PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 1994

DISCOURSES OF IN-DIFFERENCE: A CASE STUDY OF REPRESENTATIONS OF CIVIC MEMBERSHIP

Claudia Weisburd
Cornell University

The close of the twentieth century has been a time of dramatic upheaval worldwide and domestically. Formerly dictatorial regimes are now labeled democratic. Unprecedented numbers of refugees and immigrants stream into new polities. Deeply diverse peoples within nations dismantle and reconstruct political identifications. As heterogeneous nations attempt to maintain cohesion democratically in concert with pluralism, tensions are thrown into sharp relief between pluralist accommodation of diverse notions of the good life and the universalization implicit in any notion of citizenship. Citizenship entails relations between individuals (singly and in variously defined communities) and the state, and to each other within the civic sphere. It presupposes some common conceptual space within which all function, despite, and/or in accord with differences. Seeing oneself as a part of that space, as a member of a political community, is tightly linked with conceptualizations of what that space might encompass, and of how one might fit and move within it.

Understandings of civic space and membership are not fixed. Rather, they are continually reshaped and redefined socially, through ordinary language which inevitably expresses traditions of interpretations of political events, public issues, and history, and of social groups, social selves, and social relations.

Consider the following sentences from several different, contemporary, adult English-as-a-second-language (ESL) textbooks:

> Governments take money from their citizens. This is income tax.[1]
> Why does the government tax us?[2]
> What's everybody so angry about? The President is going to raise taxes.[3]
> Most people hate to pay taxes.[4]
> [Americans] tend to agree on one subject: taxes are too high.[5]

Ordinary language, whose surface meaning is apparent: they are about taxation, and seem to say nothing about civic space or citizenship. Yet, in the way they talk about taxation, they do. The content and forms of these sentences suggest a relationship between people and the government of separation, hierarchy, and hostility. They suggest uniform complaint about the responsibility of shared expenses. The surface meaning may seem so common-sensical that the discourse level may not be immediately evident. The same topical content in a 1919 ESL text, however, reflects quite a different conception of civic space and membership, one of connection and legitimacy.

> To pay for all the useful work which the nation, states and cities are doing, a great deal of money is needed. This money is raised by taxation and bonds. In a democracy the people tax themselves through their representatives. Taxes are levied by the representatives of the people in Congress, state legislatures, and in city councils.[6]

In this passage, taxes are presented as a social benefit, not as a taking, the people and the government act as one to affect this benefit, and levels down to the local are involved, not simply a distant monolith. Connections between language and the formation of political understanding are rooted in theories of the dialogical construction of self, of social identities, and of systems of

10.47925/1994.080

understanding, and at the same time, in linguistic theories which illuminate the social construction of language itself. Current formulations of communicative ethics, grounding the legitimation of norms in plural democracies in procedures of dialogue, add impetus to problematizing language and discourse. History, too, prompts closer scrutiny of the social practice of language teaching and concurrent political socialization: throughout the history of the United States, the political integration of people from multiple cultures was overtly linked to language and language education.

Better understanding of the formation of political communities, including communities of "dialoguers," requires consideration of the discursive constitution of members, and of the discourse contexts within which civic dialogues might take place. In this paper, I will show how content in ESL texts, expressed in distinctive linguistic patterns and within multiple contexts, created representations of particular forms of civic space and membership. I then argue for an overt political education that constructs substantive conceptualizations of civic space as plural, principled, and potentially meaningful, to help create background conditions conducive to democratic pluralist dialogue.

Behind Dialogue

One response to the tensions between pluralism and the need for democratic unity has been the theorizing of civic talk, focusing on procedures and behaviors of non-dominated, open conversations, and dialoguing across differences. Focus on *conduct* of dialogue, however, sidesteps the thorny prerequisite issues of the discursive constitution of prospective participants, and of their notions of civic space and membership. Through shared language, individuals develop socially shaped meanings of civic space and its import, and of the potentials for themselves within it. Taylor (1991) elaborates:

> Much of our understanding of self, society and the world is carried in…dialogical action…language itself serves to set up spaces of common action, on a number of levels, intimate and public.[7]

Civic space and membership have no pre-defined parameters, role or power. The boundaries between public and private, individual and collective, particular moral and shared political, and the relative powers enjoyed, are continually negotiated, legitimated, relocated, or weakened through language and associated actions. Participants in dialogue come to be participants, listen, speak, understand, and evaluate through and within discursively spun meanings of the civic arena, and of the self and others in it.

