

Democratic Education at 30: An interview with Dr. Amy Gutmann

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Abstract

In this interview, Dr. Amy Gutmann discusses the legacy of her book *Democratic Education* after 30 years since it was first published. After presenting some of the main ideas from *Democratic Education*, Dr. Gutmann emphasises the importance of both democratic education and democratic deliberation as central elements of public education in a plurally diverse polity. She then discusses a range of other educational issues including access to education as key to individual opportunity and social development (from both personal and scholarly perspectives) and the civic minimum goals of education in a democracy. Throughout the interview, Dr. Gutmann also presents a number of examples of how ideas and ideals central to her teaching and scholarship have been put into practice during her tenure as President of the University of Pennsylvania. The interview concludes with a reflection on some of the most pressing challenges facing education today.

Keywords

Democratic Education, Amy Gutmann, deliberative democracy, civic equality, diversity, higher education

Dr. Amy Gutmann is President of the University of Pennsylvania. As Penn's President since 2004, Dr. Gutmann is an internationally renowned leader in higher education: a prominent advocate for increased access to higher education, for innovation based on interdisciplinary collaboration, and for the transformative impact of universities, locally, nationally, and globally. In her 2004 inaugural address, President Gutmann outlined her Penn Compact. Penn's commitment to the three core values of the Penn Compact – Inclusion, Innovation, and Impact – has propelled the university forward during an era of dramatic change.

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President Gutmann is the Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Professor of Communication in the Annenberg School for Communication, with secondary faculty appointments in Philosophy in the School of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate School of Education. She has published widely on the value of education and deliberation in democracy, on the importance of access to higher education and healthcare, on 'the good, the bad and the ugly' of identity politics, and on the essential role of ethics – especially professional and political ethics – in public affairs.

Prior to her appointment at Penn, Dr. Gutmann served as Provost at Princeton University, where she also was the Laurance S. Rockefeller University Professor of Politics. She was the Founding Director of the University Center for Human Values, an eminent, multidisciplinary center that supports teaching, scholarship, and public discussion of ethics and human values. Also at Princeton, she served as Dean of the Faculty and as Academic Advisor to the President, and was awarded the President's Distinguished Teaching Award. Dr. Gutmann graduated magna cum laude from Harvard-Radcliffe College. She earned her master's degree in Political Science from the London School of Economics and her doctorate in Political Science from Harvard University. Dr. Gutmann was recently named one of the world's 50 greatest leaders by Fortune magazine.

In this interview, Dr. Gutmann discusses the legacy of her book Democratic Education, together with the most pressing issues facing education today.

When Democratic Education was first published in 1987, a reviewer described it as 'the finest contribution to the literature on democratic education of the last seventy years'. How does Democratic Education fit within the context of your work?

A democratic citizen enjoys liberty, opportunity, and the respect of others, which she reciprocates. These three core democratic values – liberty (personal and political), opportunity (education, healthcare, security), and mutual respect among persons – have inspired my life and informed all my work as a scholar, teacher, and university leader.

Liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect are not self-evident or self-perpetuating. They must be carefully taught or else opposing values – authoritarianism, plutocracy, intolerance, bigotry, and hatred – will dominate our societies. I wrote *Democratic Education* to shine a spotlight on the importance of education for securing individual freedom, opportunity, and mutual respect. *Why* and *how* should democracies educate free and equal citizens, and *who* should be authorized to do so? As societies have become more interdependent and individuals ever more mobile across national boundaries, these educational questions have taken on increasing international importance.

How can schools and universities, professional educators and parents, civic associations and the media play their rightful part in securing and transmitting the values of liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect for future generations? *Democratic Education* connects the *personal* with the *political* importance of education, as the primary means by which we human beings engage in *conscious social reproduction* of our societies across the generations.

It is true that reasonable disagreements arise in determining the 'how' and the 'who' of democratic education. Public and private schools and universities, professional educators and parents, civic associations and the media, along with citizens and public officials

who govern democracies all play educational roles, but the nature and extent of those roles are controversial. Parents are indisputably the primary educators of children, but the extent of even their role raises controversial questions, such as should they be able to prevent their children from learning about evolution or sex in schools? What about homeschooling and its regulation? We can agree that however great our parental liberty, it is not an unlimited license. But the boundaries of parental liberty are not something that democratic societies or citizens agree upon.

