Storytelling and Deliberative Play in the Oregon Citizens’ Assembly Online Pilot on COVID-19 Recovery

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Abstract
This article draws on the deliberative play framework to examine empirical examples of storytelling in an online deliberative forum: The Oregon Citizen Assembly (ORCA) Pilot on COVID-19 Recovery. ORCA engaged 36 citizens in deliberation about state policy through an online deliberative process spanning seven weeks. Drawing on literature on small stories in deliberation, we trace stories related to a policy proposal about paying parents to educate children at home. Our analysis demonstrates that storytelling activities accomplish aspects of deliberative play through introducing uncertainty, resisting premature closure, and promoting an “as if” frame that allows groups to explore the scope and implications of proposals. Forum design influences interaction and our analysis suggests that technology use and timing are key design features that can facilitate or inhibit deliberative play.

Keywords
COVID-19, deliberation, language and social interaction, small stories, storytelling

Introduction
Over the past several decades, groups and communities have engaged in deliberative democracy to help them address complex public problems. Deliberation has been employed in a wide range of contexts around the globe, and has garnered interest from a large, interdisciplinary group of scholars (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Communication

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scholars, in particular, have examined deliberation by looking closely at some of the different communication practices involved, such as group facilitation, decision making, argument giving, question asking, and storytelling (Gastil & Black, 2018). Although deliberation is typically framed around policy questions, participants often relay stories of their own experiences, or the experiences of others, as they are weighing information and discussing policy proposals. As Ryfe (2006) noted, when people come together and are asked to deliberate, they tell a lot of stories.

We find the research on storytelling to be of particular interest to questions of deliberative play because stories shift interlocutors’ attention a bit away from the topic of discussion and toward some other set of events. In this way stories can disrupt the analytic work of deliberation and introduce some uncertainty or even fantasy into the discussion. Storytelling can help groups accomplish some deliberative functions by inviting perspective-taking (Black, 2008), presenting arguments (Ryfe, 2006), and helping participants establish and negotiate identities (Black, 2008; Sprain & Hughes, 2015). Storytelling also occurs interactionally during deliberative events. Hearing a story can prompt participants to share a story of their own, and stories can be revisited later in the discussion in new contexts.

As scholars of deliberation and storytelling, we see connections between the playfulness and interactivity of storytelling and Robert Craig’s concept of deliberative play. In this article we explore how storytelling can accomplish aspects of deliberative play by examining storytelling activities in a series of online deliberative meetings that occurred in the state of Oregon during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. We begin by situating our research in the literature on deliberation, deliberative play, and storytelling in deliberative forums. We then describe our data and analytic approach of studying small stories and deliberative play in the Oregon Citizens’ Assembly online pilot on COVID-19 recovery. Finally, we present our findings and discuss their implications for deliberative practice, research, and continued development of the deliberative play framework.

Review of Literature

When Robert Craig (2023) introduced the deliberative play framework, he called for empirical research to test his speculation. This article answers that call by applying the concept of deliberative play to a corpus of data generated from storytelling episodes during a series of online deliberative forums during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before situating this project in conversation with extant research on storytelling and deliberation, we begin by briefly introducing each of the four key features of Craig’s deliberative play framework: (1) indeterminacy or uncertainty of outcome; (2) a free, loose, loping to-and-from form of movement; (3) an “as if” ontology of thought and action; and (4) the potential for interaction to be framed as either cooperative or competitive.

While equivocality, or the openness of experience to interpretation, is arguably a key condition for all meaning-making (Weick, 1995), the concept of “play” requires that we understand indeterminacy within certain bounds. That is, all play—from the structured activities of organized sports to the apparent anarchy of children’s imaginative
games—requires rules. At times, rules may not be known until they are violated, as noted with accusations of cheating, of not “being fair,” of making the play not fun anymore. However, within the structure of the rules, there must be freedom to move, indeterminacy and uncertainty, or else the interaction is not “play” but choreography.

The existence of uncertainty allows for the second feature of deliberative play: a free, loose, loping to-and-from form of movement (Craig, this issue). This movement is what allows for the consideration of alternative experiences, interpretations, and proposals for action. The empirical question that remains to be answered is how, in interaction with one another, do participants in deliberative forums, which are often oriented toward decision-making ends, resist closure to allow space for this element of play.

A speculative response to that question is that deliberation may require an “as if” ontology of thought and action. The consideration of multiple courses of action becomes possible through a willing suspension of disbelief, an openness to consider ideas and criticism that individuals may not actually believe, an imaginative exercise of pretend. It is worth noting that it may be difficult at times to discern what a person “really believes” versus ideas they are entertaining “as if” they might be true. However, just as Bateson (1972) explains that animals distinguish between a playful nip and a hostile bite, so too does an “as if” ontology of deliberative play require metacommunicative signaling to distinguish the act of play from aggression.

