

FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY SPACES: The Intersection of Peace, Democracy Education, and Public Dialogue in Norway

Abstract

Background: Democratic education in Norway emphasizes values like tolerance, cross-cultural understanding, and collective responsibility, yet significant gaps exist in understanding how these principles transfer from K-12 schooling to community dialogue spaces addressing societal challenges like racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia. Despite Norway's commitment to democratic education, rising social tensions suggest that formal education alone may be insufficient for developing authentic democratic engagement.

Purpose: This pilot study investigates how public dialogue facilitators in Norway observe community members utilizing their previous knowledge of democratic principles in facilitated dialogue sessions.

Methodology/Approach: Using an interpretive qualitative design grounded in Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 2011) theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two experienced public dialogue facilitators in southern Norway. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, focusing on how dialogue participants move from peripheral to full democratic participation.

Findings/Conclusions: Facilitators observed that dialogue participants initially approached dialogue through institutionalized debate practices learned in formal education, characterized by competitive argumentation and reliance on external authority. Through sustained engagement, dialogue participants transformed toward more authentic democratic approaches marked by personal responsibility, collective accountability, and genuine listening, with facilitators identifying specific "turning points" in this transformative process.

Implications: These findings illuminate how democratic learning extends beyond formal education into community spaces where previously learned principles are reconstructed through dialogical practice. This pilot study contributes to peace education literature and suggests that facilitated dialogue serves as a bridge between institutional and experiential democratic learning, offering insights for educator development and democratic curriculum design.

Keywords

Democratic Education, Public Dialogue, Peace Education, Communities of Practice, Norway

Democratic education and peace education are interconnected practices that promote values, knowledge, and skills essential for understanding and advocating for human rights and freedoms through pedagogy. Democratic education emphasizes principles like tolerance, participation, and collective responsibility, while peace education focuses on creating environments where individuals are empowered to encourage harmonious relationships and mitigate physical and structural violence (Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016; Dewey, 2001).

The approach to democratic education covered in this study differs from models that emphasize national identity formation, instead recognizing that authentic democratic engagement requires

navigating differences within communities.

In increasingly diverse societies experiencing demographic changes driven by global migration, meaningful democratic participation must account for varied cultural perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of knowing, moving beyond assimilationist approaches toward practices that value and integrate community diversity.

Together, principles that support peace and democracy prepare citizens to engage in meaningful democratic interactions in diverse communities.

Facilitated dialogue has been utilized to create spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those whose voices are often silenced, can freely communicate their experiences, and it

can be one very effective way to educate *about, for,* and *through* peace, social justice, democracy, and human rights (Bajaj, 2017).

As educational researchers and practitioners increasingly recognize the urgent need for more equitable and socially just educational practices, understanding how democratic values learned in formal educational settings translate to community engagement becomes increasingly important. This study explores the intersection of formal education and community practice investigating how public dialogue participants in Norway confront challenging societal issues that threaten democratic cohesion within communities through their participation in facilitated dialogue.

A growing body of research supports facilitated dialogue as a tool to create cross-cultural understanding and empathy between groups (Zúñiga et al., 2014). Despite extensive studies on dialogue as a conflict prevention and resolution tool in the U.S. context (Gurin et al., 2013; Nagda et al., 2018; Zúñiga et al., 2014), research examining these practices in the Nordic countries, particularly Norway, remains limited. This research addresses this gap by investigating how public dialogue facilitators in Norway observe participants translating democratic principles they have learned in classrooms into broader community spaces.

BACKGROUND

Norway is well-known for its peace-building efforts and history of prioritizing democratic values (Pisarska, 2016). Norwegian society places significant importance on teaching democratic values throughout formal education to promote peace, human rights, and social justice (Skåland, 2010; Stray, 2013), and intentionally implements methodologies that foster cross-cultural understanding across educational environments (Biseth et al., 2021; Nustad et al., 2020). One of the primary objectives of these initiatives is to promote a more inclusive and democratic society, encouraging individuals to prioritize the needs of the community alongside their personal interests. The core curriculum is built on these values, which include maintaining human dignity, fostering identity and cultural diversity, respecting nature and environmental awareness, and actively participating in Norway's democracy (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

