Articulating political knowledge in deliberation

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Abstract

Deliberative democrats have examined the potential for deliberation to improve the knowledge levels of citizens. This has resulted in a body of literature that examines the knowledge effects of deliberation based largely on subjecting participants in deliberative events to ‘civics tests’ before and after deliberation. In this paper we argue that there is a need to critically interrogate what constitutes political knowledge and hence to reconsider appropriate methodologies for its detection in the deliberative context. We contend that there is a need to research the expression of knowledge in deliberation. To examine how this can be achieved we draw on empirical work on face to face deliberation (the deliberative exchange) to highlight ways in which knowledge is expressed in the act of deliberating.

1. Introduction

The theory and practice of deliberative democracy has attracted considerable attention from political scientists in recent years. The reason for this increasing interest in this form of communication has multiple roots. These include concern about the effectiveness of representative democracy as a decision making system, the possibility of stimulating increased interest and participation in politics, and concern for the conditions under which citizens are engaged in decision making processes¹.

In this paper we focus on a particular rationale for the development of deliberative techniques advanced in particular by proponents of deliberative polling² - namely, that deliberation has the potential to increase knowledge levels and hence improve the conditions under which individuals
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make political decisions. This rationale is based on the proposition that on the whole people are relatively uninformed about policy and politics. Where decisions are being made in the context of a lack of knowledge we might reasonably expect that these are not properly informed decisions and may not reflect individuals ‘true’ interests.

The case for deliberative polling as a type of deliberative institution therefore draws on a series of arguments concerning low levels of knowledge in the mass electorate, the potential for the act of deliberation to increase knowledge levels and hence it’s potential to alter policy preferences. This paper takes this argument for deliberative polling as a starting point for a discussion of the epistemological basis of current approaches to researching the relationship between knowledge and deliberation. We argue that existing discussion relies too much on a conception of knowledge as the possession and articulation of discrete ‘facts’. Consequently methodologies for assessing or measuring knowledge rely of the ability to recall decontextualised pieces of information about the formal political sphere. These ‘civics test’ approaches use structured interviews and self completion questionnaires which are administered before and after deliberation to ‘measure’ changes in levels of knowledge.

In this paper we draw attention to the way that knowledge is expressed in the act of deliberating. We therefore propose an alternative epistemological and methodological basis for the study of knowledge and deliberation to the civics test approach, which we term the ‘deliberative content approach’. This approach relies on the argument that knowledge is expressed and constituted through the narratives that emerge in deliberation. Through studying the content of deliberative conversation we aim not only to demonstrate how instances of the recall of facts and figures can be isolated but more importantly to argue that knowledge is temporally and spatially situated.

Furthermore, this individual knowledge emerges in the act of deliberation because communication
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between individuals stimulates the expression of knowledge and provides opportunities to identify shared knowledge in a way which the ‘civics tests’ do not. We argue that each individual possesses a unique fund of knowledge that emerges through the act of deliberation. This knowledge is not easily amenable to a structured test or a predefined set of questions. However, we are not arguing that the civics test should be abandoned in the study of the relationship between knowledge and deliberation. Rather we contend that alternative approaches need to be developed to further stimulate debate on what constitutes political knowledge and how its expression can be understood.

In the first section of the paper we examine the existing literature on the relationship between deliberation and political knowledge. Here we find that at least under certain conditions deliberation can be argued to increase the knowledge levels of participants even if important questions remain as to why this is so. The existing literature makes the case for deliberation as benefiting representative democracy based on its educative effects. It seems there is a positive knowledge effect for the individuals participating and hence, ultimately, for the polity as a whole.

In the second section we consider in more detail the methodologies employed in measuring political knowledge in the deliberative context and its contemporary definition in political science. We argue that the dominant civics test approach relies on a set of assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and an approach to its measurement. Examining the critical literature on this approach we highlight how it ignores some potentially important aspects of the expression of knowledge. In particular we argue that a fuller conceptualisation of the role of knowledge in deliberation requires that it is studied in the deliberative process, as well as being measured before and after a deliberative event.
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In the third section we take an example from recent empirical work on the deliberative process in order to set out an alternative epistemological and methodological approach to the study of the relationship between knowledge and deliberation. We examine the kinds of ways in which an individual expresses knowledge of politics and policy in the course of discussion. Our aim is to demonstrate how the content of deliberative events can be used to study the way that people articulate political knowledge in deliberation.