Deliberation and Storytelling

Craig’s theorizing of deliberative play offers a new perspective on the phenomenon of deliberative democracy. Scholarly interest in deliberation has proliferated over the past three decades and, as André Bächtiger and colleagues note in their recent handbook on the subject, deliberative democracy has become a “flourishing field” of study spanning a wide range of disciplines. At its core, “deliberative democracy is grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives” (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2). A great deal of deliberative research has explored the conditions that are most suitable for promoting deliberation, the role of deliberation in larger political systems, and the outcomes of deliberative events. While traditional deliberative research focused on rational argument and consensus (Cohen, 1996; Habermas, 1989), deliberative scholars have also highlighted the social and interpersonal dynamics of deliberative discussion (Burkhalter et al., 2002; Fraser, 1990; Sanders, 1997). Communication research on deliberation has explored the group interactions and communication practices involved (Black, 2012; Gastil & Black, 2018) and emphasized the importance of deliberative design (Aakhus, 2007; Carcasson & Sprain, 2016) and facilitation (Dillard, 2013).

Within this larger body of work, a small group of scholars have examined the role of personal stories and storytelling activities that occur during deliberative events (Black, 2008, 2009, 2013; Lukianova & Steffensmeier, 2020; Ryfe, 2006; Sprain & Hughes, 2015). The research on narrative and deliberation predominantly treats
storytelling as a social process (Ochs & Capps, 1996), which means that these scholars examine not only the structure of a particular narrative, but also the way that the story is responded to by others interactionally. This research has found that people in deliberative forums tend to tell personal stories (Ryfe, 2006) and that these stories can help people accomplish interactional goals that are in line with deliberation. For instance, stories can function as evidence and help interlocutors support their arguments (Black, 2009; Lukianova & Steffensmeier, 2020). Personal stories told during disagreements can invite perspective-taking and promote moments of dialogue and openness (Black, 2008). The way people tell stories can help frame issues in ways that can help deliberators manage conflicts (Black, 2013). Storytelling helps people establish their identities interactionally, which serve as either a uniting or dividing force (Black, 2009, 2013) or can allow participants to speak on behalf of others who are not present in the deliberation (Sprain & Hughes, 2015). Storytelling interactions can also allow group members to reinforce or challenge existing power dynamics by inviting someone to tell a specific story, judging the actions or emotions expressed in that story, or refusing to tell a story when invited to do so (Ochs & Taylor, 1992).

Although there is variety in how these scholars have defined what counts as a story, the bulk of this research on storytelling in deliberation has focused on relatively complete narratives, which describe a sequence of events that “pivot around a problem” (Ryfe, 2006), include characters, and have evaluative devices that demonstrates some kind of moral to the story (Black, 2009). Yet, as Sprain and Hughes (2015) note, many stories told in deliberative events are partial, brief, and temporally dispersed across different interaction sequences that occur throughout a deliberative event. Drawing on Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), Sprain and Hughes argue that the concept of “small stories” is a productive way to examine storytelling interactions in deliberative forums. They describe small stories as “an umbrella term” that encompasses a wide range of ways that people tell stories including “how people reference a story but then promise to share it later (deferrals of telling) or signal that there is a story to tell without actually telling it (allusions to telling).” A small stories approach allows scholars to “attend to talk that participants orient to as narrative, even if the talk is missing typical elements associated with stories” (Sprain & Hughes, 2015, pp. 533–534).

We find that this orientation to small stories fits well with the deliberative play framework because it could potentially allow us to explore the ways that participants play with stories or use stories to play with ideas presented in the deliberation. Drawing on this body of research, we propose the following research question: How do participants’ storytelling activities accomplish deliberative play? In the following section we introduce our data and describe our analytic method to answer this guiding question.

**Methods**

This study draws upon data from the 2020 Oregon’s Citizens’ Assembly Pilot on COVID-19 Recovery (ORCA), which was a partnership between two non-partisan, non-profit community organizations, Healthy Democracy and Oregon’s Kitchen Table, and three state senators. The purpose of the citizens’ assembly was to bring
together Oregonians to develop recommendations for pathways forward through and out of the coronavirus pandemic. The authors of this study were members of a larger research team investigating different aspects of the deliberative process (Gastil et al., 2021). In the following section we describe ORCA’s design, then we explain our data collection and analytic approach for this specific study.

ORCA was designed following Healthy Democracy’s Citizens’ Initiative Review (CIR) process, which has been a successful deliberative project in Oregon and several other states (Gastill & Knobloch, 2020; Gastil et al., 2021). As a minipublic (Setälä & Smith, 2018), CIRs consist of participants who are demographically representative and thus are able to offer a glimpse into what voters would think about a policy proposal if they had an opportunity to engage in well-informed deliberation about it. Typically, CIRs involve bringing together participants for four days of intense deliberation, including hearing expert testimony and working in small groups to discuss information about the proposal and draft a statement for inclusion in the state voter’s guide.

ORCA was composed of 36 randomly selected Oregonian voters. Potential panelists were recruited through mail and by phone, and a stratified sample of participants was drawn from this pool to reflect key state demographics of age, geographic location, political affiliation, gender, race/ethnicity, and education level. Event organizers shipped loaner laptops to panelists who needed them and provided one-on-one technical support. Additionally, all panelists were compensated for their time with a stipend.