In formal educational contexts, authentic democratic participation may manifest in several ways. Intentionally including student voices in curriculum decisions or collaborative problem-solving around real community issues is one way, however, some studies have shown that institutional constraints often impede these practices (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). In Norwegian classrooms specifically, structured dialogue about immigration policies in which students share personal or family experiences alongside policy analysis (Solbue et al., 2017), student governance councils with genuine decision-making authority (Jones & Dehlin, 2025), or collaborative projects addressing local community tensions can encourage students to consider multiple perspectives rather than simply debating predetermined positions (Kjellander et al., 2023). In community settings, meaningful democratic engagement includes facilitated dialogues addressing local tensions, participatory decision-making processes around shared concerns, or civic organizing efforts (Krick, 2025). These practices also face barriers that include time constraints, power imbalances, and limited spaces for genuine cross-cultural exchange.

Moreover, informal educational opportunities are conducted through non-governmental organizations responsible for organizing programs to promote peace, tolerance, and cultural awareness within communities. These programs come in many forms and are implemented in various environments, including public spaces where community members participate as a way to confront complex issues with the assistance of trained dialogue facilitators. These facilitated public dialogue sessions focus specifically on structured community conversation around challenging topics and create spaces where individuals can share their experiences and perspectives, which is essential for building trust and reducing prejudices - core components of social justice work (Zúñiga et al., 2014). Although there is limited research on how facilitated dialogue is implemented in Norway, even fewer studies explore how the emphasis on democratic values in formal education influences these community environments, representing a significant gap in our understanding of how these educational practices translate to community-based social justice efforts.





PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research indicates that individuals who have participated in an education where democratic values and engagement with difference are prioritized are more likely to advocate for inclusive and tolerant societies, drawing on those democratic values to interpret and discuss issues like racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia (Eidsvåg et al., 2004). However, this relationship is neither automatic nor straightforward. Studies show that formal civic education often fails to translate into active democratic participation (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Levinson, 2012).

While Norwegian students demonstrate strong civic knowledge in international assessments, research indicates that civic knowledge levels do not consistently predict future political participation (Biseth et al., 2021). Further, how that knowledge translates to authentic community engagement is unclear and faces similar challenges to those documented in other democratic societies (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003; Levinson, 2012). It can be argued, however, that this focus on democratic education has led to more nuanced and empathetic public conversations, as citizens apply critical thinking and principles learned in school to these complex societal issues, positively impacting Norwegian society (Dessingué & Wagner, 2024). Despite these positive outcomes from civic education throughout formal schooling in Norway, there are criticisms regarding its effectiveness and reach. Scholars have noted gaps in how democratic values are internalized and acted upon in broader societal contexts (Broderstad & Josefsen, 2023; Haraldstad et al., 2022; Tow, 2024). The persistence of racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia in Norway indicates that formal education alone is insufficient, necessitating further research into how individuals bring their experiences with democratic educational initiatives into their communities, where societal attitudes, media representations, and political discourse also play a role (Mårtensson, 2014; Osler & Lybaek, 2014; Thomas & Abdul-Razak, 2019).

Norway's educational system is relevant for its commitment to democratic values within a context of increasing diversity and social tension. Unlike educational systems that treat democratic education as supplementary, Norway's core curriculum mandates democratic participation as fundamental (Norwegian Ministry of Education and

Research, 2020). This provides a unique context for examining how formal democratic education experiences influence community-based dialogue practices, particularly as Norwegian society struggles with the same challenges facing many democratic societies: translating educational ideals into authentic community engagement.

PURPOSE

This study explores how individuals bring their previous understanding of democratic values to public dialogue experiences in Norway addressing racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, as well as other community concerns. Rather than dismissing formal education as simply inadequate, this study examines how education experiences function as a starting point that must be transformed through community practice. By investigating how facilitators observe participants drawing on and reconstructing their previous knowledge of democratic principles, this research bridges institutional learning and authentic democratic engagement, revealing both the limitations of formal approaches and pathways toward transformation.

