

# DEMOCRATIC LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS\*

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## Abstract

In this article, we address the characteristics of democratic education, examine learning communities in higher education and offer suggestions for faculty in Educational Leadership programs to develop learning communities in their classrooms that more systematically and effectively address issues of democracy. This publication aligns with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) Standard 5: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner."



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## 1 Introduction

As educators who shape future educational leaders in credential and degree programs, we are faced with the challenge of instilling in them certain attitudes and values while also helping them acquire a specific body of skills and knowledge – all crucial for success in the challenging world of education today. At the same time, we hope to impact them as people and to provide them with a platform or philosophy that they can apply in their own setting, allowing them to have a positive ripple effect on those they touch

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in their daily work. Educational leaders, through their work with communities in and surrounding their schools, face the daunting task of preparing graduates for success during the educational process as well as giving them what it takes to contribute positively to society once they complete their education. In this type of work, it is necessary for educational leaders to work in a collaborative, democratic and ethical fashion. If they can leave Educational Leadership programs with an understanding the power of democratic learning communities- that they are the path to empowerment and powerful learning for adults, children, and ultimately society - we can be better assured that they will make a difference in the workplace. If we “put our money where our mouth is” and we actually model, in addition to talk about, democratic learning communities, our educational leadership graduates will be more likely to carry on with this same practice. In this article, we address the characteristics of democratic education, examine learning communities in higher education and offer suggestions for faculty in Educational Leadership programs to develop learning communities in their classrooms that more systematically and effectively address issues of democracy.

## 2 Democratic Education

Those involved in democratic educational organizations see themselves as participants in communities of learning (Apple & Beane, 1998). Democratic education can refer to strategies practiced within a classroom or at the site or campus level. In democratic educational institutions all those directly involved, including professional educators, students, their parents, and other members of the community have the right to be engaged in collaborative planning, reaching decisions that address aspirations, concerns and interests of all participants. “This kind of democratic planning, at both the school and the classroom levels, is a genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives” (Apple& Beane, 1995). Furman and Starratt (2002) contend that “because of the need for cross-cultural, cross national dialogue and understandings in regard to the common good” (p. 114), democracy (and as a consequence, schools and classrooms) needs to include values such as 1) the worth and dignity of individuals and the value of their participation, 2) reverence for free and open inquiry and critique, 3) the responsibility of individuals to participate in open inquiry, collective choices and actions in the interest of the common good, and finally 4) the recognition that “postmodern” democratic participation transcends understandings of democratic principles associated with specific nations/states.

Morrison (2008) shares benefits and challenges of democratic education. Benefits include:

- Learning is more meaningful because students have a choice.
- Students are more engaged because they are interested and committed.
- A greater trust is placed on students to make wise decisions and to do quality work, which, in turn causes them to meet expectations.
- There is greater intrinsic motivation and maturity.
- Finally, democratic students will most likely become more democratic citizens in the future.

Some of the challenges include:

- Students are not accustomed to democracy and being actively responsible for themselves and their environment and hence they may rebel.
- Students can mistake freedom for “a free for all”.
- Fearful teachers might resist the move towards more student control.
- A change in the paradigm of “head filling” to a more active participation in the process is required, a need to open avenues for dialogue and true listening arises.
- Democratic classrooms within non-democratic sites or campuses clash with the status-quo, and the reality of balancing out institutional requirements with students’ needs and wishes does not go away.

Weighing out these benefits and challenges, we may ask ourselves two important questions. Is it possible? Is it worth it? The answer, we feel, is another question. Can we afford not to move towards more democratic schools and classrooms? Can we afford not to make students’ educational experiences meaningful, effective, and ultimately prepare them (and society in general) for a more active role in their future?

Ideally, schools should be places where all children and adults feel valued and allowed to develop to their full potential. Teachers, students, administrators, staff and community members should join together to determine how an individual and collective well being can be promoted and improved on a daily basis. Schools should be places that society considers as examples and as training grounds for producing positive and productive global citizens. We believe that democratic schools and classrooms can move us towards this ideal. Learning communities within those settings may be the vehicle that permits all constituents to participate more actively in the process of democracy. The challenge for institutions of higher education, however, is to develop teachers and leaders who have the knowledge skills and dispositions to foster democratic learning communities in classrooms, schools and universities. Ashby (2000) contends this can be accomplished by building learning communities that “minimize the isolation of educators—superintendents, principals, teachers, and professors—and that maximize intentional parallels between the work of K-12 educators and professors” (p. 4).

