Student Centered Learning – An Approach to Fostering Democracy in Schools

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Abstract

After an opening anecdote about a well-functioning small group of students, the article discusses concepts related to democracy. Next, the article defines student centered learning (SCL) and some SCL elements, linking these elements to concepts in democracy. The following section offers various means of implementing SCL. Subsequently, the article looks at issues raised about the use of SCL. To conclude the article, the authors maintain that SCL not only promotes learning but that SCL also fosters democracy.

Introduction

A group of four grade 10 students sit around a table actively discussing their group's writing project. One student begins by taking 30 seconds to explain what confuses her about feedback a groupmate gave her on a draft of her section of the group's project. The other students ask basic level questions prompting her to examine her assumptions and procedures so far. Once they all understand what she had in mind and why she wrote in that way, they then move on to asking increasingly challenging questions which lead her to rethinking her approach and ultimately finding a way to rewrite the draft. Her team members then ask her to summarize the group's discussion and come up with a statement which will clarify the points of confusion so what the group has learned can be generalized to future individual and group writing projects.

The tone throughout is respectful and focused on bringing the whole group along to arrive at a solution, rather than calling out answers or criticizing others' ideas and writing. The discussion is monitored by the teacher, but her role is restricted to encouraging students to follow the discussion protocol. The teacher touches base with the group twice during the 15 minute discussion to monitor how well they are working as a group and to keep them on schedule.

How Democracy Links to Student Centered Learning

This scenario is a powerful example of how student centered learning and concepts of democracy work hand in hand to create a classroom focused on student success.

Most educators and most educational institutions, regardless of the age of their students or where they are located, espouse the belief that education should promote democracy. Of course, as with most abstract concepts, democracy can be defined in different ways (Munck, 2016), and many diverse practices have been labelled as democratic. This article looks at some of the ways education might promote democracy and proposes that student centered learning (SCL) methodologies foster democratic attitudes and skills; whereas teacher centered learning (TCL) methodologies may inhibit such attitudes and skills.

The article begins by briefly elaborating on concepts related to democracy. The next part of the article explains SCL and selected SCL elements and discusses how these elements link with concepts in democracy. The third section of the article suggests a few means by which educators might implement these elements of SCL. The article's fourth section examines concerns raised about the use of SCL practices. In the conclusion to the article, the authors return to the links between SCL and democracy, arguing that SCL should be implemented not only to promote learning, but also to promote democracy.

What Is Democracy?

Definitions of democracy vary, with many focusing on the characteristics of democratic governments. A more general definition, from the Cambridge Advanced Learners' Diction-ary (2016), states that democracy is "the belief in freedom and equality between people." Another general definition of demo-cracy, from the Collins English Dictionary (2016), emphasizes the social and political nature of the term: "the practice or spirit of social equality. Table 1 presents seven characteristics of democracy and what it looks like when democracy is present or absent in a classroom.

Table 1.
Comparison of the Presence or Absence of Democracy in the Classroom

Characteristic	What it Means	When It's Present	When It's Absent
1. Decision Making 2. (Who decides?)	Shared responsibility as appropriate for making decisions in the classroom. Negotiating who controls the flow of learning.	Everyone can take part in decision making	Top down decision making
Knowledge Generation	Understanding that both teachers and learners have a role in building the knowledge that society and individuals need?	Teachers join with students to build knowledge	All learning comes from the teacher and textbooks
Understanding	Shared understanding of the decisions made and the policies implemented	Everyone needs to understand what is done and why	Only those at the top need to understand what is done and why. Others just blindly follow orders. understands the decisions made and the policies implemented; no one is blindly following orders
Evaluation	Shared responsibility for determining what happens in the classroom and whether and which changes are needed.	Everyone takes part in evaluation	Those at the top evaluate themselves and others
Embracing Diversity	Respect for diversity in its many forms, from diversity of opinions to diversity of religion and sexual preference, etc.	Diversity is encouraged and citizens are enriched by interaction with others	Conformity is encouraged, differences of opinion, approach and lifestyle are not tolerated
Cooperation	Encouragement of cooperation and the development of a sense of community	Cooperation is encouraged	People with less power discouraged from cooperating with one another
Motivation	Encouragement of intrinsic motivation by which people strive to meet goals that they set individually or collectively	Scope exists for people to pursue their own interests within the overall needs of society	Rewards and punishments are the main motivators

What Is Student Centered Learning?

