

Making Teacher Education More Democratic: Incorporating Student Voice and Choice, Part Two

by Kristan A. Morrison

Abstract

This article describes an action-research project in which the author sought to enact her philosophy of democratic education. A brief discussion of this philosophy along with its pitfalls and promises is followed by details of the author's attempt to co-construct a graduate education course with her students. The article concludes with reflections on what the author would do differently in the future and why democratic and other models of education are so necessary in teacher education programs.

Keywords: *democratic education, freedom-based education*

My Struggles with Democratic Education

For the past six years I have been teaching social foundations of education courses in both undergraduate teacher preparation programs and master's-level education programs. Teaching these classes, I was bothered early on by the feeling that I couldn't "practice what I preached." Part of my preaching in these classes is that the way our society has organized schools, emphasizing technical rationality and the banking model of pedagogy (Freire 1970), often results in student disempowerment, disengagement, and, ultimately, dehumanization. I also try to help my students appreciate the rich tapestry, past and present, of different approaches and beliefs about education—approaches and beliefs that seek to counteract these negative outcomes and reframe education as a joyful, intrinsically motivating, democratic undertaking that honors each individual's dignity.

The Basics

Such notable author-educators as John Dewey, Maxine Greene, Paulo Freire, John Holt, Ivan Illich, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor (and innovative school directors who have published on the subject, including Chris Mercogliano, George Dennison, Matt Hern, Grace Llewellyn, and A. S. Neill) have all, in some form or another, argued for a “democratic” education—an engaging education that truly embodies the characteristics of citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic society. Although these commentators’ specific ideas may differ, they all assert that students should have more voice and choice in what they study, and how and when they study it. They maintain that education is about constructing knowledge through meaningful experiences and contacts with others; thus schools and classrooms should be characterized by student choice, exploration of information for intrinsic goals, dialogue, discussion, self-governance (either on individual or group levels), and trust. These authors and educators have argued that such schools help to create the mature, self-disciplined, engaged democratic citizens our society needs. (See Morrison 2008 for a more detailed discussion of the theoretical framework of democratic education.)



Realities

I highly value the ideas set forth by these authors, but I teach their approaches and beliefs within a traditional educational institution characterized by lack of student power, a focus on extrinsic motivators and instrumental values (grades, future employment), transmission models of pedagogy, and fear of failure held by both teachers and students. This surrounding environment, as well as my students' and my own histories within conventional educational institutions, influences us to behave and react to situations in certain ways—ways that discourage alternative approaches to learning and teaching. (For a detailed discussion of institutional, teacher, and student constraints on a more-democratic education, again please refer to Morrison 2008.)

Institutional expectations, along with my comfort level and my perception of my students' comfort levels, compelled me to approach my first few semesters in ways that limited student voice and choice. I came to the first days of class with pre-set agendas—nicely typed and photocopied course syllabi that enumerated grading and attendance policies, established assignment listings, and project or paper explanations and rubrics. I also had lesson plans all mapped out and ready for each class period. On one level, I felt like a good teacher—prepared, organized, clear; my approaches meshed well with the institution, and my students seemed satisfied and comfortable with my upholding of the educational status quo. But as mentioned, on another level I felt my beliefs in and teachings about democratic education were hypocritical—that while I was teaching my students about the value of more democratic and engaging approaches to education, I was violating those approaches by “doing school” with them in the same old ways.

Breaking with Convention

I realized that I needed to democratize my teaching to make it more consistent with my own educational beliefs. I knew I needed to push myself to break down the conventional approach to teaching in order to meet two goals. First, I hoped that by approaching the social foundations courses democratically I would be enacting Vygotsky's “Law of Awareness,” in which a

break in a routine or an impediment to an automatic activity raises awareness of the activity and routine. When a routine is broken, we then have a chance to notice it, question it, and consider alternatives. (Vygotsky, in Shor 1996, p. 122)

By doing things very differently in my classroom, I hoped that I would help my students question conventional American schooling practices and understand that alternative visions of education exist. My second goal was to model what a democratic classroom could be, one in which students take part in democratic discourse and authority assumption by helping to develop course content, assignments, and evaluations. I hoped that such a model would encourage my students to enact such practices with their own students.

