Dis-Embedded Discourse: Challenge for Civic Education

Dilafruz R. Williams
Portland State University

In her critique of deliberative democratic theory, Stacy Smith raises an important question: How do we reconcile a social condition of radical plurality with an ideal of consensus? For our deliberations of questions like this one, she invites us to consider Benhabib's concept of the "concrete other" which encourages recognition of "each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution."[1] Smith aptly reminds us that these "concrete aspects of individual identity encourage attention to one's status within salient groups" allowing differences "and the complex social relations in which they are embedded, to become manifest within the discourse procedure."

It is by now clear as C. Douglas Limmus[2] argues in *Radical Democracy* that the ideals of democracy are impossible to attain at the level of the modern nation-state. For, the celebration of Benhabib's "concrete other" is impossible at the national, international, or global scale in which people disappear, reduced to "masses," "classes," or "we, the people." Despite Dewey's hope for regenerating the ragged individual[3] through national and international organizations, the average voter casting her or his vote at the ballot box fails to achieve the concrete identity needed to enjoy Smith's "radical plurality." The plurality and the consensus needed for radical democracy are possible only at the local level, on a scale small enough to be human.

For my own meditations on the type of concrete particularity that does not disappear in the process of building consensus, I am compelled to go beyond the abstractions of the politics of identity, otherness, difference, multiculturalism, and to situate my discussion in the context of a particular problematic for civic involvement and education — that of *dis-embeddedness*. We must confront the following: (1) How does the primacy of the construct of an individual as "autonomous," "free," and "equal" over that of one who is embedded in tradition and/or community impact the nature of democratic deliberation? and (2) What are we to make of "de-placed" discourse that occurs through bits and bytes with no recognizable "concrete other?"[4] In light of the fact that Smith is interested in ideal theories that "can help us create ourselves as more rather than less free, more equal rather than unequal," I will explore these problems through two specific examples.

I begin with the first question that deals with embracing the construct of an individual *qua* individual, one who is dis-embedded, autonomous, free, and/or equal. Such a view (commonly known as worldview) of an individual is far different from another that considers an individual as part of a complex web of relationships — linking her or him to the past, to tradition, to the human and biotic communities, or to the cosmos. But in present times relationships and understandings of the world based on traditional indigenous knowledge and/or community are suspect and hence "taboo" in much of deliberative discourse. While I am not claiming that all tradition

should be blindly adhered to, I want to point out that we should not be simply writing off "tradition" or "community" as projects that revive primitivism. As Bowers argues, "thought and language are rooted in the epistemic patterns of a cultural group."[5] There can be profound differences in the worldview of cultural groups whose root metaphors might contradict the taken-for-granted symbolic world of another group. Civic understandings are likely to differ based on the views of individual and community we espouse. In our public schools, for instance, high status is accorded to the view of "autonomous," "free," individual, whereas the view of self embedded in context is low status. Any attempt at *inclusion* must confront the fact that people with low-status understanding of the world may not participate in dialogue for a variety of reasons one being that of pejorative connotation associated with embeddedness.

Civic issues are handled differently by people who have context-based knowledge of the situation from those who are dis-embedded as experienced by Kawagley and Barnhardt[6] from whom I take the following example. For the Native Indians of Alaska's Minto Flats attuned to living in ecological balance, "self" is understood as embedded in the context of their human and biotic community. In recent years, the river, their source of spiritual and communal support, has been heavily sedimented with a corresponding decline in pike. To address these problems, representatives of the Department of Fish and Game and of Natural Resources attended a meeting with Minto elders. While the elders saw this as an opportunity to address issues affecting their community, for the researchers the meeting was to provide expert information. However, this incongruence of purpose was the least of their problems.[7]

As the agency representatives introduced themselves they noted their area of specialization. Present were two fisheries specialists (one on whitefish and one on pike), a moose specialist, a beaver specialist, and a hydrology specialist with expertise on mining sedimentation. I will not go into the details offered by Kawagley and Barnhardt about the specialists' presentation of statistics and tracking of pike with sophisticated electronic gadgets which prevented the Minto community from eating pike. Instead, I will focus on their story of the sedimentation specialist who demonstrated his equipment which would be placed on the side of the streambed with a hose going in the water. This would automatically suck up a sample of water, several times a day, do a sediment analysis, and then enter the results on a chart. The varying levels of sedimentation would be captured on a graph by the end of summer. When they had finished with their demonstration, one of the elders asked about what was going to be done about the "burn policy."[8] None of the specialists had a clue and shirked addressing the question as being irrelevant to the problem at hand.