Because ORCA occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the entire process happened online rather than in a series of in-person meetings. The panel met synchronously, online via the video platform Zoom for 2 hours per week for seven weeks in the summer of 2020. All sessions occurred on Thursday evenings between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m. The event program was a mix of full-group plenary sessions and small group discussion. All full-group sessions were live-streamed on Healthy Democracy’s YouTube channel, but all small group discussions were closed to the general public to protect panelist privacy.

**Data Collection**

Members of our research team observed sessions live, taking field notes and recording small group sessions using Open Broadcaster Software. In total, we recorded 34 hours and 37 minutes of small group discussion videos, which were subsequently transcribed for analysis. Additionally, the research team contacted all participants, facilitators, and forum organizers for interviews following the final deliberative session. Of the interview data, this study drew only on participant interviews, which generated 7 hours and 29 minutes of audio recording across 12 panelists who agreed to be interviewed. All interviews were transcribed for analysis.

**Analytic Method**

From the beginning of this project, storytelling was a “sensitizing concept” (Tracy, 2020, p. 29) for our research team. In this way, as observers watched the live sessions,
they recorded in their field notes occasions when storytelling episodes occurred, jotti-
ging down key words and/or time stamps, which made those moments easier to locate
again in the transcripts. Additionally, during the interviews, we asked participants to
reflect on any memorable stories or personal experiences that they heard from other
panelists. We treated the fieldnotes and interviews as a type of metadiscourse (Craig,
1999), which served as a starting point for finding storytelling episodes in the small
group discussion transcripts.

In our initial review of storytelling episodes, it became evident that about half of all
interview references to stories involved family dynamics of the parent-child relation-
ship. As a result, we searched within the small group discussion transcripts for the
following keywords: parent(s), kid(s), child(ren), daughter(s), son(s), father(s), Dad,
mother(s), and Mom. Using this process we narrowed our focus from the total corpus
of 134 group discussion transcripts to a sample of 43 transcripts. We then removed any
references to non-family terms (e.g., “mom”ents), as well as non-storytelling refer-
ences to these terms. As a result, we narrowed our focus to 26 transcripts that included
storytelling episodes related to family dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Guided by the theoretical framework of “deliberative play” and our interest in
understanding how participants “played” with stories, we looked through these 26
transcripts for stories that “moved” through the event—occasions where particular
panelists would repeat a story, references by other group members to stories they had
heard earlier in the event. Then, we traced these story references through the tran-
scripts to identify one particular network of stories related to the idea of paying parents
a stipend to care for and educate their children during the pandemic.

After identifying relevant excerpts from the group discussion transcripts and the
interview data, we conducted a narrative analysis informed by Sprain and Hughes’s
(2015) small stories approach to studying storytelling in deliberation. In tracing stories
through the ORCA transcripts, we followed how “different tellings and allusions to
tellings worked together over the course of the discussion” (Sprain & Hughes, 2015,
p. 537). Adopting a similar discourse analysis approach, we interpreted the signifi-
cance of particular storytelling practices by asking the following questions, informed
by the framework of deliberative play:

- How do storytelling activities (re)introduce uncertainty?
- What are the signals of play, how is storytelling interaction marked as playful?
- What are the metacommunicative frames evident in the storytelling
  interaction?

Findings

In the sections that follow, we trace one small group’s discussion of the policy pro-
posal of paying parents to homeschool their children during the pandemic. Our analy-
sis highlights the small stories told and the storytelling interactions that allow
participants to engage in deliberative play regarding this topic.
Playful Framing: Challenging Assumptions with a Story

Our first excerpt comes from a small group discussion during week 4. In this segment, panelists were told to go back to the list of core principles that they generated in the previous week(s) and to prioritize them. Their specific task was to select the top five principles (things that should be considered for any decisions related to COVID recovery) from the big list of principles, which was mailed to each panelist before this meeting. The interactions immediately prior to excerpt one involve group members looking at a numbered list, which was visible through the group facilitator’s use of the screen sharing feature on Zoom. Several minutes into this interaction, one of the small group participants (referred to below as “Matt”) disrupted the discussion by asking a challenging question about the claim (which another group member refers to by its number on the large principle list as “number 48”) that kids need to go back to school in person. He supports his question with a small story about his own experience as a teenager and the group discusses his question.

