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### Deliberative governance in higher education: the utility of John Dryzek's concept of meta-consensus

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## **Deliberative governance in higher education: the utility of John Dryzek's concept of meta-consensus**

### **Abstract**

A rapprochement between managerialism and collegialism has become commonplace within policy discussion on governance within higher education. Processes of deliberation within university governance are suggested as one means of fostering this apparent accord. I suggest that Dryzek's notion of meta-consensus can assist processes of deliberative governance. The concept of meta-consensus describes how disparate discourses can be acknowledged and incorporated within deliberative governance. I illustrate how a process of deliberation characterised the nature of participatory and deliberative teaching policy development within a university through reference to case studies on accommodating student equity and diversity in teaching policy and practice and organisational structure and developing consensus between teaching staff on English language proficiency development in university students.

### **Keywords**

john, utility, education, higher, governance, consensus, deliberative, meta, concept, dryzek

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# Deliberative governance in higher education: the utility of John Dryzek's concept of meta-consensus

Greg Hampton

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*A rapprochement between managerialism and collegialism has become commonplace within policy discussion on governance within higher education. Processes of deliberation within university governance are suggested as one means of fostering this apparent accord. I suggest that Dryzek's notion of meta-consensus can assist processes of deliberative governance. The concept of meta-consensus describes how disparate discourses can be acknowledged and incorporated within deliberative governance. I illustrate how a process of deliberation characterised the nature of participatory and deliberative teaching policy development within a university through reference to case studies on accommodating student equity and diversity in teaching policy and practice and organisational structure and developing consensus between teaching staff on English language proficiency development in university students.*

Keywords: deliberative governance; higher education; meta-consensus

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### **Rapprochement between collegialism and managerialism**

This essay seeks in part to describe how apparent tension between university corporate management and traditional collegial approaches to governance can be mitigated by fostering academic input into decision-making through deliberation in policy development and how Dryzek's (2002, 2010) concept of meta-consensus can assist this process. Deliberation upholds the development of practical reason so that a variety of rationales for various policy alternatives are provided from a diversity of sources, which within a university are likely to vary considerably across disciplines. It is important in this process that the diversity of opinion that is elicited is respected and that the participation of a variety of groups is encouraged. Dryzek's concept of meta-consensus is examined for its utility in explaining and fostering deliberative governance in higher education.

In the literature on university governance there has been a tension between collegialism and managerialism. The advent of managerialism in universities has led to a defence of traditional collegial practices, which are often portrayed as the promotion of tolerance and empathy and the maintenance of academic values. Waugh (2003) claims that university management now focuses on effective management rather than on collegial aspects of decision making, argued to be essential for a healthy academic institution yet now sacrificed for the sake of productivity. Allen (2003) argues that managerialism has created insecurity, demotivation and resistance to change and that university management should not simply ape out-dated corporate approaches to management. Kogan and Bleiklie (2007) characterise this situation as an academic capitalist regime, which has become a global yardstick, despised by some but espoused by others.

Churchman (2006) suggests that academics are creating new identities on multiple fronts so they can cope with the incongruities and compromises that are now required in academia. The resultant schism in identity has been characterised as a distinction between the academic manager and the managed academic (Winter 2009). Marginson (2002) suggests that this tension, though inevitable, can be fruitful if academic identity is maintained in the redesign of university organizational and institutional practices. Shattock (2002) argues for a more evenly balanced approach to governance which emphasizes collegiality as well as the new managerialism. He suggests that governance and decision making are

more effective when seen as a partnership between the corporate and collegiate approaches and when a common purpose informs the relationship.

Open communication and participation in planning in the educational sector have a long history; the distinctive social character of a higher education institution is that it is a domain of communicative association (Marginson 2007). It includes the right to speak and to be treated with mutual respect with intra-institutional and inter-institutional relationships characterized by justice, solidarity, compassion, cosmopolitan tolerance and empathy. Winter (2009) espouses generative conversations whereby academic managers and managed academics learn to speak with one another in collaborative ways. These conversations can be guided by skilled process consultants whose role is to ask purposeful questions and stimulate conversations. Some aspects of management may be more efficiently dealt with from a corporate perspective whereas other issues may require a collegial approach. Educational policy is one area where there should be shared governance between administrators and faculty (Simplicio 2008). Administrators may take a long-range view in decision-making but they must keep lines of communication open with faculty members in order to consider their crucial input. Increased pressures for efficiency and effectiveness have led to a decline in academic input into decision making. However incorporation of the professoriate in strategic directions of the university is seen as important for the preservation of academic values and productivity (Meyer and Evans 2005). Forms of university governance are examined to ascertain how governance processes can facilitate this apparent rapprochement between managerialism and collegialism.