The language at hand to "dialogue" with is not an entirely individual matter, in individual control. It does not spring forth, like Athena from the head of Zeus, the spontaneous product of a sole creator. From Bahktin to Wittgenstein, language has been seen as social product and process both, attached always to discourses at once reflecting and constituting ways of seeing the world. Hence, efforts to control discourses and elements of language to achieve social effects. Manipulation of gender pronouns to reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures of understanding, and the anti-Semitic re-definitions encoded in Third Reich dictionaries, share the foundation of the linkage between discourse and political thought. All discourses do not have equal access to institutionalization, however. All do not move in the same circles, nor enjoy equal space or transparence in the streams of ordinary language. If existing discourses of public space, membership, and social relations are left unexamined, excellently theorized procedures of civic talk may prove irrelevant. If the content and distribution of discourses are not identified, participation may not be open, but narrowed to a select few. Well-behaved dialogues might then simply recirculate distortions and dominations by way of discourses that remain unremarked, clothed as they are in common language usages.

Consider the language of a dialogue itself. The United States is multilingual. This multilingualism exists within discourses about languages which assign different status and effectiveness to users of different languages or accents of English. In a multilingual society, within the context of existing discourses about language, selection of the language to use and the form of talking itself

immediately structures access, power, and social relations in a way that cannot be solved by following better rules. Discourses about language and its users must first be identified, along with the practices that create and maintain those discourses as predominant. Inextricably entangled in interpretive language, participants in dialogue cannot escape the webs of discourses by sticking to the procedural straight and narrow.

If engagement in civic conversation is to loom large in reconceptualized practices presumed supportive of pluralist democracy, then dominant discourses of the political world need critique. I turned to ESL textbooks and the doubly institutionalizing practice of English language instruction to non-English speakers. Discourses found in ESL texts are reflective of accepted discourses, are institutionalized through educational channels, and are further recirculated by linking interpretations of the political world with ordinary content and learned forms of expression. Contemporary ESL texts contribute to initiating people into additional self and social identifications through the new language they are learning. These texts, then, seem a particularly relevant location for identifying prevailing discourses of civic space and membership.

ESL Texts: Discourses of Indifference

To understand the meaning of a term such as "citizenship," one must look at the sets of concepts that implement or constitute it. Concepts underlying "citizenship" are contested, and include differing conceptualizations of what the civic sphere might entail, and of people's relation to it. In my analysis, I aimed to see which of a range of possibilities were reflected. To do this, I first identified all overt references to the civic sphere, and then posed questions like, who is acting, doing what, to what end, why? Combining hermeneutic and linguistic analyses, I looked at content and patterns of language form, in context of each other and in context of the texts as whole works, to see how the civic sphere and people in it were represented. I cannot go into all the representations, but will present here some of the themes and patterns I found.

An overview of the seven methodologically different texts referred to in this paper shows mention of a variety of social groups (predominantly "Blacks," "women," "Indians" or "Native Americans," and "environmentalists"), multiculturalized illustrations, and content relating to civil rights, women, environmental issues, labor, immigration, freedom of religion, taxation, and other public sphere topics. The government, electoral processes, and officials were mentioned. That is, some conventionally political and pluralist content was identifiable on a surface level. Ultimately, I found that interrelated representations of this content came together to reflect an irrelevant civic sphere, and point to a citizenship of indifference.

The civic sphere did not appear to be an arena encompassing groups in interaction. When I considered what groups were shown doing in relation to the civic sphere, I found that social groups appeared *one at a time*, to be acted upon. The groups named were rarely presented as acting subjects in *relation* to other named, acting groups.