2. Deliberative democracy and political knowledge

What does the current research tell us about the relationship between deliberation and knowledge? Proponents of deliberative democracy claim that the act of deliberation has educative effects resulting in increased levels of knowledge amongst deliberators. This educative effect is argued to be important to the political process as it potentially impacts on voter preferences. As Fishkin et al. contend:

While there is disagreement about how much the lack of information and interest affects people’s views, it is possible that voting preferences would be noticeably different if everyone was more knowledgeable about, attentive to and reflexive about the issues involved.

In deliberating it is hoped that citizens will develop informed, or more reflective, preferences than would otherwise be the case. However, while in theory it may seem intuitive that deliberation will result in increased knowledge levels it is worth examining in detail how deliberation might promote political knowledge.
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Eveland suggests three explanations for the educative effects of deliberation. These are exposure to others’ knowledge, paying more attention to the media in the expectation of deliberation, and more effective information processing in the act of deliberation. First, discussion will expose co-deliberators to the information that the other person can provide. However, there is a problem with this explanation for the acquisition of knowledge. If we assume that the majority of people have a low level of knowledge, deliberation will often take place in the ‘absence of political information’ or ‘at worst considerable misinformation’.

The other two theories do not rely on the transfer of knowledge between co-deliberators but rather on the less direct benefits of deliberation. In preparing to deliberate people will pay more attention to the issues that they know they will be asked to discuss. Furthermore, in preparation for making a judgement on the issue at hand it seems feasible that people will process information more effectively while they are deliberating. Increases in knowledge levels could therefore either reflect preparation undertaken before the deliberative event or the imperative to reach a judgement on an issue. While Eveland still argues, on the basis of empirical work, that there is a relationship between deliberation and improved levels of political knowledge it remains unclear how this relationship works. However, it seems unlikely, where there is an absence of knowledge on the part of one or more co-deliberators, that talking alone will have educative impacts on participants. Therefore, as Cooke argues there is need to carefully consider what it is about deliberation as opposed to participation in any collective event which stimulates people to acquire knowledge.

While deliberation may or may not increase the amount of factual information that the participant is exposed to Gastil and Dillard argue that deliberation enhances political sophistication based on studies of the National Issues Forums in the USA. In this context sophistication is understood as the ability to make more ‘coherent’, ‘integrated’ and ‘differentiated’ political judgements and
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demonstrating less attitudinal uncertainty. Furthermore, Luskin et al. and Fishkin and Luskin in
evaluations of different deliberative polls in the UK and USA found that, following participation in
such exercises, people are stimulated to learn more about politics generally and score better in
knowledge tests. Bennet et al.’s study of political talk also provides evidence that discussing
politics is related to possessing political knowledge. Based on statistical data from multiple election
studies they conclude that ‘reports of how often respondents had talked about politics were a
statistically significant predictor of the level of political information’. However, while a
relationship exists the research did not probe the question of whether discussion was a cause or
effect of knowledge noting only that it is likely that ‘discussion directly or indirectly encourages
learning’.

Other research also suggests that there is cause for treating claims of educative effects of
deliberation critically. Denver et al. in their study of one type of deliberative opinion poll, the
Granada 500 in the UK, found no evidence that deliberation significantly affected the quality and
nature of participant’s beliefs on the issues discussed. Furthermore, they found that participants
knowledge of certain political ‘facts’ had actually decreased. Addressing the findings from the
Denver et al. study Gastil and Dillard argue that the differences in effects on participants between
the National Issues Forum and the Granada 500 is explained by the relative levels of discussion that
took place in the two different settings. The context which Denver et al. reported on relied more on
giving participants information and less on collective discussion in contrast to the deliberation
centred institution of the National Issues Fora. While the actual amount of communication between
participants in the Granada 500 exercise was relatively limited it is likely that deliberation alone is
not a panacea for the tackling the perceived problem of low knowledge levels.
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Merkle\textsuperscript{20} also sounds a cautionary note in his analysis of the National Issues Convention (NIC) deliberative poll held in Austin, Texas and organised by James Fishkin. Only nine out of eighty four questions in the survey of participants conducted before and after deliberation related directly to knowledge. Therefore, while the knowledge effects of deliberation are an important aspect of the arguments offered for deliberative democracy, the evidence of the knowledge impacts of deliberation is not yet conclusive.

