Social Education 84(5), p. 289–293

C3 TEACHERS
COLLEGE CAREER & CIVIC LIFE

Dining with Democracy: Discussion as Informed Action

Paula McAvoy, Arine Lowery, Nada Wafa, and Christy Byrd

Jeremy Thomas and Russell McBride are social studies teachers in North Carolina and, until recently, were colleagues at a charter school outside of Raleigh, serving students in grades 6–12. After learning about the Inquiry Design Model (IDM),[1] both teachers implemented it into their classrooms and immediately saw how the blueprint helped deepen students' engagement, understanding of concepts, and ability to make and support arguments. The teachers even took the model to the next level by co-teaching an elective in which students learned to design their own inquiries and took turns leading classmates through their lessons. The course was student-centered and alive with discussion. As a result of their collaboration, Jeremy and Russell made the IDM blueprint a regular feature of their school's social studies program.

Like many teachers, Jeremy and Russell found that Taking Informed Action was the hardest aspect to put into practice. Moving student engagement beyond the classroom can be difficult to manage—it is both time consuming and logistically challenging. And, as Jeremy noticed, a lot of teachers "just throw it to the side." But an idea emerged when Jeremy attended a session at the North Carolina Social Studies Conference in 2019. The presenter shared an assignment he called "Dinner with Democracy," in which each student arranged to have a meal with someone to talk about their political views. The students then reported back about what they learned in their conversations. On the way home from the conference, Jeremy and Russell started brainstorming. Jeremy said they liked the idea because, "we wanted our students to learn that civil discourse can extend outside of the classroom and out into everyday life," but they also wanted a task that would require more public engagement.

By the time they arrived home, Jeremy and Russell had decided to host Dinner with Democracy as an evening event that would engage students and parents in multigenerational political discussions. Russell noted that this goal had been on their minds for a couple of years:

> In 2016, I think what we saw in the election more than anything is that kids did not see examples of how to engage each other when they disagree. So, we wanted to figure out a way to not just bring kids, but also bring parents and our larger school community together to try to model this for the whole community.

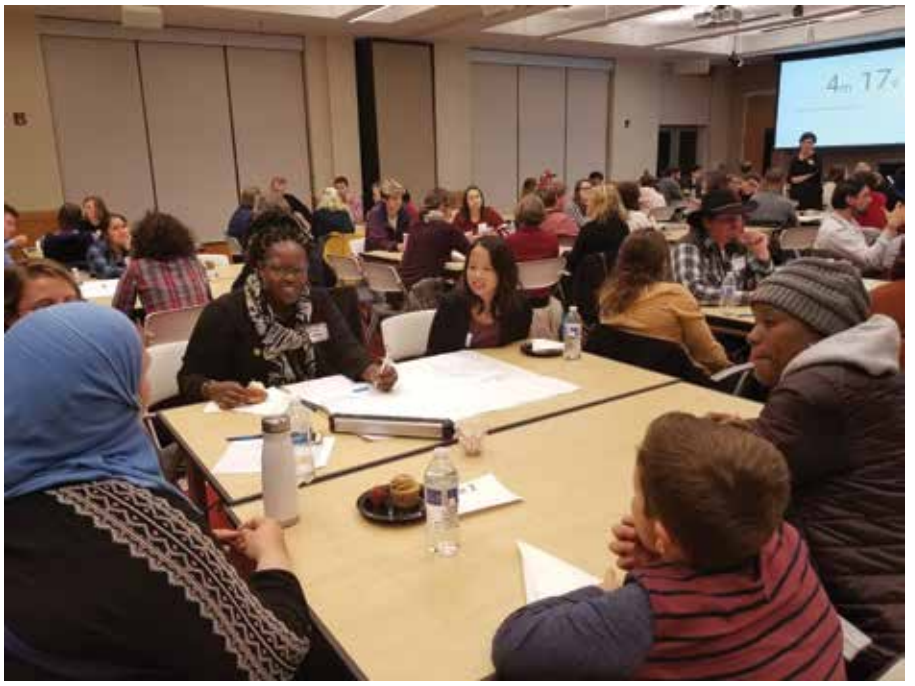
Later that semester, Jeremy and Russell facilitated their first Dinner with Democracy. They saw the civil discussion that unfolded as a type of informed action that could help alleviate the divisiveness of political polarization. It was a success to be sure. But it was also just the beginning of a journey with discussion and Taking Informed Action that would bring us into their work and unfold over the next several years.

Dinner with Democracy 2.0

In October of 2019, Jeremy and Russell hosted a gathering of about 60 people—tweens, teens, parents, teachers, administrators—and us, faculty and graduate students from nearby North Carolina State University. On the perimeter were tables filled with potluck contributions, and in the center were ten tables arranged with six seats each. The room was filled with the aroma of food and the anticipation of interacting with strangers about one's political beliefs and values. We were there to experience Jeremy and Russell's Dinner with Democracy 2.0.