> American Indians weren't allowed to vote at one time.[8]
> Southern blacks were denied the right to eat in certain restaurants.[9]
> Blacks used to be given inferior roles…few black actors or actresses were chosen.[10]
> Black people had to sit in the back of the bus.[11]

The unnamed or backgrounded groups were always those who denied, did not permit, gave or withheld, leaving the named groups isolated in civic space as victims of actions by persons unknown. That is, conflict *between* groups, the notion of groups acting in civic space *in tension or in concert with other groups*, is absent. Consistently backgrounding the more powerful group and their actions diminished any sense that civic space might encompass engagements among *unequals*.

Civic space included little civic action. The social groups above were recipients, not agents of action. In addition, in virtually all cases in which political change was presented, civic action

accompanying the change was absent. The standard form of omission was the inference gap, an ordinary and necessary English construction that leaves to inference the information linking the conditions stated in the first sentence to the effect stated in the subsequent one. The existence of gaps is unremarkable, but patterns of gaps should be examined. Gaps are filled by common knowledge and shared experiences, knowledges not likely shared with or among newcomers to a society. Across these texts, consistently, the gap occurred at precisely the point of civic action.

> The first labor unions were formed in the 1850's, but it wasn't until the 1930's that *unions became strong*. Child Labor Laws *were then passed*.[12]
> Working *women have not always received pay equal* to that of men who are doing equal work. *Today's laws state* that a women must be paid…[13]
> But *times have changed*. Black actors and actresses *are now treated* with more dignity.[14]
> Before 1954, in many states *black children weren't permitted* to attend white schools. In 1954, *the Supreme Court decided* that segregated schools were unconstitutional.[15]

The gaps omit civic action; they also delete the groups in conflict and the violence and passion generated by struggles between groups over important goods. Significant amounts of violence lie at the bottom of these chasms not bridged with material found elsewhere in the texts.

In rare instances, violence was cited. In these cases, the presentation continued to obscure the relational actions of more powerful groups, and at the same time cast the less powerful groups as responsible for the violence and "problems."

> Some of King's supporters began to question his belief in peaceful protests. They were tired of waiting. They wanted change NOW. Suddenly, there was a period of terrible violence and hatred between blacks and whites….The nation was divided by fear, hatred, and violence.[16]

The implication is that Blacks, here shown clearly as the political actors, caused violence and hatred. The "suddenly" contributes by locating segregations mentioned previously in the passage in a category other than violence or hatred. In another example, political actors are also cast as trouble makers in part by obscuring inter-acting groups.

> Many times workers are not satisfied with their working conditions and decide to go on strike….However, even if there is a strike, *some people may cross the picket line* and go to work. *This* causes strikers to become very angry….Often terrible fights break out *between the strikers and the strikebreakers*.[17]

This is the only passage in this text about labor relations. Management is absent, as are management actions that might lead to strikes or cause violence during strikes. "[W]orkers are not satisfied," without management, obscures justification for the actions portrayed; one can infer that workers are just the dissatisfied, fractious types. "Terrible" conflicts are located only among workers; conflicts of interests between workers and management, which might legitimate the social action shown, are not apparent. In both examples, civic action is mentioned, but shown as causing, not addressing problems, and having a questionable basis.

The importance of the goods dealt with in the civic arena was also hazy and diminished. Conflict and passion are generated because what is at stake matters; removing conflict thus deflates importance. Further, issues or goods in the civic sphere are important because decisions made about them have consequences of harms and benefits. Harms and benefits associated with civic actions or decisions were extremely unclear. In the above examples, harmed groups are visible, benefitters are not. The stakes in the civil rights movement, the sole topic consistently linked to some civic action, appeared to be bus seats and restaurant choices. Segregations were mentioned without reference to actual differences in quality or to the implications of those differences.

Three texts discussed school desegregation; none mentioned differences in school quality or connected school quality to life chances. All located "the problem" as one of where "people," apparently freely and equally, "choose to live." In the following complete passage, the narrowed

problem appears soluble by the solution, busing. Absent the information that schools are of different qualities, however, this solution makes little sense.

