The Democratic Classroom: Giving Students Power

By J'Anne D. Ellsworth

I did well all through school and was awarded honors and scholarships. I suppose I was even teacher's pet from time to time. But it wasn't until graduate school that, for the first time, I felt empowered as a student—felt my ideas counted and I mattered as a person.

No longer was I answering set questions handed to me by a teacher. Instead, what I thought and how I came to my conclusions mattered. I felt alive, empowered, energized!

When I taught my first undergraduate courses the next semester, I resolved to bring this energy—this permission to think and feel powerful in developing a personal viewpoint—to my students. But my goal of creating such learning epiphanies in the classroom was not as easily accomplished as I'd imagined.

Despite my efforts and my hopes, this "peak" in teaching often eluded me in that first year of teaching. I knew moments when teacher and student soared, time disappeared, and the search for ideas consumed us. I knew those moments but not how to create them.

Giving students the freedom to learn, allowing them to personalize their approach to a course, rather than liberating them, often brought out a need for structure with many students.

For example, I decided to make due dates suggested rather than mandatory. I did this because no matter when a project was due, someone had a mismatch, conflict, or life stressor. Given these conflicts, this change seemed like a student-focused solution. I announced that projects were now due when they were done and quipped that turning in assignments sooner would be counterproductive.

No one chuckled; instead, students panicked: "Just how soon after the due date should I turn it in?" "What if I don't have it done until a week later?" "How many

J'Anne D. Ellsworth is an associate professor in educational specialties at Northern Arizona University. She is also a licensed psychologist with a wide range of public school experiences. Her areas of expertise and interests include proactive discipline and classroom managment, creativity, educational empowerment, humor, and enhancing teaching. This article presents innovations that Ellsworth has developed, piloted, and implemented during the past 11 years as a university instructor.

Lack of due dates inspired anxiety.
Making attendance a matter of honor
sometimes resulted in fear of failure.

points will I lose if it's not in on the suggested due date?"

Student responses like these followed empowerment of any kind. If I left the length of paper up to the students, if I assigned open-topic essays or open-ended journaling, my students resented not getting enough content.

Despite the concern that there might be "too little content," most students didn't feel they needed to add learning activities on their own, even in areas that seemed obvious.

For example, I talked about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and mentioned that The Broken Cord[1] was an excellent story. Next class, a student raised his hand and said, "I found that book you mentioned. Do you think I should read it?"

The absence of due dates did not inspire ownership, only anxiety. Making attendance a matter of honor sometimes resulted in fear of failure, and, periodically, passive aggressive insults when I didn't go back over things a student missed when not present.

Students were either not used to the idea of an education being personal or unprepared for this approach. I finally realized that students need support and practice in assuming responsibility.

I also realized that the syllabus, while allegedly designed for students, doesn't necessarily work for students. A syllabus contains clear explications of expectations, rules of conduct to be imposed, and global issues, all from the professor's point of view.

This awakening marked a change in how I presented the syllabus. I first tried sharing syllabus building but reaped resistance. I tried providing objectives and having students develop personalized syllabi, but that netted resentment.

Now, at the beginning of the course, I provide a syllabus that includes university requirements. Students examine the document and write personal course expectations.

At the second class meeting, we share expectations and make alterations to the document, taking changes and perspectives into account. Finally, we sign the amended syllabus to show mutual agreement with changes.

In addition, recognizing how few students were ready to share responsibility for learning, I designed process devices that would help to prepare students to initiate learning extensions for themselves. Figure 1 shows a sample of a student process plan that emphasizes how students are responsible for their own learning.

I also discovered that the more graphic the undergirding of the course material, the faster students made the transition from "taking" a

course to fully engaging in the work.

The more an assignment connected to extending expertise—the more they saw the material as useful—the more prepared students were to ask relevant questions, personalizing and valuing tasks. Another light went on for me.

Without realizing it, I was addressing Coopersmith's classic components of self-esteem.[2] When I changed the class's expectations that the teacher would be responsible for everything to an understanding of mutually shared goals, students began viewing themselves as competent, signifcant, empowered, and virtuous or trusted. No wonder this was effective!

Making the distinction between deep and surface structure was also part of my discovery. Deep structure refers to the relevance of course materials and communicating expectations about depth and breadth of competence. It includes surveying student ability to comprehend, analyze, and use concepts and constructs creatively.