Jeremy and Russell started by explaining the reasons for the event and the norms for the evening. The first round began with a student who provided a three-minute "TED talk" about gun violence. She ended with an invitation to discuss whether the U.S. should pass

(Photo by Christy Byrd)



Arine Lowery records responses during the Dessert with Democracy tug-of-war activity.

stricter gun control policies. Guests were randomly assigned to tables, which were set with jars of ice breaker questions (e.g., What is the scariest movie that you've seen?). The discussion began with participants introducing themselves and answering the question. Next, the format required that each person at a table share her or his perspective on the focal issue before the group engaged in open conversation. The room buzzed as people eagerly offered their ideas.

Jeremy and Russell circulated, keeping watch for incivility, but mostly just enjoying the experience of seeing parents and students listening to each other. Gun violence was the first of three controversial political issues posed throughout the evening. In between each discussion, people rose to get their next course and then found a seat at a new table of participants.

Central to the idea of Taking Informed Action is that students should drive the activity. Jeremy and Russell had worked with students through a series of classroom inquiries that led to this Taking Informed Action task in which the students designed the questions and prepared the short talks that launched each discussion round. As Jeremy said, "we wanted them to create questions that they were going to feel comfortable engaging with and that they felt were relevant." The classes also worked together to generate the list of ice-breaker questions. Each table had a jar of these questions that they could pull from throughout the evening. The students also worked together to organize the event, recruit family and friends, and model the norms of discussion. In this way, the students' classroom learning extended to a new audience.

Discussion as Informed Action; Discussion as Inquiry

One challenge that teachers face today is how to engage students in political discussion without inviting the vitriol of polarization into the classroom.[2] Russell's students were similarly concerned, with one asking whether her dad *had* to be invited, because, "I don't think he can have this conversation." But, as this event showed, something remarkable happens when diverse groups are brought together, given norms and structure, and invited to share: They behave. The teachers reported that parents "were shocked" that middle schoolers could engage with complex questions, and the students were "impressed" (and relieved) that their parents listened and remained respectful.

Providing opportunities for students and the larger public to talk with one another normalizes disagreement as an essential feature of democratic life. Yet fear of disagreement is precisely why many teachers hesitate to bring political issues into the classroom.[3]

Ill-mannered disagreements can cause discussions in classrooms to go poorly. Fear of this result may be one reason why teachers shy away from designing inquiry-based discussions. The general focus of the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc—investigating compelling questions, building knowledge, constructing arguments, and taking a stand—are the same building blocks for a good discussion. If the question is genuinely open to interpretation, students will naturally disagree as they read, evaluate sources, and construct evidence-based arguments. Because the students are consulting common materials to build understanding, they are engaged in a puzzle and not merely trying to win an argument. The discussions that result should contribute to the development of the participants' ability to listen to and discuss with others who may not agree.

Designing an inquiry that culminates in a discussion—within the classroom or at a public event—models several civic virtues that educators ought to be cultivating. First, discussion-as-informed action asks students to apply what they have learned to a current issue. Consider, for example, ending an inquiry on the history of voting rights and voter suppression with a discussion about whether ID cards should be required to vote. This discussion would be more informed because students could evaluate the issue within the larger historical context of restrictions on voting rights. In addition, it would offer students an opportunity to listen to how others reason about an issue that affects their lives and the larger community. Moving this conversation beyond the classroom to a public event, further broadens perspectives because

young people hear how the issue affects parents, peers, and community members. Lastly, classroom and community discussions about political issues help students find their civic voice—they get practice speaking up and being heard.