### 3 Learning Communities

Developing learning communities in an effort to improve educational organizations is a popular strategy within the education community. There doesn't, however, seem to be much consensus on what constitutes a learning community. Dufour (2004) notes “people use this term to describe every possible combination of individuals with an interest in education” (p. 31). Some experts offer a more focused look. Where community exists, according to Gardner (1989), it “confers on its members identity, a sense of belonging, and a measure of security” (p. 73). He suggests that ideals of justice and compassion are nurtured in communities such as they were in an earlier era when personal support came not only from one's family but also from an extended family or the community. Those who seek to build community today hope that it embodies the best of contemporary values, is inclusive, balances individual freedom and group obligation, fosters the release of human potential, and invites sharing and participation in leadership tasks (Apple & Beane, 1995).

In the realm of educational organizations, Cross (1998) describes a learning community as “ groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning (p. 4). Norris, Barnett, Basom, and Yerkes (2002) posit that community “celebrates the dignity and worth of self and others, fosters the empowerment of both, and encourages and supports the maximum development of human potential for the benefit of the common good” (p. 9). More specifically, Markowitz, Ndon, Pizarro and Valdes (2005) define classroom learning communities as ones that foster:

- an appreciation of the value of student differences (culture, language, gender, expertise, age, etc.) in promoting classroom learning;
- a willingness of students to take intellectual risks within the learning environment;
- a shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills; and
- a connectedness among students that lead to a common identity and a sense of belonging (p.2).

Hugo (2002) suggest that organizations, professional educators and formal and informal leaders blend learning and the experience of community in order to strengthen connections between people, facilitate the ability to keep up with social change and right social injustices (p. 21).

### 4 Learning Communities in Higher Education

Learning communities in higher education are increasing in popularity. In fact, Smith (2003) reports that more than 500 colleges and universities offer some type of learning community in their classes and programs. The history of the learning communities referred to by Smith date back to the early 1920's when Alexander Meikeljohn (in Smith, 2003) developed the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. Meikeljohn believed that the typical university offered short classes that fragmented social and professional relationships and did not provide faculty or students an opportunity to participate in the kind of academic community that would seriously investigate critical interdisciplinary issues. He proposed that developing habits of the

mind for democratic engagement required more than content knowledge; it required an environment that fostered engagement in and outside the classroom (Smith, 2003).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the term ‘cohort’ came closest to embodying the learning community concepts in educational leadership programs at the graduate level. In the late 1990’s authors were redefining the concept of cohortness as more than merely an efficiency model in preparing school leaders. The broader definition of cohort made references to cohorts as learning communities (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1996). The learning community served Meikeljohn’s (in Smith, 2003) goal of providing opportunities for students to seriously investigate critical interdisciplinary issues as well as meeting later educators’ attempts to humanize the learning environment. It also met Lenning and Ebber’s (in Zhao & Kuh, 2004) definition of a classroom learning community, in which the classroom “serves as the locus of community building by featuring cooperative learning techniques and group process learning activities” (p. 116).

Learning communities also provided a framework for change that went beyond most reform efforts by fostering the implementation of inquiry-based approaches to learning. Approaches such as service learning, problem based learning, collaborative writing and projects, experiential learning and reflective practices, however, do not always fit well into traditional class schedules and may not be included in the teaching repertoire of many faculty members.

Norris, and her colleagues (2002) indicated that the foundation for developing learning communities in educational leadership programs rests on the members’ knowledge and acceptance of self and others, and a willingness to share power through collective contributions. They go on to suggest that learning communities exert a powerful influence in shaping personal and collective values and argue, “learning communities are laboratories for experiencing transformational leadership and for forming the dispositions, knowledge, and performance skills necessary for transformational leadership” (p. 10).

It is in those laboratories, our classrooms, that professors of educational leadership can shape the curriculum to model and develop future transformational leaders. As the next generation of leaders experience community, “they learn to speak the language of community, learn to build connections that foster community, and, more importantly, learn to value community for themselves and for others” (Norris et al., 2002, p. 17). The challenge for those of us who prepare future leaders is to consider our classrooms as learning communities providing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for fostering learning communities within their future workplaces.

