

The 2026 Mary Parker Follett Conversation on Creative Democracy Proposed Conversation Teams & Call for Participants

Conference Description

- Fall 2026; Boston-area; 3 days and 3 nights; in-person only
- Team-based Inquiry Approach: Teams explore together, create new insights, knowledge, ideas, etc. within the overall theme of democracy as a creative experience (or “creative democracy,” for short).
- Teams form in advance of conference and begin collaboration. Team-members collaborate in person for most of the Conversation, then teams present at a plenary session. Team reports and individual papers (optional) are then published in a Proceedings following the Conversation.
- Conference website: follettfdn.org/conference

Teams and Joining a Team

- The teams listed below have been proposed and are open for participation (see list and team details below).
- In order to attend the Conversation, you need to join a team.
- For teams that you may be interested in, please contact that team’s proponent/coordinator if you have questions.
- Please use the form at <https://forms.gle/9tbADUdHtCdhzwKBA> as soon as possible before February 15 to indicate your preferred teams, and your likelihood of attending. This will help with team and conference planning.
- Due to a limited number of break-out spaces at the conference venue, teams that don’t have at least five participants may not be able to form for purposes of the Conversation. *Team proponents will be informed if this is the case so that participants can choose other team options.*
- Based on response, final teams will be determined by or before February 15, 2026

We will announce at a later date the registration timeline and registration procedures for the Conversation.

Proposed Inquiry Teams (Detailed Descriptions Below)

Team A: Integrative Activism

Team B: Moving Social Media from Spaces of Civic Disabling to Spaces of Civic Learning and Uplift

Team C: Achieving Integration through Musical Improvisation

Team D: A Virtuous Circle: Strengthening social and community bonding in order to release individual and community potential needed for democratic engagement

Team E: Conflict, Integration, and Democracy: Learning to Use Conflict to Make Democracy Work

Team F: Co-creative Democracy at Scale: How?

Team G: Stewarding a Commoning Standard

Team H: Power-Grabbing vs. Power-Growing

Team I: The Follett Documentary Dream(ing) Team (could be combined with Team J)

Team J: Envisioning a Stage Play about Follett's Life and Legacy (could be combined with Team I)

Team K: Creating a Culture of Democratic Constitutionalism

Team L: Idealized Design of an Authentic and Powerful Civics Education Experience for K-12 Students

Team M: Interweaving Follett and Works of Fiction

Team A: Integrative Activism

Contact: Graham Wright, gwwri@brandeis.edu

Description

Mary Parker Follett (1918) saw integrative dialogue as an essential component of democratic governance, and in recent years political philosophers have worked to connect Follett's thought to contemporary discussions of deliberative democracy (Leiviskä, 2023; Warren & Mansbridge, 2013; Wright, 2025). The key challenge for instantiating Follett's vision of democracy is figuring out how to make different spheres of political life more "integrative." Some forms of political activity, such as legislative negotiation, already employ integrative processes, if not always in public (Binder & Lee, 2013), but others seem to be in deeper tension with integrative ideals.

Political activism, a concept that encompasses protests, boycotts, media campaigns, and other forms of non-violent actions aimed at putting "pressure" on key decision makers, is an important part of political life, but seems deeply at odds with many of Follett's core ideas about the resolution of political conflict. Activism leaves little space for dialogue, has generally been seen as in opposition to "political deliberation" (Young, 2001), and often seems oriented explicitly toward domination (as Follett understands that term), as opposed to co-creation. However, there are ways in which activism can, in certain contexts, improve the quality of democratic deliberation (Mansbridge et al., 2012), and there are likely to also be contexts in which it can specifically support an integrative conception of democracy.

I would like to propose a team that would explore the ways in which political activism can either undermine or support a Follettian conception of integrative democracy.

Guiding /Triggering Questions

Considering different forms of political activism as they have been practiced by recent activism movements (on both sides of the political spectrum), for example political slogans (for example "Black Lives Matters," "Defund the Police," "Make America Great Again"), forms of direct action (such as sit-ins, marches, boycotts, letter-writing campaigns), media strategies (including on social media), and the articulation of goals and demands:

- *To what extent have different examples of these forms of activism reflected (or undermined) Follettian ideals of integration vs domination, power-with vs power-over, "group vs crowd" dynamics, and circular response?*
- *What are some general principles that could support integrative forms of political activism?*
- *What are some concrete examples of how these principles might be used in current or future activist movements?*

Preparation (Shared readings, etc.): TBD

Open Team? Yes

Team B: Moving Social Media from Spaces of Civic Disabling to Spaces of Civic Learning and Uplift

Contact: Matthew Shapiro, mshapiro@follettfdn.org

Description

Every day, billions of people make or read posts and comments on social media platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram. Many of the posts and comments are related to public issues. Many are “political” in nature (in the popular sense of the word). And for many of the users, these online spaces are their primary experience in interacting with people and ideas differing from theirs.

