

Learning Exchange: Democratic Strategies in the Classroom

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Our session was organized around these framing questions:

1. *What are your experiences using democratic strategies in the classroom?*
2. *How can democratic strategies be part of the basic the design of courses?*
3. *How do you handle dialogue that is culturally, politically, or ideologically charged?*
4. *What are the limits to democratic strategies in the classroom?*
5. *What are the barriers to using democratic strategies in the classroom?*
6. *What are the implications of using democratic strategies in the classroom for justice in democracy?*

**What innovations, ideas, opportunities, and/or action steps received the most support among your group?**

We discussed a lot of different strategies for “good teaching” before we started distinguishing between “good teaching techniques” and teaching that advances democratic principles and practices and advances citizenship skills, and we focused on the good teaching techniques that advance democracy. (So, for example, we didn’t discuss how to give a dynamite lecture.)

Participants agreed that it is critical to plan ahead for using democratic strategies in the classroom, and to **build them into the course design**. It’s hard to add new teaching techniques in the middle of the course if you haven’t laid a foundation for a dialogic learning community by:

- building community
- communicating teaching approaches
- establishing norms of behavior for the classroom (ground rules)
- naming and discussing the power issues
- sharing attitudes about and approaches to managing conflict
- identifying expectations of the class, and
- being transparent about your course goals and hopes for student learning/development

One idea that seemed to get a lot of support was that of **building community** within the classroom. A number of people commented that they’ve seen classrooms where the students don’t even know each others’ names, much less what they have in common. It’s critical that the students learn each others’ names and exchange stories so that they know a little about each other. It’s helpful to explore what “personal stakes” or interests the students have in the subject of the course.

Another was that classes function better if the **students know the teaching techniques that will be used** and they understand what is expected of them in terms of participation and attitudes. The group suggested that teachers run through a comparison with the students

between debate and dialogue, between dialogue and everyday conversation, between dialogue and deliberation. Explain “choice work” or “fishbowls” or polling, if they will be used. If a teacher is going to use a Socratic method or a “hot seat” approach, or require students to offer perspectives that are not in the room, they should explain that up-front.

Establishing **ground rules** is a good way to build trust and lay the groundwork for managing any conflict that might arise.

We talked about **power**, but not as much as we probably needed to. Several people said that teacher-learner dynamic in the classroom is both appropriate and expected, and that it’s best to “name it,” and discuss it, but not pretend it isn’t present. The teacher needs to explicitly facilitate a discussion on the role of the teacher: the teacher as a neutral facilitator *and* as the person who has the final say in the course content, sets the tone, selects the teaching method for each unit, and gives out grades.

Some ideas that emerged for **conferring power to students** included: having the students design the syllabus, the teacher as neutral facilitator or no teacher facilitation at all, peer coaching, students facilitating or governing the classroom or topic, self evaluations, and peer review.

One participant shared an experience she had had teaching a particular book on prisons, only to be met with unexpected hostility from the students (the students seemed to have no sympathy for the people in prisons, and disinterested in discussing the class and racial dimensions to our penal system). We identified a number of things she could do, not to diffuse the hostility or avoid conflict, but to **turn conflict or hostility into a teachable moment**:

- Name it
- Correct misinformation with correct information
- Say how you feel about the class, how the classroom dynamic is affecting you personally
- Debrief the dialogue, and ask, What just happened here? What do we as a group do about it?
- Write a letter to the class saying what you are observing
- Role play, and take a different point of view
- Keep asking questions, frame your concern as questions
- Ask, Can anyone think of a viewpoint that has not been expressed? or, Can anyone speak for the voice not in the room?
- Recover in the next class – don’t just move on
- If you suspect the problem is racism, ask, What is racism OR talk about something else and move to the racial dimension to it
- Wait. Be patient. Dialogues can be self correcting. Trust the students to get it right.

There is also power in **language**, so being attentive to what things are called is important. “At risk” children, for example, may not be the best term. On the other hand, no one advocated for

too much political correctness. Establishing the ground rule that “if you offended, say so and say why,” can allow students to identify language that might be inappropriate, for example.

Some specific ideas for **adopting democratic practices from the field** included: Katy Harriger’s Democracy Fellow program (see advance readings), study circles, fishbowls, choice work and viewpoint learning (assigning viewpoints, exchanging viewpoints, taking the perspective of others), and an overall combination of large and small group work.

We discussed the value of **creativity** in the classroom: storytelling, drama, physical voting, stories as a stimulus for discussion, and role playing.

We touched on the need to provide students with opportunities to **work collaboratively**, and one suggestion was collaborative exam and assignment writing.