Deep structure emphasizes the importance of competence and mastery in a subject rather than accepting the more passive emphasis of completing a course to get a degree or certification.

Deep structure fits naturally into the syllabus, but it also needs verbal expression. It's a "constructivist" concept. Rather than being told how something connects with the future and occupational goals or tasks, students need to see, for themselves, how it fits.

For example, I always begin each course by describing the philosophy and current research in the subject. Then, my first assignment helps students apply foundation concepts to their own lives, based on their own personal history.

I provide grade bearing opportunities for students to examine how they come to their own belief systems. This helps students feel a personal stake in the concepts we

---

FIGURE 1

Student Process Plan

Week Two—Assessment: Legal and Historic Context

Yes   No

____ ____   1. I was in attendance. On time?

____ ____   2. I reviewed the syllabus. Clarification:

____ ____   3. I wrote out my own expectations for the course.

____ ____   4. I reviewed the cooperative learning material.

____ ____   5. I played Intro Bingo.

____ ____   6. I took careful notes about the psychology of discipline and —

      a) Got it?

      b) I still don't understand _____.

When I 'turn over' education to students, I need to help students feel ready and competent.

are covering.

Surface structure, on the other hand, refers to attention to detail and procedural guidelines—due dates, margins, number of pages in an assignment, attendance, tardiness, presentation style. These things are important, but not inviolate.

As such, these surface tasks provide a perfect opportunity to recognize student ability and allow for personal taste. I may accept a student request to change the nature of an assignment or test, for instance, to include a more rigorous form of learning, or a group presentation rather than a paper.

If an assignment is not done well, I can offer help in retooling or reframing it. If there are a lot of misspellings, I suggest a spell checker. If there are a lot of typos, I suggest asking a peer to review initial drafts.

Surface structure helps balance the needs of the student with the demands of the discipline. It is also a way for students to see teachers as facilitators, encouraging their efforts. I enter each of these opportunities expecting to find a way to say "YES!"

When I begin to get my roles confused, I think about driving a car. As long as I am in the driver's seat, I have control. It also means that others in the car may not focus on where we go. In fact, I feel uncomfortable if there are signs that others are second guessing my driving, though I feel even worse if they seem to resent being in the car and keep others from enjoying the trip.

If I turn the wheel over to another driver, I find myself hyper-alert at first, and then I begin to relax. If I turn the car over to an inexperienced driver and constantly guide, suggest, flinch, even squeal disapproval, soon, the person driving is so unnerved and unhappy that he or she will refuse to drive, get angry, or only drive when I am not in the car.

When I "turn over" education to students, I need to help students feel ready and competent, and then relax and differentiate between when I am driving and when I am a companion on the journey.

Initially I went back and forth between honoring individual need and group good, teacher need and the demands of content. I soon saw that teaching and learning could work as a continuum rather than an on-and-off switch. Conceptualizing ideas as continuous, as well as systemic, led to the idea of balance.

Working for this sort of balance highlighted the necessity of infusing self-understanding and second-person perspective[3] as a formalized part of instruction.

We literally changed the way

Many students will need help in initial efforts to work in community since this is likely to be an emerging skill.

we spoke to each other and how we approached ideas and issues once we started thinking about the views of others. We resolved conflicts more easily once we thought in terms of sliding from one option to another until each person felt comfortable with the resolution.

As students better understood multiple positions and the needs of fellow students, the idea of saying "YES" moved from my agenda to the operational vocabulary of the students. The need to get along, to attain a sense of unity, gave impetus to community.

Once I realized how important and powerful process and relationship skills were in transforming learning to a mutually shared endeavor, I hunted for ways to make these skills a part of the class, without sacrificing the content of the course.

I tried using the first week of class to teach community, but found little benefit from that. Group cohesion is developmental,[4] so time spent at the first of the class may initiate a strong coalition, but seldom facilitates later group stages or growth. To be effective, group work needs to be infused with course content and be ongoing.

This led to the ABCs of group work. Each lesson has two pages; the first gives the basics of a community building topic, while the second page supplies hands-on community building activities.

Students can select skills that finetune and personalize group experiences, contributing to the individualization and democratization of process building.

Group work is monitored through individual or group logs, while occasional classes include time for group work so I can encourage commitment, help with focus, or facilitate resolution of interpersonal issues.

This is critical during the developmental time of "storming"[5] when student participation is most likely to be conflicted. It is vital to give group work a place in the syllabus, providing continuity and time for projects.

