

## TEACHING FOR DEMOCRACY'S SAKE

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### ABSTRACT

Democratic classrooms place a premium on such things as student voice, integrative curriculum, problem-centered units, collaborative activities, multicultural resources, and reflective assessment. Getting started is not always easy and teacher autonomy is often limited but there are many ways to bring democracy to life in the classroom once we are determined to do so. This paper explores some of those possibilities.

**Keywords:** Democratic classrooms. Student voice. Integrative curriculum.

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## ENSINAR EM PROL DA DEMOCRACIA

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### RESUMO

*Salas de aula democráticas valorizam coisas como a voz do aluno, um currículo integrador, disciplinas centradas na resolução de problemas, atividades colaborativas, recursos multiculturais e avaliação reflexivas. Nem sempre é fácil começar e a autonomia do professor é frequentemente limitada, mas existem muitas maneiras de dar vida à democracia na sala de aula, desde que estejamos determinados a fazer isto. Este artigo explora algumas dessas possibilidades.*

**Palavras-chave:** *A sala de aula democrática. A voz do aluno. O currículo integrador.*

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## ***ENSEÑAR EN BENEFICIO DE LA DEMOCRACIA***

*BEANE, James\**

### **RESUMEN**

*Clases democráticas valoran cosas como la voz del alumno, un currículo integrador, disciplinas centradas en la resolución de problemas, actividades colaborativas, recursos multiculturales y evaluación reflexiva. No siempre es fácil comenzar y la autonomía del profesor es frecuentemente condicionada, pero hay muchas maneras de dar vida a la democracia en el aula, desde que estemos determinados a hacer esto. Este artículo investiga algunas de esas posibilidades.*

***Palabras clave:*** Clase democrática. La voz del alumno. El currículo integrador.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

For good reasons teachers are constantly concerned about what might be called “technical matters” - the nitty-gritty details of classroom organization, learning activities, lesson plans, and so on. Who can blame us? When the bell rings, the time for speculation is over. Something has to happen. And that something needs direction and organization. Certainly spontaneous moments occur in classrooms, but only someone completely out of touch with classroom life could think that teachers do not have to plan ahead about a wide range of technical details. What are my students supposed to be learning about? What kinds of resources do I need? What activities could we use? How will particular students react to one or another activity?

Moreover, teachers have reasons for the choices they make. Maybe a certain book looks like it will be interesting. Maybe one activity seems like it will be more engaging than another. Perhaps one way of forming small groups would make them more heterogenous than another way. Whether it is to make the classroom more exciting or more efficient or more equitable or something else, teachers have reasons for what they choose to do in their classrooms.

What happens if a teacher chooses to teach the democratic way? A philosophic commitment is just the start. What happens when the bell rings? When a teacher wants to teach the democratic way, how do they think about what to actually do in the classroom? These are extremely important questions because while philosophical discussions may avoid them, once the classroom door closes they demand full attention. And it is in this moment that the most noble intentions of a teacher may come to a sudden halt.

The intention here is not to write a complete methods guide or recipe, but to imagine how we might think about what to do. After all, there is no one way to bring democracy to life in a classroom and factors like local circumstances, teacher confidence and security, prior experiences of students, and many others have to be taken into account. But there are lots of ideas and examples we might draw upon to see the connection between classroom details and the democratic way (BEANE, 2005).

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## 2 DECIDING THE DEMOCRATIC WAY

In a democracy the principle of human dignity insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that their say counts for something. For this reason, probably no idea is more widely associated with democratic classrooms than the involvement of young people in making decisions about what and how things are done

The portrait of a democratic community is often one of a group of people in careful deliberations, making decisions together about which issues to take on, and how to go about the work of the group. Inspiring as that image may be, it implies a kind of open-ended agenda that is not always available in classrooms. Perhaps the implication of that vision is why so many teachers say they can't have a democratic classroom because there are too many external mandates to allow an open agenda or because young people don't know enough about what is in a course or subject to make decisions about it. In some cases, teachers even begin to feel guilty because they believe it is unlikely they can ever reach that idealized portrait.

The fact of the matter is that most teachers do not have the luxury of a completely open agenda. They are hired to teach a particular subject or course whose content and resources have often been decided by some school or district curriculum committee that is, in turn, responding to pressure from state standards and assessments. And even where there is a good deal of flexibility, teachers often already have favorite themes or topics they like to bring to the classroom, sometimes having refined them over years of use. In either case they cannot imagine how young people can be involved in planning.

Instead of beginning with the idealized picture or the real and imagined reasons why young people cannot collaborate in making decisions, perhaps we could begin by thinking about areas in which virtually all teachers make classroom curriculum decisions: the selection of activities and resources, the identification of organizing centers for the curriculum, or the ways in which a group's experience might be evaluated. Within each one of these areas, many decisions have to be made. In a democratic classroom one of the key questions is, "who will decide about such matters?" Will the teacher decide? Will the students decide? Or will the teacher and students decide together?