As is well known, social media spaces are prone to two dynamics that can harm, or at the very least inhibit, the development of civic skills and constructive interaction that is needed for democracy to thrive – perhaps even to meaningfully exist. These two dynamics are (1) silos of like-minded thinking, and (2) disagreement taking forms that are essentially violent in nature, in the sense that different viewpoints, and often their speakers, are immediately dismissed or maligned. It can be concluded that social media is a space in which a large fraction of humanity practices anti-democratic behavior. It is, in other words, civically disabling.

While patterns of interaction in social media today can be generally characterized as civically disabling, any space in which so many people interact also represents an opportunity for experience that works in the opposite direction, i.e., providing experience in constructive interaction and civic uplift (as was an early hope during the emergence of social media).

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

What could be done to move social media from being a space that is civically disabling and destructive to a space that is civically uplifting?

The team will likely explore the nature of the problem, work to define the nature of the opportunity, and develop ideas or even tools and strategies for implementing those ideas. Points of opportunity and “intervention” could be identified at the level of the users, the level of those who tend to generate original posts (media outlets, local governments, organizations, etc.), and at the level of platform ownership.

Shared Readings: To be determined. The team proponent and team members will early in their collaboration identify potential shared readings that help inform the team about the issue and help orient the team around their inquiry.

Open Team? Yes

Team C: Achieving Integration through Musical Improvisation

Contact: Mara Zepeda and Andrew Berns, mara@mszindustries.com, aberns@mailbox.sc.edu

Description

As Professor Jane Mansbridge noted in her introduction to the 1998 reissue of Follett's *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government*, the groundbreaking concept of integration in the field of organizational behavior and management may very well be one that we should attribute to Follett. The popular theory, which means "to make whole," is an urgently needed practice in our times. This team explores how practical integration may gain traction through a simple and overlooked method: musical improvisation. There are no better teachers in this field than musicians, and especially world musicians who are fluent in improvisational practice.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

Drawing on simple percussion instruments that anyone can use, the question we'll explore is: How might musical improvisation support leaders to achieve, embody and experience a felt sense of true integration?

Open Team? Yes. Our team is welcoming to all participants and lovers of music, regardless of musical background and experience.

Team D: A Virtuous Circle: Strengthening social and community bonding in order to release individual and community potential needed for democratic engagement

Contact: D.G. Mawn and Melinda Burrell, dgmawn@nafcm.org, mcburell@nafcm.org

Description

Over the past year, particularly collaborating with school boards, with communities recovering from natural disasters, and communities exploring barriers to good governance, the National Association for Community Mediation (NAFCM) has seen how voters are exhausted by politics, unfulfilled promises, and deliberately created divisions in our society. NAFCM has also seen that, though exhausted, voters are thirsty for connection to each other and their community as we live in this democracy together. Our experience has been that true connection happens when both social bonding (involvement and belief in democratic practices that connect people to each other) as well as community bonding (involvement and belief in democratic processes to help others) are strengthened.

To meet this desire, NAFCM and its 400+ member centers have been expanding the use of the models and methodologies of listening sessions in a variety of processes. Listening sessions are structured, facilitated conversations designed to surface hopes, concerns, priorities, and potential

solutions. Results are strong, such as building new trust between community members and school boards, identifying blockages in systems designed to aid victims of natural disasters and restoring hope in the possibility of good governance.

NAFCM wishes to explore how more intentional use of listening sessions as process that can once again normalize active engagement in the democratic process is both an obligation and an opportunity for all. The proposed team would explore issues of law and ethics, diversity and differences, leadership and political activities within the community and interpersonal relationships contexts, embedded in the values and principles of conflict resolution and transformation.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

- *How do we catalyze more community bonding?*
- *How do we catalyze more social bonding?*
- *How do we do this in a way that reinvigorates our democratic procedures and practices?*

Open Team? Yes. We are very open to working with anyone interested in exploring and increasing the power of listening sessions and other structured, facilitated conversations to help us connect and help each other more within our democratic infrastructure.