Excerpt One

Becky: Yep. And then I -- the number 48, safely getting kids back to school. Certainly, kids need to go back in person but it needs to be safe.
Matt: I’m just curious, why ‘need to go back to school in person’?
Becky: What was that?
Matt: Just -- you say that ‘go back to school in person.’ Why is that?
Becky: Why do kids need to go back to school in person?
Matt: Right. I was homeschooled for a year doing correspondence classes.
Becky: What’d you do your other 11 years?
Matt: [Crosstalk] in a school so --
Gabby: What age were you?
Matt: That, I was 13.
Becky: What did you do the rest of your 11 years?
Matt: I was in public school, yeah.
Becky: Most parents don’t wanna homeschool their kids and they’re ineffective at it, so kids do need to be back in school. But I’m an educator so I think it needs to be [laugh] -- I’m not ready for ‘em to -- I mean it’s clearly the governor doesn’t think we’re ready either, so.
Matt: Right. Okay. I just wanted to double-check.
Linda: Goin’ to school is not necessarily all about learning. It’s the socialization, it’s the learning how to resolve conflict, it’s all about learning how to interact with other people. And nothing against homeschooling, I don’t -- I wouldn’t have the fortitude to homeschool my children. Somebody would die. But my kids needed that social outlet to help grow as people.
Becky: It’s also a place where --
George: I agree 100% with Linda.
Becky: Sorry, go ahead.
Matt: I was doing -- just to be a devil’s advocate.
Linda: And devil’s advocate is perfectly fine. It makes people think.
Matt: I guess that was the whole point.
Moderator: Becky, did you wanna finish that thought?
Becky: I was just saying kids, in addition to the social and educational aspects -- I live in Salem and a lot of our kids get two meals at school every day, and we send food home for 'em on weekends. And a lot of the kids are not in safe households either, so school’s a very important thing.
Matt: That’s a very good point.
Moderator: Gabby, any thoughts you wanna ask?
Gabby: Well, I was just gonna say if your kid’s at home, you as a parent can’t go to work.

In this interaction, Matt challenges the group’s emerging agreement that kids need to go back to school. He frames his utterance as playful with his statement “just curious” before he states his question, but he is met with resistance from Becky, who solicits clarification and repeats his question back to him. Then Matt offers a small story, noting that he was homeschooled for a year, and Becky and others challenge him by asking him about his “other eleven years” of schooling. Becky asserts her expertise as “an educator” to support her initial claim that kids need to go back to school, but her laughter during her speaking turn maintains some kind of playfulness to the claim. Matt does not disagree with Becky, and instead supports the playful frame by saying he “just wanted to double-check.” As other participants agree with Becky, Matt recharacterizes his initial question as “just to be a devil’s advocate,” a characterization that is met with approval by other group members.

Matt’s initial question, and his accompanying small story, introduces uncertainty into the group by contradicting a claim that the group had been building agreement around. His metacommunicative framing in this excerpt, as “just curious,” “just checking,” and “just to be a devil’s advocate” mark his storytelling interaction as playful. That is, while his comments risked being interpreted as hostile or confrontational, Matt frames his challenging presentation of a personal story as cooperative—as aligning with the larger goals of thinking deeply about difficult choices within the deliberative forum. As the interaction progresses, we see group members such as Linda, Becky, and Gabby deliberate about the claim by offering reasons and providing additional small stories about their personal experiences. Their speaking turns provide reasons that children need to go back to school, such as families’ financial security and children’s access to adequate food.

**Taking Up the Question and Playing with its Implications**

Shortly after the interaction depicted in excerpt one, the ORCA participants left their small groups and went into a large plenary session. In the plenary session, the organizer shared a short biography of an expert witness from the Oregon Department of Education who would join later that evening. Participants then went back into small groups and
were asked to generate questions for her. In this discussion, we see the group engage in several aspects of deliberative play. Given the length of this interaction, we have split it into three segments for analysis. Excerpts Two, Three, and Four are all contiguous speaking turns, but are divided into distinct excerpts to highlight the different ways that storytelling activities accomplish deliberative play in this group. In Excerpt Two, we see the group take up Matt’s question and his story by playing with the policy implications.

**Excerpt Two**

George: Lemme suggest as a great first question Matt’s devil’s advocate question, why not homeschool everybody? I mean that gets to a core difference and let’s see if we pass the test on that. Let’s hear what the expert has to say from her perspective on homeschooling versus the more traditional schooling.

Matt: Especially when you say it like that, sort of like well not everyone is a 13-year-old who is anxious to get work done so he can stop doing work.

Linda: I was just thinkin’, what type of relief, if any, can we come up with for parents who are now home with their children, some struggling to homeschool them because they can’t go to school, but at the same time they need to be working to keep a roof over their head?

Matt: Maybe this is -- I don’t know, but why don’t we kill two birds with one stone and pay people to educate their kids?

Becky: [laugh] Isn’t that called parenting?

Matt: Sure, but actually paying them to do that.

Gabby: Okay, so the money we’d be paying to school districts we’ll distribute among the parents? I like that idea.

Linda: Yeah, that actually has some merit. You have to come up with some sort of metrics to make sure that the parents are in fact teaching the child and the child is in fact learning.

Matt: Don’t they already do that with teachers and students and testing scores?

George begins the discussion by suggesting that the group revisit Matt’s earlier question about educating children at home. George metacommunicatively frames this as a high quality question, describing it as “a great first question” that can allow the expert to get at a “core difference.” In this way, George characterizes Matt’s question as one that promotes deliberative discussion. Matt, however, reintroduces some uncertainty and tentativeness around his question by again offering a small story. This story positions him as a certain kind of student (“a 13-year-old who is anxious to get work done so he can stop doing work”), which narratively implies that Matt’s successful homeschooling experience may not be applicable to other students, who are not like him.