Suppose it's time start a yearly unit on "Cultures" in which students are to read books and poems by authors from diverse cultures as pre-selected by a curriculum committee. There is nothing here preventing the teacher from asking this year's students, "what questions do you have about cultures?" and then using those to guide discussions about the readings or to expand the unit into new topics. Nor is there anything preventing the high school algebra teacher with a pre-determined course, sequenced content, and textbook from inviting students to suggest how small groups might be used, how evaluation might be handled, or how homework might be scheduled. Certainly in the case of the high school algebra class, students would have had enough experience in school to know about these things and to have some idea about how they might be arranged.

In some cases, teachers do have a large degree of discretion in determining the curriculum. For example, a first grade teacher and her students planned the curriculum together through three interrelated steps:

- (1) selecting the target theme (the focus for developing the curriculum);
- (2) establishing guiding questions to serve as the scope and sequence of the thematic unit; and
- (3) designing the classroom activities.

In one case they decided to do a unit on "Whales." Next they identified guiding questions for the theme and categorized them according to the different subjects they usually had in school: language arts, music, art, mathematics, and so on. Finally the group created activities to answer their guiding questions and again discussed how these connected to various subject areas. As well as being an excellent illustration of collaborative planning this case also tells us that it is not just for older students. Little kids can have big ideas too.

In another case where wide discretion was possible, this one in a middle school, Barbara Brodhagen (2007) describes how she and her teaching partner began the year from scratch with no definite plan for the curriculum. After a few weeks of community building they took their students through a process she describes this way:

*We begin by asking the students to do some self-reflection: "We would like you to begin by thinking about yourself. Who are you? What are you like? What are your interests,*

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*aspirations? Please make a list of words or phrases you would use if asked to tell about yourself.”*

*Next we raise the first of the two major questions: “Still thinking about yourself and looking at the list you have made, now please list questions or concerns you have about yourself. What questions or concerns do you have about yourself?” After sufficient time for the students to list questions individually, we form small groups of five or six people and ask them to search for shared questions which are recorded on newsprint: “Are there questions or concerns that were expressed by several or all members of your group? If so, what are they? No one is required to show their personal list or to share anything from it unless they choose to do so.”*

*Once the group self questions and concerns are recorded, we turn to the second of the two major questions: “Now we would like you to look outside yourself at the world you live in, from the close parts (family, friends, school, cultures, our community, and so on ) to the more distant parts (your state, your nation, the global world). We would like you to think about that world - both near and far- and list questions or concerns you have about that world. What questions do you have about the world you live in?” Again, after sufficient time to record individual questions and concerns, the students are placed in their small groups and asked to find shared “world” questions and concerns (with the same right to remain silent).*

*At this point the classroom walls are covered by newsprint sheets filled with questions like these:*

### Self Questions

*How long will I live?*

*What will I look like when I am older?*

*Do other people think I am the way I think I am?*

*What job will I have?*

*What would I do if I met an extraterrestrial?*

*Will I ever go to outer space?*

*Why do I fight with my brother and sister?*

*Should I get a tattoo?*

*Will I be poor and homeless?*

*Will my family still be there when I am older?*

*Will my parents accept me as an adult?*

*Where will I live when I am older?*

*Will I get married and have children?*

*Why do I act the way I do?*

*Why do I have to go to school?*

*Will I have the same friends when I am older?*

*Why do I look the way I do?*

*Will I go to college?*

*Will I be like my parents*

### World Questions

*Will we ever live in outer space?*

*What will happen to the earth in the future?*

*Why are there so many crimes?*

*Why do people hate each other?*

*Why are there so many poor people?*

*Will racism ever end?*

*Will there ever be a President who is not a white man?*

*Are there other planets than the ones we know about?*

*Who owns outer space?*

*Will the U.S ever be out of debt?*

*Will cures be found for cancer and AIDS?*

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*Where does garbage go?*

*Who will win the next election?*

*Why are schools the way they are?*

*Will the rain forests be saved?*

*Why is there so much prejudice?*

*What is the purpose of time?*

*How do you know when something is real?*

*Will drug dealing stop?*

*What will people evolve to look like?*

*Will hover boards replace skate boards?*

*Is time travel possible?*

*How many kinds of species are there?*

*Next we ask the small groups to look at their self and world questions to identify themes for the curriculum: Are there any cases where there are connections between self and world questions (such as questions about conflict in school and conflict in the larger world)? If so, what are some words or phrases you might use to name the connects (such as “conflict”)? (In groups of 60 or less we have also done this by posting all questions from small groups in a central location and asking the large group to find themes).*

*Next, the lists of themes from the small groups are posted and the large group reaches consensus on a single list. A vote is then taken to select the first theme for the year (with the rest of the themes to be addressed later). Having selected an opening theme, the small groups are re-convened to identify questions and concerns from their lists that they would include within the first theme: What are specific self and world questions and concerns we might want to answer within this theme? Be sure to indicate which questions are of interest to all or most of the group*

*and which to one or two since there will be room for both large and small group activities. ( For this task we have also used a steering committee with a representative from each small group).*

*Finally, we ask the students to identify possible activities the group might do and resources they might use to answer the questions for the theme. To do this we use one of several ways: small groups rotating through stations where one or two questions are posted, large group discussion, or dividing the group in half.*

*This process completed, the teachers proceed to organize and expand the activities, develop a calendar for activities and projects, and so on. The teachers and students also create a web for the unit as a visual organizer.*

Among other things, these examples show that there is no one way to involve young people in making classroom curriculum decisions. The point is to continuously ask, “How can students be involved?” Sometimes the possibilities may be limited, in others they may be wide open. Teaching the democratic way means involving young people in decision making whenever and to whatever degree possible. Giving students a voice in this way, no matter how restricted the teacher may feel by various mandates, is a step in the democratic direction.