Deliberative democracy is the ideal of governance that complements democratic education: citizens and their accountable representatives offer one another reasons for mutually binding laws in an ongoing process of mutual justification, which is based on mutual respect. To the extent that a democracy is not deliberative, it treats people as passive subjects to be ruled rather than as citizens who are free to take part in governance, both giving and receiving reasons for mutually binding laws and public policies. Deliberation in democracy is also a form of lifelong education. We are continually educated by robustly and respectfully arguing – occasionally agreeing, oftentimes not – with our fellow citizens about how best to move our societies forward.

From 2010 through 2017, I put both democratic education and deliberation into the practice of bioethics while chairing Barack Obama's Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues. The commission openly deliberated with the public over some of the most controversial issues in bioethics, including how best to develop new biotechnologies, to protect individuals in human subjects research, and to secure the benefits of genomics and brain science while mitigating risks to privacy and other potential harms. True to the increasingly international nature of education and deliberation in bioethics, we invited international groups to join us in deliberating on many issues.

So, *Democratic Education* was like the trunk of a rapidly growing tree whose branches include an exploration of the pluralistic nature not only of societies (in *Democracy and Disagreement*, with Dennis Thompson) but also of our personhoods (in *Identity in Democracy*), as well as the role of racial identities in democracy (in *Color Conscious*, with K. Anthony Appiah). Most recently, the tree has been growing many branches in bioethics, and I am now in the process of writing a book with Penn Professor Jonathan Moreno on the hard choices we face as individuals and societies in making progress in medicine and healthcare both accessible and affordable.

What triggered your interest in education as a political philosopher?

Access to education played an essential role in shaping my life. I am the daughter of an immigrant, refugee father who loved learning and a mother who desperately wanted to become a teacher but had to support herself from the time she was a teenager and could not afford college. I am the first in my family to graduate from college, and education clearly has opened the doors of opportunity wide for me, as it does for everyone who is fortunate enough to receive an excellent education. To this day, as President of the University of Pennsylvania, I remain avidly involved in making education of the highest quality more accessible for students from all backgrounds. I have always loved learning, and more than ever before in human history, it is crystal clear that education opens doors of opportunity for individuals and propels societies forward.

As a political scientist and philosopher, I became fascinated by the question: who decides what kind of education all children have access to? Not since John Dewey's work on education in the first half of the twentieth century had this question been centrally pursued in political philosophy. Yet, the way any society answers this question has increasingly powerful individual, societal, and political ramifications. I hoped to trigger a new wave of rigorous thought on what decision-making about education – both its content and accessibility – means for members of a democratic society and for democracy's future. You can see this interest manifest from the very beginning of my career when, in 1980, I published *Children, Paternalism, and Education: A Liberal Argument*, which planted seeds in my mind that grew into *Democratic Education*. I am most gratified – and intellectually grateful – that many great scholars subsequently have branched out broadly beyond where I left off. Scholarly engagement with education in democracy, once dormant for decades, is now vibrantly alive.

As you write in the Preface to the Revised Edition of *Democratic Education*, '[t]he central question in the political theory of education – How should citizens be educated, and by whom? – has become even more prominent since the first edition of *Democratic Education* appeared [. . .] 'What are the democratic goals of education today?'

Across a range of educational issues, from school choice to school funding to school quality, the debate over the central questions of 'how?' and 'who?' rages hotter than ever. The unsolved problems of our societies and the world require ever more creativity as well as knowledge to address, which puts an even greater premium on education. It follows that the power to make educational decisions is also more consequential than ever before. The democratic goals of education – liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect among people – remain unchanged in essence but those goals have, if anything, grown in urgency.

As I wrote in the Epilogue to *Democratic Education*, to make democracy work, the civic minimum goals of education include not only literacy and numeracy, but also toleration and nondiscrimination across religions, races, genders, sexualities, and abilities; respect for individual rights and legitimate laws; the ability to articulate and the courage to stand up for one's publicly defensible convictions; the ability to deliberate with others and be open-minded about politically relevant issues; and the ability to evaluate the performance of officeholders. In short, the democratic goals of education seek to prepare people with what they need to live freely and engage productively in a liberal democratic society.

Given the seismic civic and political shifts we are witnessing even in some of the most stable democratic nations around the world – trends toward tribalism, sharply polarized partisanship, retreats from civic-mindedness, and resurgent specters of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Islamic rhetoric – we would do well to revisit the importance of the democratic goals of education. It is also more urgent than ever to explore the full range of effective means for realizing these goals, beginning with how to make the value of education more real – which also means it must be more affordable – to more people.

What skills and virtues to be cultivated in future citizens do you consider most important to the ‘conscious social reproduction’ you articulate in *Democratic Education*?