In the following section we critically examine the methodologies currently employed in the study of political knowledge. We argue that the existing research is based on epistemological assumptions both about what constitutes knowledge and about appropriate techniques for its measurement. While these techniques may be appropriate for the measurement of certain types of knowledge in the study of the mass electorate there is a need to extend the study of the relationship between deliberation and knowledge beyond these conceptual and methodological confines.

3. Detecting political knowledge

The existing literature on political knowledge is overwhelmingly quantitative in nature and based on the study of the mass electorate. This body of research relies on a variety of techniques for detecting the presence or absence of knowledge\textsuperscript{21}, however, the most popular way of measuring the political knowledge of the mass electorate relies on some form of ‘civics test’. In these exercises people are asked to name politicians and public figures in addition to recalling certain ‘indisputable’ facts about the political system. In a UK example of a civics test study Martin \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{22} developed a short quiz for the measurement of political knowledge. This included items on the number of Members of Parliament, time allowed between general elections, whether or not the electoral system was based on proportional representation and whether or not women were allowed to sit in the House of Lords.
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In addition Delli Carpini and Keeter\(^\text{23}\) provide a widely cited example of the study of knowledge levels amongst the American electorate in the post war era and Baker \textit{et al.}\(^\text{24}\) have used such techniques in studies of the Canadian and various European electorates. While these studies indicate that using this methodology levels of political knowledge between nation states do vary the common message is that the level of knowledge demonstrated is relatively low. For example Bennett\(^\text{25}\) in his study of the American electorate based on the 1984 National Election Study classifies 29\% of the study participants as ‘know nothings’. Further studies of the 1988 and 1992 elections resulted in similarly low scores.

However, these seemingly straightforward tests of knowledge of politics and politicians have attracted a series of methodological criticisms. For example, Mondak\(^\text{26}\) highlights the complexities of measuring knowledge through tests of ability to recall facts. This critique rests on the way that wrong and ‘don’t know’ answers are treated in the same way when ‘to be uninformed and misinformed represent different behaviour states’\(^\text{27}\). This is one example of the way in which the collection and interpretation of the statistics that such exercises produce have been challenged. However, there is also cause to question the utility of the whole civics test approach.

The difficulties in researching the presence or absence of political knowledge highlights the need to critically reflect on what it is to be politically knowledgeable, what this knowledge would consist of and how it could be detected. These issues suggest a series of potential criticisms of the concept of political knowledge and the existing methodological approaches to its measurement. \textit{First}, the dominant approach only reflects one aspect of the kind of abilities and behaviours we might want citizens to demonstrate if they are to make informed choices. It is a partial concept that potentially privileges cognitive recall over the ability to analyse, criticise and differentiate. \textit{Second}, it is vital to question whether the types of knowledge that are being tested in conventional studies of political
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knowledge test the kinds of knowledge that are most important. Following Frazer and Macdonald\(^\text{28}\) we might ask whether an ability to recall the names of leaders, constitutional rules and party positions are ‘relevant to democracy’\(^\text{29}\) or whether people can make informed choices without necessarily being able to recall the name of the Home Secretary. \textit{Third}, respondents tend not to be probed about their values or their understandings of concepts. These values and concepts form a vital contextual component to the expression of knowledge and can also be understood as forms of knowledge in themselves. \textit{Fourth}, knowledge tests tend to be focused on the national political arena and imply an understanding of politics as the formal conduct of government. This often excludes knowledge of local, regional or European government or the ‘informal’ sphere of interest group politics, community activism, social movements and households.