And we considered that there will be times for **advocacy, debate, and challenge**, particularly the teacher as the one who pushes students out of their comfort zones through a hot seat or Socratic approach.

*See appendix for newsprint notes*

In the probes (suggestions, not mandatory questions), we ask about **language, assessment, and technology**. Please share with us anything regarding these topics that resonated with your group.

Technology can be a great equalizer, and it can provide students with the anonymity they might want to participate candidly. Clickers-voting was a popular option.

In the probes, we ask about **justice, equity, and freedom**. Please share with us anything regarding these values that resonated with your group.

People tend to repeat what they’ve practiced. If, for example, they are challenged to listen more, then they will repeat those habits beyond the classroom. And if teachers create a learning environment that invites new views, ideas, and people to the discussions, then they are more likely to repeat those habits beyond the classroom.

It would be helpful if teachers were explicit and transparent about these goals, and linked them to *systems* – how social change happens, how we make policy in this country. Teachers need to ask themselves, how does what they are doing in the classroom affect social, economic, and political structures? If they think these questions through *before* the course starts, they can be more intentional about citizen participation in a just society as an outcome.

Based on the discussion, what do you think should be the **top priorities** for educators and practitioners?

Professional development for teachers at all levels on creating the inclusive classroom and teaching for democracy. The format we designed could easily be adopted for a more intensive workshop.

## APPENDIX

### **Newsprint from Democratic Strategies in the Classroom**

Ideas:

- Students design the syllabus
- Study circles in the classroom
- Name exchanges
- Story telling
- Role playing – assigning views
- Story stimulus
- Connective learning
- Personal stake
- Hot seating – put someone in the hot seat
- Conversation mapping – recording what is said
- Ground rules, including trust, conflict
- Formal debate
- Small group-large group work
- Compare debate and dialogue
- Peer coaching
- Teacher as neutral facilitator
- Socratic approach
- No teacher
- Diamond ranking
- Dialogue, deliberation, choice work
- Fishbowls
- Anonymity
- Self evaluation
- Psycho-drama, creative drama
- Community-based work and learning
- Physical voting, lining up in a continuum
- Three-D story telling
- Student governance
- Scaffolding preparation
- Peer review
- Collaborative exam or assignment writing
- Voting, polling
- Humor
- Democracy as content
- Offering perspectives that may or may not be in the room

- Role playing: assign viewpoints that may be uncomfortable or different from what the students' viewpoint
- Story telling: both as a way to get let students get to know each other and as a stimulus for discussion about the particular topic

### Managing culturally and politically charged topics or exchanges (and discouraging political correctness)

- Choice work: frame it with the uncomfortable or unpopular perspective represented
- Ground rules, e.g., if someone is pushing your buttons, say so
- Tell the students why we are establishing ground rules
- Anonymity through technology (or 3 x 5 cards)
- As teacher, play a different role
- Ask, "Can anyone think of viewpoints that have not been expressed?" or "Can anyone speak for the voice not in the room?"
- Talk about the power of language (e.g. at risk)
- Name it
- Use a clicker system to address the elephant in the room
- Hot button exercise
- Race: Take it head on. Ask, "What is racism?"
- Or talk about something else and discuss the racial dimension to it
- Turn a problem over to the class: What do we do about this?
- Wait, be patient: dialogues can be self-correcting
- Correct with information
- Remember the power of the peer
- Carefully designed, pulled together materials
- The right attitude
- Recover in the next class
- Say how you feel about the class, about what's happening
- Debrief the dialogue itself, What just happened here?
- Write a letter to your class about what you are observing
- Tell the class, "I have an agenda: that you will consider perspective you don't have."
- Frame it as a question

### Barriers

- Time
- Class size
- Untrained (as facilitators) teachers
- Teachers not good a managing conflict or disagreement
- Fear of losing control of the classroom
- Tradition
- The high level skill set required of teachers to teach this way
- Thin skinned students

- Grades – how do you evaluate class participation? How much should dialogue count?
- Power-dynamics
- Definitions: lack of shared understanding or meaning of some terms or language
- It's annoying
- Lack of experience
- An extremely narrow view of democracy
- Push-back from students
- Student fear of public speaking
- Lack of institutional support
- Discomfort of students with ambiguity
- The challenge of getting students to prepare
- If going outside the classroom (e.g., community-based learning), controlling inherently messy student experiences
- Lack of peer support
- Lack of resources, lack of professional development experience so that teachers know what to choose when
- Lack of reflection – no time to consider how to change things for next time
- Overly prescriptive teaching styles
- No rewards for this
- High learning curve
- Our own biases and prejudices