Launching Co-construction

After a few semesters of experimenting in minor ways with such democratic-oriented practices as grade contracts (Shor 1996), open discussions (Brookfield and Preskill 1999), and “protest rights” (Shor 1996), I decided to take a huge leap and ask the students in my graduate foundations of education class to join me in co-constructing the full course. I chose the graduate-level class because I trusted the graduate students’ maturity level and commitment slightly better than the undergraduates’. Ultimately, I hope I can expand co-construction into my undergraduate classes, but graduate students proved an ideal intermediate step.

Day One

On the first night of class, I began by talking with the students about some of my struggles with teaching middle school students (fully explored in chapter 1 of Morrison 2007), about looking on glazed-over eyes or recognizing that students did as I asked to get good grades, and about my discomfort over compelling students to perform in particular ways and playing a heavy authoritarian role. I discussed the dissonance between doing what teachers are expected to do and simultaneously questioning if my students were really becoming people equipped to take on productive roles as critical, democratic, global citizens.

I spoke with the class about my professional search for different ways of teaching, different philosophies of education, and how I had ended up conducting a dissertation study on the Albany Free School. I told them about my delight at seeing the Free School students totally engaged for the sake of learning, not just grades, and my enjoyment at not having to act super-authoritarian. My positive experiences in Albany convinced me that my philosophy of education was more in line with that school’s than with conventional public schools’.

I went on to ask the graduate students: What was I to do? Give up on public education or try to move it away from present practices and toward those that might prove more engaging for students and

promising for the outside world? I pointed out that I had obviously chosen the latter—I had entered teacher education and graduate teacher education hoping that I could help other teachers or future teachers think more deeply about what is going on in American education and see how we can perhaps try things differently. But I worried that by returning to conventional education and its institutional constraints—grades, required classes, required meeting times—I would have to give up the things I loved about the Free School.

I explained that I wanted to conduct an experiment that semester and that if the students were willing to conduct it with me, we could experience a very different and exciting sort of class. They looked receptive, so I went on,

I believe in democratic education—an education in which students have a powerful voice in deciding what they learn, the manner in which they learn, and the manner in which they are held accountable for that learning. I believe that this sort of education is more meaningful for students on many different levels, and I seek for you to have a meaningful education. Therefore, I am hoping that together we can co-construct this class and we will begin that process tonight. I do not have a syllabus for you to look at because I want your voice in this.

The Vote

We discussed the students' preferences—did they want a teacher-directed course or a more student-centered one? Virtually all the class of twenty-five sided with the more student-directed philosophies, and that was the go-ahead I needed to proceed with co-construction.

Drawing on Freire's ideas of working with students to develop "generative themes," I then asked the students to come up with questions, topics, and themes they wanted to tackle. Before proceeding to their input, I offered the caveat that we needed to coexist with the more teacher-directed philosophy of the university as a whole and stick to topics generally related to the mandated foundations content (history, philosophy, sociology of schooling). I then went through a PowerPoint presentation on topics typically covered in a foundations course (hidden curriculum, nature and aims of education, history of education, funding and organization of schools, socialization of social class, gender, and race and ethnicity, curriculum and knowledge, achievement and ability).

In retrospect, I see this step as a possible mistake and a manifestation of my fear that students who “don’t know what they don’t know” could not possibly arrive at the usual topics for a foundations course. Although it is technically true that people don’t know what they don’t know and sometimes need to be told what information is available to learn, consistently determining *a priori* what students must know can create a slippery slope that ignores students’ curiosity and their ability to arrive “organically” at important topics themselves. Although I felt I had to lead them, I have wondered if my leading, by effectively colonizing their thinking, was thus undemocratic. But I couldn’t take back what I had done, so after the PowerPoint presentation, I asked which of those topics they especially wished to examine and what additional questions they had. The list we generated included a variety of topics, including questions about types of schools, competition, standardized testing and NCLB, school funding, philosophies of education, parental involvement in schools, curriculum choices, and gender influences on school.

By this time, we had been in class close to two and one-half hours and our time was almost up. I had wanted to get into co-constructing grading requirements, attendance policies, assignments, and so forth, but realizing the students were tired, I instead decided to end class with an assignment for the next session. In addition to having them read some articles on the hidden curriculum, I wanted the students to examine the “proposed” syllabus, which outlined my ideas for course requirements and policies, and to come to the next class ready to negotiate with me and one another. Before they left, I asked them to journal responses to the following questions: How are you feeling about this class right now and why do you feel this way? What’s appealing about co-construction and what is not?

