

Education for Democracy at the University Level

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Although I (Knoester) teach at a small regional university in the Midwestern part of the United States, I was fortunate to teach a seminar last summer that included 12 students from a variety of countries, including three from Saudi Arabia, three from the U.S., two from South Korea, one from Japan, and one each from the United Arab Emirates, Lithuania, and Kuwait. With this interesting mix of students, we embarked on a first-year writing-intensive seminar focusing on the topic “Perspectives on Democracy.”

The University of Evansville, like many universities, requires a seminar for all incoming first-year students to prepare students for college-level writing, along with the reading and discussion of challenging texts. Often, these courses share particular books to allow in-coming students to share a “common experience.” In this case, I was able to choose the topic and the books that would be read. It was a wonderful opportunity to teach outside of one’s discipline (education, in my case), and to think about issues that might not arise in my usual courses. I was able to use the opportunity of proposing this course to think further through these issues myself, even as I had recently written or edited two books on the topic of democratic education (Knoester, 2012a, 2012b).

Before I begin discussing in more detail how this class explored the topic of competing definitions of “democracy,” allow me to first suggest that I don’t believe this topic arises enough at the university level. Social studies education is generally associated with primary and secondary education—that set of disciplines, including U.S. and world history, generally taught throughout a child’s matriculation in K-12 schools in the United States. But aside from History majors in colleges and universities, I do not believe it can be said that these institutions pay enough attention to what it means to participate in a democracy, or to be a citizen of the world. Where do students learn what Deborah Meier (2009) calls the “trade of democracy,” those skills that include debate, deliberation, questioning, and rethinking one’s own cultural assumptions in light of that of others?

In one of the chapters of the edited volume I cited above, my colleague Christopher B. Crowley and I argue that the “public” in higher education is currently under vociferous attack in the United States. Given the large amount of debt that students accumulate, and the decreasing amount of public support for universities, student tuition is rising, amounting to what we argue is a “regressive tax,” and steering students away from citizenship education and toward courses and majors that focus on attaining high-paying jobs upon graduation.

In fairness, the same could be said about primary and secondary education. Given the increasing pressure of high-stakes testing, and political investment in education for jobs and the economy, rather than for the original purpose of public education in the U.S.—for effective citizenship in a

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democracy—Social Studies has taken a backseat to the reading and math that are the focus of the tests.

Yet, judging by the low levels of voter knowledge on basic political issues in the U.S., low levels of voter turnout, the deep social inequalities we see on multiple levels, the large amount of legislation passed that is arguably against voters' interests, and the sight of wealthy donors drowning the political process with campaign contributions for policies that benefit a small minority while cutting essential goods and services for those who need it, it is not difficult to argue that the social studies education currently available in the U.S. is grossly inadequate. So, of course, when there was a chance to teach social studies—even to non-History majors—and at the university level, I jumped at the opportunity.

As mentioned above, the course I proposed and taught was entitled "Perspectives on Democracy." I chose this title because the term "democracy" is understood differently by different people, yet it is how countries like the United States officially characterize themselves. It is how "we" organize ourselves, how "we" understand our role as citizens, and provides terms around which "we" debate what is "fair." (I use quotation marks here because these terms and claims are also strongly disputed). Still, the term "democracy" continues to be a topic of debate. In defining "democracy," tensions inevitably arise, such as: Whose voice counts? Who should decide the most important issues of the day, and how? What is the role of education in democratic participation? Why shouldn't "experts" decide and be the "final call?" Should everyone have a vote? Why not people under 18? Why not people who lack citizenship papers? Why not ex-convicts? Why not African Americans, women, Native Americans, people without land (when the U.S. was first founded)? How are the rights of the minority protected? Should we listen to those who do not vote? What is and should be the role of money in politics? What is the role of education in democratic participation? What is the role of newspapers and the media? What should their role be? These were the questions explored throughout this course.

Drawing from the book *On Democracy* by Robert Dahl (1998), and the constitutions of five different countries (France, Ireland, Kenya, South Korea, and the United States), along with guest lectures from scholars from each of the countries outside of the United States named above, students compared how "democracy" appears to be defined from country to country. One of the guest speakers for the class, the second author of this essay, detailed how she was involved with the movement for democracy in Kenya, and offered a valuable perspective from a politically active citizen within a movement that helped to create the first democratic constitution in her nation's history. I invited her to provide this lecture because "democracy" is too often narrowly defined as "voting" and "elections." And yet, here is a person who, shut out from the electoral process, was able to help make political changes in her country by contributing to a movement that pressured the government to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of the people. Here also was a college student creating this political pressure, an act that Anyon (2005) has argued is perhaps the best form of democratic citizenship education.

