

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: follettfdn.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.

Registration

The Conversation registration form is located at the bottom of the Conference page on the Foundation website. **Most teams remain open for additional participants until we reach capacity.**

Inquiry Teams Finalized (Detailed Descriptions Below)

Team A: Integrative Activism

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

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

Team I/J: The Follett Documentary Dream(ing) Team / Envisioning a Stage Play about Follett’s Life and Legacy

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

Contact: Nicolas Parra-Herrera and Amy Cohen, nparra@law.utah.edu, ajcohen@temple.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*
- Others that team participants may agree on

Guiding/Triggering Questions

- *If, as Follett suggests, creative democracy is creative because it involves the integration of the lives of the people in affecting and effecting their shared situations, what specifically is being integrated through that experience? (e.g., needs, ideas, etc.)?*
- *What are the types of shared situations that could or should be affected and effected by people creating together in creative democracy? How can they be differentiated?*
- *If realizing a creative democracy means fostering a universal capacity for democracy as co-creation at the ultra-local and local levels, how would (or how could) that capacity scale?*
 - *What needs to be scaled in order for creative democracy to be scaled?*
 - *In what directions (up, down, in, out, across...?) need to be scaled the things that need to be scaled for creative democracy.*
- *Once we define the above, what means (models, methodologies, and tools) could be brought to bear to help make it happen?*
- *What might have to change in our systems of governance to allow creative democracy to be realized? What would not have to change?*
- *What would have to be learned in order for creative democracy to be realized? Who would need to learn it?*
- *How does creative democracy in our emerging theory compare with the dominant current image of democracy? What does our emerging theory say about current efforts to improve and strengthen democracy? How could it help?*

Team I/J: The Follett Documentary Dream(ing) Team / Envisioning a Stage Play about Follett's Life and Legacy

Contact: Suzanne Martin, martin@transformperiod.com

Description

Documentary: 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.

Stage Play: 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.

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)

Documentary:

- *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.*

Stage Play:

- *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?*

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?*