

A Reflection on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as Democratic Practice

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Abstract

This personal reflection describes how the scholarship of teaching and learning models democratic practice. Motivated by a forced curricular change, this piece outlines the reflection and growth of a college professor as he realized that democratic awareness is developed more fully through action than through readings and/or class discussions. In the end, a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) project served to re-frame my perspective towards teaching, learning, and democratic practice in a college classroom.

Keywords: democratic practice, learner-centered, reflection, SoTL example

In the fall of 2005 a state-mandated curriculum forced me to re-design my undergraduate education courses. As a teacher educator, I fundamentally believe that having a democratic awareness is a critical quality of a public school teacher. I was convinced that this mandated curriculum was going to devalue the democratic values that served as the framework for most of my courses. However, as I carefully considered the impact of this new curriculum, I realized that I had never really examined what democratic values my students took with them as they entered the profession. This mandated curricular change served as the impetus for a scholarship of teaching and learning project.

The first question I contemplated before initializing my study was "what do I mean by being democratic"? Informed by the work of John Dewey (1916), I had always considered democracy more than a form of government; like Dewey, to me democracy is a way of living your life. Similar to Benjamin Barber's (1984) conceptions of a "strong democracy", I believe that living a democratic life means a dedication to the public deliberation on specific problems that require action. As I began to reflect on this idea in the context of this class, I realized that, in the past versions of this course, I have always attempted to teach my students that a democratic citizen and/or educator is a) dedicated to personal and community growth, b) desires public deliberation around specific problems, c) is committed to exploring diverse perspectives and ideas, and d) is motivated to take action to solve these problems. Additionally, my reflection revealed that my past attempts to teach these values to my students occurred through carefully selected course readings and projects. Thus, the goal of this SoTL project was to assess how, and in what ways, this new curriculum was going to impede my students' development as democratic citizens. I was about to be surprised.

Like any knowledgeable faculty member, my first task was to study how to study my classroom. On this journey I learned about using small group instructional diagnosis (Black, 1999), peer review (Chism, 2007), student associates (Cox & Sorenson, 1999), teaching logs (Brookfield, 1995), and student evaluations as ways to assess and frame a more complete picture of my classroom. All of these methods were utilized over the course of a semester in an attempt to see the impact, if any, this new mandated curriculum was having

on my students' democratic perspectives. In the end, my comparisons of these students' papers and projects with the student work from previous semesters revealed little difference in their demonstrated democratic awareness. If anything, the students in this new class appeared to display more awareness of my proposed democratic principles than my previous classes. How could this be? I felt that this mandated curriculum had limited my creativity and was forcing me to delete key readings and discussions from the past. I had to know more.

Two years after the fact, as these students prepared to enter the field, I wanted to know how much of these democratic ideas were still informing their way of thinking about the teaching profession. My thought was that maybe this was just an extraordinary group and that, over time, they too would not be as democratically aware as I desired. As I interviewed several of the students, I uncovered some powerful revelations. First, none of them could remember a single thing we had read that semester. One student could not even identify her final paper for the course. "Aha!", I thought, "I was right! This new course will be the demise of democracy in our country!" However, as the interview continued, I was shocked to find that all of them, when asked what it means to be a democratically aware teacher, repeated, almost verbatim, the list I included above. I was devastated. I couldn't explain it. How could this be? How could these students not remember any of the key people from the course (Dewey, Freire, Greene) yet repeat verbatim the values I wanted them to share as future teachers? I had to know more.

As our conversations continued I gleaned another new insight. In sum, these students all acknowledged that what they remembered about the course was how I treated them and how it felt to be a part of this process. All of them respected and appreciated the idea that we were studying, together, the learning that was occurring in this class. All of us (the students, the teacher, the peer reviewer, the student associate, the SGID facilitator) were on a quest to make this learning experience better. The students, rightfully so, had equated this dedication to improving the class with living life in a democratic way. As one of them stated,

...we learned about being democratic by watching you study your teaching. We've never had professors ask us what was working and what wasn't. We've never had anyone want to know what we were learning and what it meant to us... we were all in this together to make it better for us. That's what I took to be democratic... that's what I remember.

Another one summed up their overall perspectives when she added, "...you showed us what it meant to be democratic because you were doing it".

The scholarship of teaching and learning has numerous documented benefits in terms of student learning and pedagogical practice. However, this experience has convinced me that there is also a larger democratic outgrowth of this work. As Boyer (1990) so eloquently noted

The aim of education is not only to prepare students for productive careers, but also to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose...not merely to study government, but to help shape a citizenry that can promote the public good. Thus, higher education's vision must be widened if the nation is to be rescued from problems that threaten to diminish permanently the quality of life (p. 77-78).

I now fully understand Boyer's commitment to include the scholarship of teaching in his overarching statement about the role of the professoriate. The SoTL models for our students a commitment to a larger public good. It models for our students a commitment to hear the voices of others, identify the problems in our classrooms and to take action to correct the issues. All of this is done in the name of learning. All of this is done to empower the powerless and to create learning environments with our students. As Weimer (2002) notes, describing her awakening to the learner-centered classroom, "...I saw course content in a whole new light. It moved from being the end to being the means. It went from being something covered to something I used to develop learning skills and an awareness of learning processes" (p. 5). For me, my SoTL project awakened a similar shift in the way I view course content. Like Weimer, I now view course content as a means to develop the awareness of learning processes. Additionally, I've been reminded that it is my classroom interactions with my students, not necessarily the content, that awakens democratic awareness and processes.

I have now committed myself as an educator to create learning environments *with* my students, not for them. I have learned that a mandated curriculum does not have to get in the way of practicing and living democracy. The SoTL project, created from this mandated change, served to free me as an educator, moving away from an instructor-driven perspective to a more learner-centered approach. Definitely, my new curriculum has its limitations, but with my students we are using the curriculum to discover new democratic possibilities. In an odd way, I am thankful for this forced curricular change. It helped me to realize that the scholarship of teaching and learning is a model for democratic living.

On a final note, I have a word of caution. I would not advise asking your students what they learned from your class two years later. On second thought, go ahead and ask. It's a good exercise and you might be surprised with what you discover.

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