A word of caution is needed here, however. I have heard many teachers who have done a bit of collaborative planning with students excitedly say something like, “they decided to do just what I would have planned.” This should come as no great surprise. Students are real people too. They live in the world and they have been to school. If we ask them what questions they have about cultures or how to organize small groups, or what questions they have about the world, they are very likely to come up with ideas that look like ours. But the word of caution is this: the purpose of involving students in planning is not to trick them into thinking that our ideas are theirs or to subtly lead them to the plan we already had in mind. Tricking students or engineering their consent is not consistent with the democratic way. The purpose of involving students in planning is to help them learn the democratic way. Whether their ideas match ours is not the point.

For some teachers the possibility of involving students in planning simply sounds like too much work. There is no denying that collaborative planning can be difficult or that it involves more complex skills than merely telling students what to do. On the other hand, too many

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teachers find themselves in a constant struggle with students because there is no mutual understanding of what is supposed to happen or the teacher has guessed wrong about the best way to do things. Worse yet, many teachers find themselves in long meetings trying to figure out with colleagues what might work with students. Why would teachers think that these struggles, meetings, and moments of bad guesswork are less work, let alone less frustrating, than planning up front with their students about how things might happen in their classrooms? More difficult? Perhaps. More complex? Yes. More work? Not in the long run. Collaborative communities are a lot less work than adversarial ones.

For other teachers the very idea of planning with students seems almost impossible because it means letting go of their complete control of classroom life. Teachers are certainly entitled to such feelings since most have probably had little preparation for planning with students and, moreover, they are responsible for what happens in their classroom. At the risk of seeming overly harsh, though, I want to ask the question, “Whose education are we talking about here?” In a democratic society, public participation in making decisions does not depend upon whether elected officials feel comfortable with the idea. It is about the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the obligations of elected officials. Likewise in the classroom, the matter of collaborative planning is not really about the feeling of the teacher. True, the teacher must make many decisions alone regarding the safety and well-being of students. But there are still countless matters open to consideration in a classroom. In these matters, collaborative planning is about the right and responsibility of young people to learn the democratic way and the obligation of the teacher to help them do so.

So, how can teachers get started in planning with students? First, they can set aside any feelings of guilt over how little or much seems possible. Second, they can be honest with students. Tell them what has been planned already and why. Third, they can select a way that seems doable, such as the following.

- Try asking students what questions they have about a theme already planned.
- Ask them what kinds of activities they have had good experiences with in the past and use the information to plan activities for an upcoming unit.

- Bring a unit plan you already have to your students. Ask them to look it over and give you suggestions.
- As part of getting to know your students ask them what questions they have about themselves and the world. Collect these and think about how they might be incorporated into units you plan to do. Or study the questions to identify themes you might use during the year.

Obviously there are lots of ways to involve students in planning. The way most teachers get started is to pick one and try it out. If that one doesn't work, they try another. And they remember that most young people have never been asked to be involved in classroom planning so they may be as apprehensive as the teacher. The first request for student ideas may be met with silence or a remark like, "you're the teacher, you decide." But over time we can help them find their way just as we will find ours. And that search, in and of itself, is an important part of the democratic way.

Notice, though, that in all of the examples of collaborative planning I cited, none involved simply asking students, "what do you want to do?" or "what are you interested in?" As we will see in the next section, teaching the democratic way is not a matter of whimsical ideas or of doing whatever we are interested in. Democratic communities take on particular kinds of issues and concerns. People may find them interesting and enjoy working on them. But even if they don't, the issues and concerns of democracy must still be addressed.

### 3 CONTENT WORTH TEACHING

Many educators seem to think that student voice or participation is all there is to a democratic classroom. But democracy is not simply a process. It is about something. In that same way, a democratic classroom is not characterized simply by how things are done, but also by the topics, issues, and questions they focus on. Like all teachers, those who choose to teach the democratic way are faced with a myriad of expectations about content and skills they are supposed to cover. But they constantly seek ways to make space for socially significant topics and themes by explicitly using them to organize the curriculum or by working them into the

subjects they are mandated to teach. In doing so they think about knowledge as something more than a collection of facts or skills to be covered to get through a test, on to the next grade, or as cultural ornamentation. For them, knowledge is an instrument for understanding and resolving socially significant topics and problems.