The research question is as follows:

In what ways do public dialogue facilitators in Norway see community members utilizing their previous knowledge of democratic principles in public dialogue sessions?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Communities of Practice: Theoretical Foundations

This study employs Communities of Practice (CoP) theory, a social learning framework examining how learning occurs through participation in shared practices within specific communities (Lave & Wenger, 2011; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). CoP theory emerged from situated learning research, proposing that learning is fundamentally a social process occurring through participation in communities organized around these shared practices (Lave & Wenger, 2011). Communities of Practice can be characterized by three elements: a shared domain of interest, a community of people who interact regularly around this domain, and a shared practice that members develop through sustained interaction (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Central to CoP theory is the concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), where newcomers to a practice gradually develop expertise through sustained engagement with more experienced

practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 2011). This involves movement from peripheral participation toward fuller participation as newcomers develop competence and assume greater responsibility. Learning occurs not through explicit instruction but through ongoing participation in the community's practices, developing what Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) describe as a "shared repertoire of resources, experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" (p. 2).

CoP theory has been applied to examine teacher professional development (Buysse et al., 2003), student learning in collaborative environments (Jonassen & Land, 2000), informal learning spaces and identity development (Pahl & Allan, 2011), and how civic education translates to community engagement (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). However, limited research has specifically examined how formal democratic education experiences—as forms of legitimate peripheral participation—transform through community-based dialogue practice.

Communities of Practice in This Study

The application of CoP theory to democratic education contexts offers new insights into how learning and practice intersect in community-based social justice work. Participants' K-12 experiences represent initial legitimate peripheral participation in democratic practice, where students learn "fundamental democratic values, such as mutual respect, tolerance, individual freedom of faith and speech, and free elections" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p. 10).

Public dialogue sessions function as distinct communities of practice where new democratic norms and expectations develop through collective engagement. Facilitators serve as more experienced practitioners who guide participants toward fuller participation in democratic practice, supporting a transformation of their previously learned knowledge into new forms of democratic engagement. Dialogue sessions typically last 2-3 hours and can accommodate 100 or more participants, although many typically include a group of 15-30. Regardless of the size, the same format is generally followed.

Sessions are structured around specific topics such as "Discrimination of migrants in our community" or another topic of the community's choosing, and they follow a carefully crafted process that begins with a shared set of "ground rules" established by the group

for interactions, then moves through an open forum for sharing where participants articulate experiences from their own perspectives, and a specific style of follow-up questioning from facilitators that guide participants through personal reflection to "turning points" in their thinking. The facilitators create what they describe as "brave spaces" through these practices where participants can share personal experiences related to the topic while engaging with others whose perspectives may differ—sometimes significantly. The transformation process observed by facilitators represents the movement from legitimate peripheral participation to fuller participation with this new community of democratic practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, democracy in Norway has been emphasized through *Bildung*, a holistic approach to democratic development emphasizing personal responsibility toward community alongside individual growth (Nordic Bildung, 2022). Educational institutions in Norway bear tremendous responsibility for teaching democratic values with schools considered vital in establishing these values among citizens (Biseth et al., 2021; Dalehefte et al., 2022; Strand, 2016). Yet, critics argue that contemporary implementation has become increasingly procedural rather than transformative (Stray, 2013). Students are given opportunities to engage in democratic participation in formal and informal spaces, yet those experiences often center around rhetoric and debate (Haraldstad et al., 2022). Further, an increased emphasis on individual student achievement contributes to neoliberal reforms that contradict democratic ideology emphasizing collective values (Lovlie & Standish, 2002; Lowe, 2007; Stray, 2013).

Current scholarship indicates that Norwegian educational policy is shifting away from a long-held commitment to collective values and toward individual development, the "cultivation of human capital" (Stray, 2013, p. 171), and a focus on scientific competency measurement in mathematics, reading, and natural sciences. These neoliberal policy reforms emphasize market-driven efficiency, standardized assessment, and individual competition over collaborative problem-solving and community engagement (Ball, 2012). School performance quality is increasingly measured through standardized testing results and international comparisons (such as PISA rankings),





with policymakers and educational administrators using these metrics to prioritize reforms rather than democratic competencies (Stray, 2013).

While these policies have shifted, other changes have also occurred in Norway. Those changes include increasing economic, political, and social inequalities, growing marginalization of certain groups (Strand, 2016), concerns about xenophobia and racism (Osler & Lybaek, 2014; Strand, 2016), and rising threats of extremism and anti-democratic movements (Osler & Lybaek, 2014).

