

Tracy, K. (2010). *Challenges of Ordinary Democracy: A Case Study in Deliberation and Dissent*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

## Review by Alice Diebel

*Civility rules can have a chilling effect on free speech (p. 114).*

Ordinary democracy is a term coined by the author to describe the political communication practices of citizens and local governments—in this case, school boards. Rigorous analysis of transcripts of Boulder Valley School District meetings provides the grounding Karen Tracy uses to develop her practical theory of ordinary democracy. Ordinary democracy might be defined as the local, observable “communicative practices that occur in local governance groups” (p. 2). Tracy is a communication scholar who focuses on the talk that goes on in public meetings. She points to “reasonable hostility” as the ideal present in small, local governance settings and argues that it is necessary in ordinary democracy for communities to deal with conflicting interests. Her research suggests that adversarial democracy is working well because citizens become emotionally and passionately involved in the issues at hand; emotion and passion become diluted in attempts to be civil or deliberative. Tracy argues that deliberative democracy can inhibit civic participation by posing an unrealizable ideal that gets in the way of the passionate participation needed in democracy.

The book has two purposes. First, it is intended to provide a rich description of the talk that occurred in the Boulder Valley School District public meetings as an example of ordinary democracy. Second, it suggests a “communicative ideal” for school board meetings that takes into account how democracy works in these settings: an ideal Tracy calls *reasonable hostility*. Tracy argues that reasonable hostility marries the communicative practices of argument and emotion as the means of dealing with the “multiple aims and competing values that are always present in sites of educational governance” (p. 21).

The methodology of the book is as interesting as its research findings, and the reader can plan on thinking deeply about both democracy and communication. Readers who are unfamiliar with rhetoric and discourse analysis will be treated to a compelling

presentation of the kind of talk Tracy observed. Tracy, along with Robert Craig, developed grounded practical theory, the approach used here, which is essentially grounded theory, but emphasizes communication and everyday speech. Grounded practical theory intentionally looks at how people manage their dilemmas through talk and puts forward practical theories to guide communication practice.

School board meetings provide the perfect laboratory to examine ordinary democracy. To capture this ideal, Tracy examined 3 years of Boulder Valley School District board meetings from 1996 to 1999. Tracy lays out tensions inherent in democracy as they are revealed in her analysis: Do rules facilitate fairness or subvert actions; do elected representatives vote with constituents or exercise personal judgment; do we value unitary, consensual processes or the passionate arguments of competing interests? It is through these tensions that the conflicts on the Boulder Valley School District meetings unfold. Tracy presents a number of examples: When do we allow someone to speak longer than the rules allow? Who should make decisions about education: professionals or parents? What is acceptable conduct in civil society?

The chapters themselves are full of examples of the discourse in school board meetings and elsewhere to illustrate the points throughout. The book actually reads like a political thriller. One of the more interesting chapters (Chapter 3) describes how people in public meetings appeal to the term *democracy* to reveal the messy processes in which they are engaged. It is as though the concept of democracy justifies a lack of clarity, fumbling for a direction, and uncertainty about processes. Citizens use arguments such as “that’s not democratic” or “democracy is messy” to rationalize, criticize, or advocate. Tracy reports that invoking democracy reflects the value we place on wrestling with the tensions of living in this messy practice. She writes, “An abstract normative concept like democracy, as used in the talk of public meetings, is much more likely to reflect a series of ideological contradictions than a consistent theory” (p. 54).

Use of the term *democracy* is one example of the communication patterns we citizens use to give reasons. Interestingly, when citizens invoke the term *politics*, it is used as a negative concept or “devil” term. Using a term in this way supports Tracy’s hypothesis that citizens purport to want a consensual ideal of decision-making rather than the argumentative approach that actually exists. Tracy hypothesizes that citizens may stay away from politics if they do not think they are up to this ideal.