Here as in the case of collaborative planning there may be a wide range of possibilities depending upon the experience of the teacher and the amount of discretionary space in the curriculum. In search of content for math problems, teachers and textbook authors seem most often to turn to simple situations like dividing up food among friends, making change from multiple purchases, or finding distances around an imaginary town. Teachers who are thinking about the democratic way are more likely to search for examples having to do with topics like trends in local population patterns, distribution of wealth, or effects of different land use patterns. Where lists of preferred stories and poetry often emphasize classical “musts” or “child favorites,” teachers who choose the democratic way are also on the lookout for those that bring to light important contemporary issues and which systematically give voice to views from diverse cultures.

Topics and problems in science are not simply drawn from simulations or exercises in a manual when teachers are thinking about democracy. Instead they are more likely to involve things like testing water in the school or community, analyzing the nutritional value and consequences of cafeteria food, identifying pollution sources in the local area, and studying and debating trends in scientific and medical research and funding. Social studies is not merely a chronology of events defined by wars and land acquisition deals populated by military figures and politicians. More importantly it is a study of recurring issues and problems like human rights, civil liberties, and economic justice that are struggled over by real people from diverse backgrounds who influence and are influenced by social, political, and cultural forces. Music and Art are not simply areas for clever activity, holiday performance, or high culture appreciation, but opportunities to express hopes and feelings in relation to life’s events and struggles.

Thinking about examples like those reveals some of the kinds of questions teachers can use when they choose to teach the democratic way.

- Does the content of a particular subject involve socially significant issues and topics wherever possible?

- How can I use my subject to bring to light important issues or topics?
- Are students aware of my attempts to add social value to a subject?

Teachers who have not thought about these kinds of questions might be surprised to find that taking them seriously not only begins to bring democracy to life, it also helps bring mechanical or abstract content and skills to life. This is becoming increasingly important as teachers are mandated to use standards-based, packaged, and scripted curriculum materials that are sanitized of social issues so as not to inhibit sales in any particular state or community. Examples are not hard to find: popular science programs that include a unit on genetics without mentioning how the “proportion of (a person’s) blood” from different ethnic backgrounds was historically used for racial profiling and discrimination. Or math programs that have students calculate family budgets as if every family enjoyed a living wage. In the end, most of these materials may seem like good subject content to the subject specialists who create them, but they are inconsistent with the lived realities of many young people and lacking in any social conscience.

Another way of bringing the content of democracy to the surface is found in classrooms where teachers organize the curriculum around personally and socially significant themes (BEANE, 1997). Sometimes identified in collaboration with students and sometimes by the teacher alone, such themes provide opportunities for young people to simultaneously think about themselves and the world around them, and to use a variety of content and skills. For example, picture a unit called “Living in the Future,” in which young people do survey research to identify concerns about the future, design inventions to solve environmental problems, examine the accuracy of forecasts that had been made for their own time, and make recommendations to their city planning office for dealing with anticipated future problems areas like land use, transportation, and housing (BRODHAGEN; WEILBACHER; BEANE, 1998). Consider another, entitled “Show Me the Money,” created out of questions young people had about where money came from, how it is distributed, how it is manufactured, how to budget, how much various occupations pay (BEANE; BRODHAGEN; WEILBACHER, 2005). To answer such questions students engage in a variety of activities including researching the evolution of barter and money in ancient civilizations, creating budgets for families in wealth and poverty, studying statistical

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trends on the distribution of wealth, inventing improvements on our economic system, and investigating the economy of countries where their favorite clothes are made, including conditions of sweatshop slavery in those countries. Then imagine the group moving to a new theme entitled “Conflict” that involves questions like, “Will there be another world war?” “Why is there so much prejudice?” and “Did the Civil War ever end?”

Still other teachers prefer to engage young people in a direct approach to democratic living by organizing major portions of the curriculum explicitly around social problems and service learning. Such was the case some years ago when a first grade teacher in a Midwest school began the year with a field trip to a local landfill so the children could see first hand the effects of unnecessary waste. With that issue in mind, the year was spent creating posters and songs, reading and writing stories involving conservation, raising money to plant trees on school grounds, and helping other people in the school learn to recycle. More recently, at a high school in another school district, a teacher and group of students in a computer class used statistical mapping software to show the effects of a grocery store closing on surrounding neighborhoods. Their data were then used by a neighborhood activist organization to lobby for a new grocery store rather than some other kind of business for that commercial space. In still another example, Grady (2003/2004) describes how students from the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in Massachusetts used data they gathered from peers to study and make recommendations for addressing public health issues among adolescents. In addition to specific ideas for improving public health, the data also serve as a basis for additional work by new groups of students each year.

Teachers at all levels do these kinds of units or projects and their stories often appear in newspapers and on television news, especially when the social problems are local. Ironically, though, the reports usually portray these experiences as supplemental to some other coursework or as fillers when other work is completed. In some cases that is true. But for many of those teachers this IS the curriculum, for social problems are, after all, the content of democratic work.

In addition to using content of social significance, teaching the democratic way demands that content be drawn from more than the usual academic sources, like textbooks, or those that present only one cultural view. In a democracy, the question, “whose knowledge is of most worth?” is extremely important. The democratic right to have a voice and the related

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responsibility to hear many voices requires that teachers and students draw content not only from the traditional disciplines of knowledge but also from other sources like their own personal knowledge, popular culture, and current media. Moreover they are obligated to seek ideas and viewpoints for diverse cultures.