The group, however, entertains the idea of keeping kids at home, and moves to considering more tangible proposals. Linda invokes an as-if frame by saying “I was just thinkin’,” and asking “what type of relief, if any,” the group could come up with to support families. Linda offers a small story here by using narrative descriptions and alluding to stories of families struggling financially. Matt responds by
clearly articulating, for the first time, the policy proposal of the state paying parents to homeschool their children. He discursively hedges by saying “maybe” and “I don’t know,” which maintains some element of the as-if frame. Becky laughs and seems to treat his proposal as a joke, but he reasserts his suggestion with more seriousness. Gabby and Linda take up this proposal, expressing agreement, and begin to deliberate about potential implementation ideas.

This excerpt shows how the group invokes an as-if frame around Matt’s proposal. By metacommunicatively orienting to the proposal as a “good” question, George encourages the group to take up the idea that they had disagreed with and dismissed in their earlier interactions. The small stories told in this excerpt help participants maintain some open-endedness and explore the potential limits of the proposal.

Telling Hypothetical Stories

The group continues this playfulness in the next excerpt by sharing hypothetical stories. Linda notes that test scores, a metric used by states to assess student learning, might not work as well for homeschooling because teachers and parents have different relationships with their kids. This prompts a series of utterances from different group members who imagine how challenging it would be for them personally to do homeschooling.

Excerpt Three

Linda: Yeah, but parent -- a parent/child relationship is a little different than a teacher/child relationship.
Gabby: I could have never taught my kids at home.
George: Yeah --
Linda: Yeah, I couldn’t -- I couldn’t either.
Matt: I’m not sure I would have taken well to my parents trying to teach me either.
Gabby: No, you wouldn’t have. [laugh]
Matt: I’m almost certain of that.
Linda: So, you know, there’s some people out there who can do it and I take my hat off to ’em. But I’m not one of those who could have.
Gabby: Me neither.
Linda: Like I said earlier, somebody would have ended up dead and it’d have been very ugly. But the thought of -- you know, maybe my outlook would have been a little different had there been some incentive other than just the child learning. I doubt it very seriously but, you know, it’s probable.
Gabby: Well, you’d have to get paid enough to stay home to homeschool otherwise I’m sure most -- like most of us, you would have needed to be going to a job every day to make the money to feed them.
Linda: Yeah. And boy, they eat a lot.

The videorecording of this session shows participants smiling and laughing as they collaborate on the claim that they, personally, are not the kind of people who could
successfully engage in homeschooling. Gabby, George, and Linda all position themselves as parents and note that they could “never” have taught their kids at home. Matt, despite claiming earlier that he had a successful homeschooling experience, positions himself as a child and says he would not “have taken well to my parents trying to teach me either.” Although he once again begins his speaking turn by hedging with a statement “I’m not sure,” when Gabby teases him “no, you wouldn’t have” he laughingly agrees and says “I’m almost certain of that.”

The small stories approach allows us to see this sequence of utterances as a hypothetical narrative. In this hypothetical narrative, the interlocutors collaborate on a claim that homeschooling is possible for “some people out there,” but most parents would not be able to do it because it would strain their relationship with their children. Linda culminates this hypothetical narrative when she says “somebody would have ended up dead and it’d have been very ugly.” As the participants collaborate on this narrative, they show playfulness through their laughter and their as-if, hypothetical language. Near the end of the excerpt, Linda and Gabby return to more logistical issues by noting that financial compensation may make homeschooling more doable for parents, if the monetary incentive was substantial enough. In this way, the interaction demonstrates how playfulness and small stories can be connected to deliberative analysis and argumentation.

**Playing with and Resisting Closure**

Our final excerpt is a continuation of the previous discussion, with the moderator’s statement directly following Linda’s speaking turn above. In this excerpt the moderator introduces a time warning and attempts to bring the group to some closure. Our observations and field notes highlight that these time warnings were common in ORCA small groups. As Gastil and colleagues note in their evaluation of ORCA, “foremost among the barriers to deliberative rigor was the scope of the agenda relative to the time afforded the panelists” (2021, p. 15). Small groups were often given as little as 5–10 minutes to accomplish relatively complex tasks, so group moderators frequently reminded groups about how little time was left before their Zoom breakout room would close, thus, ending the small group sessions. Excerpt Four begins with the group receiving a time warning from the moderator.

**Excerpt Four**

Moderator: Just wanna bring you guys’ attention to the three-minute warning. Becky, I saw you nodding back there. Do you have anything you wanna add to this or another question you’re thinkin’ about? I don’t think we’ve heard one from you yet.

Becky: Well, fortunately and unfortunately I already -- I know a lot of what the ODE [Oregon Department of Education] information is already so I don’t really have any questions but I support what the other people are saying. I don’t think you can pay parents to teach their children. They should be doing that anyway.
Matt: They should be doing it for free, and also you can’t pay them enough.
Becky: Right. That’s parenting, it’s do everything for free.
George: How can we improve the social skill opportunities in a time of social distancing? There must be some techniques or some opportunities that can be used to get kids in a park, in a playground, out hiking, out there in fieldwork, and maintain social distancing. What are the opportunities that the state schools’ office recommends?
Matt: I heard a story about pandemic pods. So you have a group of kids that are all together and then the teacher is -- I don’t know. It seemed like a neat concept. I’d like to see what the professional’s opinion is of a solution like that.

