have been informally agreed on although no explicit decision has been taken. There immediately follows a stretch of the deliberations seeking clarification of P1's proposals regarding the content of the course. P2 asks P1, "what do you mean by access issues?"

At the end of the clarification P2 restates his commitment to future action but this time his contribution is phrased not as a commissive but as an expressive statement of an individual psychological state: "...I would prefer a task to come out of the discussion – practical old me!"

At this juncture the third participant, Participant 3 (P3), enters the chat room. The tutor summarises the previous discussion. P3 presents the following argument:

my mind is working on two levels – one in relation to content (which can either be presented, or made available as a resource) [...] and then what are the institutional issues which people are experiencing in relation to introducing networked learning into he [higher education].

This new proposal put forward initially as the expression of a psychological state ("My mind is working on two levels") leads to informal agreement and the first explicit decision. P2 does not respond directly to the post, although, after a slight delay, P1 states: "I like the way you're thinking [P3] ... My themes could fit within your institutional issues section". There very soon follows a public expression of partially joint intention:

P1: Will I have a go at institutional issues? P3: If you want to pick up on institutional issues that's fine by me [P1] P2: Okay by me. P1: Will do.

"Will do" being a commissive speech act committing P1 to the future action of searching for information relating to institutional issues. Here P1 moves from implicit proposal (overlap between her framework and that of P3) to explicit decision via group agreement.

At this point the tutor suggests topics to the other participants. P3 responds by saying:

Picking up on [the tutor's] points though. First of all can you clarify what you mean by dissemination as a theme? Secondly, by pushing us to choose a theme to research we lose the attention we presumably need to give to the process of the workshop and to the purpose of doing this research

The tutor replies: "I'd like to pull things back to us deciding on themes around which we can search for resources". There is an immediate response to the tutor's input from P1, "sounds good". P3 continues however:

this may be a tension between the task set which seems to assume that in order to design a workshop we need to do some research on content versus what may be more my preferred mode which would be to work out process first. Does this make sense...?

P2's reply is "No, it makes sense. There's a disparity here", while P1's reply is. "I see what you're saying [P3], but I think the purpose of this chat is to decide on areas in which we might like to research".

The stalemate is resolved when the tutor suggests that process can be combined with content: “would you like to look at process issues [P3]?” and the response from P3, “Happy too”. This exchange highlights the need for participants to debate their conceptions of the “public good” with reference to which group members are evaluating proposals and taking decisions. The tensions between a conception of democracy as the maximisation of individual preferences and democracy as a deliberative process are also confirmed.

It was then subsequently proposed as to whether the tutor should be involved in the group investigation. Two participants explicitly stated that the tutor should be involved and the other member of the group, P1, acquiesced with the deliberations, exclaiming “Sorted! (?)”. This left one member of the group (P2) without a sub-task. The time allotted to the chat session (one hour) was running out however and when prompted that two people could cover one area P2 asks: “shall I do some bits on organisational issues as well unless I discover uncovered [sic] theme? And in response to the following proposal from P3: “How about reflections on using networked learning as a learning vehicle and staff development process – i.e. your experience”, P2 replied, “Uh oh! Bit of each then!”

It is worthwhile asking at this stage whether P2 wanted to do “organisational issues” all along, whether there was enough deliberation, and whether the agreement reached is merely the aggregation of individual preferences or the outcome of a deliberative process.

Subsequent to the discussion participants searched for resources and held further synchronous discussions with the tutor depending on need and availability. The outcome was a “Possible Course Design?” submitted by the tutor for possible comment and further development on the penultimate day of the workshop as a synthesized version of everyone’s contributions. The synthesis was welcomed by the members of the group who were available at the end of the exercise to express their views and there were calls for the course design to be further discussed for possible implementation within an inter-institutional context. Indeed, this would have been an ideal outcome of the process, where through discussion, the participants took a decision to implement in their own institutions the model they had developed as part of a wider inter-institutional collaboration.

At the end of the group investigation synchronous discussions with participants focused in part on a summative review of how the group process had developed. This review was distinct from discussions held during the course of the exercise that had aimed at discussing issues which would be formative for the group process. Peer to peer communications were viewed as being good, although as one participant mentioned “there is always the problem of clarifying meaning, of course, and the extra time taken to do that online”. And of course the problem of clarifying meaning, how meaning is opened up to further negotiation and how closure of meaning is achieved in a collaborative context lies at the heart of democratic discourse. As one participant (P3) put it: “...what we are doing now, and have been



doing in relation to the task set for this group is what I would call ‘negotiation’, i.e. negotiation of meaning”. It is this negotiation process which helps in practice to establish group investigation’s educational aim of shared ownership.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The excerpts, above, from a decision-making process engaged in as part of a group investigation illustrates some of the challenges of engaging in direct, deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy presents us with the opportunity to shape our collective future through democratic responsiveness to the proposals of other citizens. It is a form of procedural negotiation that attempts to achieve a fair political agreement between parties on the basis of direct voter participation in the deliberative process rather than on the exercising of voter preferences informed by the observation of others. Nevertheless this example illustrates deliberative democracy also presents a ‘classroom society’ with a number of challenges. These include different conceptions of democracy and of the public good, time constraints, education for democracy, and the relations between the process of decision-making and subsequent action.