I began by noting examples of how social issues might be inserted into the content of various subjects. However, many teachers in search of democratic methods have come to the conclusion that teaching the democratic way eventually involves moving beyond the separate subject approach to the curriculum toward approaches that integrate knowledge through problem-centered units (BEANE, 1997, NAGEL, 1996). This makes good sense when we understand that no problem of any social significance can be understood or resolved using only one or another subject. For example, statistics about hunger may help us to understand the scope of these problems but to really work on them requires information about health, political analysis of budgets, speaking out at meetings, writing reports, creating artistic displays, and so on. University scholars and scientists understand this as evidenced by the increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary programs and centers around topics like environmental studies, cultural diversity, and integrated medicine. Knowledge organized for the sake of democracy is not separated into bits and pieces of separate subjects taught as if they had little or nothing to do with one another and memorized for some test. Nor is it drawn only from academic or single culture sources. Instead it is pulled together from a variety of sources in an integrated way so that it can be put to use on a significant topic or problem. And in that form it becomes knowledge for the sake of democracy.

In the book Democratic Schools (APPLE; BEANE, 2007), teachers and administrators from several classrooms and schools describe how they bring democracy to life. In every case, the authors mention using problem-centered thematic units to help organize the curriculum in their classrooms and schools. Across the essays, which were from all levels of schooling, the themes included issues like “Justice,” “CityWorks,” “Making a Difference on Planet Earth,” and “Racism and Prejudice” (MEIER; SCHWARTZ, 2007, ROSENSTOCK STEINBERG, 2007). This should not have been a surprise. A lot of teachers use themes in the curriculum. The difference here was where the themes came from. Some teachers draw themes from existing

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subjects, like “Colonial Living” or “Metrics.” Or they use “processes” like change or cycles. Or they use appealing topics like “Dinosaurs” or “Inventions.” But for those who want to teach the democratic way, the most important source of themes is significant social issues and topics. A closer look at the themes used to organize the curriculum at one of those schools, La Escuela Fratney/ Fratney School (PETERSON, 2007), makes this point especially clear.

*Theme I: We respect ourselves and our world.*

- \* *Every living thing has needs.*
- \* *I am somebody important.*
- \* *We all have a cultural heritage.*
- \* *We need to live in peace.*
- \* *TV can be dangerous to our health.*

*Theme II: We are Proud to be Bilingual, Multicultural Learners.*

- \* *Diversity is a strength in our society.*
- \* *There are many benefits to being bilingual.*
- \* *We communicate in many languages and in many ways.*
- \* *We learn from and teach each other in our Fratney community.*
- \* *We recognize and respect our multiple languages, cultures and experiences.*
- \* *We learn to counteract the stereotypes contained in cartoons, books, magazines and the media.*

*Theme III: We can make a difference on planet Earth.*

- \* *We have been shaped by the past, we shape the future.*
- \* *African-American people have contributed greatly to our nation.*
- \* *We celebrate the contributions of women.*
- \* *People of all nationalities have worked for justice and equality.*
- \* *We need to overcome prejudice and racism.*

*Theme IV: We share stories of the world.*

- \* *My family's story is important.*

- \* *We learn about other people through their stories.*
- \* *We can all be storytellers and actors.*

Other kinds of themes, taken from other sources, might lend themselves to interesting activities and they may give some context to various skills or facts. But they do not speak to the problems and concerns that occupy the work of democratic communities. Nor do they help young people to learn the democratic way.

#### **4 DOING THINGS THE DEMOCRATIC WAY**

Sometimes people talk about the democratic way of life as if it is only about getting together for planning and decision-making. In fact, students who first find themselves involved in planning as part of a democratic classroom have been known to ask, “Are we going to do anything this year or just plan?” But democracy is also about doing things and getting things done. The democratic way of living is an active one as people search for informed opinion, analyze situations, express viewpoints, create solutions, offer recommendations, and take direct action. Teaching the democratic way thus involves active classrooms as well as particular kinds of activities.

In democratic communities, people spend a good deal of time and energy becoming well informed about important issues, topics, and problems. In a democratic classroom we thus might expect to see young people frequently engaged in researching the questions and concerns they have helped to identify. In an age of communication such as ours, sources of information are increasingly accessible inside and outside the school, through technology and personal contact, and from all kinds of media. Teaching the democratic way means seeking differing viewpoints from a variety of sources and helping young people to become increasingly adept as critical consumers of information. In a democratic classroom, teachers and students are not only interested in what is said, but who is saying it, why, and by what authority – a scrutiny that may extend from media commercials to textbook authors.

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In addition to gathering and critically analyzing information, democracy requires learning how to share it with others. This is why democratic classrooms place a premium on informed discussions and debates as well as presentations and performances. Suppose, for example, a group of students is considering what they would like their town or city to be like 25 years in the future. They might identify important aspects of community life like land use, transportation, social services, recreation, and then form small groups around each one to gather information and make recommendations. Rather than stopping there, as might happen in some classrooms, the small group recommendations would be debated, revised, and voted into an integrated and comprehensive set of recommendations and submitted to town or city authorities.

