

**Practicing What We Preach: The Struggle to Create Democratic Teacher  
Education Classrooms**

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conditions under which all voices can speak and be heard (including our own), and in which educational processes are seen to be open to genuine negotiation. (pp. 44-45)

We embraced a philosophy best articulated by Brookfield (1995):

We teach to change the world. The hope that undergirds our efforts to help students learn is that doing so will help them act toward each other, and toward their environment, with compassion, understanding, and fairness. But our attempts to increase the amount of love and justice in the world are never simple, never unambiguous. What we think are democratic, respectful ways of treating people can be experienced by them as oppressive and constraining. One of the hardest things teachers have to learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice. The cultural, psychological, and political complexity of learning and the ways in which power complicates all human relationships (including those between students and teachers) means that teaching can never be innocent. (p. 1)

### **Theoretical Framework**

Support for democratic education stems from classical democratic theory espoused by Rousseau, John Stuart Mills, James Mill, John Dewey and others (Rainer & Guyton, 1999). Dewey envisioned democratic education as “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience,” requiring the active participation of students in collective deliberation and inquiry (Dewey, 1966, p. 87).

Cunat (1996) believes:

The overall purpose for democratic education is to engage individuals in a process that will help them develop skills and attitudes necessary to become the people who can and will contribute to the making of a vital, equitable, and humane society (p. 130).

Roche (1996) identifies components of democracy, including genuine participation in decision making, and the broader issues of power and control that must be present in educational experiences if students are to be prepared to participate in a democratic society.

Rolheiser and Glickman (1995) state, “Just as schools must be places where practicing teachers live the democratic process, teacher education programs also must be places where democracy is modeled and explored” (p.205). Beyer (1996) describes this type of teacher education as “creating educational practices aimed at social justice rather than stability, participation rather than silencing and exclusion, liberation rather than domination, equity rather than exploitation” (p.10).

Additionally, we were guided in our inquiry by social constructivism and critical social theory literature. Social constructivists view knowledge as constructed through interactions with others. This construction takes place against a backdrop of context, including “historical and sociocultural dimensions” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). Consequently, knowledge is neither static

of...clearing the way for the emergence of a new self” (p.124). Journal keeping over time allowed us to look back at our own practices, the “self in action” (Elliott, 1989) over the course of the year, to monitor our efforts to construct democratic classroom communities.

In addition to journaling and dialoguing with one another, we each solicited written, anonymous feedback from students through periodic course feedback forms and through end-of-course evaluations (see Appendices A and B). Both instruments incorporated items adapted from feedback instruments developed by Brookfield (1995). Results from feedback instruments were compiled by each author and shared with one another and with our respective students. In many instances the sharing of compiled feedback with students sparked additional dialogue about our goals and students’ perceptions of our efforts and their learning.

As we progressed through the academic year, we engaged in an iterative process of reading and re-reading our journals and feedback received from students. We identified and discussed common and divergent themes that emerged. Themes were analyzed as they related to our guiding research questions. Finally, as we neared the end of the study, we each reflected on our valuing of the community we had created. How did we each appraise the experience and its influence on our aspirations to be critically reflective practitioners and enact democratic classroom practices?

## **Results**

During the course of this study, through journaling, dialoguing online, and soliciting feedback from students, we gained insight into our taken-for-granted assumptions, developed greater awareness of how our efforts were interpreted by others, and acquired understanding of how our thinking might be shaped by characteristics of our contexts and relationships with others. Additionally, the community we developed with one another and with our students served to strengthen our resolve to maintain our efforts to be critically reflective and enact democratic principles.

We agreed we were committed to democratic classroom practices: creating classroom communities in which students and professors openly communicate, mutually respect one another, and jointly engage in critical inquiry intended to inform and transform practice. Discussions in this collaborative community often centered on challenges in conducting classrooms that are democratic.

As we sought feedback on our curriculum and instruction from students, we noted some difficulty in having genuine, non-coercive dialogue because of the inherent power differences. Some of our students did not immediately see value in the process and wanted us, as the ones “in charge,” to give them explicit directives rather than work collaboratively on developing and improving the course.