Balancing individual preferences against the public good can be a fine balancing act and to be successful direct forms of democracy need to successfully negotiate this tightrope. At two points in the dialogue individuals unilaterally state their individual preferences as a way of moving the deliberation forward, rather than basing their contributions on the current state of the deliberative process. Related to this is the question of ‘what is the public good’? What is the conceptual framework that supplies the criteria that we can use to evaluate the worth of any proposal? It may be that there is an “incommensurability of cognitive ends” (Richardson, 1998) and hence a diversity of meanings — and this is surely right in a democracy. What does matter however is how the closure of meaning is achieved, what meanings are eventually privileged and who has a stake in these meanings and who has not. Negotiation is not an end in itself but is a process of human communication and organisation in the light of a particular conception of the good, of democratic arrangements in the public arena.

The question of the time needed to engage in productive deliberation is also pertinent. A fact alluded to by P2 in a further chat session reviewing the progress of the group investigation: “From my point of view I would have liked further clarification...for example, we didn’t [sic] seem to have enough time to gtalk [sic] about objectives “. In a wider social context opportunities for deliberation may need to be balanced against such constraints.

Education for deliberative democracy is also relevant. Learners are at different stages of being able to first recognise and then being prepared to take up a position in the authentic space of joint deliberation. There are implications for identity, there

are implications for interpersonal skills of deliberation and there are implications for the organisations and institutions that supply us with procedural rules within which we live and work.

Finally, the relationship between the process of decision-making and action taken on the basis of that decision-making needs to be addressed. Drawing on the work of Tsagarousianou (1999) Jankowski and van Selm (2000) review three studies<sup>66</sup> against three key claims of digital democracy:

- Obtaining information
- Engaging in deliberation
- Participating in decision-making

Given that 'deliberation' is taken by the authors to mean discussion it is the third claim which we are most interested in the present context. This claim about participation in decision-making "refers to a yet unresolved issue regarding the relation of virtual political debates to those held in real life, and to their relation with further political action" (Jankowski and van Selm, 2000: 161). With reference to the Usenet discussion the authors comment on the relationship between discussion and action:

At best, the newsgroup provided contributors with the opportunity for developing and enacting collective actions. No evidence is presented as to whether such action emerged during the course of the period studied (Jankowski and van Selm, 2000: 155).

In regard to the second, experimental, study the authors again comment on the links between debate and outcome: there was, from the very beginning uncertainty as to how the debate might contribute to policy formation...policy had already reached an advanced stage of completion and it was consequently unclear what role there might be for 'interesting ideas' emerging from the public debate (Jankowski and van Selm, 2000: 156).

Commenting on the third study however the authors state that "...some senior participants believed that their level of political influence was enhanced through the debate" (Jankowski and van Selm, 2000: 156). As these comments indicate a link between the process of decision-making and subsequent action is not guaranteed. On Richardson's account it can be suggested that there needs to be a stronger emphasis on the formation of joint intentions and the links between those intentions and subsequent action. In their conclusions Jankowski and van Selm indicate that among other areas of investigation "more research is necessary on the way control and procedural mechanisms imposed on virtual debates influence the degree of citizen involvement" (Jankowski and van Selm, 2000: 162). An emphasis on an

<sup>66</sup> The studies were "a Usenet discussion, an experiment with specially developed Internet software for supporting public discussions and decision making, and a debate between senior citizens and political candidates on the eve of a national election" (Jankowski & van Selm, 2000: 149).

understanding of the rules of engagement along with being part of a shared locality such as a city are also identified by Dahlberg (2000) as being enabling factors for such online debates in general.

## 8. IMPLICATIONS FOR ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

The vision of government that this paper proposes is of one that involves traditional government and citizens in a process of negotiation that involves active responsibility on both sides. There exists a domain of civil society whose legitimacy derives neither from some external force e.g. government nor from the aggregative preferences of individuals, but which emerges from the interaction of these parties. A domain that can be called “authentic” (Dryzek, 2000). A similar thesis has been put forward in which it is suggested that the “good governance of Cyberspace” depends on an extension of participatory institutional arrangements to domains traditionally outside the social decision-making process (Hamelink, 2000). Both traditional government and citizens should have a stake in its future. Hamelink also notes the need for education for informed decision-making: “the expertise needed can be learnt: the capacity for informed and balanced public decision-making is not part of the human constitution” (Hamelink, 2000: 182).

In tackling questions of electronic democracy our concern should not just be with democracy as an unexamined concept but with what type of democracy we want. Is it one based on the maximization of individual preferences or is it a form of democracy in which decisions and actions are taken within a discursive framework? It is moral and political questions such as these that need to be asked as part of the debate on the development and use of information and communications technology in e-government. Such questions can be asked as part of a political education for e-government.

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