Since concern for the common good is a hallmark of democratic living, we might also expect to see groups in democratic classrooms involved in various kinds of community service, and especially through “service learning.” According to the National Service Learning Clearinghouse, service learning “combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content.”

Without demeaning short-term acts of charity or kindness, teaching the democratic way involves looking for ways to engage young people in more complex projects by which they may not only experience a sense of altruism but also learn how to act upon problems and concerns. Earlier I mentioned two examples, one in which young children pushed for more recycling in their school and another in which older students used mapping software to show the effects of a grocery store closing. Hundreds more examples have been reported over the years from designing school playgrounds to conducting community surveys to registering voters to organizing public health campaigns. There is no shortage of examples such as these but there is a need for both educators and the public to understand such projects not simply as charity but as part of a larger understanding of teaching and learning the democratic way.

Sometimes those kinds of activities are often found in classrooms where the intent is to make learning more engaging or hands-on. Used this way they are often the center of debate about whether they result in high achievement, enough content coverage, or even too much noise.

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Sometimes they are criticized because they lead young people to discover and demand action on issues in the school or community. And nothing can chill a classroom more than the administrative admonition, “don’t light any fires we can’t put out.” But where educators are committed to teaching the democratic way, these criticisms are badly misdirected. Aside from the fact that active learning leads to better academic achievement<sup>i</sup>, the central purpose of democracy requires particular kinds of activities, not because they are clever or engaging or exciting or fun, but because they are the way of doing things in democratic communities.

One other premium approach in democratic classrooms needs to be mentioned here, for both its importance and the controversy surrounding it - having students work together on projects and other activities. What to call this approach these days is not an easy question. The original name, “cooperative learning,” has fallen somewhat out of fashion because it often came to be associated with academic games more than social learning and because conservative critics thought it detracted from the individualistic competition they associate with capitalism. For social and political reasons, then, many educators have come to use the term “collaborative learning” instead. Either way, though, it is hard to imagine a democratic community or classroom in which students are not frequently working together. Collaboration and cooperation are icons of democratic life.

Ironically, the use of such groups has fallen into disrepute in many places under the weight of criticisms that they hold back “gifted” children who have to “carry” the group. This sort of reasoning suggests how far our schools have wandered from an understanding of democracy and its role as a central purpose in education. If the purpose of schooling were to teach young people how to compete for personal gain, the critics would surely have a point. But we look to cooperative and collaborative groups not just for their widely documented academic benefits, but because they are a critical aspect of living and learning the democratic way. The dilemmas they pose, such as how to work together and how to deal with those who don’t pull their weight, are not reasons to avoid cooperative groups; they are reasons to use them. The response to critics is not so much an argument about achievement as it is a claim for democracy and the obligations of schools in a democratic society. Some years ago my mother, herself a progressive teacher in the 1930s, expressed surprise that debates over cooperative and

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heterogeneous groups continued some sixty years after she thought they were settled. Explaining a bit of the current political context, I asked her what she would say to parents who demand to know what their “gifted” children will get out of such groups. Her response was quick: “they learn to lend a hand.” Sometimes the obvious answer is the most compelling.

## 5 EVALUATING THE DEMOCRATIC WAY

It is often said that the best way to tell what educators value is to look at what they evaluate. When it comes to teaching the democratic way, however, the question is not only what is evaluated but how. In thinking about classroom curriculum planning we recognized the fundamental idea that people have a right to have a say in decisions that affect them. That same idea applies to designing evaluation. One way of getting started with involving students in designing evaluations is to ask them straight out how they think their own work, the curriculum, the groups’ efforts, the teacher’s role or anything else might be evaluated. Should we use a scaled survey, a test, a performance, a discussion, a written narrative, a portfolio?

As a prelude to the larger question the teacher alone, or with students, might create a list of various types of evaluation methods so as to guide the discussion of which one or more to actually use for a particular situation. Is it undemocratic for the teacher to offer a list of possibilities for the students to consider? Of course not - so long as there really is a difference among them and the students’ choice or recommendations will be taken seriously. And depending upon the situation, the best choice from a democratic viewpoint might be to use several different methods so that different students might find the one that gives them the best opportunity to show their work or ideas.

Students might also be involved in helping to create any given type of evaluation (Brodhagen, 1994). For example, before projects or other work are underway, the group might design rubrics for evaluating them, from the content requirements to the quality of exhibits and presentations. The whole group or a committee might look at the comment sections on report cards to see if the language is clear or if additional or different comments should be included. As well, they might design a format for student-led conferences or project performances.