The most comprehensive critique of existing research on political knowledge has been developed by Doris Graber. Graber\(^\text{30}\) has argued that information tests are flawed because the technique does not give voters full credit for what they do know. This is because there is a mismatch between what politicians and the media think the public ought to know about and what the public is interested in and therefore does know about\(^\text{31}\). Hence, ‘although most people earn low scores when they are quizzed about political facts during surveys, it is also a well-established fact that most people do possess a large fund of useable political knowledge’\(^\text{32}\). Graber advocates asking open ended questions which do not require the ability to recall names and figures but which do allow people to express what they know about politics. Focus group research indicates what people are capable of in conversational settings. Therefore:

when ordinary people discuss major political issues using their own words and perspectives – African-Americans, Latinos, and poor people – display political insight and cognitive complexity in addressing major political issues that they regard as matters of concern\(^\text{33}\).
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One possible response to the concerns of the critics of the civics test is therefore to use a range of techniques in the study of political knowledge. As Bennett\textsuperscript{34} observes, ‘a systematic effort to incorporate multiple approaches, combining data from surveys, interviews, experiments and focus groups would help resolve debates over methodology’. There is an existing case for further examining the role of qualitative research in the study of political knowledge to complement and develop the analysis that has been produced from quantitative studies of the mass electorate.

In the previous section, we noted that deliberative democrats involved in the development of deliberative polling are interested in the potential for deliberation, as a form of political communication, to result in increased knowledge levels. In this section, we have examined the ways in which political knowledge is currently understood and researched. The literature on the knowledge effects of deliberative polling relies largely on the civics test approach developed for the study of knowledge levels in the mass electorate. However, we have also highlighted the criticisms of this research approach which suggest that it takes a rather limited view of knowledge and places its expression in something of a methodological straightjacket. The study of political knowledge needs to extend its epistemological and methodological terrain to understand a broader range of types of political knowledge.

The process of methodological extension can be achieved in the context of studying the relationship between political knowledge and deliberation. Over recent years the deliberative poll has been one of several deliberative fora that have been developed to institutionalise the deliberative process and apply theories of deliberative democracy to the political and policy process. Analysing the texts of such deliberative events potentially provides a wealth of material on the kinds of knowledge that people do possess and express in the act of deliberation. In the following section we therefore
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examine the material from a particular experiment in deliberative communication to analyse instances where political knowledge was expressed.

4. Political knowledge in the deliberative exchange

In order to examine the expression of political knowledge in deliberation we use the results of a recent piece of research on one to one deliberation. In what we termed ‘deliberative exchanges’ people from different social and educational (and hence presumably knowledge) backgrounds were brought together in order to discuss environmental issues. The project involved six academic scientists and six members of the public resident in the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. Each participant met each person from the other group once in a facilitated one to one meeting. In each meeting a different environmental issue was discussed. The content of the exchanges reflected an interest not only in the nature of the environmental issue but also issues of governance and, in particular, governmental responses to specific environmental challenges. It was left to the individuals participating to decide what, if any information or knowledge, they introduced to the discussion. The exchanges were facilitated by a researcher who had information on the issue and specific questions to pose if required. However, if the participants were raising their own issues and questions without prompting from the facilitator she did not intervene but allowed the discussion to continue in an unstructured way. If the facilitator judged that the discussion could benefit from the introduction of relevant information then this was done. The discussions lasted for approximately one hour with the research project, including individual interviews with the participants before their first exchange and after their final exchange, conducted over a ten month period in 2004. In this section we analyse some examples of the expression of political knowledge by one individual in the study to highlight a series of points about the expression of knowledge in deliberation. In short we outline a deliberative content approach.
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Through analysing the contributions of one of the non-scientists in our study (Henry) we illustrate how knowledge is expressed in the particular spatial and temporal contexts that constitute the dynamic environment of that individual. Henry articulated his knowledge of politics in a way that privileged a sense of himself as a resident of a particular locality and with a specific set of experiences of policy and politics in this place over time. His knowledge was not expressed as discrete facts (although there was a factual component in terms of awareness of distinct policies and pieces of legislation) but rather as an unfolding narrative on the actions of the local authority and its relationship to particular groups of residents over time. Early in the exchanges he set himself up as someone who was active in the local community. He was willing to engage with the local authority often as a critic, but also through involvement in various groups and schemes. Henry’s account of the current and past record of Newcastle City Council began as something of a tirade:

…it infuriates me and maddens me when I see the councillors’ meetings. I mean I started going to the residents’ meetings in 1992 when I moved in…topics that was brought up at a residents’ meeting then about the environment, about rubbish getting dumped in the back streets…it’s still the main complaint now…and it’s just ohhh maddening. When you get the council sitting in these meetings and saying, ‘yeah, er, residents will be fined, people will be fined for putting rubbish out on back lanes’…and an hour after the bins have been cleaned…emptied and the back lanes swept up. An hour later, you can see rubbish chucked out…and nothing happens.