How can we move towards more democratic classrooms in educational leadership programs? Morrison (2008), spoke of the benefits and challenges of doing this in schools. These benefits and challenges are not unique to K-12 settings. They can also occur when working with adults. Democracy is not easy and shaping and working in democratic communities requires courage, patience, dedication and skill. Davis (2002) explains that most of us have had experiences in communities and recognize that individuals “do not always ‘get along’ nor are all activities positive or successful. Nevertheless, individuals continue to pursue this mutuality even when it is stressed to unimaginable limits. They never seem to arrive. In most cases, they continue the undertaking” (p. 2). This same challenge belongs to us. As professors of educational leadership, are we ready to forge ahead in search of such communities? Given the potential derailers of working within a community, are we willing to pursue mutuality of relationships with our students, to ‘continue the undertaking’ (p.2)? Are we ready to develop within our classroom the democratic communities of learners we expect our students to develop in their work places? If so, we need to seriously examine what is presently happening in our classes and move toward a more inclusive sense of true partnership with students. We need to involve them in all decisions that affect them.

## 5 Faculty’s Role in Developing Learning Communities

Whether we speak of schools or universities, it is the teacher’s/faculty’s and the school’s/ university’s responsibility to encourage a sense of democratic community by designing activities to which all can contribute (Osterman, 2000). Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004) stress the importance of shared responsibility for developing successful cohorts, or learning communities, and remind us that as faculty we are facilitators, mentors,

and sometimes mediators—roles quite different from what many professors may have expected as university professors. What are the implications of shifting from an authoritarian, non-democratic environment to a more collaborative, shared democratic way of working?

The new role required of educators is not unlike the role of a school leader. By purposefully modeling behaviors, that build learning communities and encourage democratic learning in educational leadership classes, we are providing practical experiences that will help students on the job. We believe that it is possible to foster development of the type of democratic community that Dewey envisioned and that meets Furman's (1998) definition of the postmodern community. This development occurs at the university level, in courses provided for training future administrators, with the hope that it will spill forth into their K-12 settings. Furman wrote that the postmodern community

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...is a community of differences. It is based on the ethics of acceptance of otherness with respect, justice, and appreciation, and on peaceful cooperation within differences. It is inspired by the metaphor of an interconnected, interdependent web of persons engaged in a global community. It is fostered by processes that promote among its members the feelings of belonging, trust of others, and safety (p. 325).

Collin and Heaney (2001) contend faculty members in higher education need to examine certain beliefs before they can hope to develop democratic learning communities in classrooms or programs. Faculty members first need to practice what we teach. This means that we should have an articulated plan to transform ourselves through ongoing learning. This begins with the acknowledgment that what we may know about something is not all there is to be known. We must relentlessly search out other intellectual paradigms and make space for competing ideas, concepts, and philosophies. Secondly we must be willing to consider alternative models of graduate adult education. We would argue that the cohort model allows for the consistency of time and space needed to create an environment conducive to democratic practices. The interrelationship of mutual trust, respect, and academic democratic practice is not one that can be developed within a single semester; it needs to be maintained over the duration of a program and beyond which a cohort model facilitates. Collins and Heaney also believe we must not be afraid to critique the assumptions that influence our social and political worldview. Clearly, these assumptions are not inalterable states of being. A heightened level of social consciousness will alter our view regarding the sociopolitical implications or our practice (p.36).

Are we, as educational leadership faculty, ready to model the democratic classrooms we expect our students to develop in their work places? If so, we need to seriously examine what is presently happening in our classes and move toward a more inclusive sense of partnership with students as we attempt to develop our higher education democratic communities.

## 6 Building Learning Communities in Educational Leadership

Instructors who want to develop learning communities in educational leadership courses or programs can enhance the probability of that occurrence by “attending to group dynamics, promoting a safe environment, de-centering authority, promoting interdependence, maximizing the potential for co-creativity, encouraging exploration of multiple perspectives, valuing experiential ways of knowing, and helping students develop support systems within their group” (Lawrence, 1996, p. 2). If we are truly interested in modeling what we expect of our students (Ashby, 2000), then we need to take seriously the learning activities identified by faculty (Yerkes et al., 1995; Norris, et al., 2002) recommended by students (Norris, C., Barnett, B., Basom, M.R., & Yerkes, D., 1996), and reinforced in the literature (Lawrence, 1996, 2002). Facilitators of learning communities should provide students with learning experiences “of a deep transformational nature aimed at transforming conditioned perspectives and fostering personal empowerment” (Norris, 2004, p. 3). Using the characteristics for fostering classroom learning communities posited by Markowitz, et al., (2005) as a framework, we share a list of instructional strategies for educational leadership faculty who are committed to developing learning communities and modeling for students who want to foster learning communities in

their own workplaces.