Many students will need help in initial efforts to work in community, since this is likely to be a new or emerging skill. Proper attention to structure and dynamics will facilitate progress.

After discussing group development and providing tools and activities, I gave students time to work. As I circulated in the class, I overheard one student say, "All the teachers tell us to work in groups, but this is the first time anybody showed me how."

I changed my syllabus to mastery grading rather than a competitive model. Objectives are tied to accreditation or certification. As-

signments provide opportunites to hone and advance competency of skills. I write a rubric for each graded task and include it with the assignment.

In order to pass the class, students must turn in every assignment and show competency in using the material. In the syllabus. I note that failure to hand in even one assignment will result in failure. But I do offer to negotiate any assignment and help students find a more personally comfortable way to show mastery.

Many assignments are guided practice and are combined with community building. Final exams are typically extensions of material into practical exercises. For example, my final in classroom management consists of developing a personal discipline plan and participating in mock job interviews.

At times I use multiple choice tests and suggest students do them open book, use study groups, or even bring up questions in class. The test scores tells students and me how we are doing. If students want to challenge an answer, they can do so in writing or in class, and if they justify, or even add an answer that they think is a better solution than those offered, they can get double points for the question, one for understanding and one for extending the thinking and synthesizing the course content.

I provide opportunities to gain credit for process work. Figure 2 shows a group evaluation that members use to monitor themselves and then turn in as part of their portfolio.

Structure, balance, and respect are critical components in building the type of student/teacher relationship that facilitates a democratic learning environment. Moving a sense of ownership from teacher to community is essential and the evolution is based on relationships.

Boundary issues emerged as an

FIGURE 2

Group Snapshot

Mark the Following: **Did this during group today.**
                 + Will do this in future sessions.

___Communicated	___Good partner	____Cooperative	___Pride in work
___Followed rules	___Listened well	____Careful	___Did favors
___Supportive	___Stewardship	____Reflective listening	___Team member
___Empathic	___Helpful	____Self control	___Motivated
___High morale	___Sharing	____Creative	___True to self
___Expressive	___Worked hard	____Respectful	___Gave a little extra
___Orderly	___Friendly	____Honest	___Encouraging
___Shared self	___Persevered	____On time	___Kind

On task _____ % of time)   /   Did fair share of work _____ %   /   Trusted _____ %

My own experience as a counselor and parent teaches me that extending hospitality helps build relationship.

early part of this process for me. These include my knowing how much to say, telling personalized stories to emphasize points, but not divulging "too much information;" being able to be wrong, to apologize, to give and thus receive rather than demand respect.

In as many ways as possible, I affirm that I trust the students. I often find myself saying, "I believe you, just put your initials in the grade book." "Thanks for letting me know about your concerns. It matters a lot to me that you trust me with your insights." "I feel that it is my job to trust you, and it is yours to be worthy of the trust."

Getting down off the pedestal is confusing on both sides. If a bond, a sense of trust and safety, is built, students can accept my humanity, my weaknesses and idiosyncrasies.

If I do not extend that safety net to them, I don't provide room for my own error. If they believe I trust them, accept and understand their limitations, and allow them room to err and grow, I have it for myself.

If I am unbending, callous to their concerns and lack of perfection, I have no wiggle room. Again it is balancing my needs and their needs. I explain my role as initial guardian of content and good conduct and invite all to participate.

My own experience as a counselor and parent teaches me that extending hospitality also helps build relationship. I frequently bring candy or snacks to class, or insert minor celebrations into our time together. These activities confirm the students' sense that my time with them is more than just a job and models relationship as a critical piece of our time together.

In this approach, taking attendance means "we miss you and we are cheated of your presence," rather than the idea that coming to class is a solitary, uncomplicated individual choice.

Of course, each class needs time for community building and sharing the richness of student input. This was problematic at first. One or two students tended to dominate, and this can be deadly. You don't build democracy if the teacher becoming a guide creates a vacuum that is filled by a student tyrant.

I address this through appealing to students to maintain balance and value other perspectives. I then provide structures that enhance communications.

I may pair students to discuss a question. "Turn to a neighbor and share one instance of . . ." I may give six-minute interludes to groups of four: a) write a one minute answer; b) go around the group and share each answer; c) summarize salient points.

I gained insight at how resilient most students are and at the sacrifices they make to gain an education.