This negative evaluation of the council was reiterated numerous times in the exchanges and interviews. His criticisms of the local authority form a key part of the self-construction of Henry as
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someone who is active in the local community, someone who speaks up but also takes action. This willingness to act was shown in his involvement in hospital volunteering, charity fundraising, a Neighbourhood watch scheme and a wood recycling initiative. These experiences are constantly brought up in the course of his discussions. He relates the themes that emerge on the different environmental issues to these experiences. For example, he relates anecdotes about people he has met in hospitals and while raising money for charities in Newcastle city centre which begin to reveal his account of human nature and his relationship with society at large.

As the exchanges progressed Henry continued to develop the narrative on his experiences with the local authority through the issues raised in conversation with the different scientists. In response to one of his co-deliberators’ complaints about the state of the pavements in the city Henry relates that:

I had an accident about three years ago with loose paving stones and I’ve recently lost a case because Newcastle City Council say they check their paving stones every six months…what a *!@? load of *!@?

His experience prompts an evaluative judgement about the city council which relies on the knowledge of institutional action (or in this case inaction) gained through living with a disability. Both the evaluation and the knowledge are revealed only because both parties to the conversation have the shared experience of coping with disability in the particular geographical context of Newcastle city centre. Further material on Henry’s relationship with the local authority comes later in the same exchange when conversation turns to major redevelopment plans in the area of Newcastle in which Henry lives:
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In the West End there’s big plans in the area, as we mentioned, there’s trams to come through but there’s a lot of undercover work… the resident’s feel the council’s not being totally honest with the residents about what’s going on in the West End. For the last few years it’s been ‘they’re coming down in six months, no they’re not’ but now we have a definite promise from the council.

But while expressing scepticism about the council’s methods Henry remains supportive of the actual plans commenting:

I think there is some exciting events going to take place in the West End with the tramlines coming through to link up with the metro which would be good.

At other times Henry points to instances where he supports the Council’s approach, nuancing his evaluations according to the specific topic under discussion. Henry’s narrative is not one dimensional or unsophisticated, it recognises that the Council’s performance varies and is worthy of his support in certain respects:

The council are interested in it (a wood recycling scheme with which he is involved), really interested… and they are going to give us all the backing they can when we’ve got set up… so there, I’ve got praise for the council on that score but not on the clearing up kind of thing

Newcastle City Council they were going to have their vehicles environmentally friendly… which is a really good start… so let’s hope other councils take notice and do the same.
The theme of local level action and inaction is raised by Henry in his communications with most of the scientists. Sometimes his responses took the nature of a polemic, at other times he calmly focuses on the specifics of his experiences. The clarity of expression and the depth of knowledge that he can demonstrate were clear in the final exchange, from which the quote below is taken. He began by claiming that several years ago the council never talked to residents about plans for redevelopment but came under increasing pressure as a result of local lobbying until:

“We objected to plans that the council were going to draw up, had debate and debate with the council. And residents did finally swing the council back round to our way of thinking on most of the points. Fair enough we gave in on some of the points but consultation is good on every aspect of anything that’s going to be developed…and I know the residents in our place now, on our estate, we are consulted all the time by the local council. There did seem to be a pretty good consultation process in the development that’s gone on near us.”

In this passage Henry is clearly analysing the approach that the City Council is taking, differentiating between the strategies that it has employed over time. At no point does he articulate knowledge of Council structures or the names of members but he does examine their practices based on the empirical experience of residents on his estate. Inadvertently he is highlighting a change in the way that local governance is practised that has been the subject of sustained academic analysis over the last decade on the part of social scientists not only in Newcastle but across the UK\textsuperscript{36}.

His cumulative comments on the local authority express a particular conception of their role as possessing certain responsibilities for public services and for effective communication with
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residents. Furthermore, implicit in his views on the local authority and himself as an active resident are a set of personal values in which notions of community, altruism and the importance of collective action are brought to the fore. At several points he tells his co-deliberator that he was a mining union official pointing, not to the political activism that this might be thought to imply, but highlighting the responsibilities it brought in looking after other miners and their families, sorting out others’ problems and providing for their long term well being. For Henry social and political values are indistinguishable.

