

Deep Democracy

The Inner Practice of Civic Engagement



P a t r i c i a A . W i l s o n

What happens when you take the tools of dialogue, systems thinking, learning communities, presencing, and profound change, and apply them to civic engagement? The result is deep democracy—an organizing principle based on the transformation of separation to interconnectedness in the civic arena. Deep democracy is not what elected representatives do, nor experts, nor large public institutions, nor voters. At its essence, deep democracy is the inner experience of interconnectedness.

The following stories show this organizing principle at work.

Twenty-two residents of inner city Sydney, Australia—resettled Aboriginal migrants and working class whites—are gathered around a site map to talk about their needs and desires for the re-use of the abandoned factory that lies between their two neighborhoods. The whites have worked hard to come to terms with a generation of fear for the safety of their children in the face of drugs and crime in the adjacent Aboriginal housing projects and are now willing to listen to the “other.” The Aboriginal migrants have worked hard to deal with their rage over generations of inhumane treatment and discrimination by whites and are now willing to talk to the “other.” They are not just designing a site plan; they are building deep democracy.

Five men and three women talk animatedly over a map of Central Texas, listening, laughing, and working together. They are recognized leaders of their stakeholder groups—environmentalists, developers, minority communities, urban neighborhoods, rural communities—who moments before with arms folded amid palpable tension had thought that building a consensus from such divergent positions would be impossible. But now they are each thinking about the needs of the whole, engaged in creative conversation, taking into account each other’s concerns and ideas. Like the other 280 people in the room they are doing more than putting together a land use plan to accommodate the expected growth in the greater Austin area over the next 20 years; they are practicing deep democracy.

The Core Practices of Deep Democracy

For the individual, deep democracy is the enfranchisement of self at the level of mind, heart, and spirit: the realization that “I count.” It is the exercise of one’s membership in a larger



whole, the acceptance of one's responsibility for that whole, and the desire to act for the good of the whole: the realization that "I care." From a systems perspective, deep democracy is an open dynamic system springing from the diverse points of engagement where individuals and community come together. It neither privileges the individual nor imposes collective values. It is the point of creative tension between individual and community held in place by the transformation of self through greater understanding of, compassion for, and relationship with an expanding circle of others.

In deep democracy, citizenship is conferred by personal engagement—not by revealing individual preferences through voting or rational choice, but by stepping out of isolation. Deep democracy starts with the practice of civic dialogue, where one begins to listen to and know the "other," to see through others' frames, and to recognize and expand one's own frame. From civic dialogue, it moves to civic "knowing," the learning and sensing together in community; then to civic "willing," the visioning and presencing of the whole that is wanting to emerge; and then to civic "manifesting," the co-creative process of making the invisible visible. Finally through renewal and reflection, the cycle returns, in no necessary order, to civic dialogue. The end result is participatory consciousness—a sense of oneness—manifested in the realm of the visible.

Many of us have experienced moments of participatory consciousness in a group that suddenly found itself on the same wavelength, moving in synch, creating effortlessly, or connecting in warm silence. Deep democracy is a pattern of such moments. Through small daily acts of engagement, iterative actions become "habits" that grow into new cultural patterns of interaction. Deep democracy will not be created by a master plan, experts, or government officials, but rather by the small daily acts of engagement. Imagine how the following three habits, if embedded in the culture, could build the basis for deep democracy:

- the habit of listening to understand the "other" before advocating a position
- the habit of reflecting on, and revealing, one's own assumptions and values
- the habit of sensing together the emergent future of the whole organism or field

Process Leaders

An important catalyst to deep democracy is the *process leader*—the one who facilitates the experience of participatory consciousness. Process leaders create the container for building trust and shared understanding amid diversity and difference. The process leaders embody the values and attitudes of deep democracy, model the practices, deepen the conversation, and raise the octave for the transformation from separation to connectedness to occur.

In each of the stories above, at least one process leader played a crucial role behind the scenes in nurturing the capacity of individuals and the group to find their voices and connect with others. In the Australian case it was an urban planner contracted by the town council to put an end to the violent controversy around the reuse of the factory site. She could have simply designed a compromise plan that incorporated the interests of both sides, but she knew it would be only a temporary truce. Instead she worked with each side for months, listening to their anger, fear, and pain until they felt heard and ready to meet face to face to design the plan together. In the story from central Texas, it was the facilitator who called on the stakeholder rep-

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representatives to think from the whole and modeled how to do that, putting aside her own opinions about the future of the region.

An effective process leader knows the social technologies for civic engagement and when best to use them. But more importantly, she or he has done the deep inner work necessary to be “strong like a mountain and spacious like the air”—to be centered in the face of conflict and emotion, to connect with the other’s humanity without judgment or defensiveness, and to be aware of the invisible energy field of the whole.