Team E: Conflict, Integration, and Democracy: Learning to Use Conflict to Make Democracy Work

Contact: Nicolas Parra-Herrera and Danya Rumore, nparra@law.utah.edu, danya.rumore@law.utah.edu

Description

In “Conflict is Constructive” (1925), Mary P. Follett wrote that “we should set [conflict] to work for us.” This statement proposes a strikingly different understanding of conflict—one that departs from its usual association with violence, disorder, and negative human dynamics. For Follett, conflict is a difference that can be used productively, a force that enables outcomes beyond what compromise or domination can achieve. In this team, we aim to interrogate what Follett meant by conflict, and more specifically, what she meant by harnessing conflict for our benefit. Our hypothesis is that conflict is the sine qua non of democracy and integration: without conflict, integration is impossible, and without integration, a genuine democracy cannot emerge. In this view, difference—and some meaningful conception of conflict—is inherent to any pluralistic democracy.

This team will explore Follett's ideas on conflict, integration, and democracy, examining how these concepts intertwine to offer a robust alternative understanding of democratic life in a world where deliberative, electoral, and agonistic models currently dominate the discourse.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

What do we need to learn about conflict—and how can we learn it—to make democracy work?

Open Team? Yes

Team F: Creative Democracy at Scale: How?

Contact: Matthew Shapiro, mshapiro@follettfdn.org

Description

It's one thing to envision how democracy as a creative way of life could take root in our ultra-local spaces like neighborhoods and schools. We can imagine how that might influence politics and governance at a larger scale. But how could it really scale up to the regional, national, and even global levels? How could Follett's conception of deep-rooted, widespread participatory democracy integrate with a republican (or comparable) system of representative governance? These are the questions that this team would seek to address.

Shared readings would include:

- Follett's *The New State* and from *The 44th Ward Assembly* and *Neighborhood Power*
- Others that team participants may agree on

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

If we are successful in fostering a universal capacity for democracy as co-creation at the ultra-local and local levels, how would (or how could) that capacity scale up?

Open Team? Yes

Team G: Stewarding a Commoning Standard

Contact: Cecile Green, cecile@roundskysolutions.com

Description

The *Stewarding the Commoning Standard* inquiry can be seen as a direct effort to address the central guiding question of the Mary Parker Follett Conversation on Creative Democracy: "How can we fulfill the promise of democracy as a creative experience?" The Standard identifies a key need

in responding to that question by unlocking the capacity to reliably self-govern/cooperate across difference at scale. This aligns with Follett's core principle of viewing difference and diversity as a source of strength and pursuing democracy as a creative, evolving experience. The Standard's vision is to achieve a flourishing world where healthy self-organization is the norm, enabling a collective creative experience that unleashes both personal and social potential—the very goal of the Conversation—by synthesizing existing knowledge and practices.

This inquiry aims to offer the "civic innovation of a means of integrating the plurality of research and practice" in self-governance—from teal organizations to DAOs—into accessible, open standards for effective commoning, eventually supported by a coordinative platform or 'orgware'. This approach, grounded in integrated diversity and continuous evolution, synthesizes disparate learnings into an integrated, practical, accessible operating system. We hope to incrementally move forward the possibility of a system that can be implemented globally, providing the necessary tools and infrastructure (orgware) to actualize Follett's idea of democracy as a way of life, from the intimate to the global level.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

What does it take to effectively, kindly, and safely self-govern over time and at scale?

Open Team? Yes

Team H: Power-Grabbing vs. Power-Growing

Contact: Dale Smalley, mdalesmalley@gmail.com

Description

In his inaugural address in 1789 George Washington described the government over which he was to preside as an "experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people." That test is still underway. At issue is the veracity and robustness of the model ratified in 1790, inclusive of its 27 amendments. Modern technological innovations and the economic imperatives linked to them within a context of declining resources and climate change pose challenges to the suitability of the model going forward. It does not seem reasonable to doubt that meeting these challenges will present crises for our way of life. Many may suffer more than a few.