SCL is an approach to learning and teaching which encourages students to be more active in and to take more control of their own learning (Hannafin, 2012; Weimer, 2013). Modern theory and research on how people

learn (Gardner, 2008) suggests that SCL more closely reflects human learning processes than TCL in which teachers are the most active people in the classroom, and students are largely passive. Other frequently cited characteristics of SCL include student-student collaboration, student reflection on their learning processes, and explicit instruction in the learning and thinking skills students will need to effectively manage their learning in the present and future.

Within the classroom, there are seven key elements of student engagement which lead to integration of democratic principles into learning and instruction. Each of these elements suggests a particular instructional approach as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2.
Links between characteristics of democracy and student centered learning

Key Elements of Democratic Societies	Evidence of Democracy in Society	Student Centered Learning (SCL) Elements
1. Decision Making	Everyone takes part in decision making	SCL Element: Learner Autonomy
2. Knowledge Generation	Those in positions of authority join with those they serve to build skills and knowledge	SCL : Teachers as Co-Learners
3. Understanding	Everyone understands what is being done and why	SCL Element: Focus on Meaning
4. Evaluation	Everyone takes part in determining the efficacy of the work of improving society	SCL Element: Alternative Assessment
5. Embracing Diversity	Diversity is encouraged with the understanding that it improves society for everyone	SCL Elements: Learning Climate and Thinking Skills
6. Cooperation	Cooperation is encouraged so that everyone contributes according to their capablity	SCL Element: Student-Student Interaction
7. Motivation	Opportunities exist for people to pursue their own interests within the overall needs of society	SCL Element: Motivation

Element of Democracy: Decision Making

An essential characteristic of democracy in the classroom is that decision making is shared. In SCL, the sharing of power manifests itself in the element of learner autonomy, which means that students have some control of how and what they learn (Benson, 2013). However, autonomy does not mean individualism; students are not totally on their own to decide what and how to learn. Through meaningful student-student interact-ion, students learn more in community with peers and others than they would just getting teacher directed instruction. As in a political democracy, the democratic classroom has formal systems of leadership and account-ability. The role of the teacher continues to be to guide and structure the learning experience. In SCL, this is done with an eye toward increased student participation and a give and take among students and teachers.

SCL Element – Learner Autonomy

In a democratic classroom, not only is learning a shared experience, students have a lot of autonomy in how they approach learning. Within a structure set by the teacher, they have choices and opportunities to reflect on the consequences of their choices. An example of students having choices could be students in groups of 2, 3, or 4 choosing the topic on which they will do a project or smaller task and also choosing how they will gather information for the task. Of course, as with other elements of SCL, student choices can be guided by teachers who act as facilitators. A

way to encourage reflection involves students in keeping journals in which individually and/or in groups, they consider what is going well in their learning and how they might improve moving ahead. These reflections aid individual students, in collaboration with teachers and peers, in shaping their future learning.

Element of Democracy: Knowledge Generation

In democratic classrooms, no one has a monopoly on creating and dispensing knowledge. In SCL, this concept connects with the element of teachers as co-learners, i.e., teachers are not all knowing; they come to class with unanswered questions of their own and model open minded learning and the joy of curiosity. Rather than relying totally on display questions (to which the teacher knows the answer and the students are asked to give the pre-determined right answer), the teachers mix it up with referential questions which build on the classroom discussion and present the opportunity for both students and teachers to learn something new. (Richards and Schmidt, 2009)

SCL Element – Teachers as Co-Learners

Two ways for teachers to implement the SCL element of teachers as co-learners are for teachers to share with students about the teachers' own failures and for teachers to let students see how the teachers go about the process of learning. An example of sharing about teachers' failures was the list of failures in his career that a professor put together and shared with his students (Jaschik, 2016). These failures included jobs for which he had unsuccessfully applied and times when his manuscripts were rejected by publications. Ways to let students see teachers learning include teachers sharing what they wanted to learn, why they wanted

to learn it, how they went about their learning, and what they will learn next.

Element of Democracy: Understanding

It is clear that students are learning the skills of democracy when everyone in the class, students and teachers, understand what is happening and why. The class is then focussed on making meaning, making sense of the material, such that real world skills and knowledge are being built. In other words, students do not do activities just because the teacher told them to do the activities; students need to understand both the meaning of the material they are studying and how the curriculum overall brings meaning to their lives, even if indirectly.