> Integration of black and white students in schools is still a major issue in American education today. American law says that all children must be given an equal opportunity to get a good education. Before 1954, in many states black children weren't permitted to attend white schools. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided that segregated schools were unconstitutional. The law now says that black children can't be segregated in separate schools. It has been difficult to desegregate schools in some areas because black people and white people frequently live in different neighborhoods. Since children usually go to the school closest to their homes, this creates a different form of segregation. How can this problem be solved? In some communities, the law says that some children from white neighborhoods have to be taken by bus to schools in black neighborhoods, and some black children must be bused to schools in white neighborhoods. Many parents feel that busing shouldn't be used as a solution to the problem. Where should children be sent to school in these parents' opinion? They believe that their children should be sent to school in their own neighborhood.[18]

Who is harmed or benefited? How? One evaluation of the situation is phrased with a non-particularized "many"; no expression is offered of parents who believe busing to be valuable, despite inconveniences; the implication is that all — Black, white, rich, poor — were equally affected by busing. No text hinted that some whites fought to prevent access, with rationales based on their interests. "Difference" seems to make little difference to the short or long term experience of the situation, to evaluation, to actions.

Content gains meaning in the context of other content. Content about school desegregation interacts with content elsewhere in the text about civil rights and associated actions. Segregated schools were symptoms and agents of racial inequities, yet the school segregation passages were completely divorced from presentations of other civil rights content in the text. Acceptable reasons might exist for disassociating elements of the overarching topic. Nevertheless, the separation, coupled with the minimization of the goods at stake, effectively removed a basis for understanding civil rights issues and their implications, and for justifying the civil rights actions mentioned. Thus, civic action was again marginalized, by leaving actions shown (such as the bus boycott) bereft of some of the rationales that could have lent the actions broad legitimacy and urgency.

Through these representations, civic space seems to have little moral or material relevance. To be morally relevant, civic space needs to be seen as an arena of competition over and decisions about distributions or control of variously defined important "goods," with consequences in which some are harmed and others benefit. On the contrary, the discourses of these texts suggest a civic space encompassing matters of minimal moral bearing, and entailing little action leading to material change. Such discourses offer scant reason to engage in the civic arena, and tend even to delegitimate such engagement.

The surface-level diversity shown by including various groups in the content was little articulated with civic space. "Difference" was not shown as a multi-faceted inter-relation, important because it is linked to power, and to the ability of some to corral benefits, but was presented as a solo appearance of "them" with a more powerful "us" hidden behind the scenes. Consistently, the civic space of "pluralism" in these texts echoes with the sound of one hand clapping. Cultural pluralism *may* be suggested; political pluralism certainly is not.

The notion of social responsibility for social conditions was also deflected out of the representation of the civic arena, through a variety of patterns of content and forms. Human agency was typically obscure: agents of social problems were omitted, as shown previously, or responsibility was displaced onto inanimates. Although nominalization is grammatically acceptable and its use quite ordinary, its consistent use in the political content, in context of the absence of active, agented constructions, continued the pattern of backgrounding social agency.

> If the southern *states* hadn't *denied* blacks their rights as citizens after the Civil War, there might not be so much racial tension.[19]

> Differences in *culture* often *cause* serious trouble.[20]
> *Towns didn't allow* interracial teams to play.[21]
> Slavery was a terrible *institution* that *caused endless problems*[22]
> A common repository of responsibility was the law…until the 1950's, there had still been many *laws* in the south that *treated* black people unjustly.[23]
> By 1964, the Civil Rights *Act* was passed to *give equality* to blacks.[24]
> But there are *laws* which *give* every person… the chance or opportunity to succeed. These *laws guarantee* equal opportunities.[25]
> There are *laws*…to *protect* people from discrimination.[26]

Laws were rarely presented as inanimate statements of permission, prohibition, or requirement. When laws are animated as the agents of giving, guaranteeing, or protecting, the existence of the law is cast as the reality of the thing. Posing existence of laws as *affecting* a fair society is rooted in formal political understandings. Other understandings were not offered, those, for example, suggested by showing the law as socially malleable encodings of social norms differentially applied. Civic space does not appear to include "the people" grappling with their laws as expressions of beliefs, even through representatives. Instead, the law stands as social flak-catcher or beneficent genie, insulating humans from responsibility for shaping civic space or acting within it.