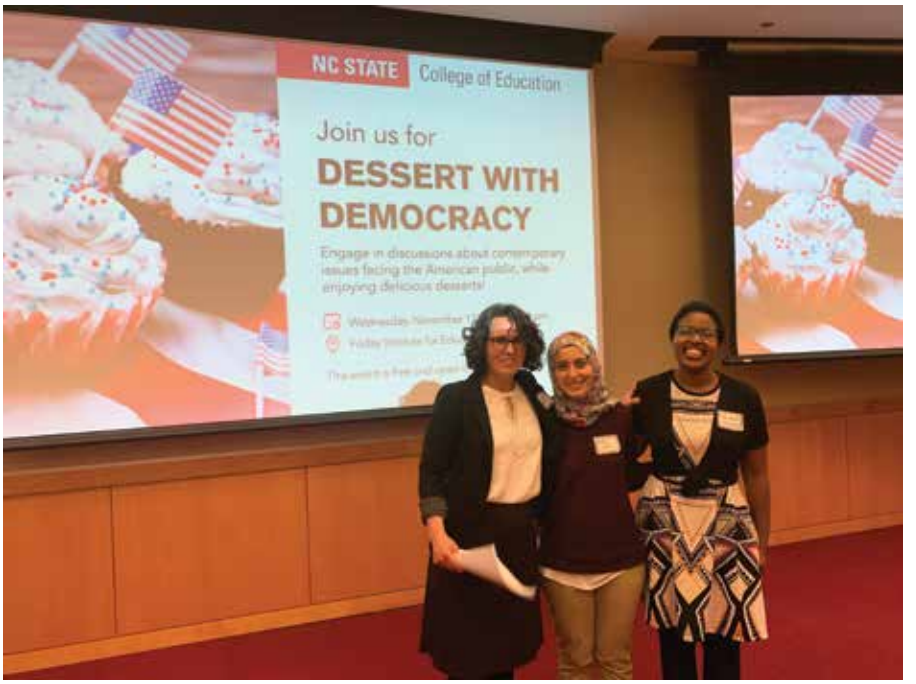
Version 3.0: Dessert with Democracy

The graduate students who participated in Jeremy and Russell's Dinner with Democracy event were all members of a course at North Carolina State University that focused on classroom dialogue and deliberation, co-taught by Paula McAvoy and Christy Byrd. One of the major projects for the course was to develop and implement a similar event with two goals: (1) design the discussions to include the practices of dialogue and deliberation and (2) deepen the inquiry. The result was a public event we named Dessert with Democracy.

On a November evening in 2019, over 100 people arrived at the NC State campus and were greeted by a bounty of cupcakes, fruits, cheese, and crackers. The audience included area teachers, pre-service teachers, faculty, elected officials, graduate students, middle and high school students and their parents. To meet our goals, we provided more structure to the event, and used the Taking Informed Action sequence (Understand, Assess, Act) as our guide. The Dessert with Democracy graphic (see Table 1 on p. 292) provides an overview of the structure and questions asked. There were three 25-minute rounds that each followed the same pattern.

Understand. Each round began with a five-minute background talk, following Jeremy and Russell's TED talk design. The talks were supported with slides and each presenter explained the background to the issue, relevant evidence (e.g., the gun issue included statistics about gun-related deaths in the U.S.), and set up a clear policy proposal. Table facilitators then invited everyone to answer the "opening share" question.

The sharing questions were designed to elicit a more personal response to the topic. For example, during the college affordability question (Round 2), the facilitator invited participants to share their responses to the question "how has paying or attempting to pay college tuition affected your life or the lives of people close to you?" During the sharing questions, facilitators made sure that everyone had the opportunity to speak without interruption and without comment from anyone else. Doing so allowed everyone to articulate a perspective that could not be questioned or challenged. The personal experiences became part of the group's common understanding about the issue.



From left to right: Paula McAvoy, Nada Wafa, and Christy Byrd pose after the Dessert with Democracy event.

These questions modeled aspects of intercultural dialogue.[4] Unlike deliberations, which are discussions that try to make a decision about a policy, dialogues provide spaces for participants to listen with the aim of understanding our different experiences within society. In its truest form, dialogue facilitates conversation among people who may have antagonistic socio-historical legacies due to unequal social power, stereotypes, or explicit and implicit bias.[5] The aim is to develop empathy and common understanding and to treat each other with dignity. Our sharing questions recognized the idea that to talk about a political issue with strangers can result in more open and honest discussions if everyone has a sense of how others are differently affected.

Assess. Next, facilitators invited their table participants to evaluate reasons for and against the policy proposal. To do this, we used the Tug-of-War strategy described in *Making Thinking Visible* by Ron Richart, Mark Church and Karin Morrison.[6] Each table in the room had a large sheet of paper on which they drew a horizontal line to represent the rope in a tug-of-war. On one side of the line, the group collectively generated reasons for the pro side of the proposal. After a few minutes they moved to the con side of the line.

This process was important for two reasons. First, it set a tone for discussion and not a debate by requiring everyone to work together to think of reasons. Second, it modeled inquiry by first asking participants if they could think through the issue from multiple angles before coming to a judgment. After listing reasons for and against, the group was invited to have a 10-minute open

Table 1: **Structure of the Event**

The Dessert with Democracy event is designed for three rounds of discussion. Each round follows the same structure and should take 30 minutes. Each table had a designated facilitator to help participants move through the inquiries.

Objectives	Develop a better understanding of the diverse views in our community. Express one's views and feel heard. Leave with a new understanding about the issues we discuss.
Staging the Question	1. **The Set Up. (5 mins)** Short talk delivered by a student or faculty member that gives sufficient background and provides enough evidence so that participants can understand the policy question and discuss it. 2. **Opening Share Around. (4-5 mins)** A warm-up introductory question for the group. This is not the policy question, but one that can give participants a sense of each other's experience with this issue. Each person can share their 1–2 sentence answer. No comment from others are allowed. See examples in the supporting questions below. 3. **Tug of War of Reasons. (5 mins)** Using the Tug-of-War Routine, groups can spend up to five minutes generating questions for the yes and no sides of the "rope." The facilitator may encourage participants to stay with one side before moving to the other side. 4. **Discussion (10 mins):** The group engages in a free discussion of the policy question. 5. **Closing Share Around (4 mins):** Each person shares her or his answer to the sentence "if I had to vote on this issue today, I'd say _____ because _____." No comments from others are allowed. 6. **Vote** with a show of hands.