SCL Element – Focus on Meaning

The SCL element of focus on meaning can be promoted in many ways. For instance, teachers can begin with teachers explaining their objectives for the class and asking for student input. At the end of the class, students can individually and collectively consider the extent to which the objectives were achieved. A second way to empower students to understand what their class is doing is to involve students in shaping the class by such means as the class using materials brought or suggested by students, e.g., a song, connecting what is studied to students lives beyond the classroom, e.g., doing calculations based on shopping students' families do, and linking class activities to students' purposes, e.g., students writing letters to governments, organisations, and individuals suggesting and describing their view of a better society and making concrete suggestions for improvements.

Element of Democracy: Evaluation

A strong sign of the presence of democracy in schools is seen when students share the responsibility for evaluating their

learning and understanding the consequences – how that learning will play out in the broader society. The use of alternative assessments in the classroom – going beyond everyone taking the same paper and pencil test regardless of what is being studied and how - pairs with this. Whereas in TCL, teachers are often the only evaluators, determining what will be assessed and how, SCL involves students in assessing themselves and peers. Students partner with the teacher to identify key learning targets and outcomes and how they can demonstrate mastery or how they can identify areas in which they need more work. This not only gives the teacher a much richer view of what is going on in the students' minds, it also builds the students' ability to self monitor and manage their own learning, skills which transfer directly to being an independent citizen of a democratic society.

SCL Element – Alternative Assessment

SCL's alternative assessment element contrasts with assessment in TCL, in which assessments are set by and evaluated by teachers or outside bodies, such as companies that create standardised tests. SCL seeks to broaden assessment practices. First, students can create assessment tasks. For instance, the technique Exchange A Question (Author, 2002) begins with students writing a question and an answer for the own question. Teachers advise students on the types of questions they might want to ask, e.g., questions which require explanations. Next, students exchange questions with a partner, answer their partner's question and then compare answers. A second means of implementing alternative assessment, even when assessment tasks are designed by teachers, invites students to play a role in assessing peers' response. This assessment can be done using scoring rubrics designed by the class with input from teachers.

Element of Democracy: Embracing Diversity

A truly democratic society cannot function without a high level of respect for diversity of ideas, beliefs, cultural practices, and approaches to life. All of this diversity is present in most classrooms as well, although respect for diversity may be lacking. The ability to enrich one's life through embracing diversity is a critical learning skill when students interact with peers who have different backgrounds. Furthermore, when students work on less structured tasks that require higher order thinking (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 2014), they need to learn how to deal with uncertainty, ambiguity, and sometimes temporary failure.

In educational settings, diversity has many meanings, including teaching in a variety of ways to match the varied intelligence profiles of students, using questions to promote thinking as well as display knowledge, and structuring tasks to have multiple possible valid responses. This approach to learning in the classroom helps students appreciate the advantages of living in a diverse society and engaging with people different from themselves in a wide variety of ways.

SCL Elements – Learning Climate and Thinking Skills

The various elements of SCL link to each other in many ways. For instance, thinking skills and learning climate link, as can be seen when students use thinking skills to explore thought provoking (referential) questions or tasks which require students to go beyond the information given (Bruner, 1973), compared to questions or tasks which merely require

identification and repetition of previously presented information (display questions). Obviously, attempting to answer thinking questions poses more risk of being wrong. This highlights the need for a supportive learning climate, a climate in which students are willing to take chances.

One way for teachers to promote a learning climate that encourages risk taking is for the teachers themselves to admit when they do not know something or to recount times when they or various other experts were wrong. Teachers can help students develop their adversity quotients (Siphai, 2015), i.e., their ability to use failure as a learning experience so that students feel, "When life gives us lemons, we should make lemonade." When we can foster a supportive learning climate, we do not need to quickly intervene when students, working alone or in groups, face adversity dealing with thinking questions.

Element of Democracy: Cooperation

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of democracy in action, cooperation among the students, forms a key way that students learn to exercise their power as decision makers. Students have power in numbers – their learning comes from each other, not just the teacher. Collectively, they build their learning skills and strategies by interacting with peers, and develop the power to influence their learning by making their collective voices heard in collaboration with the teacher.

SCL Element – Student-Student Interaction

Group activities (groups can be as small as two members) play a vital role in SCL. Thus, the SCL element of student-student interaction deserves particular attention. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, many students do not display the attitudes and skills necessary to cooperate well with others. Two ways to address this lack are, first, to make initial group tasks relatively easy ones so that students can begin to feel comfortable with group mates and confident in the ability of their collective efforts. Second, group tasks should often be of such a nature that they cannot be done alone. An example is a task in which each group member has unique information, and the group cannot succeed unless that information is shared with the other group member(s).