Defining what constitutes “democratic” education proves challenging, as competing ideas exist. Dewey (2001) defines it as “a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (p. 91)—a social phenomenon created through shared values and collective participation. This contrasts with procedural approaches that reduce democracy to voting mechanisms or debate competitions without attending to the relational and communal dimensions Dewey emphasizes. Norwegian democratic education has historically aligned with Dewey’s relational vision, emphasizing collective responsibility and community participation, though more recent forms threaten this normative definition.

There are theories proposed in the literature specific to democracy that are worth exploring in the context of this study. In addition to Dewey’s (2001) seminal work, the ideas proposed by Iris Marion Young (1996) elucidate how democracy may be viewed in the context of community-based public dialogue in Norway. Young proposes a revised approach to traditionally referenced deliberative democracy theories, which she calls *communicative democracy*. Where deliberative theories advance the idea that democratic discussion aims to reach a shared understanding or obtain a common goal (Habermas, 1985), Young challenges this as a failure to consider cultural differences and varying social perspectives as resources critical to any political or social discussion (Young, 1996). There is an assumption in deliberative theory that democracy requires “an equal voice for all citizens to press their claims, regardless of social position or power” (p. 122) and that these differentials can be separated from democratic discourse. Young (1996) argues that social power preventing equal participation derives not only from economic and political domination but from “an internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak” (p. 122) and

cultural devaluation of different speech styles.

Young’s (1996) critique is particularly relevant for understanding how democratic education in Norway may perpetuate certain forms of discourse while marginalizing others, making her framework important for examining how dialogue practices move beyond superficial conversation to create more inclusive spaces. And Dewey (2001) asks, “Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?” (p. 102). This question becomes relevant when examining how formal democratic education translates to community-based dialogue practices aimed at addressing social inequalities. Combined, these ideas create a foundation for thinking about how formally educating for democratic values would translate into broader community interactions—especially when they are thoughtfully designed to induce critical thinking as they are in facilitated dialogue sessions.

METHODOLOGY

Positionality

My positioning as a researcher exploring Norwegian democratic education and public dialogue emerges from personal transformation and sustained scholarly engagement with these practices as an American citizen and student. Growing up in a predominantly White, middle-class rural town, I was sheltered from discussions on race, class, and equity. During my first year as a Ph.D. student, I experienced a paradigm shift in my thinking, realizing that consciousness-raising (Freire, 2000) could occur in others within a thoughtful environment where exploration of intersecting identities was encouraged, leading to improved cross-cultural understanding and moving us closer to peace. This understanding of critical consciousness through dialogue fundamentally shaped my interest in how educational experiences translate to community-based democratic engagement.

As I developed a deeper understanding of the U.S. education system during my doctoral studies, it became apparent that students are affected by striking inequities in resources, systemic and institutional racism, classism, and other deeply rooted issues that impact the quality of education they receive. This awareness fundamentally shifted my understanding of education’s role in either perpetuating or dismantling systems of oppression, creating the foundation for my interest in examining similar tensions in other national contexts.

As a White American researcher investigating predominantly White Norwegian contexts, I bring both advantages and limitations to this work. My outsider status allows me to identify patterns that might be taken for granted within Norwegian contexts, yet I remain mindful of risks of misinterpreting cultural nuances or imposing external frameworks on Norwegian practices. Shared racial positioning can be both an advantage and a hinderance, and I have attempted to address this by focusing on facilitators' observations about diverse participants rather than making claims about participants' own experiences.

Research Design

A pilot study was chosen for this research to inform future inquiry into facilitated dialogue in the Nordic region. Pilot studies provide an opportunity to gain insight into a phenomenon without the time and expense of a full-scale study (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). There are several topics that have emerged, inspiring refinement of the interview protocol which will sharpen future investigation.

