



Naming the Goods: The Case for Reflective Discourse in a Democracy

A symposium in development by the Project on Civic Reflection

Symposium Dates: October 10-11, 2008

Symposium overview

Much attention has been paid in recent years to the importance of deliberative discourse for American democracy. Books and articles about deliberation in a democracy have appeared, programs to spread the practice of deliberative discourse have emerged, and an energetic national conversation has begun to debate the pros and cons of this particular form of public talk.

At the same time, and with much less notice, a scattering of groups and organizations across America have been experimenting with a different form of democratic discourse—a form of discourse in which the goal is not to *deliberate* but rather to *reflect*. We call this form of public talk *reflective discourse*. Examples include community reading programs like those organized through the National Endowment for the Arts 'Big Read' initiative; leadership renewal programs like those offered by Parker Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal; art, film and theatre discussion programs like the Talking Point Series at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago; civic reflection programs like the Meaning of Service, which encourage text-based discussion in the midst of civic action; and workplace reflection programs like Literature and Medicine, which develop opportunities for reading and conversation among hospital staff. As this list of examples suggests, many of these efforts to cultivate reflective discourse draw upon the arts and humanities to start the conversation.

While the practice of reflective discourse continues to expand, there has not been a parallel effort to conceptualize and articulate this form of public talk. In a symposium to take place October 10-11, 2008, we propose to start a serious scholarly examination of the meaning and value of reflective discourse. The symposium will bring together a group of approximately 15 scholars and scholar-practitioners to examine the nature and significance of reflective discourse in a democracy, with special attention to emerging models that use the arts and humanities to provoke reflection.

Central questions to be addressed

- 1) How is reflective discourse similar to or different from individual acts of reflection? In what sense can both activities still be called 'reflection'? What do we mean by 'reflection'?
- 2) Can we usefully talk about reflective discourse as something distinct from dialogue or deliberation? What are the differences?
- 3) What is the role of reflection in a democracy?
- 4) Can the arts and humanities play a special role in enabling reflection in a democracy? Have they played this role in American democracy?
- 5) Does the practice of text-based discussion enable reflective discourse in especially useful or valuable ways?

Symposium Structure

Prior to the Symposium, participants will produce short written pieces of no more than 2500 words exploring one or a combination of the questions above. These essays will be circulated among participants in advance to facilitate close reading, discussion and critique during the symposium.

The Symposium will take place over two days and will consist of three kinds of activities:

1. Reflective sessions using different models of reflective discourse, which will help to deepen the engagement of the participants beyond their authored contributions and also help to orient the diverse participants to the same objects of inquiry.
2. Workshop sessions in which participants divide into groups and take turns presenting or commenting on and critiquing each others' work.
3. Plenary sessions to identify and examine emerging themes and questions. Plenary sessions will be open to the public.

Symposium products and outcomes

The symposium will result in an anthology that contains finished versions of selected essays, along with an introductory essay by conference organizers. In addition to the publication, the Project on Civic Reflection will produce a companion webpage that will provide a bibliography of relevant sources as well as their location online when available and summaries of the articles that appear in the book. We also intend the symposium to create a durable network of scholar-practitioners with a specific interest in reflective discourse.

Symposium organizers

The symposium will be organized by the Project on Civic Reflection, in partnership with the Civic Knowledge Project at the University of Chicago. The Project on Civic Reflection is dedicated to helping civic groups build capacity, commitment and community through reading and discussion. Since it began as a grant program of the Lilly Endowment in 1998, the Project has partnered with numerous organizations nationwide to engage a wide variety of citizens in civic reflection and has developed high quality supporting resources such as *The Civically Engaged Reader*, *Talking Service*, *The Perfect Gift*, and the online resource center at www.civicreflection.org. With its scholarly and practical experience, wide network of partner organizations, and online resource center, the Project on Civic Reflection is uniquely positioned both to start a significant conversation about reflective discourse in America and to disseminate the results to scholars and practitioners alike.

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