One of the aspects of evaluating students' course work that Valerie continues to feel trepidation about is the assigning of grades and critiques to students' in-class demonstrations. Ironically, Valerie feels very comfortable providing student teachers with feedback about their practice. However, she has not yet determined how to orchestrate it with a classroom full of fellow students. As she places herself in the role of her learners, she has not been able to develop a protocol that would not feel threatening to her if she were the learner.

Sandy has developed a rubric for class presentations but finds that it does not address the performance of students in any deep or meaningful way. She believes that working along with students as they present, stopping them periodically to address both the content of their work and their teaching strategies would be helpful to both the presenters and the other students. Interrupting this way, however, seems somehow disrespectful. Perhaps the most meaningful time Sandy spends with students is in post lesson observation sessions. Students reflect on many aspects of the lessons they have taught and set goals for themselves and their students. Sandy makes observations, asks questions, suggests strategies, but primarily encourages them to think about what occurred as they taught and assessed the children. Inevitable these sessions lead to deeper thinking than what typically occurs in the classroom. Is the private setting the critical component of this reflection or is there a way, as Valerie asks, to orchestrate it with a classroom full of fellow students who might also benefit from this kind of dialogue. We have not yet created the classrooms that would allow for unselfconscious critique of individual performance.

Grading is one area where classroom authority resides and could be an area of legitimate negotiation. Although we believe that teachers have both a right and a responsibility to evaluate students' work, we also know that we must help students to critically reflect upon their own performance. The literature mentions reform efforts to traditional grading such as self-grading (Fernandez-Balboa, 2007), learning contracts (Greenwood, 1995), action research (Beyer, 1996) and portfolios (Robbin, Moss, Clark, Goering, Herter & Templin, 2009), all of which might shift the onus of responsibility towards shared or self-evaluation.

### **Attendance**

One week into the first semester of the course it became apparent to Valerie through discussion with her students that they felt the attendance policy was too rigid and not responsive to their needs. In response Valerie made some adjustments to the policy in order to be more lenient but she continued to require absences beyond the first two to be verified through a doctor's note or communication from the campus's dean of students. As she recorded in her journal at the time:

*. . . I had not clearly thought through having such a tough attendance policy. Instead, I had merely adopted the policy that was used by one of my veteran colleague. So, in reflecting on the situation, I wondered about how my policy was perceived by students and whether or not it served my goals as a professor and my goals for students' learning in my course. In the next class session on Monday of this week, I had two more students who were not in attendance, and I thought at the time had failed to contact me! So, I initiated an impromptu discussion with the class about the attendance policy. They provided some suggestions of changes they would like (e.g., two absence, no questions asked) and I told them I would give the matter further consideration between then and the next class on Wednesday. . . . On Wednesday, I began the*

- ♦ *You really had me thinking on my drive home about spelling and the use of the games vs. worksheet and test. Oh wait, I mean reflecting <Grin> on the many things we do in education out of habit or false beliefs. Thanks, I like to challenge conventional thinking!*

However, some other students were confused and frustrated by our failure to provide formulaic responses to their questions. Students seemed to actively resist some of our efforts to promote a more participatory learning community. When Valerie's students were given the assignment of leading discussions on readings many of them interpreted the task as providing their classmates with a lecture oriented summary of the materials.

Sandy's students reported that they were most comfortable with a lecture format and were unhappy with having to engage in discussions or do presentations of any kind. A number of students reported that they felt most disengaged when their peers were presenting. Some wrote that they did not like giving presentations in class nor did they enjoy listening to the presentations of their classmates. Having to prepare to lead a discussion was sometimes actively resisted.

As one of Sandy's students wrote, "You're the one that gets paid to teach...not me."

### **Ambiguity**

Students wanted clear, precise, and infallible answers to thorny issues. When none were forthcoming, or when questions were turned back to them for deeper examination and thought, a few became hostile and frustrated. And we, as instructors, sometimes became defensive.