The principle of student voice also applies to answering the question of who evaluates student work. Obviously teachers must be involved in evaluating and reporting the work of students. Even if they are reluctant to do so, parents and school authorities insist upon it as part of the teacher's responsibilities. But teaching and learning the democratic way means that students must also play a crucial role with regard to their own work. Aside from the right to have a say about how they did, young people also deserve and benefit from opportunities to become more skilled in making judgments about their own efforts. Thus in democratic classrooms, teachers make every effort to engage students in reflection and self-evaluation through discussions, conferences, journals, guided self-evaluation forms, and other means. At the end of units or grading periods, students complete self-evaluation activities that are placed in portfolios and shared with parents or guardians. A high premium is placed on student-led conferences in which self-evaluation results and future goals are discussed with teachers and parents or guardians. And where mid-term or final report cards are used, two columns of grades or comments are included - one for the teacher and the other for the student. Here again though, teaching the democratic way means framing these kinds of activities in terms of the right to participate in evaluation rather than as a clever device for forcing students who have not completed their work to publicly admit it.

When teachers choose to teach the democratic way, they are also concerned about the work of the large group and that of small groups used for special projects. In this case arrangements are made for reflective evaluation through discussions, structured response forms, and other means. Here crucial questions are asked about how group work integrates the values associated with the democratic way of doing things. Did group members have equitable opportunities to participate and to have their ideas heard? Were decisions made using some process of thoughtful consensus? Were efforts made to encourage everyone to contribute to discussions and decisions? Did materials and other resources considered by the group reflect a range of viewpoints? Did group leaders, including the teacher, encourage the group to be thoughtful and respectful in collaborative work and communications? Were efforts made to have diversity in small groups? Was ample time allotted for planning, conducting, and evaluating individual and group work?

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Using the idea of inquiry, students might also study state standards as well as sample or so-called “released” items from state or district content tests. Doing so opens up opportunities to reflect on how their learning experiences have helped them to meet external requirements or prepare for various tests. In a time when such mandates are so heavily weighted, students have a right to this kind of information. On the other hand taking such inquiry to a critical level may also help students to begin to see how these testing regimes involve undemocratic political interference in their lives and schools.

Many teachers have never had experience with these kinds of democratic evaluation ideas. How might they get started?

- Create a form for students to answer questions about how they did on a project.
- Ask students to write a short self-evaluation statement to go home at mid-term and indicate whether the teacher agrees or disagrees with the statement. Invite students to submit questions for a content test - and then use them.
- Set aside some time at the end of the day or period on Friday for the group to discuss how things went during the week, and again on Monday to preview plans for the new week.
- Ask a small group of students to come up with a rubric for assessing aspects of a project.

And remember, most young people have probably never been asked to participate in evaluation. Like the teacher, they too need opportunities to try things out and to struggle along the way.

Obviously teaching the democratic way requires us to think about evaluation in ways quite different from those typically used in classrooms. The premium here is on encouraging students to think carefully about their own work, to have a meaningful say in assessing it, to reflect upon how democratic values are integrated into group work, and to take the lead in reporting how their work went. Many educators would no doubt say that they would love to do these things if only there was time enough in their already busy classrooms. The fact of the matter is that every teacher spends a lot of time doing grades and report cards. The democratic way of evaluating is not so much about time as about a commitment to the idea that young people

have a right and responsibility to reflect on their efforts. Instead of asking where we will find the time, we would do better to ask what are the consequences of young people learning to depend entirely on others for judgments about what and how they do.

## 6 ACHIEVEMENT AND DEMOCRACY

In a robust democracy, social justice and equity are taken seriously. For this reason, educators who want to teach the democratic way are in a constant search for high achievement for all young people, especially those who are non-privileged and for whom difficulty in school cannot be offset by family wealth or influence. Importantly, all of the methods and approaches I have already described offer more access to more knowledge for more young people. Taken together they are inviting, engaging, in-depth, and comprehensive.

Even so, critics often dismiss those methods as lacking “rigor.” They may be right if they mean typical dictionary definitions of “rigor” that use terms like “harsh, “inflexible in opinion,” “severe,” and “tyrannical.” After all, those terms certainly do not hint at democracy. But if we use “rigor” to refer to methods that are intellectually stimulating, involve high expectations, and require in-depth inquiry, the critics would be quite wrong. The ones I have described meet this definition much more than the rote drill, textbook exercises, constant lecturing, and simplistic worksheets forced on young people in too many classrooms. Could the critics possibly mean they want young people to have experiences that match so well with the typical dictionary definition of “rigor.” We should certainly hope not, for in those dictionaries “rigor” is usually immediately preceded by the term “rigamorole,” defined as “a complex and largely meaningless procedure,” and then followed immediately by “rigor mortis.”

Teaching the democratic way means pushing for those higher expectations and more rigorous learning experiences. It also means differentiating instruction, encouraging different learning styles, and otherwise accounting for the diversity among young people. In a democratic society we should want all young people to experience the best education we have to offer while recognizing that all may not approach or engage with it in the same way. In this sense accounting

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for diversity involves variety within a heterogeneous group rather than separate groupings or different curriculum content for different students.