### **The nature of university governance**

Various commentators have focussed on the integration of university governance functions. Carnegie and Tuck (2010) argue that academic governance, business governance and corporate governance be put together in an overall model of governance. Academic governance concerns contributions to scholarship, business governance focuses on performance, and corporate governance addresses accountability, assurance and the protection of organisational resources. University governance is assumed to encompass the full complexity of governance as it is implemented by university councils, administrators and heads of

academic departments and reviews and committee work groups. Failure to provide such integrated governance would lead to sub-optimal outcomes for universities and society.

Trakman (2008) offers four models of university governance. In the trustee model governors ensure that responsibilities are maintained for the university and the public. The stakeholder model sees governance invested in a wide array of stakeholders such as academics, students, corporate partners and other parties. The corporate model is more concerned with responsibilities to shareholders and finally the amalgam model typifies the governance of the particular university which is the context for the examples of deliberation discussed in the latter part of this essay. Trakman describes governance in the amalgam model as seeking to build the knowledge base of society, find profit in not-for-profit activities, ensure proper expenditure of government funds, create innovation and associated economic development, provide freedom for academics to develop disciplinary expertise and provide expert comment and advice, and provide an environment where diverse students have the opportunity to excel.

Some attention has been given to the need for debate and deliberation within university governance. Kennedy (2003) calls for governance partnerships between governing bodies, managers and academics that are deliberative and committed to debate and discussion. The university may need to be managed in the commercial environment in which it now resides but that needs to be done in conjunction with the academic heartland upholding scholarship and enquiry. There needs to be a bi-directional process of management through governing bodies and from faculty academics. Principles for such partnerships can be derived from public deliberation activities that take place in civil society. The relevant principles for engaging with the academic community are access to balanced information, an open agenda, participation from all 'ranks' of academics, scope for free interaction and freedom from manipulation or coercion. On the other hand, according to May (2006), time for deliberation has become a luxury in the modern university, with current typical university culture discouraging extensive deliberation.

An important part of academic governance of university affairs is the nature of the deliberative process which the academic community goes through in deriving educational policy. The strength of the academic community is its capacity to grapple with and communicate ideas and

formulate reason in support of particular positions. The policy analysis field has much to offer in explicating processes of deliberation, as shown by the following conceptual work on deliberation in policy analysis and related disciplines and its application in the higher education sector.

### **Deliberation in university governance**

Deliberation is about the pursuit of public and practical reason and the development of reasoned argument. It is derived from Rawls' work on liberal, constitutional democracy (Rawls 1993). The purpose of such deliberation is the search for common good and the policy and institutional arrangements to promote this (Anderson 1993). Dryzek (2002) extensively discusses deliberation about difference and how difference can be maintained in deliberative governance, suggesting that a contestation of discourses is necessary. He suggests that critical reflection can lead to change in a dominant discourse along with adoption of alternative frames of reference initiated by social interaction. I suggest that principles of practical reason through deliberation are a constructive means of conducting university consideration of learning and teaching policy if not other areas of university governance.

Bohman (1996) argues that deliberation involves the exchange of reasons and taking the other's perspective so that it is reinterpreted and incorporated in that process of deliberation. Deliberation produces informed and reasoned judgements that might resolve problematic situations requiring interpersonal cooperation. Fischer's (2000) concept of deliberation relies on the use of practical reason that connects theory to practice and action and has more in common with the reason of physicians or judges who may make judgements outside their direct area of expertise but who have the ability to reason on complex matters in order to make practical judgements.