**1. An appreciation of the value of student differences (culture, language, gender, expertise, age, etc.) in promoting classroom learning:**

- Ask students to develop platforms as they begin their leadership development program. Have students identify non-negotiable core values essential to understanding choices, decisions and effectiveness regarding issues of diversity, social justice and equity.
- Encourage self-discovery activities or self-assessment instruments: Cohort members can better understand themselves and others through these activities. The more community members understand themselves, “the more clearly they will understand and identify with their core beliefs, leadership styles and decision-making biases” (Milstein and Associates, 1993, p. 155). Such activities may include the use of the autobiographies, self-inventories, learning style inventories or leadership style inventories (Barnett, 2004).
- Have students maintain daily or weekly journals through which they learn about themselves and thus about how one accepts and deals with the diversity of the learning community. Respond to students’ journals, ask questions to enhance student thinking, comment on their beliefs, and point out inconsistencies between their stated beliefs and their daily practice of leadership in particular as it relates to working with others in a learning community.
- Have students debate issues in order to listen and value different points of view or perspectives. Provide for learning how to organize/conduct debates in public following rules of civility and respect logic and evidence gathering (Furman & Starratt, 2002).

**2. A willingness of students to take intellectual risks within the learning environment.**

- Ask students to engage in team-building activities that can only be successfully completed with physical and emotional support from cohort members. Early interactions among students allow them to share their values, beliefs, and expectations for becoming fully participating members of the group. Simulations, adventure activities such as ropes courses, and experiential learning activities can also accomplish this goal.
- Use Problem-Based Learning activities: introduce students to problems of everyday practice and engage them in acquiring new knowledge to identify and solve problems collaboratively (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Norris et al., 2002). When members are working on complex problems in a supportive environment, they are more likely to take risks.
- Encourage the use of reflective activities to explore the complexities and concerns of learning in their community.
- Develop the curriculum around major social problems and issues that encourage a wide range of views and voices.

**3. A shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills.**

- Engage students and teachers in mutual inquiry and reflection through collaborative learning and the sharing of ideas, experiences, and perspectives. In collaborative learning groups, students learn from their colleagues, teach their professors, and create knowledge together (Lawrence, 2002, p. 85). Collaborative teaching, however, “requires teachers to subordinate and transform traditional teaching methods” (Bruffee, 1993, p. 9).
- Encourage student voice/participation. Have students share their knowledge with the community, thus building on the shared experiences and mutual support that promote adult growth and development. Students should be involved in the decision making of all issues that directly affect them- course requirements, schedules, grading, assessment rubrics.
- Develop working norms, conduct research, review data, create plans, assess each other’s participation, and make presentations of authentic tasks to individuals or classes.

- Have students share skills and resources to foster the habit of collaboration and mutual support (co-operative learning groups). Complex problems can be more readily addressed when students work together and understand the synergy that comes from valuing differences.
- Have students use reflective activities to explore their practice. Challenge them to invite their entire school community to reflect on how to achieve the goal of developing a reflective community (Starratt, 1995).

#### 4. A connectedness among students that lead to a common identity and a sense of belonging.

- Use self-assessment activities in order that learning community members better understand themselves and others through the. The more community members understand themselves, “the more clearly they will understand and identify with their core beliefs, leadership styles and decision-making biases” (Milstein and Associates, 1993, p. 155). They will also better understand each other and move a focus on what’s good for self to what’s good for the community.
- Provide students with opportunities to meet outside of the classroom to relax, get to know each other on a different level, and to celebrate individual as well as group successes.

## 7 Summary

Apple and Beane (1995) remind us “democratic schools like democracy itself, do not happen by chance” (p.9). Neither will democratic learning communities. Such communities result from explicit attempts by faculty to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life” (p. 9). It will take more than well-intentioned faculty to learn how to model democratic ideals through structures, processes and the curriculum of higher education classrooms. Such classrooms need to emphasize students “working with teachers to engage in collaborative planning, reaching decisions that respond to the concerns, the aspirations, and interests of both”(Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 9). It will also require rethinking the concept of knowledge, power and student voice. Faculty may have a problem letting go of “prerogatives and privileges of the professorial position” (Colin & Heaney 2001, p. 34) but fostering democratic learning communities demand that “education be undertaken by and with students not to them” (Colin & Heaney p. 31). Do we have the courage to make it happen? Are we up to the challenge?

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