Element of Democracy: Motivation

In totally teacher centered classrooms, teachers usually rely on extrinsic motivation ("You need to learn this because it will be on the test") to get students to engage in learning. In contrast, in democratic classrooms, the teacher fosters intrinsic motivation in which students can see how the work they are doing will lead, even if indirectly, to building the knowledge and skills they need to pursue their dreams in concert with the overall needs of society. Intrinsic motivation is a "must have" of SCL. Rogers (1983, pp. 18-19) captured the spirit of intrinsically motivated learning in this definition of learning (emphasis in original):

I want to talk about <u>learning</u>. But <u>not</u> the lifeless, sterile, futile, quickly forgotten stuff that is crammed in to the mind of the poor helpless individual tied into his seat by iron-clad bonds of conformity! I am talking about LEARNING – the insatiable curiosity that drives the adolescent boy to absorb every-thing he can see or hear or read about [cars].

SCL Element – Motivation

The SCL element of motivation plays an essential role in education (Robichaud, 2013). One strategy for increasing motivation is to link learning with the needs of society (Dewey, 1938). We hope that

students will want to learn not primarily to help themselves, e.g., by being able to find a good paying job, but that students will also see learning as a means of benefiting society. Students, individually and collectively, can contribute to society's ability and willingness to overcome the problems confronting us and the other beings with whom we share Planet Earth. For instance, students can choose an NGO and see how they might contribute to its goals, e.g., helping ease the plighted of factory farmed animals. Such a path towards motivation embraces what Seligman (2016) called a "meaningful life."

Concerns about Building Democracy through Student Centered Learning

While many people would agree that working towards both democracy and SCL are ideal, many of these same people believe achieving democracy and SCL in a classroom setting to be unrealistic, at least in any pure form. The objections we have heard most often are that democracy is not an appropriate goal for classroom learning outside of the social studies curriculum, and that even if it were, SCL is not an effective means of building democratic skills and concepts because students, even university students and adult education students, much less primary and secondary students, lack the knowledge and disposition necessary to manage their own learning. This criticism is not without validity. For instance, do students have the knowledge needed to make decisions about why and how to study or to evaluate the quality of the work they do? Are students, especially lower performing students, capable of developing and deploying the complex thinking skills needed to not only develop the concepts of democracy but also to put them to action in their lives? Without extrinsic motivators will students study? Can students successfully interact with peers, especially peers different from themselves, or will group activities degenerate into the chaos depicted in the novel *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), in which a group of preadolescent boys were stranded on a deserted island and soon descended into barbarism? Does society, including family life and the students' world outside of school, such as sports, entertainment, and just socializing with their friends, prepare students for SCL or reinforce dependence on teacher centered learning?

As a result of these concerns raised about SCL, many educators have concluded that decisions about what happens in the classroom are best left to teachers and other education professionals who, these stakeholders believe, are much better prepared to make such judgements. However, clearly a middle ground exists between pure forms of either TCL or SCL. Supporters of SCL, including the authors of this article, may turn to Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), which forms part of a larger theory of social constructivism in which people construct understandings together in communities, often with more knowledgeable members of the community, such as teachers, guiding the less knowledgeable members of a learning community. From this perspective, the teacher becomes the more knowledgeable "guide on the side," rather than the omniscient "sage on the stage" who controls all aspects of learning. The sage on the stage approach is less likely to lead to students internalizing democratic principles which will generalize to their development as citizens. Similar to the scaffolding that

supports a building as it is being constructed and is gradually removed until finally the building stands on its own, through gradual implementation of SCL, the teacher and students begin to function as self-directed members of their classroom and other communities of learners.

Perhaps most students are not currently ready to be fully immersed in SCL. However, a key aspect of a teacher's task involves moving students towards greater readiness for independent learning, i.e., keeping our eyes on the prize, on the goal of preparing students, teachers, and other education stakeholders for increasingly greater student centeredness. In the long run, from the perspective of fostering democracy in our broader society, this is more important than preparing students for exams, especially given the ever changing nature of society and knowledge.

Conclusion

Neither building democracy in the class-room nor SCL are easy to put into practice. Both require learners and educators who are empowered to take greater responsibility and thereby become more effective citizens in collaborative learning communities and in society as a whole. Fortunately, great rewards flow from taking on that responsibility, for countries with responsible citizens and educational institutions with responsible students offer the promise of great advances toward creating a more democratic society for everyone.

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