This excerpt begins with the moderator interrupting the playful banter to re-orient the group to the task and remind them that they needed to achieve some closure. The moderator also redirects the group’s attention by inviting comments from Becky, who had not been vocally participating in the immediately previous interaction. Becky acknowledges some sense of closure by stating that she already knows a lot of information from the department of education, so she does not have any questions. However, she comments on the proposal about paying parents to homeschool, and she and Matt seem to engage with this idea again in a somewhat playful manner. Matt articulates two constraints on the proposal, that parents should be obligated to care for their children without compensation (“they should be doing it for free”) and, paradoxically, that it would not be feasible to adequately compensate parents for the work (“you can’t pay them enough.”) Becky agrees and states “that’s parenting, it’s do everything for free.”

It is unclear whether these statements from Matt and Becky are meant to be joking or sarcastic, or if they are bringing some closure to the discussion by arguing that the proposal is unfeasible. In either case, the group seems to resist closure. George poses a series of questions that signals a return to Linda’s earlier arguments (in Excerpt One) that school serves an important social function for kids. Matt offers a small story about “pandemic pods” as a way to address George’s questions. These interactions allow the group to return to a multidimensional framing of the problem of education during a pandemic, and the group continues to play with these ideas until the end of their small group session.

Metadiscourse and the Limits of Playing with Stories

During the interviews, we asked participants about their emotional experiences during ORCA and whether there were any stories or personal experiences that they heard from other panelists that stuck with them. A few interviewees answered this question by describing stories about families and schooling issues. For example, Claire stated that she was “very surprised” by the proposal to pay families to educate their children. Claire’s comment is presented in the following excerpt.
Excerpt Five

Some of the panelists expected that the parents staying home with the child helping with education should be paid by the state. . . I was very surprised that the people here expect them to provide breakfast and lunch and like all of these extra services and it should just be there for them for free, and it’s almost like ‘I’m going to have a child, but you are expected to raise them’ and that is sort of like the mentality that has just astonished me.

Claire was not in the small group that played with the stories related to this policy proposal, and in her interview she expressed surprise that such an idea would even be proposed in the first place. She not only disagreed with this proposal, she also was “astonished” by the “mentality” and expectations embedded in this proposal. We posit that part of the reason why participants like Claire might be “surprised” by this proposal is that they were not engaging in the deliberative play that accompanied the stories about education and parenting. Because they were spectators, rather than participants in the game, to them the proposal lacked context and nuance. Claire’s metadiscourse about other people’s stories demonstrates some of the limits of storytelling as deliberative play.

It is possible that the framing of the interview question, which asked respondents to recall stories that stuck with them, led interviewees to be in a kind of analytic mode. In our analysis, we considered the possibility that the metadiscourse would inherently be analytic because of this framing, which would limit participants’ responses and push them out of a deliberative play framework. However, comments from another interviewee, Jimmy, challenged that interpretation. Jimmy noted in his interview that he did not have children, but if he did he would welcome the opportunity to stay home and help educate them. So, he was surprised by stories from parents who were eager for their children to go back to school. Jimmy’s comment is presented in the following excerpt.

Excerpt Six

I never really got overwhelmed about my feelings. I think the closest thing that I was like, “Whoa,” that kind of checked me again was that whole parents story. We were talking about how to get kids back into school and we were talking about having a stipend . . . to help the parents, would they be more open to being a part of the children’s education and kind of their day in, day out of learning. I think the only time that my emotions became like, “Whoa,,” is when parents were like, “No, I just don’t want any part of it.” They just don’t want a part of educating their children. And I guess the emotion that is complicated, but kind of like: Why would you have your kids, if you don’t want to be a part of the upbringing of them and stuff?

On the surface, Jimmy is expressing a negative judgment about other people’s stories that might appear to mirror Claire’s. However, looking more closely at Jimmy’s participation in small group discussions provides a more nuanced view of how the ideas of the proposal developed.
Jimmy was actually the ORCA panelist who put forward the proposal to pay parents if they needed to stay home to educate their children during the pandemic. During small group discussions as early as Week 4, Jimmy shared stories of his own experiences having trouble with traditional educational systems as a child. Although he is not a parent, he thoughtfully advocated for a network of support for parents struggling with their children’s education during the pandemic. Jimmy brought up the proposal to pay parents during Week 6 and it became formally listed as a policy recommendation in Week 7. Other participants in Jimmy’s small group noted that this was an idea that should be discussed further, and some shared their own stories about parenting. In the end, it was Jimmy’s proposal that made it onto the list for potential voting.