Ambivalence

The initial responses showed ambivalence to the process—trepidation about the uncertainty and confusion over expectations, but also excitement over the opportunity to shape the course and hope about acquiring ideas for approaching their own current and future teaching differently. Students wrote in their journals,

I felt extremely uncomfortable. Not much accomplished in the first class. I felt ill prepared to begin the class. I like clear expectations. My time is valuable and feels scarce—let’s just get to it. You’re here to teach me something that you know that I don’t. Reality is, I’m just one of thirty-some-odd others.

If we tried to individualize the syllabus for each person it will be a frustrating process and someone will end up unhappy.

I am somewhat confused of what exactly is going on. Is the professor really going to change her syllabus just because we, the students, offer our suggestions as to what would better suit our interest? . . . [E]xcited because this class suddenly became a lot less intimidating, and nervous because I have no idea what to expect. I believe that co-constructing the class will allow me and the other students to see the purpose behind what we're learning or doing and it will have more meaning because we chose it.

I feel very anxious about the process that was discussed for constructing this course. I feel this way because I'm used to a "traditional" educational experience where the professor imparts important or pertinent knowledge and I apply this knowledge in my classroom. Parts of this idea seem wonderful, but other parts seem overwhelming. Feeling that I can voice my opinions about what is best for me and my graduate work seems wonderful and practical, but what if what's best for me is in conflict with other members of the class?

Day Two

When we next met, we launched immediately into co-constructing the course requirements. I asked the class to create an agenda of discussion items, such as participation, attendance, short-term (more frequent, minor) assessment, long-term (less frequent, major) assessment, and content. Each student was assigned to a task force that dealt with one topic. Each task force was charged with collecting classmates' input on its topic (by interviewing or by posting questions on chart paper to collect answers) and then discussing what suggestions to make to the whole class on that topic. The task forces collected input and met for thirty to forty minutes, and then we came together as a whole class to discuss the myriad ideas.

Struggles

The students differed with one another on the issue of positive and negative freedom. As one student wrote,

Many students appear to want to take the easiest route possible to the end of this course, while others are willing to do much more. It's almost embarrassing at times to listen to

excuses, made by people who truly don't seem to be here to learn or grow, that pretend to warrant why we should do no readings or outside preparation. I love the idea of a class tailored to me, but I'm only human. I work full-time and take three graduate courses. Of course less reading would make my life easier now, but what about the impact it will have on me as a teacher?

We wrestled with the difficulties of developing assignments that would both attend to people's strengths and learning preferences and challenge them to stretch and grow. After reaching an apparent impasse, one student suggested just presenting a lengthy list, or menu, of ways to earn points and allowing me to determine the point total that would equal A, B, C, D, and F work. Many students spoke up in agreement, and because we were near our ending time, I agreed to try to take all their ideas and suggestions about course requirements as well as their content questions to create a semester plan and syllabus, which I would e-mail them within the week.

Rising Investment

Before we ended for the night, I asked the students to journal their responses to the following questions: How did the negotiation process make you feel? Do you now feel more or less invested in the class? The responses to the questions were overwhelmingly positive: many students expressed a growing excitement about the possibility that the class would meet their needs. Many students indicated feeling empowered by the process and connected to their classmates.

I felt as though my opinion mattered. I felt my ideas were taken seriously and not just "with a grain of salt."

The process actually made me feel powerful; I had some power to control what I was to learn and participate in.

Students expressed feeling more invested in this course than in others in which they had no voice:

I am not stressed to just do what the professor expects from me, but to really focus on what I want to learn from the class.

A sense of relief and eagerness seems to come with the ability to map out what I would do with this course. It becomes much easier to fit the course to my learning style.

Because I feel like I have a part in the syllabus, I feel as if I'm more likely to buy into a theme or assignment I might

not want to do otherwise, because at some point my voice was heard.

Co-construction begins to tear down the wall of the student doing just as the teacher asked, and reverses some of the brainwashing, by giving us a voice.

But some students still felt trepidation about the level of responsibility this co-construction placed on them:

If I have any qualms with the outcome of the class, I am part of its source, so I share in that responsibility.