This study employs an interpretive qualitative design, which seeks to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences within specific cultural and social contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Interpretive qualitative research is particularly appropriate for this pilot study because it allows for deep exploration of facilitators' perspectives on complex social processes—specifically, how they observe and interpret participants' use of democratic knowledge in dialogue settings. Unlike positivist approaches that seek to generalize, interpretive qualitative research emphasizes understanding phenomena within their specific context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), making it well-suited for examining the nuanced process of democratic learning and transformation in Norwegian dialogue spaces.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to explore facilitators' observations while maintaining flexibility to pursue unexpected insights (Billups, 2021; Seidman, 2019). Sample questions include: "Does participating in these dialogues deepen individuals' understanding of democratic values?" and "How do you distinguish between a 'safe' and 'brave' space. The semi-structured format supported follow-up questions to make sure that key topics were addressed. This methodological choice reflects my commitment to center facilitator's voices and experiences, recognizing

that those engaged in frontline social justice work often possess insights that can inform both theory and practice in meaningful ways.

Participants

This study investigates the manifestation of democratic values in public dialogue sessions through the perspectives of two public dialogue facilitators in southern Norway. Anna and Iris have been working in public dialogue facilitation for a combined 20 years. Their commitment to continuous learning and reflection—both through ongoing professional development and collaborative practice—demonstrates their alignment with Communities of Practice principles that recognize learning as mutual and ongoing within communities (Adams & Bell, 2016; Lave & Wenger, 2011). Interview participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Seidman, 2019). This method of sampling does not require randomization or a large population, and it is also less likely to generate generalizable results (Seidman, 2019). While the findings are context-bound to southern Norway, the goal is in-depth understanding rather than generalizability, providing opportunities for future research (Seidman, 2019). Access to facilitators was available through my existing relationship with the Norge Center where this community dialogue program is centralized. I initiated an inquiry via email to gauge interest in participating in the study. The facilitators shared my concern for the lack of research supporting their work and were eager to participate.

The decision to interview facilitators rather than dialogue participants was based on several methodological and theoretical considerations. First, facilitators occupy a unique observational position, witnessing multiple dialogue sessions with diverse participants over extended periods. This longitudinal perspective allows them to identify patterns in how participants utilize democratic knowledge that might not be apparent to participants themselves, or observable in a single session.

Second, facilitators serve as what CoP theory describes as "more experienced practitioners" who guide newcomers' development within the community's practices (Lave & Wenger, 2011). Their role requires them to actively observe and respond to participants' democratic engagement approaches, making them particularly attuned to the transformation process this study investigates.





Third, practical considerations influenced this choice. Dialogue participants often attend single sessions and can be difficult to contact for follow-up research, while facilitators are generally available and have developed sophisticated reflective practices around their observations. Additionally, focusing on facilitator perspectives in this pilot study allows for future research expansion to include participant voices with better understanding of patterns initially identified through facilitator observations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, scheduled to last 45-60 minutes each, and transcribed using Zoom's recording feature. Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to performing theoretical thematic analysis was engaged to analyze the interview data. Defined by Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Initial patterns were identified focusing on the specific research question and theoretical framework. The thematic analysis was conducted at the latent level, examining the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). NVivo software assisted with analyzing and coding the transcripts. The initial coding resulted in dozens of codes, reduced to six categories and three themes. This article focuses on one theme directly addressing the research question.

Study Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This pilot study has several important limitations that affect the scope and transferability of findings. First, the small sample size of two facilitators from one organization limits the breadth of perspectives represented. While these facilitators have extensive experience, their observations may reflect the specific approaches and participant populations of their organizations rather than broader patterns in Norwegian dialogue facilitation. Second, focusing on facilitator perspectives rather than participant voices only provides one viewpoint of the phenomena being explored. Participants themselves may describe their experiences differently or identify aspects of the transformation that facilitators miss. Third, as a pilot study, this research provides preliminary insights rather than a comprehensive understanding of how democratic education translates into community practice. The findings point toward patterns that prompt further

research but should not be considered conclusive in any way. As an American researcher studying Norwegian dialogue practices, cultural nuance may be missed or misinterpreted.

Informed consent was obtained emphasizing participants' right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Data was anonymized to protect interview participants' identities, and sensitive information was securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: Institutionalized Democratic Practice

Norwegian dialogue facilitators observe a distinct tension between participants' previously learned democratic practices and the alternative forms of engagement required in dialogue spaces. This tension manifests in how participants initially approach democratic discourse through debate-style interactions. Across interviews, facilitators consistently identified debate culture as a barrier to authentic dialogue that aims to improve cross-cultural understanding and reduce prejudice. Specifically, Anna and Iris noted that participants often enter dialogue sessions with argumentative techniques that have likely been learned through formal education, prepared to defend positions rather than listen and engage in genuine exchange:

Anna directly challenged the value of debate practices:

But what comes out of a debate? Nothing, actually nothing. Nobody learns anything. No, you just arguing against each other, and then those who have the best facts, or who are best in rhetoric. They win in the debate.