Here are the words of Wangari Gichiru, the second author of this essay, in describing how she participated in the movement for democracy in her native Kenya. She gave this lecture via skype after the students had read a copy of Kenya's new constitution:

One cannot understand the modern history of Kenya without placing the country in the context of colonialism and postcolonial politics that formed the basis of the struggle for democratic citizenship by Kenyans. For most Africans, the wave of independence movements from colonialists

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that swept through the continent in the 1960s brought renewed hope and high aspirations for what a free and independent Africa would provide, but these hopes were soon dashed. In many regions of Africa, people realized that the newly formed governments were not delivering the promises they had made. Instead, the African post-independence elite, who took over from the colonialists, inaugurated a new era of persecution characterized, among other things, by corruption, nepotism and dictatorship, leading to total disillusionment, endless conflicts, and resulting in a quality of life that has continued to deteriorate (Ali & Mathews, 1999).

For many Kenyans, like in many African nations, political independence did not bring the prosperity that so many had expected. Though it would be right to say that Kenya has enjoyed relative stability since independence, as compared to most of her neighbors, the years following independence have been marked with brewing tensions and recurring sporadic pockets of violence that the government has generally managed to contain. The grievances mostly had to do with long-standing disputes over land and the distribution of economic and political resources (Oucho, 2002). In addition, constraining realities of poverty and political instability put university students almost always at loggerheads with the government of the day.

University riots have been going on for as long as I can remember. Even though many times the riots were triggered by a single incident (e.g. the recent riot that took place at my alma mater, the University of Nairobi because ‘a student who had been caught cheating in an exam had been arrested only for him to ‘commit suicide’ in jail – an explanation that the students would not buy) (Nation Reporter, 2013). Such incidents--and they are too many to name--became the very sites within which students struggled to push back at the ‘de facto’ ideologies that ran the country while the governments struggle to maintain the status quo. Of course, this came with dire consequences, both intended and unintended.

As a student who endured a riot almost every year of my undergraduate life, I was often left wondering when a new dawn would come. The perpetual struggle was too daunting. We were punished by long expulsions from the campus, occasional student detention without trial, and heavy casualties and damage during protests by clashing sides. By the mid 2001, mixed feelings of expectation and resignation hung in most of our minds about the hopes of a real democratic transition (Murunga & Nasongo, 2007).

It was in this struggle that, somewhere in 2003, The Constitution of Kenya Review Commission was created for the purpose of soliciting public input for the first time to help draft a new constitution. This led to the draft constitution being rejected in the 2005 referendum. The draft was eventually revived after the 2007-2008 post-election violence and garnered a 67% approval in the 2010 referendum to become the Kenya Constitution of 2010.

Dr. Gichiru knew, because I told her before her guest lecture, that several of the students in the class were keenly interested in the “Arab Spring” taking place in the Middle East. Students were particularly interested in the fate of Egypt at the time, as news outlets reported the rapidly evolving political situation there. Some of my students even wished they were in Egypt, taking part in the political situation there. In this scenario, discussions about “democracy” are not merely abstract ideas or philosophies, but on-the-ground struggles that demand new answers to questions such as: when is it appropriate to use violence as a tool for a more “democratic” or inclusive and responsive

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government? Can the work of Ghandi and Mandela be replicated in other politico-historical contexts? Dr. Gichiru stressed that in the midst of her struggle for democracy, it seemed that the fight would never end. Only in hindsight does the outcome seem inevitable.

I will not embark on attempting to answer all of the questions I raised in this short essay and that were discussed in this class, but only raise them because I think they are important to think about. They demonstrate that these topics allow for passionate and interesting discussions in class, (and perhaps because of this reality, the students wrote the most well-researched papers I have ever received from a first-year seminar), but also because many of us live in a “democracy” and questions about how citizens can effectively participate in democratic processes cannot be left to one or two classes in high school, or to the profit-driven newspapers and other news media outlets most of us rely upon in adulthood. Perhaps more of us should be asking ourselves, where can we find additional spaces for critical democratic citizenship education?

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