

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Reflections on the Democratic Classroom

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From my perspective, democratic educational practices are dependent on particular notions of, and participants' relationships with, knowledge.

It is difficult to conceive of authentic democratic classroom encounters in contexts where knowledge is perceived to be fixed, definitive, clean and predictable. In a Freirian sense, democratic education cannot be meaningful if knowledge is the preserve of the "expert" teacher, "banking" this knowledge in the "good" student who passively memorises all that is transmitted to her. While it might be perfectly possible to engage in seemingly democratic classroom activities, these are isolated, tokenistic and somewhat disingenuous without a commitment to a democratic perspective on knowledge.

I would argue that, in a democratic classroom, all actors should perceive (and be encouraged to perceive) knowledge as messy, complex, problematic, incomplete, tentative, exploratory.... Learners (and teachers) should be suspicious of any claim to knowledge and submit any such claim to thorough scrutiny and critique.

In the democratic classroom, participants should not be in awe of prestigious peer-reviewed articles and should subject these to the same interrogative techniques they would a blog

or a wikipedia article. Lazy distinctions between what are and are not valid sources of knowledge should be challenged continuously. Evaluation is not a case of perusing the list of criticisms the textbook or the teacher outline. Learners should be what Postman and Weingartner described as dedicated "crap detectors." Above all else, participants should be encouraged to contribute, both individually and collectively, to the active (co)construction of knowledge. Rather than being static and predictable, knowledge is dynamic and fluid—developing and transforming both in incremental and revolutionary ways. Instead of being clean and definite, it is messy, related to our real and lived experiences, and provisional. It does not begin and end at the walls of the classroom. Learners should be supported to feel secure with uncertainty—to be comfortable that there are no straightforward or "correct" answers. They should understand that meaningful democratic activity is dependent on risk-taking in that activity. In a democratic classroom, applied and analysed anecdotal evidence and speculative enquiry should be of equal or greater value, compared with more traditional forms of evidence and intellectual activity.

A second prerequisite for genuinely democratic educational practices, I would argue, is that the above perspective on knowledge underpins all facets of learning, teaching, curriculum, assessment, learning environment and so on. For instance, it is striking how often one might observe democratic classroom relations/activities in a module—with a range of constructivist pedagogies at play—yet approaches to assessment are anything but democratic. Discursive, problem-based, open curriculum are assessed by examination or other formal assessment tasks—where marking criteria, grading descriptors, model answers, marking and feedback are all prescribed by the tutor. Where the curriculum creates the promise of freedom, participation and empowerment, the assessment tasks firmly slam that door. This is, at best, confusing to learners. At worst, it systematically distorts and devalues democratic engagement. It reinforces notions that participation in and for democracy are not worthwhile, because any impactful decisions are made by other, more powerful (and “knowledgable”) actors.

So, I would argue, teachers cannot simply pick and choose the democratic practices that they are most comfortable with. Rather, it requires a wholesale commitment to democratic learning and teaching—warts and all!

Such perspectives on knowledge and democracy have underpinned much of my curriculum development, my teaching and my research. What follows is an example from each.

With a colleague, I wrote a course about four years ago called the “Warwick Gateway to HE: Social Studies” which is still running. The course is aimed at non-

traditional adult learners with little or no formal educational experience beyond GCSE. It prepares them to study alongside traditional undergraduates on a Warwick degree. The course begins with the individual student, then moves outwards over the weeks, to look at their dinner table, their TV, their street and neighbourhood. They work together to assess social issues and engage with problems. As the course progresses, they move further outwards to consider local, national and then global issues. Drawing from their own experiences, they learn to utilise different academic concepts and disciplines. They recognise the value of their own experience in contextualising and interpreting theory, as well as how these same theories can help to analyse and critique their own experiences. They grow to conceive of these concepts and theories as lenses and/or tools to help them make sense of the world around them.

Each week, they undertake a piece of written work, experimenting with different writing styles and developing confidence in their own academic voice. They join the full degree programme with a sense of shared identity, with an understanding of what academic disciplines can and cannot do in relation to one another and, most importantly, with the confidence to contribute and participate.

Around the same time, I wrote a module titled “Reinventing Education,” which I continue to teach today. The module is open to any undergraduate student across the university, as part of a suite of central innovative and interdisciplinary modules. It begins by asking students to reflect on their own positive and negative educational experiences and then, over the course of

the module, it introduces them to a range of alternative educational theories and practices. These radical models are presented and interrogated in an open and discursive learning space. At the end of the module, each student develops an educational utopia or dystopia. There is a very limited brief and learners are encouraged to be as experimental, creative and innovative as they dare. They are given the assessment criteria they must meet but, other than that, they can choose to create what they want.

In the final week, we meet and participate in a collaborative roundtable discussion, whereby each student briefly outlines their ideas. These are examined, first by another student respondent and then by the group, acting heuristically to help us collectively interrogate existing educational structures and practices. These assignments have been really fantastic—and a couple examples have been published in an earlier edition of this journal.

In a number of research projects, I have used an approach to pedagogic research we've termed "student-staff collaborative enquiry." Teams of undergraduate students and their academic tutors work together to operationalise wider research questions, undertake fieldwork and analyse data. These teams

have interviewed students in other universities, as well as teaching and senior leadership staff to examine current practices and recommend future developments in areas including assessment and feedback and employability. Students and staff have worked together to draft research bids, conduct research and present findings at academic conferences and in peer reviewed journal articles.

In each of these three examples, students have talked of their excitement in the learning they undertook, of how distinct these experiences were from those they had elsewhere on their degree programmes or beforehand, and of the lasting positive impact of these experiences on their wider learning and lives. Democratic educational practices like the three outlined above have the potential, it seems to me, to make educational experiences genuinely empowering and transformational, as well as to enhance our civic society and our wider engagement and participation.

In a period like the present, where unfiltered information is so widespread and accessible and where the crisis in western democratic processes is evident to us daily, there is, it seems to me, a duty on teachers to facilitate such learning activities.

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