Facilitators work to redirect participants from debate toward active listening, self-reflection, and mutual support—approaches they view as necessary for authentic dialogue.

These barriers extend beyond those evidenced through individual behavior to reflect broader societal influences. Facilitators noted that participants often rely on external authority—whether through expert opinions or institutional knowledge—rather than engaging with their personal experiences and perspectives. As Anna explains:

We live in a world of experts. We believe so much in experts. What you do in this method is to believe in people regardless of whom they are...it doesn't matter what an expert said. It

matters what you think it is, or what you think. It's what you can say or not say, and what you can stand for or not stand for.

Anna explained that the dialogue method shifts focus away from expert knowledge to participants' own perspectives and experiences.

Both facilitators expressed concern about Norwegian society's reliance on debate skills to demonstrate democratic participation. They described seeking dialogue approaches that prioritize personal experience, authentic voice, and collective responsibility over competitive argumentation.

Finding 2: The Process of Transformation

Facilitators observed participants developing new approaches to democratic engagement through two key shifts: taking personal responsibility for their statements and recognizing collective responsibility.

This transformation is demonstrated here as Anna observes:

People need to take responsibility because you, you can say what you want absolutely in the public dialogue... but then there are questions. You have to explain more, you have to reflect on what you're actually saying.

This emphasis on explanation and reflection marks a shift from debate-style assertions to dialogic engagement. Facilitators observed participants shifting from individual performance to mutual accountability—a change they viewed as essential to authentic dialogue. As Anna again explains:

So if I say something hateful to you, there's a group around there listening... then they also sit with responsibility... the group can then say, 'Yeah, but you can't say this.'

Both facilitators communicate their observation of a degrading of the collective sense of responsibility in Norwegian society, which they believe manifests through a growing sense of individualism. Iris mentions it here when she says:

Often there's a situation or a topic that the community wants or needs to talk about. It's quite common there's always someone else that should be handling this situation or that is in the wrong, instead of kind of taking accountability or seeing yourself not just as a participant of the dialogue, but a participant of your community and your so yeah, kind of shifting away responsibilities.

Through sustained engagement, facilitators observe participants developing new democratic competencies marked by personal responsibility, collective accountability, and authentic listening. They described these moments as “turning points” when participants shifted from competitive argumentation toward dialogic engagement.

DISCUSSION

This discussion examines three key dimensions of this transformation: first, how the tension between institutionalized and dialogic democratic practices reflects different levels of participation in democratic engagement; second, how dialogue spaces function as distinct communities of practice with their own democratic norms and expectations; and finally, how the shift from debate to dialogue represents a necessary reconceptualization of how democratic values are enacted in Norwegian society with important implications for educational practice. The transformation observed by facilitators confirms scholarly critiques about the limitations of formal democratic education (Apple & Bean, 2007; Biesta, 2007) while illuminating potential pathways for bridging this gap through dialogical practices.

Tension Between Institutionalized and Dialogic Practices

The facilitators' observations elucidate how formal democratic education creates legitimate peripheral participation that must be transformed for authentic community dialogue. As Anna noted, “In Norwegian school, it's debate that is in,”—educational institutions position debate as a primary form of democratic engagement. This serves as an entry point, providing basic tools, yet the debate skills, expert reliance, and competitive argumentation that facilitators observed represent peripheral rather than full participation in the kind of cross-cultural dialogue necessary for addressing social inequality. While these practices serve as legitimate points of entry to democratic discourse, they constrain participants' capacity for the genuine engagement necessary for building more equitable communities. The facilitators' observations reveal how participants must transform those institutionalized practices to achieve fuller democratic participation, connecting to critiques of neoliberal reforms that emphasize individual achievement over collective engagement (Stray, 2013).

