

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **Democratic Education in Universities: Pushing at the Boundaries**

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In a recent opinion piece in *The Guardian*, democratic education advocate Rachel Roberts posed the questions of “why not put children in charge of their schools?” (Roberts, 13 March, 2017). There were over 300 responses within the first week, many of which were thought-out and considered responses, some in support and some in opposition. A sizeable proportion of these echoed the view of one contributor who simply stated: “For the same reason you don’t put inmates in charge of their prison.”

This is an interesting analogy which implies that the power dynamic between teachers and students is akin to that of prisoner officers and prisoners. Are children in schools to “serve time”? Are they being “punished”? This is not my view. I do not want schools to feel like prisons, where teachers are in control and children are denied any sense of liberty. This is not my vision of creative, interesting and inspiring places for learning. Instead, children, parents and teachers should be collaborators in the task of education, working together to co-create the best environment in which learning can take place. My vision is that of democratic education.

Democratic education is frequently misrepresented as meaning that students

are entirely in control and that teachers have no role at all. This is not the case. Democratic education is a purposeful attempt to equalise the power relationship between teachers and students so that each and every person is valued for their contribution. When A. S. Neill wrote that “my vote carries the same weight as that of a seven-year old” (Neill, 1962, p. 45), he did not suggest that his voice was unimportant—he argued they were equal.

This is a crucial distinction, and one that helps us to understand how democratic schools function on a day-to-day basis. Some decisions are made by individual students; some by individual teachers; others are made collaboratively through dialogue, usually using a mechanism such as a School Meeting. All of these decisions—whether individual or collective—are subject to constraints. Freedom is not absolute (Montgomery & Hope, 2016).

Democratic education—whether in schools, colleges or universities—operates within the boundaries of specific contexts. Democratic schools in Israel use a standardised national curriculum and mandatory attendance at classes (Hecht, 2011). Radical student-led universities in Denmark use assessment systems and give differential grades for work of varying

standards (Hope & Montgomery, 2016, Siig & Heilesen, 2016). All democratic educational institutions operate within their own national legal systems. Some of these “limits to freedom” are imposed externally; others are negotiated internally through systems of self-governance or rule making. Accepting that there are limits—that freedom is constrained—is an essential part of understanding democratic education.

At a university level, students are adults. They choose to apply to specific universities and to particular programmes of study, and in England, they pay substantial levels of tuition fee (£9000 per year for undergraduate students). They cannot be compared with “prisoners.” So, can we rephrase Rachel Roberts’s question and ask: “why not put students in charge of their universities?”

Although it must be acknowledged that students are increasingly invited to collaborate in university-level decision-making (Brooks, Byford & Sela, 2015), it is my opinion that in lectures and other teaching sessions, sessions are rarely “student-led” in the way that might frequently be seen in democratic schools. There are several reasons why this might be the case, some of which relates to university-level processes and practices and some of which are connected with attitudes and values.

One of the modules that I have developed and taught to undergraduate students is “Democracy and Education.” This 20-credit module runs for 3 hours a week for one semester. The content of the module explores the theories, philosophies, practices and challenges of democratic education and the teaching and learning processes are—as far as

possible—aligned with the practices of democratic education. There are many organisational constraints that create limits for the democratic nature of this module.

First, this is a core module, students do not choose to do it and attendance is not optional. Second, to pass the module, students have to produce written work that meets defined learning outcomes and pre-set deadlines. Third, assessed work has to be marked by the tutor—and not by peers—and it has to be graded according to standardised criteria. These externally-imposed limits provide a boundary to my freedom and to the freedom of the students, but within this boundary, there is considerable room for manoeuvre. The precise content of the module is negotiable; the format and style of the “taught” session can be adapted; the title of assignments can be entirely student-led. The boundaries can be pushed so as to create space for democratic education.

Over the past seven years, many students have responded with enthusiasm to this module and have used the space to explore the far reaches of theory and practice of democratic education. They have responded well to opportunities to make the learning experiential as well as academic. The titles that they have chosen for assignments have been far more interesting—and challenging—than anything I might have suggested. The ideas they have brought to sessions, and the reading that has accompanied this, have been educative for me as well as for them, turning them into student-teachers and me into a teacher-student (Freire, 1970). Many have produced written work that far exceeds my, and their own, expectations.

Some students, however, are challenged by this module. In the first year, one student said “this was the most thought provoking and therefore disturbing module I have attended during my time at University.” This mirrors conversations that happen every time the module runs, where a small proportion of students want to be “told what to do” as they think that I “know best.” For them, adjusting to this style of teaching and learning is hard because it is different from their previous experiences of education, in schools and in university. Asking them to trust this way of working—and by implication, to trust me—provokes anxiety. In these instances the external constraints which are imposed by the university context are compounded by internally imposed constraints from the students. Overcoming these anxieties so that students can trust this approach is more than can be achieved in one isolated module; it requires a systemic change in the teaching and learning practices within higher education.

As a university academic, I believe that I am not the only one who is “knowledgeable” and that students should not be perceived as “knowing nothing” (Freire, 1970, p. 53). I see my role as that of facilitator rather than expert, and I have a strong desire to shift traditional power dynamics so that we are co-creators of learning. I have a vision of universities being places where students and academics can work together in creative and inspiring centres of learning, places where we are equal and where we recognise the innate value of each individual, places where “knowledge” is seen as something that can be co-created between people. This vision is for democratic education within higher

education. As part of this, students can be in charge of universities—involved in a democratic community of equals.

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