Social Technologies for Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is fast becoming a field of practice, bursting with new modalities (DIPs, as they are called internationally—deliberative and inclusionary processes) for face-to-face citizen deliberation and dialogue. Designed to provide alternatives to adversarial activism, lobbying, and political alienation, these efforts respond to the growing distrust of experts and large institutions. The table below lists prominent examples of the new modalities. All of these modalities help to deepen the civic conversation through face-to-face interaction among diverse citizens and stakeholders.

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Social Technologies for Civic Engagement

Deliberation	Dialogue	Collaborative Action	Community Conflict Resolution
Citizen Summits	Public Conversations Project	Study Circles	Community Mediation
Citizen Juries	Conversation Cafes	Appreciative Inquiry	Narrative Mediation
Consensus Conferences	World Cafe	Community Collaboratives	Circle Sentencing
Scenario Workshops	Dialogue Circles	Policy Dialogues	Community Conferencing
National Issues Forums	Compassionate Listening	Future Search	Peacemaking Circles
Deliberative Polling	Transformational Conversations	Open Space Technology	Healing Circles

The **deliberation** approaches, varying in size from citizen summits with thousands of people to citizen juries with a dozen people, involve a cross-section of everyday citizens (as opposed to recognized stakeholders). In some cases participants are randomly chosen to ensure representation. The deliberative forums typically offer information or expert input to inform the participants about the public issue under consideration. These forums emphasize rational analysis that looks at all sides of an issue as opposed to defense of predetermined positions or emotional arguments. Most of the deliberative approaches are designed to bring the participants into agreement on a recommendation for action to be presented to a decision-making body, usually a government entity. Aimed at influencing or informing government policy-making, they are popular in

North America and Europe for issues such as technology, environment, health, and land use. The 2002 New York City Town Hall Meeting on the future of the World Trade Center site is an example on a large scale: over 4,000 participants around small tables connected electronically (see <http://www.americaspeaks.org/>). Beginning in the U.S. in the early 1990s, Citizens' Juries (similar to Planning Cells in Germany) are an example of a small scale format, with 12 to 16 randomly selected participants meeting over two to four days to listen to and cross-examine expert witnesses and come up with findings and recommendations to government entities on controversial, often technical, issues—e.g., the use of genetically modified crops.

The **dialogue** approaches are social learning processes that aim to build mutual understanding and trust among diverse participants through non-judgmental listening and sharing of the personal experience and meaning of public issues. Social learning takes place through emotional response as well as cognitive appreciation. Dialogue is not aimed at coming to agreement around a course of action or recommendations and does not involve outside information or expert briefings. It is generally done in small groups, often with a facilitator or host, and usually with the participants agreeing at the start to certain guidelines to promote respect and mutual learning. Participants are usually identified and invited through the associational networks of the convenors, and sometimes specific stakeholders in the chosen topic are invited. Dialogue is a rapidly multiplying form of civic engagement in the U.S. Since the early 1990s the Public Conversations Project, for example, has trained hundreds of convenors and spawned countless dialogues on divisive public issues such as abortion, homosexuality, environment and land use, 9/11, Rodney King and race issues, and the war in Iraq, in two-hour facilitated dialogues of usually 5 to 15 people.

The **collaborative action** approaches bring together diverse citizens, as well as public, private, non-profit, and community actors, to increase community motivation and capacity for collaboration around issues of public concern, especially the "wicked messes." Collaborative action technologies, which have taken root over the last ten years in the U.S., use dialogue, inquiry, and deliberation to inspire participants, build working relationships, and make decisions about collaborative actions they will take to improve their communities. Study Circles, brought to the U.S. from Sweden in 1989, use dialogue to build relationship and understanding, and deliberation to decide on actions.

Appreciative Inquiry uses interviewing and story telling to get people in touch with their dreams and aspirations and thereby spawn collaborative action on community issues (for example, Imagine Chicago, which involved hundreds of participants). Future Search brings together up to 64 stakeholder and citizen representatives in a structured two-day workshop format designed to build shared understanding, vision, and collaborative action. Policy dialogues bring organized stakeholders together into a safe container away from the public and the media so they can step out of their roles, dialogue, and build consensus on legislative initiatives (e.g., California environmental quality dialogues in the 1990s).

These approaches work with the organizational landscape of the community or region in order to ensure continuity of collaboration and implementation. Examples of issues being addressed by collaborative action approaches in the U.S. and Canada are community revitalization, housing affordability, watershed management and land use, logging and forestry, urban brownfields clean-up and redevelopment, regional growth management, and children and family services.

In North America and internationally the field of alternative dispute resolution has opened up a new arena for civic engagement through **community conflict resolution**. Consistent with the sys-

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tems theory maxim of “bringing the whole system into the room,” community conflict resolution assumes that healing a conflict must reach well beyond a legal decision involving the immediate disputants. In the case of a conflict between stakeholder groups who reside in the same community—e.g., ranchers, loggers, and environmentalists—the relationships must be rebuilt, understanding of each other’s frames established, the possible solution set expanded creatively, and a commitment to follow-through made by each party.