Democracies in various forms emerged “spontaneously” throughout the world in tribes even before the beginning of civilization and have continued to arise for approximately 7,000 years. This speaks to a natural disposition evinced in all living systems with inherent mandates to survive and reproduce, i.e., create. Achieving a social order is integral to these human drives. Additionally, human nature as conceived in modern research is consistent with notions throughout recorded

history, and it finds its best expression in natural settings, but democracies offer the best artificial alternative devised so far, according to Sir Winston Churchill.

Mary Parker Follett held to the view that the “integration” of differences in the capabilities of people provided the best prospects for emergent ideas to address their collective problems and opportunities. The merits of this proposition indicate that it should be leveraged to find better ways to tap the power of elected officials and organization executives to advance broader interests on behalf of descendants in all segments of society.

Creative ideas must be surfaced to supplant attempts to make silk purses out of sow’s ears and peddle them to the public.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

How do Mary Parker Follett’s concepts inform the act of attaining the power to influence human pursuits of life, liberty, and happiness within the context of governance in the United States?

Open Team? Yes

Team I: The Follett Documentary Dream(ing) Team

Could be combined with Team J

Contact: Matthew Shapiro, mshapiro@follettfdn.org

Description

It is an aspirational project of the Mary Parker Follett Foundation to catalyze the production of a documentary about Follett, her life and her legacy. Some initial outreach to potential partners, producers, etc. has taken place. The focus of this team would be to explore and design a possible treatment (detailed description of content, sequence, etc.) for a documentary, which could be shared with potential funders, producers, etc. While producers may have their own ideas for how it might best be done, the treatment created by the team should help represent what people most familiar with Follett’s life and legacy would like to see represented in a documentary.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

- *Given the assumptions that a documentary about Follett’s life and legacy should be done respectfully, do justice to her life, ideas, and legacy, be of interest to as wide an audience as possible, and make as strong as possible a positive impact on the world today, what should such a documentary include in terms of content, focus, and style?*
- *Other questions that may be developed by the participants.*

Open Team? Yes

Team J: Envisioning a Stage Play about Follett's Life and Legacy

(Could be combined with Team I)

Contact: Matthew Shapiro, mshapiro@follettfdn.org

Description

The concept of a stage play about Follett's life is an emergent idea from a discussion about the documentary concept. A stage play may be a lower-cost way to help introduce Follett and her ideas to new and broader audiences, although in a different and less universally-available manner than a documentary might represent.

It should be acknowledged that the late Albie Davis performed a one-woman show in which she took on the persona of Mary Parker Follett. This may be one source of ideas and inspiration for a fuller stage play.

Some thought could even be given to how a stage play might evolve into a dramatic film about Follett's life and legacy, although it is uncertain whether this is possible to do without filling in too many details that aren't available to us today. In any event, there could be some cross-over from this line of thinking and the documentary project.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

- *What should a stage play about Follett's life and legacy accomplish?*
- *What form could such a play take? What should it include and focus on, and how?*
- *How could a stage play be written in a way that is adaptable to a variety of acting groups of different means, audiences, cultures, and styles?*

Open Team? Yes

Team K: Creating a Culture of Democratic Constitutionalism

Contact: Palma Joy Strand and Wendy Willis, palma@civcity.org, wwillis@pdx.edu

Description

Since 1803, the year that the Supreme Court of the United States decided *Marbury v. Madison*, we (We the People, that is) have ceded many—if not most—of our bedrock questions to the least democratic branch of government—the courts, and ultimately the nine-member Supreme Court. As a result, decisions about how we are going to be with each other evolve and change only when the personnel of the Court changes or a constitutional amendment is passed.

Despite the fact that the Constitution itself doesn't even hint that the courts should have a monopoly on answering the questions deemed "constitutional," both case law and practice box everyone else out. So we ordinary Americans swing between averting our eyes and ignoring the Constitution altogether, filing lawsuits like mad and hoping for a winner-take-all jackpot of a ruling, and hollering about—and sometimes even proposing--constitutional amendments, few of which have even a remote chance of passing. Despite the wave of participatory, deliberative, collaborative, and creative democracy that has overtaken and enriched other public decision-making and conflict resolution processes, there has been no significant movement to bring the generative energy of democracy to the Constitution. So while creativity and imaginative thinking have burst forth in other parts of civic life, the Constitution remains shipwrecked in the stagnant and confined backwaters of lawyerly debate, and a number of its key (and most promising) provisions languish.