Foremost among the skills and virtues necessary for conscious social reproduction – which is not mindless replication but rather mindful change over time – are those of deliberation. Future citizens need both the tools and the motivation to attend to different – sometimes vastly different – perspectives and to be able to discern what a society should maintain or change, and why. The cultivation of truth-seeking and truth-telling, tolerance and mutual respect, the skills and virtues of robust yet reasoned debate, a willingness to forge and support beneficial compromises in decision-making, and a basic understanding of the value of deliberation – as well as its limits – all are keys to improving pluralist democratic societies.

We also must not lose sight of the role of educators themselves, citizens whose religious, political, and social commitments have already been shaped even if not fully formed. To remain vibrant and productive, democracies rely on a loop that begins not only with the young people who are to be taught, but with the adults who will teach them. We need to attend to the same sets of skills and virtues that can be cultivated – or in the negative case, undermined – by civic associations, for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, the mass media and social media, and the many political institutions.

You have written extensively on citizenship education, for example, in your widely quoted article ‘Civic Education and Social Diversity’. What is the most pressing problem facing citizenship education today?

Addressing the increasing political polarization and economic divides in and across our societies is the most pressing problem facing education for citizenship and for individual well-being more generally. We cannot afford to continue losing ground in fostering and disseminating mutual respect for different ways of life and different points of view. In many places, liberal democracies have retreated from earlier gains they made in toleration, respect, and understanding across divides. We see it in the rise of hate crimes in the United States and throughout much of Europe. We see it in the decreased valuing of freedom of speech. We see it in the way democratic adversaries treat one another as enemies rather than competitors in democratic politics. We see it in bullying in schools and workplaces. We see it in the hardening of far-right and far-left politics, the widening of the gulf in between, and in corrosive distrust of sources of information and once-respected institutions.

At the same time, we have not only witnessed but have been agents pressing hard for more equal freedoms and opportunities for women, people of color, LGBTQ, and other vulnerable individuals and minority groups. Dire poverty around the world – a primary barrier to life itself, never mind citizenship education – also has decreased over the past decade.

The stakes for democracies in overcoming these barriers to life, liberty, and basic opportunity and to forging ahead with civic education for all individuals, couldn’t be higher. Without the fundamental skills and values needed to perpetuate and improve a democracy, citizens cannot effectively partake in evaluating elected officials and

policies, or engage with one another on matters of mutual concern and importance. I wrote in 'Civic Education and Social Diversity' that a well-constituted democracy requires citizens to understand and respect – without necessarily accepting – opposing perspectives. We need to exercise critical judgment in taking up unpopular ideas. We need to respect reasonable points if we robustly – yes, even vehemently – disagree with them, and we need to be law-abiding in the face of legitimately enacted public policies from which we dissent. We should carefully examine the many factors that have contributed to the retreats we have witnessed from toleration and mutual respect across divides, but we must not overlook the central role that a keen focus on civic education can play in helping to turn the tide.

What are the implications of your work on deliberative democracy and identity politics for education?

As I wrote in *Identity in Democracy*, individual freedom is an important part of democratic justice. An inescapable part of life throughout a democratic society is the free association of individuals who join a wide range of groups, including identity groups based on religion, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, partisan politics and national origin, to name just a few of the many identities that variously unite and divide people into discernible groups. Classroom education is not immune to the forces of identity politics, some of which I have argued are good, others bad, and still others extremely ugly from any ethical perspective.

The right to free association ends where injustice to others begins. Take group bullying of vulnerable students in school settings, for example. Bullying is often an extremely ugly, ostracizing form of identity politics. Its presence in schools calls upon parents and teachers to find the most effective educational means, first and foremost, to try to prevent it from arising, and second, to combat it quickly whenever it does arise. As a means of prevention, carefully designed deliberative exercises can engage students in actual decision-making based upon vivid examples of how they can get drawn into bullying or resist it. These exercises can help motivate students to resist bullying, urge others to resist, come to the aid of those who are bullied, and find the resources to aid themselves if they become the bullied.

This is just one example of many that can bring deliberative skills and virtues to bear on bridging the divides of identity politics in a way that is educational at its core. A free people have multiple identities that are open to alterable interpretations based upon our socialization, education, and deliberations over time with many others. When it comes to making democratic decisions, no more effective or respectful means has yet to be found for imperfect individuals to make the most just decisions possible than deliberation that is iterative over time.

Diversity has been another issue you have written about widely. Why is diversity educationally important?

