Fostering Civil Discourse
within the Democratic Classroom

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Abstract

Educating 21st century students to participate in reasoned, civil discourse is a moral imperative. A strong democracy depends upon the ability of its citizens to hear and consider opposing views, to view others as partners rather than adversaries, to cooperate and compromise when addressing important issues, to collaborate in order to accomplish shared goals and solve problems, and to communicate skillfully and respectfully as a means of consensus building. These democratic habits of thought and behavior are unlikely to develop without careful, intentional nurturing. Teachers must create democratic classrooms in which students learn how to develop effective and respectful relationships, how to think critically about diverse ideas, how to make reasonable and ethical choices, and how to communicate civilly with those whose understandings or opinions differ from theirs. This article proposes a framework for creating such a classroom and suggests approaches which reinforce democratic principles and promote civil discourse.

According to Edelstein (2011), the school is the only institution that allows opportunity for all students to experience democratic principles and processes in action and to cultivate democratic habits. Fostering democratic habits requires a multi-dimensional approach to "learning democracy" (p. 130) that extends beyond merely learning *about* democracy. Students must also learn *through* democracy by engaging in a school community that models democratic ideals and practices and that fosters common interests and shared experiences. Wraga (1998) identified five democratic principles that should be evident in the democratic classroom. *Popular sovereignty* is promoted when students participate in decisions that affect them. *Freedom* is experienced when students have the opportunity for reflective thinking and informed decision-making. *Equality* is demonstrated when students receive fair and equal treatment and have equal opportunity to contribute. *Individualism* is encouraged when student interests are valued in a climate that fosters self-discipline and self-direction. *Social responsibility* is evident when students practice group problem-solving and recognize the benefits of collaborating. In order to cultivate these principles in the classroom, the teacher must create a teaching and learning environment that intentionally fosters civil discourse within a community where all are respected and are expected to contribute ideas and effort toward a common purpose or for the common good. When creating such an environment, the teacher may find it useful to consider a framework that emphasizes community, content, choice, and collaboration as critical components supporting democratic habits and civil discourse.

Community: Establishing Mutual Respect, Understanding, and Purpose

In his discussion of democracy as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (1916, p. 50), Dewey underscored the significance of recognizing shared common interest and communicating freely as a means of readjusting or negotiating the common good. In a democratic community, shared interests and experiences are negotiated through diverse perspectives, made possible by the breaking down of cultural barriers that tend to separate individuals within the community, and individual actions are both independent and interdependent as each member influences the group and the group influences each member. In classrooms as in society, community is essential to a robust democratic environment.

Fostering a sense of community is one of the foundational elements in establishing a democratic classroom. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined *sense of community* as "a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met by the commitment to be together" (p. 9). They posited that sense of community develops when individuals have a feeling of belonging, a sense of mattering, a belief that their needs will be fulfilled through membership, and a shared emotional connection with others in the group. Sapon-Shevin (2010) likewise emphasized belonging and shared emotional connections in her description of the characteristics of community in the school setting, as well as feeling safe to be oneself, communicating freely and openly, and having shared goals or objectives. A classroom environment in which a strong sense of community exists is one in which the democratic principles of individualism and social responsibility may flourish.

Cultural competence is another foundational element of the democratic classroom community. For a community to be sustained, its members must demonstrate mutual acceptance and respect. In a culturally diverse classroom community, the understandings, values, and experiences of the home-community culture must be integrated into the teaching and learning environment within the classroom, and teachers must be non-judgmental and inclusive (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). In order to achieve cultural competence, teachers must avoid using their own culture-based cognitive schemata as a "cultural yardstick" (Plata, 2011, p. 118) by which to measure students' appearance, patterns of behavior, language or speech patterns, or academic achievement against expectations based on mainstream culture. According to Plata, cultural yardsticking, given authority by the power that the

teacher holds in the classroom, often adds weight to negative cultural stereotypes, heightens the perception that cultural difference is a deficit to be overcome by adapting to the mainstream culture, and undercuts the sense of community. Instead, the teacher must reinforce students' understanding and valuing of cultures other than their own and must establish norms that support inclusivity and recognition of shared values and experiences, thus creating a democratic environment which provides "participation in its good of all its members on equal terms" (Dewey, 1916, p. 55).