This issue is becoming increasingly important as our most non-privileged young people are drilled over and over with menial worksheets about bits and pieces of skill and information meant to prepare them for standardized tests. Often this fact of school life, especially in large urban areas, results from educators who believe that poor children need that kind of “structure” for orderly classroom learning to occur. Sometimes, though, it is the parents of non-privileged children themselves who insist on using those methods in the belief that they are the only way to get what is necessary to pass standardized tests. And who can blame these parents? When standardized tests have such high stakes and have historically worked against non-privileged children, any teaching method that appears to depart even slightly from the teaching of facts and skills would be cause for alarm. Ironically, though, research on teaching methods associated with democratic practices consistently shows they are associated with success on standardized tests (BEANE, 1997, MARKS; NEWMANN; GAMORAN, 1996). Given this, how can it be that teachers using democratic methods do not engage children with the “stuff” that is on standardized tests? Or is it more that when they talk about their classrooms they emphasize other higher level kinds of learning like thinking and problem solving?

Meanwhile, the premium ways of learning, like those I have described in this chapter, are left to the good fortune of more privileged young people whose economic and cultural standing alone prepares them for most standardized tests. Why do educators, policy makers, and legislators seem to favor the least effective teaching practices for the least privileged children, even manipulating research to support their views? Why wouldn't they want the best practices for everyone?

Not too long ago I watched as a young man arrived at a new school after moving from one of the poorest cities in the nation. His teacher in the new school placed a premium on problem-solving, hands-on activities, discussion, and other rigorous and engaging methods in a well-organized heterogeneous classroom. Sadly her new student had no idea what to do in this new situation. Indeed he had no way of even understanding it since in all his previous years of school he had never been in such a setting. His experience was all about drill and worksheets and simplistic activities and trivial content. Where is the equity in that? Where is the justice? What

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could policy makers and legislators be thinking when they encourage such inequity through their testing programs and unfair funding practices? Why would they allow such undemocratic practices to persist in schools meant to promote democracy? I will give these questions more attention in the last chapter. But we should never leave a discussion of democratic teaching without saying that the press for achievement is part of it. After all, in a democratic society, young people have a right to expect their schools to offer them the best chance for success.

## 7 THE TEACHER'S ROLE

For some educators picturing a classroom in which students are involved in planning, group work, discussion, self-evaluation, and other democratic practices suggests that the teacher has simply lost all direction and authority. Nothing could be further from the truth. Teaching the democratic way requires tremendous teacher presence and skill, as well as solid understanding about how to prepare for things like discussions of social issues (HESS, 2002).

In a democratic classroom students and teachers do not simply follow a textbook or prescribed lessons. Their work involves thinking, problem-solving, researching, evaluating and other complex activities. Sophisticated as many young people may seem to be, they do not necessarily know how to pose powerful questions, critically examine information, conduct thorough research, debate an issue, or prepare complete projects. Nor do they necessarily know what the larger society expects them to learn or what issues and problems are prominent outside their own locales. For this reason, the teacher is especially important in a democratic classroom to be certain that crucial questions are raised, persistent problems recognized, an array of sources consulted, and information and skill applied. As well, the teacher must be able to integrate externally mandated curriculum standards, no matter how insignificant they may be, into the context of units and activities that involve significant social problems and issues.

At the same time, however, teaching the democratic way means constantly questioning what it means to be democratic in the classroom: When do I intervene? How hard do I press here? Should I say something or let the group figure it out? For questions like these there is no curriculum package, no prescribed lesson, no script, no certain and final answer. Instead there is

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only the ever present questions that challenge the attempt to create a democratic community and curriculum.

It is the teacher's job to help young people think more deeply, more broadly, and more critically. If the teacher was not crucial, we could simply hire people randomly off the streets to teach our children. Where little is expected or required of students, that sometimes may even seem possible. But teaching the democratic way is not easy and much is expected of students. Given the importance of democracy and the way it is misused and misunderstood these days, the stakes are high. To meet this challenge we need very good teachers and they certainly cannot afford to fade into the classroom background.

## **8 AT THE END OF THE DAY**

Educators spend a lot of time looking in the professional mirror, reflecting on what went well and what didn't, why students did or did not do well with some test, why they did or didn't seem to engage with some activity, and on and on. Those committed to teaching the democratic way are no exception. Having explored some of the things they do in the classroom we can expect that besides the usual kinds of teaching questions they ask others that have to do with bringing democracy to life.

- Did my students have an adequate and appropriate voice in classroom planning?
- Was the content we focused on of some social significance?
- Were students involved in rigorous and authentic activity?
- Did we consult a variety of sources and viewpoints in our research?
- Did we critically examine information and viewpoints?
- How could our work extend more often into community service?
- Did we use a variety of ways to reflect upon and evaluate our work and our group?
- Did students have an adequate and appropriate say in creating our evaluation?
- Did students have an adequate voice in evaluating their own work?
- Were my expectations high enough and did I push all students to do well?

- Was there enough variety in activities and materials so that all students had an equitable chance to access the curriculum?
- Did I play out my role as teacher in a democratic way?

More of us ought to ask ourselves these kinds of questions. If we did perhaps we would also see a lot more examples of teaching the democratic way.

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Notas

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Marks, Newmann, and Gamoran 1996, Newman and Associates, 1996

**Artigo recebido em 13/12/2017.**

**Aceito para publicação em 16/12/2017.**

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