Also noticeable in Henry’s deliberations is an intolerance of certain types of behaviour. This results in an authoritian and rather uncompromising attitude to those who do not comply with the law or even with his standards of ‘good behaviour’. In one exchange he shows awareness of recent government legislation on anti-social behaviour but expresses doubts about its effectiveness because of the severity of the approaches needed to deal with such individuals and families:

It happens everywhere, people spoil the area, people who don’t give a monkey’s about it…all those people should be sent to a deserted island somewhere, build an estate for them…unsociable people…vandals, wreckers and things like that…yeah build an estate for these people who don’t give a damn.

From analysing Henry’s narrative on the local authority and his position on the localised politics of his neighbourhood we get a clear sense of where he stands on particular issues of interest to him. These are linked to particular policy agendas around sustainability, anti-social behaviour and regeneration. Henry only rarely expresses knowledge or opinions on politics at a national or international scale. On the one occasion that he demonstrates detailed knowledge of a national issue it relates to the 1981 miners’ strike (at which time he was working at a colliery in the Durham
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coalfield). The issue is raised in conversation with a scientist who has academic expertise in mining engineering and personal experience of living in a mining community (P). Again, Henry’s knowledge was generated as a response to the immediacies of supporting his own family, through an explicit relationship between the political actions of the UK government and the National Union of Mineworkers and his own domestic circumstances. The immediacy of politics to his life at this time results in an enduring knowledge that emerges through his conversation with P:

H: It was a hate campaign against the miners with the Tory government … it started in 1973, and I’ve always said this, and Scargill in his wisdom fell into the Tory’s trap
P: If he added on six months and started it in October he’d have won. I mean you don’t start a national strike in March
H: coal stocks were high
P: cause she had been artificially stacking it up as well
H: yes, Scargill walked straight into a trap … but he wanted to do what Joe Gormley done in nineteen seventy-three and that was bring the Tory government down.

Again Henry is providing an analysis which implicitly relies on the tacit knowledge that is the result of experience. Values and opinions that stem from experience are inseparable from the discrete items of knowledge (such as the names of mining union leaders, dates etc). As Acre and Long argue:

Knowledge is constituted by the ways in which people categorize, code, process and impute meaning to their experiences
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Knowledge is not merely the discovery and articulation of pure facts decontextualised from the experiences in which it was learned or understood but something that everybody can at least claim to possess even if there are grounds for contestation.

In order for these forms of knowledge to be expressed the situation requires communication with somebody who has shared the experience of living through the 1981 miners strike. It is not a conversation that either one of them could have with someone with no knowledge or experience of the strike but relies on each of them supplying information and opinion. P and Henry have shared a common experience of being involved in the 1981 strike but their experiences were different in that they were in very different jobs and at different stages of their lives. These similarities and differences were apparent through deliberation. The emergence of this knowledge relies on the formation of a relationship between Henry and P based on having a common interest in mining from different occupational (and generational) perspectives. In short this is not knowledge that could easily emerge in a questionnaire or interview context (unless the researcher knew to, and how to, probe this area). It is knowledge that emerges through the act of deliberation and demonstrates a major appeal of the deliberative content approach.

Henry is knowledgeable about politics at the scales and times at which he ‘chooses’ to be engaged with it. These ‘choices’ are often the result of necessity as the actions and inactions of political institutions impact on his life. His knowledge is therefore largely localised and specialised, relating to individual experience in time and place. It could not be captured by a pre-defined set of questions as the recollections his knowledge relies upon are specific to Henry. Henry’s political knowledge also relies on the inter-connections between his experience of social, cultural and economic life and his values and actions.
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The knowledge that Henry possesses also relies on social interaction and communication for its expression. His knowledge emerges in the exchanges where he finds areas of common experience (although not always common values and opinions). These commonalities provide a context in which he can be confident in articulating both himself and his understanding of ‘politics’. His co-deliberator acts as both an audience and a stimulus for his narrative.

Conclusions

Knowledge is an important theme in the study of deliberation as it forms a major component of contemporary understandings of the possible role and advantages of deliberative techniques in representative democracies. However, more research is needed not only to further test the claim that there is a positive relationship between participation in deliberation and knowledge but also fundamentally to open up debates on what constitutes knowledge. We have suggested an alternative methodology in the deliberative content approach.