A classroom with a strong sense of community provides a fertile field for the growth of a more focused learning community, or pedagogical community. Wong, Remin, Love, Aldred, Ralph, and Cook (2013) outlined three elements of pedagogical community: partnership, mutual engagement, and mutual accountability. This definition of pedagogical community is linked to situated learning theory with its emphasis on the shared nature of learning within the social context of a specific learning situation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), to constructivism with its emphasis on the creation of shared meanings constructed through meaningful and authentic learning activity in real contexts (Hung, Tan, & Koh, 2006), and to collaborative learning with its roots in sociocultural theory and its emphasis on learning through interactions with others within the social environment. In a pedagogical community, individual members engage mutually by making "distinct and diverse contributions" (Wong et al., 2013, p. 285) in pursuit of a common goal or purpose that, when realized, benefits all members, and members are mutually accountable for one another, for the work, and for the outcomes. This joint accountability and shared benefit foster the democratic principles of equality and social responsibility among the members of the classroom community.

Content: Teaching Democratic and Critical Thinking

Within an inclusive and democratic community, framing the content focus with curricula and pedagogical approaches that require students to engage with diverse perspectives and complex concepts challenges them to think beyond their own cultural views

and experiences and to develop dispositions and skills that reflect democratic principles and practice. According to Dewey (1916), a democratic curriculum embodies social interaction and collective effort, supports equality for all members, and combines abstract ideas, practical skills, and application. In practice, such a curriculum is inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives and incorporates a participatory approach (Hopkins, 2014). While both Dewey and Hopkins were addressing curriculum in the broad sense, teachers can apply those ideas within the confines of their classrooms as well by selecting texts that reflect a variety of voices and perspectives and by applying critical approaches to their study of those texts. In so doing, they promote the principles of freedom, individualism, and equality as students engage in discussion around diverse perspectives and think reflectively about their individual experiences, beliefs, and attitudes.

Critical literacy is one approach to incorporating a variety of voices into course content. Soares (2013) has proposed a framework by which preservice teachers may "foster fairness and create a democratic classroom culture of acceptance" (p. 71). Her framework consists of four themes: examining multiple perspectives, finding authentic voice, recognizing social barriers, and finding one's identity. This approach asks that students question social issues related to democracy, freedom, power, and social justice by looking within texts for multiple meanings that spring from diverse beliefs, values, and viewpoints. In doing so, students develop an awareness that no one version tells the complete story and that absent voices carry meaning. Students also identify conflict or contradictions within the text, detect which voices have power and which do not, and reflect on how it might feel to be one of the characters in the work. These tasks are undertaken as a means of developing students' ability to examine society from multiple perspectives and to participate in the critical dialogs that are necessary to a democratic way of life.

Introducing essential questions is an approach to encouraging deeper thinking about course content and to developing habits of thought and discourse suitable for participating in a democratic

society. According to McTighe and Wiggins (2013) an essential question (1) is *open-ended*, (2) is *thought-provoking* and *intellectually engaging*, (3) calls for *higher-order thinking*, (4) points toward *important, transferable ideas*, (5) raises *additional questions*, (6) requires *support* and *justification*, and (7) *recurs over time* (p. 3). The teacher may design essential questions to guide thinking and discourse around subject matter in ways that strengthen students' ability to examine ideas from multiple perspectives, that foster critical thinking about complex issues or events, and that demonstrate the relevance of content to students' lives. Thus, this approach fosters higher-order thinking and communication skills that are needed in the democratic classroom and that may translate into life in a democratic society.

Collaboration: Fostering Mutual Engagement and Accountability

Collaborative learning environments can provide opportunities for students to activate democratic principles and practices in pursuit of a common goal or purpose, often with an emphasis on achieving outcomes aimed at the common good. Dillenbourg (1999) described four processes by which teachers may increase the probability that the desired interactions will occur. First, the teacher should carefully design the initial conditions by determining the group size and criteria for membership and considering the physical and material resources necessary for the group to pursue its work. Second, the teacher should establish clear and specific roles and responsibilities for group members to assume as they carry out their work. Third, the teacher should specify interaction rules as a means of fostering productive communications among group members. Fourth, the teacher should serve as the facilitator to monitor and regulate the ongoing interactions. Attention to these four processes will increase the likelihood that learning will indeed occur and will support the development of behaviors associated with the principles of equality, individualism, and social responsibility.