**Sandy:** *I want each of my first class sessions to focus on the shared responsibilities of students and instructor in making the class meaningful...the notion of shared responsibility is really foreign to our college culture.*

**Valerie:** *I take my enthusiastic little self to class each morning and use my skills learned as a cheerleader advisor (smile, back straight, smile, nod vigorously) and I'm met with sleepy mild responses and a passive reaction to most everything that isn't simple application. I can't seem to motivate them to engage in the conversation*

Our first and easiest response tended to blame students and/or their previous educational experiences. According to students, most of their learning experiences have been in behaviorist-oriented, traditional classrooms. Teachers dispensed and students received wisdom. Characteristically, much of their college program also followed that format. According to Ritchie and Wilson (2000), "Education programs ...are dominated by an orientation that breaks learning into skills and then focuses on methods to teach mastery of those skills" (p.36).

Moving students out of their comfort zone might have accounted for some of their upset, but we knew, and gradually confessed to one another, we also held some culpability. Our attempts at establishing an engaged pedagogy were less than perfect. We fell back on what we knew, what we had experienced as students, what was more typical in our departments and what made us feel comfortable. Although we claimed a commitment to democratic practices, and had agreed

Patterns in the analysis of feedback collected for our own purposes gradually began to highlight students' needs and helped us realize that the issues they were questioning also informed our practice and programs. As an example, Laurie talked about explaining the purposes of the study to a class group who then made it clear they were supportive of her efforts:

**Laurie:** *They have very strong opinions but tend to be more productive and constructive, less critical and "rude" about their program ... they are eager to help the program improve and willing to share their experiences and frustrations...*

### Negotiating Authority

It is the concrete issues of negotiating authority without abandoning it that we found most problematic.

**Laurie:** *(in discussing her decision to use a particular text) The students HATE it. And we have only read 3 chapters. It is admittedly a little heavy, but as I read it I'm loving it. Classic case of the divide between teacher and students' interests, motivation, etc.*

Indeed, one of Laurie's students wrote:

- ◆ *Every time I open up the pages of that crisp clean book, I cannot wait until I get to shut it again.*

We struggled with practical guidelines for structuring classroom authority relations. The incongruity between what students want from us and what we expect from them requires a delicate balance of give and take. Our belief in and efforts to create democratic classrooms do not relieve us of the responsibility to facilitate student learning. In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain (2004) suggests that "Professors, as experts in their field, have a much better grasp of what learning the discipline might entail (p.55). Our commitment to democratic principles, however, requires that, while we do not abdicate our expert role, we find strategies to include our students in setting the educational agenda, designing the curriculum, determining its content, goals, and assessments, and crafting the essential questions that are meaningful to them as learners (Brubaker, 2009).

Aspects of negotiating authority have been theorized as critical dimensions of democratic education (Barber, 1984; Boomer, Lester, Oncore, & Cook, 1992; Shor, 1992). According to Brubaker (2009), classrooms in which authority is purposefully negotiated, however, remain more the exception than the rule in educational practice, particularly in college classrooms. Despite our desire that power would be negotiated, we had difficulty finding appropriate areas for negotiation.

Sharing authority as we did, with some reluctance, in issues of grading and attendance was emblematic but do not begin to address the real meaning of democracy in a classroom. That is not to say that accounts of and negotiations in day-to-day classroom practices could not be helpful in examining and documenting institutional structures, and larger social and political factors. We must begin somewhere.

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*Appendix B*

Course Title & Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor: \_\_\_\_\_

Semester: \_\_\_\_\_

*This Evaluation Form is intended to help the instructor gain a clearer understanding of how to assist future students' learning and how her actions as a teacher have been perceived by students this semester. Please answer the items candidly. The evaluation is anonymous and your participation is voluntary.*

**Please complete the following statements:**

1. What most helped my learning in this class was:
  
  
  
2. What most hindered my learning in this class was:
  
  
  
3. What most helped me take responsibility for my own learning in this class was:
  
  
  
4. What most prevented me from taking responsibility for my own learning in this class was:
  
  
  
5. I believe the instructor's goals or objectives for this course were:

**Please respond to the following statements by checking one of the boxes and answering the question that follows:**

6. In this course, I found that:
  - many different teaching approaches were used.
  - some different teaching approaches were used.
  - very few teaching approaches were used.
 What are your feelings about the teaching approaches used?
  
7. In this course, I found the instructor to be:
  - always responsive to students' concerns.
  - sometimes responsive to students' concerns.
  - rarely responsive to students' concerns.