Given the specificity of the “paying parents” proposal, we assumed that its presence on the list of potential policies was evidence that one story “traveled” across multiple groups. However, we did not find evidence to support that assumption. The design of ORCA involved separating small groups into one of two tracks starting in week 4, with some groups focusing only on issues of housing and others focusing only on education. Given this split, groups did not mingle as much in the later weeks of the forum and there was less opportunity for stories to travel between groups. Rather, this policy seems to be an example of equifinality—the principle that a given end state may be achieved by various different means. The origin of this general principle is often attributed to Hans Adolf Eduard Driesch, but its applications proliferated after Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) popularized the idea as part of his general systems theory. Applied to the context of storytelling in deliberative forums, the principle of equifinality draws attention to the ways in which different people telling stories from their varied experiences at different times for different purposes may converge on a common end: in this case, the policy proposal to pay parents.

Discussion

Our analysis demonstrates that storytelling interactions have the potential to accomplish aspects of deliberative play. First, storytelling practices accomplish deliberative play in the endless potential for diverse personal experiences to provide evidence of contradictory claims and policy proposals. As demonstrated in the above excerpts, stories can function as evidence for and against particular policy ideas. Importantly, then, when stories are used as evidence in deliberative forums, these stories can and often do contradict each other. After all, people have different experiences, which are productive of, at times, conflicting pieces of evidence. It is in the tensional space between story truth-claims that deliberative play emerges.

Second, and relatedly, the conflict between stories disrupts a quick move to coherence and maintains the uncertainty and indeterminacy needed for play. As demonstrated in our analysis, the policy proposal of paying parents developed out of complex interactions between parents’ stories and policy proposals during the ORCA online deliberative event. Storytelling around personal experiences pertaining to education motivated Jimmy’s initial Week 6 proposal to pay parents. This idea was formalized as a policy recommendation in Week 7, and as other groups considered the idea,
participants shared additional stories. Ultimately, the proposal was not included in the final list of policy recommendations from the Citizens’ Assembly. When Jimmy reflected on the “parent pay” policy proposal, he referred to his surprise around “that whole parents story,” which he used as shorthand to describe negative responses to his policy recommendation from parents who would not want to educate their children (for a variety of reasons). In this way, stories both prompted the formation of a policy recommendation and proliferated in response to that recommendation. Stories are often thought to reduce equivocality (Weick, 1995), as “a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations” (Frank, 1995). Certainly, parents’ stories helped Jimmy and other participants to make sense of problems around public education during the pandemic in a particular way. However, exactly because stories are partial, situated, and non-inclusive of the entirety of experience, another story can always be told. Therefore, when the policy proposal moved the Citizens’ Assembly toward convergence and closure, and the subsequent stories of resistant parents reintroduced equivocality, likely contributing to the ultimate rejection of Jimmy’s policy proposal. In this way, our analysis suggests that storytelling practices during deliberative forums facilitate “play” in their perpetual potential for polyvocality.

Similarly, the juxtaposition between Matt’s small story about being homeschooled against the policy proposal of “kids needing to be back in school” implied that his personal experience challenged the apparent consensus between group members that a traditional school model was ideal. As his story provided evidence against the emerging policy proposal, Matt reintroduced uncertainty into the conversation, which led to other group members raising questions and offering up their own stories in response. In interaction with one another during deliberative forums, participants test stories’ fidelity—“whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). For perspective-taking to occur, some element of the story resonates with or affirms that which another participant believes to be true.

Third, the metacommunicative frame of “play” invites perspective-taking through an as-if ontology even when participants do not share common experiences. As participants imagined themselves homeschooling their own children, which none of them actually did, they engaged in a kind of fantasy that allowed the group to consider negative implications of a proposal (e.g., “somebody would have ended up dead”) through hypothetical stories. Similarly, storytelling activities that were marked with metacommunicative frames of “devil’s advocate” or “just checking” invited participants to consider perspectives outside of their belief system as if they were plausible. Both hypothetical stories and metacommunicative frames here highlight substantial differences between participants’ experiences, while also suggesting that these differences may be bridged through imaginative play.

However, while this “as-if” aspect of deliberative play may facilitate perspective-taking, it can also lead to judgment. As evidenced by the interviewees who, imagining themselves as parents, could not understand why someone would not want to educate their own children, hypothetical storytelling is not always oriented toward reaching greater understanding. It is important to note, though, that these judgments came from members outside of the “playful” small group, which suggests that the limitations of
deliberative play may be tightly coupled with design features that enable and constrain the circulation and development of (shared) stories.

These limitations suggest our final point: forum design enables and constrains the accomplishment of deliberative play. Games have rules and structure; however, ORCA was so highly structured that it made it harder to “play.” ORCA participants met for 2 hours at a time, on a weekly basis, for nearly two months. However, the location of the event on an online platform, Zoom, in the early months of the pandemic, greatly influenced the deliberative experience. At this early stage in the pandemic, many participants were unfamiliar with online video platforms, which contributed to a number of technological challenges, only some of which are evident in the transcripts provided in our excerpts. For example, Matt did not have his camera on, so the recordings lacked his nonverbal cues other than paralinguistic features of his voice. Additionally, the facilitator was screensharing a document with their “principle prioritization” task during all of the talk analyzed in this paper, which meant that participants’ faces were minimized and difficult to view with much detail. Furthermore, given small lags and video delays, participants occasionally talked over each other.