Cooperative learning is a collaborative approach that is designed to foster social interdependence and individual accountability for the success of the group in achieving its desired outcomes (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007). Schul (2011) has argued that "the greatest promise of cooperative learning for the 21st century, therefore, lies in its ability to enhance social relationships that support an expansive view of democratic citizenship" (p. 91) and that developing concern for others, participating in peaceful confrontation, and building diverse relationships are integral to both cooperative learning and a democratic society. Schul discussed four cooperative approaches that teachers can incorporate: think-pair-share (Lyman, 1981), the Jigsaw technique (Aronson et al., 1978), small group teaching (Slavin, 1980), and group investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992). Hendrix (1996) identified several benefits of cooperative learning that support democratic practice in the classroom. It fosters positive cross-cultural relationships among students as they experience equal status, close interpersonal contact, and pursuit of a common goal; and it allows for peaceful confrontation and negotiation within student groups. In providing opportunities to practice collaborative skills, cooperative learning builds students' interpersonal and cultural competence and their confidence in their ability to work successfully with peers on complex tasks.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a collaborative approach in which "problems serve as the context and the stimulus for students to learn course concepts and metacognitive skills" (Major & Eck, 2000, pp. 1–2). In PBL, students work in teams to solve complex real-world problems by first defining the problem and then conducting research to collect the information and evidence necessary to solve it. In the final stage of PBL, students communicate their findings in a manner appropriate to the area of research. Several of the essential characteristics of PBL, as identified by Barrows (1986), are likewise essential in developing democratic thinking and skills: authenticity, student-centeredness, self-directedness, and skill directedness. Students with experience in PBL are likely to be able to think critically, analyze and solve complex problems, find and utilize appropriate and credible resources, work

cooperatively with peers, demonstrate strong communication skills, and transfer knowledge and skills across disciplines and problems (Davidson & Major, 2014). As with cooperative learning, this approach provides opportunities for developing collaborative skills as it also promotes shared responsibility for outcomes through joint problem-solving and decision-making.

Choice: Nurturing Autonomy and Decision Making

When teachers create opportunities for students to make meaningful choices about what and how they learn, they are likewise supporting the self-directed, reflective thinking and informed decision-making that support freedom, individualism, and, ultimately, popular sovereignty. Evans and Boucher (2015) have considered *choice* in two distinct ways: first as a noun to indicate the presence of options, and second as a verb to indicate the act of choosing. They argue that by providing multiple options, teachers are equipping the learning environment to meet the "widest possible range of learners" and that "it is the act of choosing itself that fosters an individual's sense of free will" (p. 88). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), an individual's sense of autonomy grows out of opportunities in which self-direction is practiced. Self-direction occurs when an individual sets goals based on personal values and interests, makes decisions regarding the steps needed to achieve those goals, and initiates action leading to achievement of those goals.

Evans and Boucher (2015) have proposed three criteria for effective student choice. First, choice must be relevant and meaningful to the chooser. In order to establish relevance and meaning for students, the teacher must provide a variety of options and support student autonomy by demonstrating or explaining the relevance of the available choices to the students' interests and goals. Second, choice should be competence-enhancing. In other words, it should present the optimal amount of challenge to the students as indicated by each student's abilities and developmental level (Katz & Assor, 2007). Providing a range of choices with varying degrees of difficulty and varied resources is a good way to ensure that optimal challenge is available for every student. Third, students must be

offered the right amount of choice in order to avoid *choice overload* that results in students feeling incapable of choosing.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework for utilizing choice in curriculum development and in addressing a wide range of student needs, interests, and skills (Evans & Boucher, 2015). The UDL framework is constructed on three principles. The first principle addresses recognition learning networks (the *what* of learning) by providing learners with a range of choices for accessing content with multiple options for comprehension; for languages, expressions, and symbols; and for perception. The second principle addresses strategic learning networks (the *how* of learning) by providing multiple means of action and expression with a variety of options for executive functions, expression and communication, and physical action. The third principle addresses affective learning networks (the *why* of learning) by providing multiple means of engagement with options for self-regulation, sustaining effort and persistence, and recruiting interest (CAST, 2011).