The tension emerges as facilitators guide participants toward more complex forms of



democratic practice. Participants arrive with what could be considered valid peripheral democratic knowledge—debate skills, fact-based argumentation, and reliance on expert authority—all emphasized within Norway’s educational framework (Broderstad & Josefsen, 2023; Haraldstad et al., 2022). However, facilitators observe that this knowledge, while legitimate within educational contexts, often impedes deeper democratic engagement.

Iris critiques this phenomenon during her interview when she says people are “very used to trying to convince each other.” Her insight here reveals how institutionalized democratic practices, though providing initial access to democratic participation, may constrain movement toward fuller participation in democratic dialogue in the context of community spaces.

This observation aligns with Young’s (1996) critique of deliberative democracy, where the assumption of equal voice fails to account for how “social power can prevent people from being equal speakers” through an “internalized sense of the right one has to speak” (p. 122). The facilitators’ work addresses this challenge by creating spaces where personal experience becomes valued over expert authority, potentially disrupting the power dynamics Young identifies.

Facilitators support participants in reconstructing democratic practice with the goal of addressing social injustice and stereotypes based on misunderstandings. Rather than dismissing participants’ prior learning, facilitators observe how this knowledge provides a foundation that must be transformed.

Dialogue Spaces as Distinct Communities of Practice

Dialogue spaces function as distinct communities of practice where participants develop a “shared repertoire” (Lave & Wenger, 2011) emphasizing mutual accountability over individual performance. As Anna explained, “You can say what you want, but you have to take responsibility. So that is on the individual level. And then there’s a group there, and the group also has to take responsibility.” This collective responsibility represents democratic principles moving beyond individual acts toward shared engagement focused on creating more equitable outcomes. The facilitator’s observations provide evidence for the critiques of formal democratic education’s limitations. While schools emphasize democratic values in the curriculum, classroom practices often fail to develop the

collective attitudes necessary for authentic engagement in diverse communities (Haraldstad et al., 2022; Osler & Lybaek, 2014).

These spaces create unique conditions for democratic practice that differ from institutionalized settings. Rather than relying on external authority or predetermined structures, dialogue participants develop their “shared repertoire” for democratic engagement addressing complex social issues. As Iris noted, this transformation becomes evident when “people talk to us afterwards, and (tell us) they had the most cathartic experience.” Such “turning points” demonstrate how dialogue spaces function as sites where previously learned democratic principles are not merely applied but fundamentally reconstituted through collective practice aimed at improving community relationships.

This addresses Dewey’s question about state-conducted education corrupting “the full social ends of the educative process.” While formal education may constrain democratic development through hierarchical relationships, community-based dialogue spaces can reconstruct democratic engagement beyond institutional limitations.

Reconstructing Democratic Values Through Dialogue Practice

Participants arrive to community dialogue with what could be considered valid peripheral democratic knowledge. Rather than simply applying learned democratic principles, participants transform how they understand and enact them through the dialogue process. Where participants initially approach democratic engagement through the competitive lens of debate, facilitators observe their movement toward what Lave and Wenger (2011) describe as authentic practice toward true collective well-being. As Iris reflected, a notable change occurs “when you’re able to talk about things from that level instead of the superficial level,” highlighting how participants transform their previous democratic knowledge into more profound forms of engagement.

This evolution addresses how participants reconstruct democratic learning through dialogue, developing new ways of engaging that reflect fuller participation rather than relying on normative school-based markers. Anna captured this transformation, noting, “When you first have this experience to be heard, with 30 other people sitting around you, that’s very empowering.” This shift from performing democracy through debate to embodying democratic principles through dialogue demonstrates how Communities of

Practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 2011) illuminates not just the utilization of democratic principles but their fundamental reconstruction through participation. This example connects to Norway's traditional emphasis on holistic democratic development. Current educational practices have become procedural and superficial while dialogue spaces may represent a return to more authentic Bildung-inspired universal development through collective engagement.

Through Communities of Practice theory, this study reveals how participants move from legitimate peripheral participation grounded in their formal education toward fuller participation in democratic dialogue. Democratic learning in Norway occurs not just through institutional instruction but through sustained engagement in dialogue spaces where previously learned principles can be reconstructed and deepened. The facilitators' observations illuminate how democratic knowledge, initially shaped by institutional practices, transforms through participation in new communities of practice. While context-specific, these findings contribute to international scholarship by demonstrating how formal democratic learning transforms through authentic and vulnerable community interactions, addressing identified gaps in democratic education research.