Citing problems, then attributing them to natural characteristics of those experiencing them, was another form that minimized social responsibility. If people or particular groups are responsible for problems themselves, then the broader collectivity is relieved of having contributed to the problem, and therefore of acting on it. Indeed, public action might seem unjustified if problems are individual and not social in origin.

An example in one of the three texts that shows this pattern consistently, attributes all the feeling of an immigrant's "strangeness" to the individual, with no allowance that people of different ethnicities might actually be treated differently.

> You may feel like everyone is watching you. In fact, you are always watching yourself. You are self-conscious.[27]

Representations of African-American "fault" were pronounced in two texts. In these, contexts were established of efficacious laws, and of the United States as a land of opportunity with intrinsic goods there for the enterprising. Persisting "inequalities" were then explained as natural to homogeneously cast Blacks, due to their own perceptions.

> Blacks and other minorities *have always had* a lower standard of living.[28]
> Black people have made many advances….*They still have* lower level jobs.[29]
> *Black actors used to have trouble* finding dignified roles.[30]
> *Blacks had distinct disadvantages*….*They could not mix easily* with the established society either *because of their skin* color.[31]
> *It was difficult for them to adapt* to the American culture.[32]
> *Because their neighborhoods are segregated*, many *blacks feel* that educational opportunities are not adequate.[33]
> In what areas do *minorities find* prejudice?[34]
> Blacks were different from other groups because (c) *they did not have support* groups.[35]

Regardless of whether these representations seem racist, their content and linguistic forms consistently suggest that if there are problems, they are anchored in particular characteristics of the group experiencing the problem, and implicitly are not the responsibility of the broader collectivity.

Finally, a comment on texts' representations of talking about politics. One of the discursively constructed contexts of civic dialogues are notions of civic talk itself. These texts and their illustrations of people "talking about politics" per se, did not show diverse people engaged in

collective discussions leading to greater understandings or novel insights. Instead, references to "talking politics" cast it only interpersonally, either as idle chat, or as vaguely unpleasant, and, across the texts, as heavily male. One text referred to "talking about politics" as a lifestyle element, then elaborated it as a major illustration of a "touchy subject." In another, it was posed strictly as a right-wrong "argument" In another, two males get "insulting," the "argument" finally broken up by the female, accompanied by the question, clearly prompting a negative response, "Is Molly enjoying this argument?" Not only do these representations, in context of other content, divert from the notion of collective civic engagement through talking about politics, but absent counter-examples, they specifically pose such talk as a difficulty.

Discourses of indifference: "the people" act little, groups are isolated, civic space seems not to encompass much of relevance, and whatever is happening, it is not our responsibility, anyway. One's evaluation of the representations depends on the particular political project. If the project entails broad, plural communities of persons willing and able to engage in civic dialogues, then representations such as these seem painfully thin.

Too little sense is offered of people *potentially* crafting a morally or materially important civic arena to spur willingness. If ability to engage turns on the capacity to speak from both situated and principled vantage points,[36] then discourses that denude the civic sphere of meaningful difference and substantive relevance seem not thin, but anorexic. Neither Benneton colors, nor ethnic feasts, nor formulaic traditional principles can fatten them up. Sustenance cannot be gained by naming venal publishers as guardians of capitalist relations. Neither will the diet be enhanced by brushing up the diners on their discourse etiquette.

Discourses of Democratic Pluralism

Commitment to pluralism precludes direct efforts to reshape social values, whether of extolling civic life, celebrating diversity, or creating political communities based on shared moral visions, a common culture, or unproblematized, static political principles. Commitment to democratic principles precludes abandoning the field to exclusively group-centered reasoning. Commitment to both precludes reliance on rules or communicative behaviors alone. As political understanding is shaped through discourses, discourse changes can work behind the back of dialogue to contribute to forming background conditions[37] more conducive to the conduct of civic conversation. A creative reinterpretation of the historical practice of overt political education is one social practice that might help develop and institutionalize discourses that lend substance to the civic sphere, and reify neither "pluralism" nor "democratic principle."