I feel this definitely puts more responsibility on me as a student. I have no excuses if I'm helping to pick the curriculum.

I feel like since you are giving me the choice of what I will be doing for assessment that I owe you maximum effort to reward your trust, as well as maximum effort to learn material.

Putting It Together

After dismissing class, I returned to my office and tried to pull together all the ideas along with a grade menu and a logical content flow for the semester. The resulting schedule of content closely resembled how I had taught the class previously, with a bit more interweaving of readings specific to students' content questions. The grade menu, however, was something much different from any course requirement listing I had ever produced. I assigned every possible task and assignment idea, from small to large, a relative point value (attendance in class = 10 points per night, reading a four-page article = 2 points, a research project presentation = 120 points, overall semester participation = 200 points, etc.). A student who finished absolutely everything would end the semester with 1,400 points. Because many choices and extras were built in, I determined that earning an A would require at least 745 points and assigned lesser point values for the lower grades. I e-mailed the students this new schedule and menu of grades two days after class so that they would have time to digest it, come up with changes, and ask questions before our next meeting.

Day Three

On the third night of class, I began by asking the students to journal on these questions: What do you think of the new syllabus and grade menu? Do you believe your needs were met? Will you feel comfortable exercising your "protest rights" if some aspect of the

syllabus ends up being problematic? Again, responses were positive. Nearly all students expressed appreciation of the level of choice and flexibility and indicated that their opinions, concerns, and questions had been taken into account. The process also seemed to reduce, to a degree, conventional teacher-student antagonism: many students expressed comfort with protesting or raising future questions. It seemed that the students had “bought into” the course and that they were beginning to trust me as well as their fellow students. Overall the class displayed a positive ambience; the students seemed to realize that I was not trying to “force” them to do something. As some students wrote,

The co-construction of the syllabus to make it as it is now has shown me that you will be fair in listening to any changes or problems that might arise.

I felt as if the negotiations process was easygoing and I was grateful that the professor was so open to ideas that would make this class better as a whole. Happy students are going to accomplish more and take more away from any class, in my opinion.

The process made me feel like you, the professor, cared about what we thought. You weren't just dictating to us what you want us to learn in this class.

The Hidden Curriculum

Our first discussion topic, the hidden curriculum, dovetailed perfectly with this process. The hidden curriculum, which teaches many students to be passive, docile, and hyper-obedient in schools and which is antithetical to true and meaningful learning, hit home powerfully for the students. I began our discussion by asking the class why all courses are not co-constructed. Responses included all the challenges to democratic education outlined in “Democratic Classrooms: Promises and Challenges of Student Voice and Choice” (Morrison 2008), and the students really seemed to understand the difference between a personally meaningful education and “schooling” through the hidden curriculum: doing what others ask without thought of one's own needs and interests.

The Remainder of the Semester

Our semester progressed wonderfully after the co-construction process. The students appeared to be engaged and interested in our topics. At the end of the semester, to obtain empirical confirmation

of this perception of student engagement, I distributed a questionnaire culled from the National Survey of Student Engagement. A rudimentary analysis of the twenty-three responses provided evidence that the great majority of the class had experienced the course positively. See Tables 1 and 2 (page 112), for example:

Table 1

Question	Very Often	Often	Some-times	Never
How often have you asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions?	12 (52%)	5 (22%)	4 (17%)	2 (9%)
How often have you come to class without completing readings or assignments?	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (26%)	17 (74%)
How often have you worked with other students on tasks during class?	19 (83%)	4 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
How often have you discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (your students, fellow students, family members, co-workers, etc.)?	10 (43%)	8 (35%)	5 (22%)	0 (0%)
How often have you examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue?	10 (43%)	10 (43%)	3 (14%)	0 (0%)
How often have you tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective?	11 (48%)	11 (48%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)
How often have you learned something that changed the way you understood an issue or concept?	10 (43%)	8 (35%)	5 (22%)	0 (0%)

Table 2

Question	Very Much	Quite a Bit	Some	Very Little
To what extent has your experience with this course contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the area of understanding yourself?	5 (22%)	11 (48%)	6 (26%)	1 (4%)
To what extent has your experience with this course contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the area of solving complex real-world problems?	4 (17%)	11 (48%)	7 (31%)	1 (4%)