Kawagley and Barnhardt write that eventually, Peter John, a 90-year-old elder with little formal education, gave an "exposition on the ecology of Minto Flats." He was able to connect the various elements of the program as embedded within a historical and cultural understanding of the bioregion — looking at the mutual relationship between the Minto people and the habitat. His understanding of the problem vastly differed from that of the outsiders with extensive knowledge of their special fields. He explained that the BLM's burn policy which permitted fires to burn

unless they endangered man-made structures had impacted the habitat of beavers in the Flats. They were being forced to move up the river into the sloughs building dams that were filling the river with sedimentation from the mining, which, in turn, were destroying the pike's spawning beds. Referring to the tracking of the pike demonstrated earlier, elder John addressed the biologist: "If you want to know where pike spend the winter, ask me. I can tell you exactly where we go to get the biggest pike." He also pointed out that while the specialists' statistics on pike went back only thirty years,

> "[o]ur record goes back 300 years. We know how many pike were around [then], and how many it took to feed our families and dogs...The biggest change occurred about 20 years ago when the State opened an access road to Minto Flats for snow machines and four-wheel drives which brought in a large influx of fishermen from Fairbanks who took more fish than the rivers and lakes could handle. The Minto people were no longer able to obtain their food from the most accessible places and were having to travel further out into the Flats to find adequate supplies."[9]

In recalling this example, my intent is to point to differences between dis-embedded, compartmentalized, and short time-span view of the world of specialists, and a more holistic, embedded, multigenerational perspective of Native elders who knew the issues and many of the answers even before the specialists started collecting data. The challenge is to confront what counts as "valid" and "legitimate" knowledge, as well as benefits that can be gained when differing views are brought together in complementary ways, in order to address the civic issue at hand. But the tendency in most discourse is to expect the Peter Johns and other Natives who espouse low status worldview to embrace the high status ones.

Another condition of dis-embeddedness that we need to address is one arising from "de-placed" communication; when we are everywhere and yet nowhere in particular. Thanks to the wonders of infobahn, individuals may have innumerable home pages but not have a home. Under such circumstances, civic discourse is a challenge. Here I am referring to our cyborgian condition where discourse is between anyone, everyone, and no one in particular; where identities of individuals are equivalent to their addresses. But, then, what does "address" mean when there is no particular "place" to which this so-called "identity" is necessarily linked? In other words, we may have an address but not know the entity's location. Or, an entity could have several addresses and several IDs all at once. I could be miguel, stacy, hawk, and dilafruz — all, simultaneously. My e-mail address could be my computer and I could set it up as Pam or even Sam. Moreover, I could get Pam or Sam to do things for me without anyone's knowledge about my involvement. The point is that when locale and identity are change-able and/or multiple, or in constant flux discourse takes on different dimensions. Under such circumstances, who is the concrete other? Who are "we" talking to? Are we even talking in the first place?

Thus, dis-embodied and hence dis-embedded *discourses* pose a serious challenge for developing civic capacities. Unfortunately, they are on the rise. Despite these challenges, our hope is Smith's project of deliberative discourse that values radical plurality. However, consensus building requires understanding contexts and assumptions: of what counts as "high" and "low" views of the construct of

individual; of de-legitimization of certain ways of "being" (such as embedded individuals); or of legitimization of certain kinds of "non-being" (such as cyborgs). Smith appropriately urges educators to "keep considerations of difference at the forefront of deliberations." I would clarify the meaning of "difference" to make it inclusive so that children see the connection between biodiversity and cultural diversity. My own sense is that civic capacities can be developed through connecting children to *place*. Developing a sense of place necessarily requires active involvement with concrete others over a period of time. Fleeting associations encourage neither dwelling, nor good listening, nor recognizing that diversity — both cultural and biological — has civic value. And, in teaching the civic care of place, educators will need to confront their own dis-embeddedness in discourse even as they provide a forum for "democratic deliberation."

1. Seyla Benhabib, "The Democratic Moment and the Problem of Difference," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

2. C. Douglas Limmus, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

3. John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1927).

4. William Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place, and Infobahn* (Boston: MIT Press, 1996).

5. C.A. Bowers, *Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987), 10.

6. Angayuqaq O. Kawagley and Ray Barnhardt, "Education Indigenous to Place: Western Science Meets Native Reality," in press.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 9.

9. Ibid., 10-11.