Principled membership and pluralism cannot be seen as mutually exclusive; they should instead be fully integrated. Inescapably foundational democratic concepts encoded in words like liberty, freedom, justice, equality, and "the people" provide a basis for principled membership. Membership cannot, however, be predicated on acceptance of fixed, transcendent interpretations of these words. Their varying interpretations can be seen in a dynamic with particularist-based viewpoints and experiences, that is, how particular groups conceive the principles differently, based on different experiences of them, across history, and across differing economic and political systems. Democratic principles can then be seen as socially constructed beliefs, which have been implemented in different forms, in different arenas, and with different effects for different groups of people.

While webs of political principles give shape to political community, individuals and changeable groups move across the webs in various relations to it. Pluralism thus cannot rest in simple identification of "difference" as existing, which homogenizes groups, denies individuality, and freezes inter-relations. Pluralism itself can be shown to be one political concept, within which "difference" makes a difference through articulation with power, in intersection with political principles. Actions among groups and between individuals can then be seen as relevant through how those actions may uphold or violate particular principles, understood in particular ways, with

significant consequences. That is, intersections between "difference" and "principle" need to be made explicit, and shown as playing out in civic space with important effects.

Political education could not build moral consensus, promote participation, or provide fixed standards of judgment. It could not promise efficacy. It could, more weakly, nourish the viability of pluralist, democratic civic conversation by circulating discourses of a fluid, principled civic space created by members, encompassing contests over matters that might matter, among individuals and groups who might have some effect. If civic conversations and so-informed actions are to drive reconceptualizations of pluralist democracy, then a balance is needed between unproblematized talk of talking and critical appraisals of what is now being said.

The following citations were not part of the original essay but were added later at the editor's request.

1. M. Walker, *New Horizons in English 3* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1992), 107.

2. S. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1986), 233.

3. S. Molinsky and B. Bliss, *Side by Side* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 103.

4. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context*, 233.

5. P. Abraham and D. Mackey, *Contact USA* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 184.

6. R. Moley and H. Cook, *Lessons in Democracy for Use in Adult Immigrant Classes* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 87.

7. Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in: *The Interpretive Turn*, ed. D. Hiley et al. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 311.

8. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context*, 99.

9. J. DeFilippo, *Lifeskills and Citizenship* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1985), 106.

10. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context,* 228

11. Walker, *New Horizons in English 3,* 93.

12. DeFilippo, *Lifeskills and Citizenship,* 56, [emphasis mine].

13. Ibid., 49, [emphasis mine].

14. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context*, 228, [emphasis mine].

15. G. Fingado et al., *The English Connection* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1991), 373, [emphasis mine].

16. Walker, *New Horizons in English 3*, 93-5.

17. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context*, 272, [emphasis mine].

18. Fingado, *The English Connection*, 373.

19. Ibid., 412, [emphasis mine].

20. Abraham, *Contact USA*, 152, [emphasis mine].

21. Fingado, *The English Connection*, 137, [emphasis mine].

22. Ibid., 409, [emphasis mine].

23. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context*, 238, [emphasis mine].

24. Ibid., [emphasis mine].

25. Abraham, *Contact USA*, 130, [emphasis mine].

26. Ibid., [emphasis mine].

27. Ibid., 75.

28. Elbaum, *Grammar in Context*, 157, [emphasis mine].

29. Ibid., 158, [emphasis mine].

30. Ibid., 228, [emphasis mine].

31. Abraham, *Contact USA*, 148, [emphasis mine].

32. Ibid., [emphasis mine].

33. Ibid., 149, [emphasis mine].

34. Ibid., 135, [emphasis mine].

35. Ibid., 151, [emphasis mine].

36. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routeledge, 1992).

37. James Fishkin, *The Dialogue of Justice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 165-96.

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

10.47925/1994.080