IMPLICATIONS

This study reveals implications for practice, theory development, and future research relevant to creating more equitable educational practices. Facilitated dialogue represents one method for developing cross-cultural understanding and reducing prejudice. The dialogue facilitators interviewed for this study have many years of experience and have witnessed incredible transformations through this mode of community engagement. Their insights provide the field of peace education with important findings that can push researchers and educators toward improved theoretical understandings and more effective practices.

The findings challenge current approaches to democratic education emphasizing debate and individual achievement over collective dialogue. Peace education as a field can benefit from dialogical spaces that bridge institutional and experiential learning. Facilitated dialogue plays a significant role in that facilitators' support guides the transformation that has been shown to increase awareness of societal issues like racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other harmful ideologies. Not only

does awareness increase, but the facilitators also go to great lengths to create conditions to encourage collective responsibility to create change.

Teacher education programs should incorporate training in dialogue facilitation rather than focusing primarily on debate skills. The "turning points" observed could inform pedagogical approaches that support students' movement from competitive to collaborative democratic engagement—and further, from peripheral to full participation. The study also suggests the need for curriculum developers to consider restructuring democratic education around experiential learning and community engagement rather than strictly knowledge acquisition. The observations that participants need to "unlearn" debate practices suggest that current curricular approaches may actually impede the kind of democratic engagement necessary for addressing complex social issues. Educational leaders might consider how to better integrate dialogical practices that prepare students for authentic democratic participation in diverse communities.

Theoretical Contributions

This study demonstrates how CoP theory elucidates transformation of formal learning into community practices, showing how legitimate peripheral participation in one community (formal education) transfers and transforms across communities of practice. The study provides empirical evidence for critiques of democratic education, showing how neo-liberal institutional approaches constrain democratic engagement. Facilitators' observations confirm arguments about debate-centered curriculum limitations.

Future Research Directions

The preliminary nature of this pilot study suggests significant potential for additional research that could inform both educational practice and social justice efforts more broadly, and several avenues for future investigation exist that may develop these findings. Longitudinal studies could examine whether the "turning points" facilitators observe lead to lasting changes in democratic practice outside dialogue sessions. Research focusing on marginalized voices could examine how power dynamics influence the transformation process and identify practices that most effectively support inclusive democratic engagement. Additional investigation could explore the role of physical presence in democratic dialogue and how welfare state structures affect democratic participation and collective responsibility.





CONCLUSION

Democratic learning in Norway occurs through a complex interplay between formal education and public dialogue spaces, where principles taught in schools transform through practice when confronted with alternative approaches to societal challenges. Through the lens of Communities of Practice theory (Lave & Wenger, 2011), the findings elucidate a complex process of democratic learning that extends beyond institutional education into spaces of public dialogue.

The transformation from debate to dialogue, expert reliance to personal responsibility, and individual to collective engagement demonstrates how democratic principles are reconstructed through dialogue participation. These transformations challenge assumptions about formal democratic education translating to authentic practice, showing how community dialogue bridges educational knowledge and meaningful engagement.

These findings contribute to both Norwegian and international discussions about democratic education by providing empirical evidence of how institutional limitations can

be addressed through community practice. While this pilot study focused on formal educational settings, schools are only one environment in which democratic values are emphasized. As Lave and Wenger (2011) have helped us to understand, learning occurs everywhere. Furthermore, what we learn in school is often much more than what is being formally taught (Apple, 1971).

Facilitators witness dialogue participants moving from peripheral to full participation as they develop new ways of engaging with democratic principles. This suggests that democratic learning in Norway occurs through an ongoing process of practice and transformation rather than superficial knowledge application. This understanding offers important insights for dialogue facilitation and democratic education, highlighting the vital role of

creating spaces where democratic principles can be actively reconstructed through collective engagement while pointing toward specific research direction that could further illuminate these processes

As societies grapple with questions of democratic participation across cultural differences, these findings suggest that understanding how democratic knowledge is transformed through practice may foster more authentic engagement. The identified research directions provide pathways for expanding this work to better understand how formal educational experiences can be enhanced to prepare students for meaningful participation supporting social justice and equity in their communities.



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