Finally, limited time in the small group discussions severely constrained “play” through storytelling activities. Reflecting during a post-forum interview on the tightly-planned schedule of events in the online space, a facilitator lamented:

There wasn’t really time for storytelling, for instance. And as a facilitator, I felt like I couldn’t allow for that type of dialogue and narrative in the process, because we were there to get specific answers to this brainstorm, this question. . . Either the group gets impatient, or people are reluctant to ask questions because they don’t want to look dumb in front of other people. There wasn’t any time to normalize all of that behavior to really allow for full participation.

Indeed, the ORCA online pilot compressed and redistributed the activities of a typical Citizens’ Initiative Review (which occur over four full days of intense deliberation) to 14 hours of online interaction, using a relatively new platform. And so, while the forum design facilitated connection across time and space in ways previously not possible with in-person intensive CIRs, the design decisions also made it harder for stories to be picked up and played with in a way that might be seen in other places.

Given these constraints from ORCA’s design, it is difficult to fully understand the interaction rules that participants develop to accomplish deliberative play. Good deliberation requires some kind of opening up moves, which can be accomplished through small stories, and then some assessment of weighing of ideas and options. Our data show the importance of storytelling interactions for deliberative play, but the short timeframes for the small group discussions in ORCA meant that these interactions were often rushed. Future research on deliberative play could more fully investigate the interaction rules participants use to accomplish deliberative play.

Conclusion

Deliberation scholars often talk about deliberation as work and emphasize the seriousness required for solving problems. As engaged scholars, we have been part of many conversations where practitioners use the phrase “the work” as a way to encompass all
of the different approaches to deliberation and civic engagement. We have also been part of many conversations where scholars acknowledge that the phrases “deliberation and dialogue,” “deliberative democracy,” and “deliberative civic engagement” are cumbersome and often not very resonant for people in the communities we wish to engage. As a field, we seem to recognize the utility of a different frame, but we cannot really figure out what that is. So, we fall back on the idea of work.

The papers in this special issue ask, what would be different if deliberation emphasized play? What if we invited participants to play with ideas, share hypothetical stories, and engage in free flowing conversation? What would be discursively accomplished by such a frame? How would play function in a communication processes to serve deliberative ends? And how might deliberative norms need to be reconsidered to take account of such a function?

Our analysis of storytelling activities shows that people can use small stories to introduce and play with ideas related to policy proposals. Stories can introduce contradiction and be metacommunicatively framed “as if” they are competitive by playful language, jokes, laughter, and hedging language. Small stories, including those that are hypothetical, deferred, or alluded to, are able to be picked up and played with in later interactions. Tracing such stories shows how groups can engage in the loping, to-and-fro playing with ideas that is at the heart of Craig’s notion of deliberative play. Interactive storytelling allows for indeterminacy and can be a way to resist deliberative closure. Although narrative research often foregrounds coherence and sensemaking, the small stories framework demonstrates how storytelling interaction can create more uncertainty and call for future engagement and interaction.

Play can also encourage creativity in deliberative discussions. The “as-if” framing invites people in deliberative forums to move beyond straightforward solutions or predetermined proposals by asking participants to consider diverse ideas, even those that may seem outrageous at first. Some dialogue and deliberation events incorporate creative or playful elements such as music, drawing, or having small toys on the tables. These design choices can encourage participants to think creatively or express their ideas in playful ways. Forums might also use graphic facilitation to depict the notes from the meetings in ways that are visually engaging, creative, and inspiring. These design choices visually indicate a playful frame and are intentional choices by organizers to prompt openness and dialogue (Black, 2012).

However, ORCA, like the CIR it was modeled on, did not build in these visually artistic or playful elements. The design of ORCA emphasized analysis of information, listing and voting on options, and gave very brief amounts of time for small group discussion. In ORCA, deliberative play was accomplished through storytelling. The as-if mentality of deliberative play allowed group members to playfully consider policy ideas, such as the “paying parents” proposal, regardless of whether the participants themselves were parents or agreed with the proposal. Playing with the ideas presented in stories allowed participants to communicate with provisionalism, rather than certainty, which can help them build a supportive group climate. In this way, play contributes to deliberative theory and practice by providing processes for groups to build relationships, think creatively, and consider and develop ideas that go beyond straightforward and predetermined proposals.
Forum design can facilitate or inhibit play, and our work illustrates how technology use and time constraints can influence storytelling dynamics. Although we are intrigued by the way stories can promote deliberative play, we also urge forum designers and facilitators to be mindful of the limits of storytelling, especially when stories are decontextualized from the playful interactions or disconnected from the information being deliberated about. Stories can be powerfully persuasive, and small stories can prompt playful engagement with ideas. But stories can also be used to stereotype others, divide groups, or obscure information that is important for deliberation. Deliberative norms can be expanded to encourage playfulness, but they should also be balanced with facilitation practices that encourage rigorous analysis and inclusive discussion.

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