We propose to use the Follett Challenge to ask: How can we open up this constrained approach to constitutional meaning-making? How can we claim the Constitution for our own and draw other ordinary Americans into the conversation about how we want to govern ourselves, how we want to make decisions in a chaotic public square, and how we want to live together and co-create the future? Specifically, this team's inquiry will explore (1) potential modes for creative democracy engaging with deep constitutional questions and (2) avenues for opening up constitutional meaning-making beyond law.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

What might constitutional renewal look like?

Related questions may include:

- What can we do to bring the Constitution closer to We the People so that we may wrestle with its tensions and ambiguities and bring it to bear on our deepest questions and most persistent conflicts?
- How can we expand our imaginations about how we might reclaim the Constitution and vivify democracy itself?
- How can creative democracy approaches and processes be applied to fundamental questions of "how we are going to be with each other" so that a cultural democratic constitutionalism can take root, grow, interface with, and ultimately complement legal constitutionalism?

New Participants: The team has identified potential group members, so is not open to additional participants.

Team L: Idealized Design of an Authentic and Powerful Civics Education Experience for K-12 Students

Contact: Matthew Shapiro, mshapiro@follettfdn.org

Description

Civics education as practiced in K-12 schools in the US today cannot foster the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for students to view and practice democracy as co-creation, including the creation of wills in common, the notion of shared responsibilities, conflict resolution and problem-solving, etc. In fact, most school environments and cultures have an implicit curriculum that in many ways fosters the opposite, while seeking to deliver a minimum curriculum in the form of the fundamentals of our system of government, particularly at the higher grade levels. While there are many calls today to strengthen civics education, most appear to continue to take this shallow approach.

This team would take on the role of a community of user-designers working to design an authentic, meaningful, and powerful civics education experience for an imaginary local school district. The team would begin with the creation of an image of a desired civic life for their community, then work inward to identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed that graduating students would need in order to help bring the desired image to life. Finally, the team would move further inward to both imagine and suggest curricula, experiences, and opportunities within and around schools that would support learning that knowledge and those dispositions and skills, and to identify barriers within typical education systems.

No special knowledge of educational theory or practice would be needed by team members, but familiarity with school culture will be helpful.

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

- *What should be the core values core ideas in the image of our desired civic life for our community and society?*
- *What would be the knowledge, skills, and dispositions would our students need in order to help bring to life the image of our desired civic life?*
- *What experiences, curriculum (both explicit and implicit), and instruction (both formal and informal) could most powerfully help to build that knowledge and those skills and dispositions?*
- *What are the opportunities and challenges we can find in and around our school system today for providing those experiences, curriculum, and instruction?*

Open Team? Yes

Team M: Interweaving Follett and Works of Fiction

Contact: Duncan Armitage, duncan.armitage@me.com

Description

Mary Follett was a great reader of fiction and non-fiction and enjoyed works including H.G. Wells, and Virginia Woolf. Over time, she became confident in using both fictional characters (e.g. Alice in Wonderland) and historical figures (e.g. Joan of Arc) to discuss key concepts in leadership and organisational behaviour.

This proposed team will look at a few of Follett's concepts (e.g. invisible leadership, power over versus power with, understanding the total situation etc.) as tools for reading and discussing literary works. Initially, the proposal is to examine one or two novels published in 1925 when Follett was popular as a speaker. Novels such as *Arrowsmith* by Sinclair Lewis and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf are both potential contenders for team analysis. For context, *Arrowsmith* is a novel that can be used to critique medical leadership- something Follett was interested in doing. Follett did read *Mrs. Dalloway* and met Virginia Woolf through her relationship with Dame Katherine Furze.

Emphasis will be placed on the application of Follett's processual concepts such as interweaving (also referred to as integration). The hope is that the work of this team will encourage diversity of ideas and highlight creativity in action.

Approach is subject to feedback from team members. Using a small number of team or zoom based meetings, it is hoped that a diverse team will come together to:

- A) agree one or more texts for exploration/discussion
- B) generate creative ideas (both content and process)
- C) have fun by engaging in a collaborative process

Suggested timings- subject to feedback

- Feb 2026- Introductions and confirmation of scope
- April 2026- Regroup to discuss finding from close readings
- June 2026- Identify key components for discussion at face-to-face event in Boston
- Fall/Autumn 2026- MPF conference participation

Guiding/Triggering Question(s)

What arises when using Follett's ideas to discuss works of fiction?

Open Team? Yes