The pursuit of practical reason is appropriate in a university community where committee members are representative of a diverse array of disciplines. The disciplinary specialisation of each committee member may be so refined that communication and the hour I year in the land of the living you don't sound to appreciation of diverse views and perspectives is best constrained within the pursuit of practical reason where differences in perspectives are respected and a common understanding and pursuit of a common purpose strived for. The pursuit of practical reason in a university context would yield cross disciplinary

arguments which are oriented to the purpose of a committee but may not be within the area of expertise an academic maintains. In this respect it represents practical reason as described by Fischer (2000). It is a practical application of the general expertise an academic uses in everyday committee discussion of teaching and learning matters, derived from general knowledge and traditions of his or her discipline and teaching practice therein. It is not necessarily derived from the specific area in which an academic has standing as an expert. The use of such practical reason within deliberation is a constructive means of conducting university development of policy for learning and teaching activity and other areas of university governance.

Steiner (2008) contrasts deliberation with strategic bargaining: the former refers to discussion in which participants mean what they say and is not for the purpose of establishing tactical advantage. Through deliberation, participants should be willing to change their preferences in response to a better argument, which is sought through common discourse. Claims are extensively justified with supporting evidence and logical reasons and expressed in a manner that takes into consideration the interests of others. Participants are treated with mutual respect. On the other hand, people who engage in strategic bargaining are regarded as utility maximisers. Utility maximisers may act for the common good but are usually oriented towards individual gain and typically do not refer to reasons and arguments for their preferences. Strategic bargaining is typical of the way in which people discuss and negotiate (Bijlsma, Bots et al. 2011) and I suggest is often the mode in which university committees engaged in decision making operate. Deliberation and strategic bargaining can coexist but it is important in deliberation that strategic actions are curbed and that parties reflect on one another's common interests (Dryzek 2002). Such deliberation may actually lead to more stable bargaining. It is also important in the process of deliberation that powerful actors do not dominate the process (Pelletier 1999). For Habermas (Schneiderhan and Khan 2008), an important part of deliberation is that people collectively pursue the reasons for their particular stance, so inclusion is important for obtaining widely canvassed reasoned argument with maximum validity. The pursuit of deliberative governance in a university may benefit from discussion which occurs in the committee process if it is oriented to the development of practical reason rather than strategic manoeuvring.



Deliberative practices may be difficult to implement in an era where time to debate committee business is considered a luxury (May 2006) and when decision making processes only partly follow rational processes (Jones 2002). However it is a useful method of fostering participation and engagement with a policy issue undergoing consideration within a university community.

Deliberation in the university context can take place in committees when representatives of academic departments are asked to comment on teaching and learning policy. This may be an expression of what is appropriate within the discipline and sometimes could be a jointly formed opinion through committee participants sharing their disciplinary knowledge of learning and teaching as it relates to the university governance matter under consideration. The intertwining of these discourses through deliberation can be explained and guided by the concept of meta-consensus developed by John Dryzek (2010).

### *Meta-consensus*

Deliberation often precedes decision making and Dryzek (2010) analyses how the concept of meta-consensus can be used to elucidate the processes occurring. Meta-consensus is a process through which diverse discourses are juxtaposed, maintained or brought to some form of co-existence. He distinguishes between normative consensus, epistemic consensus and preference consensus, which form elements of preference construction concerned respectively with value, belief and expressed preference. Differing groups may not initially have agreement on values, beliefs and preferences but recognize the legitimacy of disputed values, accept the credibility of differing beliefs and agree on a set of disputed choices. Discursive meta-consensus is agreement on the particular discourses, which are dealt with through deliberation. Such discourses can enter into discursive meta-consensus if they are not dogmatic or fuelled by resentment; do not deny others' identities or subordinate them and do not appeal to their own superior rationality.

In practical terms, discursive meta-consensus is needed when there are deep differences in identity. Normative meta-consensus is paramount when value commitments conflict. Epistemic meta-consensus is important when questionable empirical claims are invoked. Preference meta-consensus matters when actors are in a position to manipulate decision processes through, for example, the range or order of options on

which votes are taken. The process of meta-consensus can elucidate how committees in a university context can proceed to decision making and maintain consideration of deliberative processes.

