

The 2026 Mary Parker Follett Conversation on Creative Democracy Finalized Conversation Teams

Conference Description

- November 2-4, 2026; Boston-area; 2 days and 2 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: follettdn.org/conference

Teams and Joining a Team

- The teams listed below received sufficient participation to be carried forth into the 2026 Follett Conversation and are open for participation (see list and team details below).
- In order to attend the Conversation event, 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 to indicate your preferred teams, and your likelihood of attending. This will help with team and conference planning.

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

Inquiry Teams Advancing as of March 2026 (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 E: Conflict, Integration, and Democracy: Learning to Use Conflict to Make Democracy Work

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

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

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

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.

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?

Team F: Creative Democracy at Scale: How?

Contact: Matthew Shapiro, mshapiro@follettdn.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?

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?*