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This transformative approach to community conflicts is being used not only for broadly divisive community issues, but also for victim-offender cases. Circle sentencing is an example of a systems approach to victim-offender cases: both the victim and the offender tell their stories to each other and the entire community. The community decides on the retribution required to reintegrate the offender into the community and oversees the enforcement of the agreements. In some versions, the community then continues to discuss the root causes of the incident (e.g., unemployment, access to schooling) and comes up with a community-wide approach to address the root causes and reduce the likelihood of such an event in the future. Community conflict resolution approaches mushroomed in popularity during the 1990s in North America and Europe.

In addition to these four categories, innovations in facilitation approaches (e.g. dynamic facilitation, strategic questioning), communication skills (compassionate communication, nonviolent communication), and group decision-making processes (e.g., consensus) are enriching public dialogue and deliberation. Peer-to-peer learning communities in which cohorts from several different communities (or even countries) learn from each other’s experiences is another mechanism for deepening civic engagement through social learning.

Deepening the Practice of Civic Engagement

The field of civic engagement is advancing along several dimensions: scaling-up both in numbers and diversity of people involved; increasing the continuity of participatory mechanisms over time; strengthening the links between dialogue, decision-making, and action (see Archon Fung’s work); and increasing community capacity for collaboration.

I find the most exciting dimension of discovery in civic engagement to be that of depth—not downward but inward, moving deeper toward collective attunement to the inner source of knowing. A flowering of work along these lines uses unified field theory (e.g., Rupert Sheldrake) as a framework for understanding the vibrational or energetic nature of the invisible webs of interconnectedness and attunement to the implicate order: for example, the work of Otto Scharmer et al, on presencing, William Isaacs on profound change, Tom Atlee on co-intelligence, and Allan Kaplan on co-creativity.

Other innovations have emerged from the study of Native American and other spiritual traditions: for example, Barbara Marx Hubbard’s Evolutionary Circles and Christina Baldwin’s Peer-Spirit circles. These circles introduce ceremony, ritual, song, intuition, connection with the earth, awareness of energy moving, and explicit spirit-centeredness. Taken together, these processes can lead directly to the inner experience of knowing the whole through group attunement and entrainment. Applied to civic engagement, these tools can help guide the journey inward toward deep democracy.

The inner dimension of deep democracy can be represented as a cone. Around the perimeter of the top are the core practices of deep democracy as moments of the creative cycle. In the section

view of the cone, one can picture the creative cycle as a spiral wrapped around the cone, consisting of ever deepening practices of civic engagement. As the practices deepen they approach the bottom point of the cone, which is the center point of the circle—the empty center in which participatory consciousness resides.

For example, the core practice of dialogue can be deepened until we are listening beyond the words to our own and others' needs, feelings, assumptions and frames; and even deeper until we are listening together to the silence, to the heartbeat of the whole, to what is wanting to emerge and be born. At this point we are listening not with the ear, but with the mind, the heart, and the body. We are listening to the deepest faculty of inner knowing.

Conclusion

Here in Austin at the University of Texas I have started a project with my colleague, Dr. Betty Sue Flowers, called DialogueAustin, to provide a “landing pad,” a grounding, for some of the deeper modalities of civic engagement. This project has taught me how much can be learned by observing the best of what is already happening. We are listening to the stories of individuals who have become quiet leaders—change agents—for deep democracy. With solidity and spaciousness, their experience of connectedness can simply burst out as acts of love for the community. Their stories inspire and show the way.

So where do we jump in? As process leaders we can help to build the container for a culture of dialogue and connectedness, while we pursue our own inner work—some call it spiritual practice—that lies at the heart and soul of deep democracy. Aware of the collective importance of each of our own small efforts to create new habits, we can also observe our own practice of engaged citizenship. Let us begin by cultivating just one habit of deep democracy. I propose this one: to smile and listen to understand the “other” before advocating a position. That alone may be the flap of the butterfly wing that creates the sea-change to deep democracy.

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Suggested reading:

Tom Atlee. *The Tao of Democracy*. Cranston, RI: The Writers' Collective, 2003.

Allan Kaplan. *Development Practitioners and Social Process: Artists of the Invisible*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.

Suggested websites:

www.thataway.org

www.co-intelligence.org

Bibliographic references: Available on request from the author.

Dr. Patricia A. Wilson is Professor of Community and Regional Planning at the University of Texas. She is a Founding SoL member and research member since August, 2003. This article is based on the manuscript for her forthcoming book on Deep Democracy. Patricia can be reached at pwilson@mail.utexas.edu. Web page: <http://wnt.utexas.edu/architecture/people/faculty/wilson/index.html>

Photo of Dr. Wilson courtesy of The University of Texas at Austin.