Dryzek considers how appropriate use of rhetoric can aid the development of a discourse and changes in perspective within this discourse. One criterion for appropriate use of rhetoric is that it provides eloquent and reasoned exposition of a perspective within a discourse. The value of rhetoric can be measured by whether it enhances actors' capacity for reflection within a deliberative system. Rhetoric can be creative interpretation of evidence, use of irony and humour and exaggeration, performance and dramaturgy. The use of rhetoric in deliberation is regarded as legitimate when it assists with the communication and expression of reasoned viewpoints. The use of rhetoric in the communication of discourses may enable the communication of viewpoints which may not otherwise be engaged with.

Dryzek discusses bridging and bonding rhetoric where the latter involves using rhetoric to bolster a discourse to which listeners adhere. Dryzek refers to bridging rhetoric as a speaker endeavouring to understand an audience while maintaining a particular position and developing a bridge between discourses that might be disparate but have an element of evolving commonality. This concept of bridging rhetoric is akin to the concept of reframing which has been increasingly used in the social sciences. Reframing is also a strategy used by a variety of professionals engaged in managing change and conflict in institutions, organisations and social relationships in general. The concepts of framing and reframing, the use of and recasting of frames of reference, are of use in guiding the contestation of disparate discourses.

Davis and Lewicki (2003) refer to framing as enabling the shaping and organising of a person's internal and external world and allowing differentiation of events in ways that are meaningful in a complex world into essential or peripheral events. Frames enable people to define issues, decide on action to be taken or not taken, to protect themselves, or justify their stance on an issue. Reframing has been referred to as the realignment of a frame of reference which leads to agreement and the resolution of conflict (Livingood 2002). Reframing may create an overarching viewpoint through the development of a common value stance or vision to bridge opposing stances (Wondolleck, Gray et al. 2003). This process may or may not change the divergent viewpoints but

can also provide a way in which people adhering to differing discourses may be able to debate and discuss in more constructive ways. Processes of framing and reframing may draw on various linguistic or non-linguistic resources such as intonation, tense shifts or the use of euphemisms and aspects of narration involving temporal, relational or causal shifts (Baker 2007).

I suggest that what is commonly referred to as reframing is a form of bridging rhetoric that enables protagonists adhering to differing discourses to develop commonalities between and extensions to the frames of reference they use in a particular situation. I regard the concepts of framing and reframing as strategies for implementing bridging rhetoric though the use of creative interpretation of evidence in developing commonalities between disparate discourses so that protagonists are more likely to engage in dialogue from within opposing discourses. Reframing by realigning a frame of reference through casting an issue in alternative frames is a rhetorical strategy (Greenhalgh and Russell 2006) which can be used in university policy committee deliberations.

The end result of deliberation through reason and rhetoric is that protagonists engage in critical reflection of their particular stance on an issue through the exchange and contestation of discourses resulting from these activities. Such reflection enables deliberation to avoid lapsing into bargaining, the issuing of commands, or engaging in deception, routine or ritual.

#### *Deliberative processes and the academic community*

Deliberative processes can be pursued in the academic governance of universities, particularly in the area of policy development, as they foster a collegial community and joint enterprise. There are also the benefits of working with the intellectual capital of an academic community which, by virtue of its makeup of intellects, can maximise the pursuit of reason in this joint enterprise. Deliberative and participatory governance enables the pursuit of collective educational and strategic goals without the divisions that are created by the strategic bargaining approach, characterised by competing individual and group interests. When engaged in a decision making process committee members can consider the components of meta-consensus as they apply to the university policymaking task. This will require committee participants to consider

the values, identities and discourses underlying the policymaking task and to consider the way in which preferences are constructed thereby enabling or discouraging deliberation.

There has been some work on the use of the concept of deliberative governance in higher education policy development at the level of institutional and inter-institutional positions on wider policy issues (Horeau 2011). This essay applies the deliberative model at the level of teaching and learning policy development within universities. The relevance of these aspects of deliberative governance to such policy development is discussed in relation to student equity and language proficiency.