Civil Discourse: Manifesting Democratic Principles

In a democratic classroom, civil discourse becomes the outward manifestation of democratic principles. Emphasizing civil discourse in the classroom community promotes student engagement and provides opportunities to practice critical thinking and self-discipline. According to Moore (2012), teachers play a critical role in educating students for moral and civic responsibility in a democratic society. By his definition, civility "goes far beyond politeness, respectful language, and good manners" and is "a moral imperative linked with other democratic virtues, such as respect for differing opinions, listening skills, self-control, rationality, and tolerance, that must form a foundation for acceptable public discourse" (p. 141). Moore has suggested several teacher behaviors that are critical in establishing a climate of civility in the classroom. First, teachers must serve as role models for civility by demonstrating professionalism, creating a safe space for students to express themselves, using language that conveys respect, and responding to incivility with civility. Second, the teacher must

demonstrate respect for differing views and ideologies by ensuring that personal beliefs and biases do not contribute to incivility and that controversial issues are approached in an ideologically balanced manner. Third, the teacher must establish clear expectations for civil classroom speech and behavior with fair and consistent enforcement of those expectations. Fourth, the teacher must teach students how to disagree respectfully by focusing difficult discussions on the subject matter rather than on the individuals and by teaching students to look for ways to compromise. Fifth, the teacher must include content that exemplifies the desired civil virtues.

Marini, Polihronis, and Blackwell (2010) have proposed a series of exercises aimed at building positive, civil learning relationships among students. The exercises begin with students developing consensus around a shared definition for "civility." Students then operationalize civility based on their shared definition by identifying and discussing associated behaviors and co-create a "communal declaration of civility" (p. 92) to serve as a guiding statement for the group and as a contract for sustaining civility in both peaceful and contentious times. Johnson and Johnson (1988) proposed a discussion model called structured academic controversy that defines controversies as "interesting problems to be solved rather than as win-lose situations" (p. 59). The goal is for small groups of students to consider various perspectives and reach consensus regarding a controversy or conflict. In this model, the students define the controversy, form groups, research a position and present it, reverse perspective and advocate for the opposing position, work together to arrive at a consensus, and then debrief the *process* rather than the outcome. This model provides opportunity for students to consider issues from multiple perspectives, to make decisions based on expanded perspective, and to manage controversy in an appropriately civil manner.

Conclusion

In establishing a democratic learning environment, then, teachers must be prepared to embrace and model democratic principles, to create a sense of community that recognizes and removes cultural barriers to learning while identifying shared interests and concerns, to engage students critically with the content, to invite student participation through collaboration and choice, and to promote discourse that is thoughtful, respectful, and tolerant. In preparation for this role, preservice teachers must develop their knowledge, dispositions, and skills in several key areas: (1) deepening knowledge of self and identifying personal biases, (2) acquiring knowledge of and demonstrating acceptance of others, (3) understanding and respecting cultural diversity, (4) nurturing belongingness, (5) understanding and embracing democratic principles, and (6) embedding democratic processes within the classroom culture. Within the resulting pedagogical community, learning can become a shared endeavor as students pool their curiosity, experiences, intellect, and skills to expand their knowledge and to solve problems.

Just as citizens both shape and are shaped by society, students both shape and are shaped by the classroom environment. Democratic principles can and should be cultivated in every classroom. Furthermore, while electing to incorporate one or two strategies into one's classroom practice is a beginning—a truly democratic classroom will develop only if the teacher takes a holistic view and saturates the classroom environment with words and actions that give life and meaning to democratic principles, thereby cultivating democratic habits of thought and behavior. In the classroom as in life, community connects, content informs, collaboration unites, choice liberates, and civility respects. Teachers who embrace democratic principles become agents of change, fostering success in the classroom and readying their students for the complexities and civic responsibilities inherent in a democratic society.

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Preparing Students to Collaborate Across Divides: Deliberative Pedagogy, Communication, and Community

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Abstract

Democracy—with its complicated problems, multiplicity of positions, and often deeply held convictions—has always been messy. How do we prepare students to participate meaningfully in this type of world, where issues are complex and opinions vary widely? Knowledge about democratic ideals and development of civic dispositions is important, but for students to fully participate in democratic life, they also need skills to use when collaborating around difficult problems. This essay explores the educational paradigm of deliberative pedagogy as understood through its origins in the political idea of deliberative democracy. It discusses the difficult transition of deliberative democracy into educational practice, and suggests deliberative pedagogy might be more seamlessly incorporated. It also considers implications of this pedagogy for teacher preparation programs. Finally, it suggests ways in which this paradigm supports the mission of liberal arts institutions, especially as it concerns discourse, community, and life within a democratic society.