The following is a snapshot of the Dessert with Democracy event.

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Policy Question: Should the voting age in the U.S. be lowered to 16?	**Policy Question:** Should North Carolina make college tuition-free for public universities?	**Policy Question:** Should North Carolina pass the School Security Act of 2019 (SB192) and allow teachers to be armed in school?
The set up (5 minutes) A moderator presents about the issue.	**The set up** (5 minutes) A moderator presents about the issue.	**The set up** (5 minutes) A moderator presents about the issue.
Opening Share (5 minutes) Begin with your name and something you value about living in the United States.	**Opening Share** (5 minutes) How has paying or attempting to pay college tuition affected your life or the lives of people close to you?	**Opening Share** (5 minutes) When I think about gun violence in the United States, I feel _____, because _____.
Tug of War Activity (5 min)	**Tug of War Activity** (5 min)	**Tug of War Activity** (5 min)
Open Discussion (10 min)	**Open Discussion** (10 min)	**Open Discussion** (10 min)
Closing Share "If I had to vote on this issue today, I'd say _____, because _____."	**Closing Share** "If I had to vote on this issue today, I'd say _____, because _____."	**Closing Share** "If I had to vote on this issue today, I'd say _____, because _____."
Room votes with a show of hands.	**Room votes** with a show of hands.	**Room votes** with a show of hands.
Break/select a new table.	Break/select a new table.	Closing/Reflection.

discussion about the proposal. This time period gave participants an opportunity to evaluate the ideas and arguments they generated.

Act. Each table concluded the round with a final share-out about the policy proposal. The facilitator invited each person to respond to the prompt "if I had to vote on this issue today, I'd say ____, because _____." Each person had up to one minute to speak. At the end of each round, we polled the room using a show of hands to see how many were for and against the policy.

Reflection

The purpose of any Taking Informed Action task is to help students develop the skills and confidence to be politically engaged. As Jeremy noted, one of the biggest takeaways for his students was learning that they "could speak about these things with their parents and with other adults." Furthermore, both teachers reported that the students felt heard, which reinforced the notion that young people "have a powerful voice and can have an impact on what [is] going on around them."

Deliberation should also help people become more informed about an issue and about how people are differently impacted. Evaluations taken at the Dessert with Democracy event overwhelmingly showed that participants "loved listening to different perspectives" and felt that the tight structure and use of the Tug of War activity were essential to bringing those out. The structure also helped set the right tone. Many commented that the room felt "calm," "comfortable," and "non-confrontational." Ultimately, students and the participants engaged in a deliberative inquiry that allowed them to do something fairly rare in today's political culture—engage in an open discussion about our differences.

Notes

1. Kathy Swan, John Lee, S.G. Grant, *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2018).
2. Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess, "Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization," *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (2013): 14–47.
3. Ronald W. Evans, Patricia G. Avery, and Patricia Velde Pederson, "Taboo Topics: Cultural Restraint on Teaching Social Issues," *The Clearing House* 73, no. 5 (2000): 295–302.
4. Donna Rich Kaplowitz, Shayla Reese Griffin, and Sheri Seyka, *Race Dialogues: A Facilitator's Guide to Tackling the Elephant in the Classroom* (New York & London: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2019).
5. David Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado, *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001).
6. Ron Richart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison, *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for All Learners* (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

References

1. Hess, Diana E., and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education.* Routledge, 2015.
2. Swan, Kathy, S.G. Grant, and John Lee, *Blueprinting an Inquiry-Based Curriculum* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2019).

Contact **pmcavoy@ncsu.edu** if you have questions about hosting your own Dinner with Democracy.

Paula McAvoy *is an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at North Carolina State University. She is the co-author, with Diana Hess, of* The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education *(Routledge, 2015).* **Arine Lowery** *is a third year doctoral student in Social Studies Education at North Carolina State University. Her research interests include examining culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies classrooms and the usage of discussion strategies with adolescents in civics classrooms.* **Nada Wafa** *is a doctoral student in Social Studies Education at North Carolina State University. Her research focuses on the use of technology to support student inquiries related to social justice education and global education.* **Christy M. Byrd** *is an Assistant Professor of Applied Developmental Sciences at North Carolina State University. Her research examines how students make sense of race and culture in their school environments, with a specific focus on racial climate, microaggressions, and curricular/co-curricular experiences with diversity.*