### *Deliberation in a university on student equity policy in learning and teaching*

The educational policy committee in my university conducted an extensive planning process on student equity. Such concerns about student equity have since been taken up by the Australian Federal government, which conducted a review of the topic (Bradley, Noonan et al. 2008). Our policy development and planning process involved extensive deliberation with university academic departments, and the wider university community, on the nature of student equity and accommodation of equity concerns in teaching practices.

This deliberation took the form of workshops in which participants were provided with performance indicator data and other information relevant to the academic department and its dealings with equity categories of students. A discussion guide was used to direct the dialogue and the group process was facilitated to promote deliberation within the workshops. Extensive use was made of available performance indicators, which detailed the participation, retention and academic success rates of students from various disadvantaged backgrounds.

A wide array of stakeholders across the campus was consulted. A broad forum could have been thrown open to the whole of campus but was thought unlikely to elicit much participation. Attendance at the deliberative workshops was targeted towards particular equity categories of students and deliberation with academic departments was combined with regular meetings, convened by departments to discuss educational policies and procedures.

The deliberations with academic departments were interesting in that it became apparent that some academics were going to significant lengths to accommodate students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their teaching practice, particularly students with disabilities. Such students required extensive adjustments, particularly with practical classes in the sciences. Prior to these consultations, members of service departments, which supported students with disabilities, had taken the view that such lecturers were limited in the adjustments they provided. However; it was apparent from the workshops that the adjustments they made were extensive and a significant addition to their workloads. It was suggested in deliberation with academic departments that services should be provided from within departments to assist them with the adjustments that they were making for students in their teaching. This suggestion was broadly accepted and encouraged by academic staff and resulted in a significant reorganisation of services so that more assistance was provided directly to academic staff and personnel were physically relocated to faculties in order to build up direct services and promote liaison between academic and service staff. The location of support staff in the faculty also created changes in the way academic staff regarded student equity issues, in that having a person responsible for student equity on the physical site of the faculty made equity issues more apparent to academic staff. They now felt that they took more responsibility for these issues rather than referring them to another department on campus. This reorganisation of services can be seen as an outcome of discursive meta-consensus in that there were disparities between the discourse upheld by services and the discourse in operation within academic departments. The bringing together of these discourses first through discussion and reframing and then through organizational restructuring proved successful in that services providers came to operate through the discourse of the academic department, and faculty staff took on some of the concerns which were dominant within the discourse of the service providers. This would not have occurred if both groups had not been exposed to the two discourses, which became apparent through the deliberative processes occurring in the workshops. The faculties subsequently revised policy to incorporate student equity considerations in their teaching policies and strategic planning on learning and teaching. There is also provision in some faculties for policy development and associated strategic projects, which address student equity issues on

admission, student orientation and mentoring to assist with transition to university. In this particular case deliberation led to policy change and organisational restructuring of service provision and subsequent policy development in faculties. The deliberative process described provides an example of how differing discourses can be explored and bridged in the consideration of a policy issue.

### *Deliberation in a university on English language proficiency*

The university adopted the same deliberative style of policy development in the formulation of standards and strategies for the development of the English language proficiency of international and domestic students. Deliberative meetings were held with faculties, with involvement from faculty staff who had responsibility for teaching policy in faculties or were involved in the recruitment, administration and teaching of international students. The dominant discourses in these deliberations were that academics experienced considerable difficulties with the language proficiencies of their students and that they were reluctant to see changes in language entry requirements as this would likely lead to a reduction in enrolments. Interestingly, in the course of the deliberations, several faculties decide to increase their entrance requirement for English language proficiency. Being able to deliberate on issues and consider implications was perhaps sufficient to initiate change in policy and practice. I suggest that it was the juxtaposition of these two disparate discourses and subsequent deliberation about them, which led to the changes in organizational policy and practice.

Interestingly there was a significant trend for faculties to want to assume some responsibility for improving students' language proficiency and a reluctance to transfer responsibilities to a faculty which provided generic English language subjects. Academics overwhelmingly preferred to integrate language development into their subjects by involving language development specialists in their subject teaching or in some cases integrating language development within their own teaching. This involved academics recognising language issues in their teaching and assessment methods. There was extensive discussion promoted by language specialists about the need for teaching staff to recognise language issues in their teaching and assessment. This was eventually recognised in a policy statement about the roles and responsibilities of academic staff and students about language proficiency and directing that

these language issues need to be attended to in teaching and assessment practices. This policy statement was eventually accepted by a university-wide committee overseeing educational policy and practice.