Chapter 4 is particularly rich with examples of what citizens say when they speak at local governance meetings. It also describes what citizens say when they speak out, and contrasts that with what is in the meeting minutes. In the minutes of the school board meetings, the rich details of the content and the emotion expressed by the speakers are missing. The minutes indicate who “shared,” and citizens appear to be spectators. The actual meeting transcripts reveal something different. The public comments are expressive, emotional, and not at all “sharing” in any neutral way. They become emotional when they characterize leaders or question an analysis, convey outrage, or ask rhetorical questions. Yet the public comments tend to be public-spirited rather than self-serving. Citizens are arguing for a community good. Tracy argues that the minutes reflect an ideal of consensus that is not present.

Tracy also discusses (in Chapter 5) the communication that occurs in the district via the newspaper. The local *Boulder Daily Camera* helped present issues and debates about school board work. The issues highlighted in the paper reflect the broader controversies in education policy nationally. Such controversies include the citizens’ interest in teaching the basics versus the professional educators’ interest in fostering learning; standardized testing; and directing funding toward gifted children or problem children.

Tensions also come out in Chapter 6 in the election campaign for president of the school board. Tracy describes how personal attacks or the use of platitudes are citizen expressions of underlying values conflicts. The candidates are perceived to embody the differences in the issues: Do we strive for equity or excellence in education? Do we focus on traditional or progressive education? What is the role of educators and parents in policy making? An election is not about the person but about their representation of a viewpoint. Citizens are sometimes also soft on their leaders, expressing mistrust or other emotions in indirect ways that help leaders save face. Tracy encourages leaders to recognize what is really behind such speech and to develop thick skins.

Such speech acts support the thesis that this form of democracy is the preferred way to jostle for a win in a policy decision. Tracy argues that it is the emotion and the controversy that encourage interest in the process, thinking about the issues, engagement in democracy, and possibly even increased voting. Expressions of reasonable hostility bring citizens to the controversy. Citizens engaged in ordinary democracy encourage turnover among leaders so that new leadership emerges. The author also hopes that citizens and leaders will feel good about how they participate rather than beat

themselves up over not knowing how to speak properly in a public setting. Participants (and leaders) can feel good about their participation rather than be alienated by lofty ideals.

Chapter 7 weakens Tracy's argument against deliberation; she highlights the value of wordsmithing when dealing with difficult, morally charged policies such as nondiscrimination or diversity policies and the protection of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons. Ideas are proposed, reasons given, and changes made. She describes the way protracted discussions over words can be safe, comfortable substitutes for working through tensions. In such discussions, the board is deliberating and providing reasons to create "morally defensible policies" as it works its way toward an acceptable policy.

Tracy provides a thoughtful, thick description of the nature of politics and democracy in the majoritarian setting. She describes what is, and encourages the reader to recognize the value of argument and conflict as a means of dealing with tensions inherent in democracy and in education policy. She argues that deliberative democrats are pushing an unrealizable ideal that makes people feel bad about their ability to participate in the Habermasian way—all full of reason and good skills for sharing and listening. Tracy states she is not arguing against deliberation, but in favor of adversarial democracy. Many share her views about the potential for exclusion in deliberative democracy and about the value of persuasion and argument in public venues. Many also argue that anger and emotion are needed for involvement. A lack of anger can reveal an insufficient concern for justice.

Participation in public meetings can intimidate as easily as deliberative discussions. Perhaps deliberative democrats do think too much about what could be, but they also question the assumptions behind how democracy operates and wonder how it might work better. Polarization may not be the best way to further democracy. Maybe improvement is not through small-circle rationally focused discussions. Struggling to bring tensions into clearer view is a key purpose for deliberation. What would happen if elected officials understood the benefits to policy making when citizens deliberate with one another? What if options were expanded beyond up-or-down votes? What if elected officials took seriously what citizens had to say and encouraged deliberation at meetings? What if the citizens deliberated before they approached elected officials? It never hurts to question what is, and propose experiments with what could be.

## **About the Reviewer**

**Alice Diebel** is a program officer of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Her key research program area is to understand the role of land-grant universities and cooperative extension in building democratic capacity. Other research programs include how public health professionals engage citizens in addressing health concerns democratically; and, how public deliberation can be seen as part of public life through centers that provide the space and opportunities for it. She earned her bachelor's degree from Wayne State University, her master's from the University of Michigan, and her Ph.D. from Michigan State University.

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