In education and elsewhere, diversity and excellence go hand-in-hand. As Penn's President, I have a welcome responsibility to champion increased diversity as a

necessary and desirable step toward building an academic community at its best, where people from all different lived experiences and parts of the world share different perspectives and inform broader world views. By increasing all intellectually and socially productive forms of diversity, I am putting into practice lessons from the Epilogue to *Democratic Education*: When joined together in a robust and respectful learning environment, students who represent a rich diversity of religions and socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural and political orientations, races and ethnicities, and genders and sexualities help to facilitate better understanding and better ideas for improving their own individual lives and the lives of our societies and our world.

Diversity done right also encompasses historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups and individuals who otherwise have had inequitable access to educational opportunity. To open doors of equal opportunity for all people is the just thing to do and in keeping with fundamental democratic values.

Has there been any idea from *Democratic Education* that you have implemented in your work as president of the University of Pennsylvania?

During my time as Penn's President, I've made it my highest priority to increase access to educational opportunity for the most talented, hardest working students from all walks of life, a goal that aligns with deliberative democratic values. We have increased the proportion of our over 10,000 undergraduate students who will be the first generation in their families to graduate college from 1 in 20 to 1 in 8, while also significantly increasing gender, ethnic, racial, religious, sexual orientation, and geographic diversity. I've also encouraged and practiced a deliberative approach to university leadership to further Penn's tripartite mission of creating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge. Deliberation and collaboration work far better than command-and-control approaches even in large organizations that are not themselves democracies, and all the more so within universities. I have found multiple ways of deliberating with our many different constituents – faculty, students, staff, alumni, community members, and public officials – on different issues. Giving Penn's many constituents a voice in our deliberations has enabled us to move forward as one in increasing access and opportunity, advancing multidisciplinary creativity and innovation, and making the greatest positive impact on the lives of local, national, and global communities.

What has been the main legacy of *Democratic Education* for theorizing about education?

My hope is that its lasting legacy is twofold. The first is a keenly renewed focus on our understanding the vital roles that education plays in democracy and democracy in education. The second is an enhanced ability for – along with an avid commitment to – identifying ways of translating educational theory into democratic practice. An early mentor and among the greatest political philosophers of the twentieth century, John Rawls, called the provisional resting point of a productive movement back and forth between theory and practice 'reflective equilibrium'. The hard work of theorizing

democratic education informs the even harder work of putting as many of its lessons as possible into practice. From my time spent chairing President Obama's Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues to my 14 years as Penn's President, I've tried to move productive deliberations into policies and practices that improve upon the status quo and ultimately improve lives.

The 2nd edition of *Democratic Education* [published in 1999] appeared with a new epilogue on multiculturalism. Would you consider adding anything if a 3rd edition of *Democratic Education* were published?

I would underscore even more strongly the symbiotic values of freedom and opportunity, and of mutual respect and robust disagreement. All of the most effective pathways to realizing these values are paved by democratic education.

Is there any element of *Democratic Education* that you would consider revising or developing further. If 'yes', why?

I would focus more on protections against bullying and group think, while recognizing the positive contributions of democratic deliberation and big data. I would also underscore in my discussion of 'Back to Basics' the absolutely critical importance of imparting the value of veracity that is more easily put under assault through social media platforms that can make lies go viral in a matter of minutes. A democratic society requires an informed citizenry, and when confusion and 'truthiness' become the norm, the foundations of democracy are eroded. Whether you call it fake news, disinformation, or propaganda, it is a deep threat to society.

I would also delve into how we might protect ourselves and our societies against these and other new technologies that make it even easier for all of us to succumb to our own confirmation biases. For example, in France's most recent presidential election, Facebook and Google announced plans to partner with nonprofit First Draft News to launch a verification project called 'CrossCheck'. Google also announced plans to work with students at France's top journalism schools in advanced techniques for identifying fake news. Online, valuable, and free resources like Penn's Factcheck.org, urban-legend busting Snopes, and Pulitzer Prize-winning Politifact are robust resources widely available in helping everybody separate fact from fiction.

One final question: Is there any issue in contemporary discussions about education that you think deserves more attention?

Teaching children how to protect themselves from the destructive tendencies and negative biases fostered by social media. We must also focus on the responsibility of educators to teach essential interpersonal skills in the context of the power of the Internet and social media.

On the bright side, there is also enormous democratic potential created by a proliferation of accessible news outlets. They provide a means of expanding opportunity for broader democratic participation. But we have more work to do in figuring out how the

new media can be more informational and educational – and less misleading and distracting. Foundational to an excellent education is learning to efficiently locate, accurately evaluate, and clearly communicate factual information. In the age of 24-hour news cycles and ideological bubbles fueled by social media, the major social media players, political institutions, and yes, great universities have a responsibility to aid in developing tools that promote information literacy and combat confirmation biases.

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