### *Conclusions on developing meta-consensus through deliberation*

The methods used in these two examples encouraged the use of open deliberative discussion and maintained the importance of inclusion of a wide range of academics in deliberations about teaching practices. The opportunity for deliberation about language proficiency was welcomed by participants as evidenced by their readiness to attend meetings in the middle of a busy teaching session.

Within deliberation about student equity, academics were cast in the frame of reference of already providing substantial reasonable adjustment for students with disabilities whereas service providers regarded them as providing limited adjustment. This was a form of reframing which led to a bridge developing between support staff and teaching staff. Academic staff were encouraged to consider student equity concerns in their teaching. The organisational restructuring of equity services led to developments in equity policy at the level of faculty policy and practice in learning and teaching. Equity indicators were incorporated in admission policy and strategy and some faculties initiated academic and social student development programs.

A process of reaching consensus on language proficiency took place in a manner similar to that suggested by Dryzek on meta-consensus. First the discourse of language specialists, that all teaching influences language proficiency, was given consideration. Secondly, epistemic meta-consensus was achieved, in that the preferences of some academic staff in teaching language issues were accepted, with some staff already involved in such teaching while others were not diametrically opposed to such considerations. Thirdly, the structure of preferences was left at academics being able to accept language development within their own teaching if they wished, with an expressed preference in deliberations about language proficiency to have language specialists teach within their subjects. This process of meta-consensus involved an integration of the differences in identity between academics in the role of professing their discipline and language specialists as extraneous service providers. The meta-consensus emphasised language specialists working in

collaboration with faculty academics on the central concerns of learning and teaching.

There was critical reflection and reframing with regard to how language proficiency development came to be considered a normal part of teaching of domestic and international students. This perspective was in part initiated by review members who had an allegiance to the content and language integrated learning approach which has developed in Europe and America (Dalton-Puffer 2011). This enabled reflection on discourses used within deliberation and questioning of typical practices. The assumptions about who is responsible for language development were challenged and calls were made for all teachers to attend to language issues. Previously many of us involved in these deliberations about language proficiency had considered that such concerns were the province of language development specialists and that the role of academics was solely to profess their disciplines. This process of critical reflection and reframing led to discursive meta-consensus between language specialists and committee members developing language policy with an acceptance of the discourse of language specialists that there was a shared responsibility for language proficiency development. There was an acceptance of the discourse expressed by language specialists that all academic staff should recognise language issues in their teaching, the onus then being on all staff for accepting responsibility and initiating action for students' ongoing development of language proficiency in collaboration with language specialists.

### *Conclusions on deliberation and university governance*

Deliberation in university committee activity allows disparate discourses to be aired and juxtaposed, and dominant discourses to be challenged. Critical reflection can be encouraged with engagement in reframing so that dominant discourses and taken-for-granted assumptions can be challenged and modified. Reframing is seen as a form of rhetoric which challenges taken for granted assumptions and frames of reference. The bridging of frames of reference, which is facilitated by the process of reframing, provides a novel view of a hello and I and you and you and you and you and you will and you and you and you him him him him him him him him him particular matter which challenges participants in a deliberative process to reconsider the frames of reference they have been utilizing to understand an issue and develop action. Committee chairs can



strive for discursive meta-consensus, not just attend to the formal requirements of committees represented by agendas, resolutions and minutes, and they can avoid bargaining strategies. This discursive meta-consensus requires chairs to consider the perspectives of participants in the deliberative process and to facilitate the interaction and development of differing and burgeoning identities in deliberative participants. This requires chairs to be relatively psychologically sophisticated in their understandings of the discursive perspectives in which deliberative participants are engaged.

It is worth noting that formal university deliberations about policy matters led to independent intra-departmental and faculty deliberations and subsequent policy change and development regarding student equity in teaching and learning and language proficiency standards in teaching. This suggests that fostering processes of deliberation encourages generative change within governance within higher education.

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