If we have a whole group discussion, I may pass out two pennies to all participants. Each person gives two responses during the discussion and when someone's "two cents worth" is gone, that individual can't comment again until everyone has had a chance.

If some students need to comment after every response, I give them a pad of sticky notes and a time we can discuss their opinions and perspectives. I also have most of the readings and activities on the Internet, so students can work online part of the time if they need to.

This kind of teaching has definite pros and cons. It is costly in terms of energy, more time intensive and energy consuming. It also isn't usually second nature to most professors. Few teachers model these practices, and few of my current colleagues want to be part of this journey or discuss the work.

One highly respected friend told me: "You're crazy to be doing this! No teacher should ever give up power, and the worst of it is you're ruining things for the rest of us."

In the gains and losses column, I lost the sense of certainty that multiple choice tests provide. I no longer knew that all students scored at a certain level on my exams. This stopped upsetting me when I revisited my own school experiences, for, in honesty, I seldom felt tests or grades reflected my knowledge or level of effort.[6]

Student testimonials proclaimed they never worked as hard in any class before. The pride of ownership moved them from "X" theory workers to "Y" theory workers[7] as they worked for themselves, not just for grades or GPA's.

I no longer try to control students or punish them. Sometimes students miss class. I can't force them to come. I conducted a poll one semester and found that students with attendance problems in my class were often failing other classes. I found I was taking their life problems personally and doubting the value of my program based on limited information. I gained insight, a new respect for how difficult student lives could be, and a renewed sense of delight at how resilient most students really are and at the sacrifices they make to gain an education.

I lost control in some areas by empowering students. For instance, by sharing surface structure, I lose the ability to lower grades based on spelling errors, tardiness, or missed due dates. In turn, I gained the opportunity to model concern and respect.

I lost some of my anonymity. Sometimes students call me at home. In fact, last week I got a call from a former student. She's a

teacher now and wanted to let me know that the ideas she'd taken from my class were crucial to her success. The school where she teaches, she said, is working to adopt my/her discipline ideas.

I received a request from a student who needs help with citizenship papers. I get guest speaking invitations in the districts where students now teach. I've received holiday letters from students and even from students' parents.

The process isn't over, but rather ongoing. After 11 years, I'm still tinkering with the syllabus, envisioning better ways to embed deep structure so students feel safer, sooner—still looking for the best way to explain the value of taking responsibility for learning.

As a teacher educator, I feel an added weight of responsibility. My students cannot become superb teachers without understanding the nuances of great teaching. I need to be clear about them myself and help these future educators recognize and replicate these conditions in their own teaching. I can only hope to bring democratic teaching to future students by modeling it myself. ■

Endnotes

[1] Dorris, M.J. The Broken Cord.

[2] Coopersmith 1967.

[3] This is a term from ego development research. It signifies having the ability to move outside the self and recognize the perspectives and need of others.

[4] LaCoursiere, 1980; Luft, 1984.

[5] Johnson and Johnson, 1994.

[6] I graduated summa cum laude.

[7] McGregor 1976. His research documented a higher productivity when employees had a "Y" boss who trusted them rather than an "X" boss who was authoritarian.

References

Brophy, J.E. 1987. Synthesis of Research on Strategies for Motivating Students to Learn. Educational Leadership 44, (1987): 40-48.

Bruner, J.S. The Process of Education. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Bruner, J.S. Acts of Meaning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Coopersmith, S. The Antecedents of Self Esteem. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1967.

Cruickshank, D.R. "Applying Research on Teacher Clarity." Educational Leadership 36, no. 2, (1985): 44-48.

Freire, P. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Continuum, 1988.

Johnson, D.W. an R.T. Johnson. Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive and Individualistic Learning. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994.

LaCoursiere, R.B. The Life Cycle of Groups: Group Developmental Stage Theory. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980.

Luft, J. Group Processes: An Introduction to Group Dynamics (3rd ed.). Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1984.

McGregor, D. The Professional Manager. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.

Maslow, H. The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. New York: Viking Press, 1971

Rogers, C.R. Freedom to Learn. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1969.

Schon, D. Educating the Reflective Practitioner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.

Sizer, T. R. Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

Tharp, R. G. and R. Gallimore. Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, Learning and Schooling in Social Context. New York: University of Cambridge, 1993.

Walberg, H. J. "Productive Teaching and Instruction: Assessing the Knowledge Base." Phi Delta Kappan 71, no. 6, (1990): 470-478.