There are contrasting epistemologies at work in the civics test and deliberative content approaches. The civics test relies on an understanding of what constitutes knowledge that privileges the incontestable, the factual, the ‘objective’ and the discrete. The deliberative content approach implicitly rejects any artificial separation between the articulation of knowledge and the expression of values and opinions. In short knowledge is constituted through communication, through the messy and complex process of talking, reflecting and questioning. This is the knowledge that is the outcome of experiencing social, cultural and political life, expressed through narratives of this experience. The deliberative content approach relies on the claim that only through examining the discourse and narrative of individuals can we recognise knowledge that is spatially and temporally situated. The differing methodological approaches also result in different understandings of what
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constitutes politics. Whereas the civics test approach privileges knowledge of the national political arena as the locus of political life, the study of deliberation highlights the significance of power relations at local, neighbourhood and even household scales.

This paper has made a case for epistemological and methodological extension in studies of the relationship between knowledge and deliberation. In making this case we have drawn inspiration from other bodies of literature in the social sciences where the questions of the constitution, detection and reproduction of knowledge have shaped recent debates on its status and definition. The idea that all knowledge is situated or contextualised in the particular social, cultural and political arena in which it is produced is now familiar in social studies of science. Furthermore, there is an active research agenda in human geography in which the content of communication in focus groups or other deliberative arenas is used to examine the different knowledges of individuals. It seems odd to us that studies of political knowledge, especially in relation to deliberation and deliberative events have not taken more seriously these developments in the social sciences.

The types of knowledge of politics, policy and government demonstrated by participants in our research on deliberation were more diverse and broader than the specific types of information tested for in evaluations of deliberative polls. We do not have suitable data to be able to comment on whether the research resulted in increased levels of knowledge of the sorts that the deliberative poll studies sought to measure. But this is not the point of the paper. The argument we wish to make is that further studies of the relationship between deliberation and knowledge need to pay more critical attention to the question of what constitutes political knowledge and how it is expressed in the process of deliberating.
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Notes


2 The deliberative poll combines conventional opinion polling with public deliberation. It involves large groups of citizens with the biggest experiment in the USA (the National Issues Convention) involving 466 people selected to be representative of the population as a whole. The deliberative poll is a four stage process. First, the participant is asked to fill out a questionnaire, which includes questions about personal background, general political knowledge, knowledge of the issue to be discussed, and opinions and preferences concerning that issue. The second stage involves dissemination of information to all participants. Each participant is expected to have read this information prior to the third stage. The third stage is an event where participants meet each other, question witnesses and discuss (in small groups and plenary sessions) the chosen issue. The final stage involves a questionnaire that aims to evaluate both whether their knowledge of the issue has increased and whether, following their deliberations, their opinions and preferences have changed. This is not to suggest that knowledge is not discussed in evaluations and studies of other deliberative events. The focus is on deliberative polling because of the prominence of arguments about the importance of knowledge and the analysis of knowledge levels in the current evaluative literature.

3 We define deliberation as a communicative setting in which two or more people discuss an issue of social, political and/or ethical salience and where information is introduced either before or during discussion. This definition of deliberation is consistent with the emphasis placed on ‘interpersonal communication’ by Eveland. In this sense deliberative events or settings include both those developed by political scientists, such as deliberative polling and those which have a broader social science and policy application including consensus conferences, citizens’ juries and, under certain conditions, focus groups.


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8 W.P. Eveland, ibid, p.179

9 W.P. Eveland, ibid, p.190


15 S.E. Bennett and R.S. Flickinger, ibid, p.117

16 S.E. Bennett and R.S. Flickinger, ibid, p.119


18 The Granada 500 was a televised event which occurred in the run up to the general election of 1992. The focus of the programme was on allowing citizens to receive information and question politicians rather than on small group discussions. It is therefore worth questioning whether this exercise equates very well with the deliberative poll process developed by Fishkin and his associates which places more emphasis on group discussion.


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26 J.J. Mondak, ‘Reconsidering the measurement of political knowledge’, Political Analysis, 8, 1999, pp.57 – 82

27 J.J. Mondak, ibid p.59


29 E. Frazer and K. Macdonald, ibid, p.68


31 D.A. Graber, ibid p.340

32 D.A. Graber, ibid p.341


35 The topic areas were: local environment, genetic modification, climate change, energy, animals and biodiversity and land use and the countryside.


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