Additionally, for relationships with other students on a scale of 1 (unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation) to 7 (friendly, supportive, sense of belonging), the average score was 6.04. For relationships

with faculty, the average score on the same scale was 6.17. Students indicated that they spent an average of three to eight hours per week on course work outside class and that most in-class and out-of-class work involved the higher-order thinking skills: analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application. Last, students rated the course overall as excellent (74 percent) or good (26 percent); none rated it fair or poor. These responses indicated to me that the students had invested substantial time preparing for the class; they were actively involved and engaged in class (asking questions, working with others, working at higher-order thinking levels); they took their learning outside the class (discussed it with family members, co-workers); they experienced some meaningful growth (examined their own arguments deeply, empathized with other points of view, came to understand personal and real-world problems); and they experienced positive peer and teacher relationships in the class.

Conclusion: Some Reflections on Co-construction

I was gratified by the results of our course co-construction, and although I believe I could have done some things differently, the process affirmed my initial belief that this approach is especially necessary and transformative for individuals who will be or who are teachers. These individuals need such experiences to widen their vision of what education can be and to begin to imagine themselves as agents of change.

What I would do differently

Earlier, I mentioned my concern about limiting students' imagination and curiosity by introducing the typical foundations-course topics before brainstorming content questions. To avoid situations in which either the students or I might feel that I am leading their thinking excessively, I believe that some kind of activity wherein the students discuss with one another their experiences in conventional schools or perplexing aspects of American education might lead them to pose a few generative themes. For example, students could create autobiographies of their time in K-12 schools. What was joyful? What was not? What did or do you see that raises questions, frustrations, or fears?

I might also have students develop grading rubrics for assignments with me rather than develop and present them on my own. Additionally, I'd like the students to undertake a bit more self-evaluation. They did self-evaluate their participation levels, which I took into consideration when determining final point scores, but I believe self-evaluation of their written work and perhaps peer evaluations

are feasible as well. I might also prefer that the students generate their own assessment ideas. Although such ideas are themselves fraught with potential problems, done carefully and well they could help students become more invested in their learning and discern conceptions of high-, medium-, and low-quality work.

The proposed syllabus, which the students examined between weeks one and two, also seemed to limit the ways they could show involvement and engagement in course content. That may have resulted in students essentially “tweaking” my course ideas and not really attempting any deeper co-construction. In some ways, that made my life easier—I didn’t have to start everything from scratch and we saved class time—but was the result just a pseudo- or surface-level democracy?

A last item I would implement differently is to undertake more written evaluations of this process. Even though at the beginning of each class I asked, “Are there any questions, comments, concerns, complaints, suggestions about how the class is going?” students responded rather infrequently. I took this as a sign that all was well, but at the end of the semester, one student’s questionnaire mentioned that a midpoint written evaluation would have been appreciated; this individual had been reluctant to speak out because the other students seem to be contentedly “chugging along.”

Co-construction throughout all teacher-preparation courses?

People who are or will be teachers need to experience a democratic education, for how can one teach what one does not know? Even though many pre- and in-service teachers were “successful” in conventionally modeled schools, and thus might shy away from alternative visions of education (“I did OK in school, so the current model must be doing something right”), I believe that many hunger for something different. Teacher education programs must satisfy this hunger and help future and current teachers see that alternative visions exist, they are viable, and they are actually preferable by serving a democratic, pluralistic society better than our current dominant educational vision. Can *all* teacher-preparation courses provide models of democratic education practices? Perhaps, perhaps not; institutional constraints such as those discussed in “Democratic Classrooms” (e.g., the conventional view of knowledge) may be more powerful obstacles in some courses than in others.

Fortunately for me, foundations content is inherently linked with issues of democracy and student autonomy, and instituting democratic practices in this course therefore has an internal logic. Even if democratic practices don’t fit quite as well in other teacher-preparation

courses, their instructors need not restrict themselves to conventional approaches only. Instead, they should employ other models of learning and teaching with an internally logical connection to their courses (e.g., problem-based learning for classes on diagnosing learning disabilities). Teachers will cling to conventional, status quo approaches to education so long as they cannot imagine alternatives; thus it is imperative that teacher education programs provide their students with *multiple* models of educational philosophies and approaches to teaching and learning.

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