Negotiating the Democratic Classroom

Scipio A. J. Colin III, Thomas W. Heaney

Much of what passes for adult education involves routine maintenance of reality in that the assumptions and objectives underlying many courses exist against the background of a world that is silently taken-for-granted...[and is] implicitly ideological in [its] maintenance of the institutionalized reality.

D. O'Sullivan (1991, p. 224)

Making explicit the political dimensions of a graduate classroom can be a daunting and anxiety-producing task. It is daunting in that academic hierarchy and professorial authority appear to be unassailably permanent features of the university, impervious to political influence. It is anxiety producing in that any political gaze risks laying bare the contractions of an adult education practice within higher education, a practice that frequently—in inevitably, it would seem—ignores the democratic ideals of the field.

Democracy and the University

Is democracy possible in the context of higher education? We argue that is, recognizing that democracies always exist in the midst of contradictor and hegemonic institutions and thus are not totalizing structures. Th options for democratic decision making and action have always bee: hedged by external constraints. Democracy, however conceived, is alway circumscribed, limited by borders within which shared decision making an self-governance occur. In any democracy, some areas of concern are kept o the agenda for public discourse, and others are imposed by more powerfi
groups outside the borders. Some of these powerful outsider groups are also thought to be democracies.

Because the practice of democracy is always circumscribed within regimes of power, democracy requires constant vigilance. Hence, the challenge to create a participatory practice within the higher education classroom inevitably involves pushing the borders, anticipating and countering resistance. It is in engagement with this struggle that genuine participation and democracy are attained. In our efforts to construct a doctoral program around democratic practice, we frequently reflect on obstacles encountered rather than become bogged down in frustration and outrage. In hindsight, these obstacles we encountered prove to be the same as those encountered by any other group attempting to live democratically.

Inventing a Democratic Practice

We do not assume that everyone shares our understanding of what constitutes a democratic practice. For many, democracy means majority rule, a practice that by implication excludes minorities. Although some would argue that adult educators are inclusionary (after all, this ideal is embedded in our mission), both demographics and curricula clearly indicate that the political and participatory reality of our field contradicts inclusivity. Neither our knowledge base nor our academic environments reflect the racial or gender diversity of the larger society. Embedded in our literature is the principle of intellectual majority rule—that in truth and practice, we do not view all ideas, concepts, and theories as intellectual equals. Our view is more in line with Webster's (1991) definition of democracy as “the absence of hereditary arbitrary class distinctions or privileges” (p. 338).

In our view, however, democracy in education can occur only within a teaching-learning environment that provides opportunities for the articulation and analysis of multiple sociocultural experiences. Democratic practice takes us beyond cultural provincialism by confronting issues of intellectual imperialism and conceptual colonialism. Such a practice includes often excluded racial and gender groups in the discourse and environment of the classroom.

Regarding the issues of racial exclusion, specifically the Africentric paradigm, Colin (1994) argues that “our curriculum must incorporate knowledge that comes from outside the Eurocentric dominant cultural and ideological framework. By including this knowledge base (Africentrism), we make space for those current and potential research scholars who possess such knowledge and who have an Africentric perspective” (p. 59).

Hardings' (1996) argument regarding gender exclusion is that “women's ways of knowing show how legitimating and exploring diversely socially situated knowledges can expand human knowledge while also advancing recognition of the richness and diversity of human cultural traditions. With such a culturally respectful epistemological program, advancing knowledge can be more firmly linked to advancing democratic social relations” (pp. 448–449).

We believe that democratic educational practice must by its nature and design confront intellectual censorship and challenge the false and ethnocentric universals of concepts, ideas, and theories. This position is clearly reflected in both what we teach—Africentric pedagogy, womanist consciousness, critical theory, and critical feminist pedagogy—and in who teaches, as reflected in the racial and gender composition of our faculty. Guy (1999) conceptualizes this approach as “cultural democracy,” which “refers to the goal of living in a society in which multiplicity of cultures not only coexists but also thrives. From this perspective, multicultural norms and practices must be rejected in favor of a restructuring of cultural and social processes that are broadly inclusive. For adult educators this requires an examination of educational practices to make them culturally relevant to the needs and cultural backgrounds of learners” (pp. 13–14).

The Basis of Student Power

At its root, the development of a democratic practice is about balancing and negotiating power among groups that embody diverse cultural and gendered norms. The power and privilege associated with a Eurocentric, professorial class in a postsecondary classroom cannot be dismissed by a mere exercise of will or sublimated in an excess of democratic fervor. The inequities of race, gender, and class are deeply embedded in the institutional claims and functions of the university. It is the university's mission not only to disseminate knowledge but also to legitimize those who acquire it and fail those who have not met dominant norms. The power to name what it is that constitutes knowledge and to stand in judgment over those who seek to attain it is the ground and substance of professorial privilege.

While academic position and institutional authority vest faculty with day-to-day control over curriculum and the power of grading, the basis of student power is less clear. As with most other communities on the margins, the strength of students lies not in institutions or wealth but in their numbers. Once students begin to speak with one voice, their power is manifest.

In cohort-based learning, ongoing, long-term relationships develop among peers. The interests of learners, forged with the strength of numbers, demand that education be undertaken by and with students, not to them. Shor (1996) described this as the “democratic disturbance of the teacher-centered classroom” (p. 148). Individualized students, vulnerable in the face of faculty power, are often fearful of speaking critically or providing honest feedback. Students who find common cause and a forum for expressing their concerns are much more likely to challenge oppressive and dysfunctional classroom practices.
Democracy and Collaboration

In “Democracy and the Friendship Pattern,” Lindeman wrote:

The three slogans of the French Revolution, from which event so many of the values of American Democracy were derived, were Liberty, Equality and Fraternity... Without equality, liberty becomes a form of dissociation. And without fraternity, equality is no more than a cold mechanical achievement. The essence of fraternity is friendship, and friendship can only develop among persons who see each other face-to-face, who exchange their common beliefs and their divergences, who share experiences [cited in Brookfield, 1987, p. 152].

In our practice, a cohort-based doctoral program in adult education, students and faculty share an intensive residential experience for two weeks each summer. During this institute, students are challenged to devise their own model of democracy—a structure by which they can identify the concerns of their peers, develop strategies for the resolution of these concerns, and subsequently negotiate these solutions with faculty. Students meet without faculty present until their concerns and strategies have been identified in order to avoid front-loading student decision making with professorial opinions.

Once students have agreed on a structure of governance, all student concerns, except for personal matters not affecting the cohort, are brought first to their governing body. Faculty no longer need to respond to suggestions of individuals who seek changes in the curriculum or in classroom procedures. Once changes are sought by the governance group, however, these suggestions demand careful consideration and action by faculty. Student governance provides ongoing formative evaluation and allows adjustments to emerging needs of learners. Governance also provides the experiential content for discussions of democracy, a core concept in our conceptualization of an adult education practice.

Democracy at the Core of Adult Education

Eduard Lindeman was one of the first to identify the emerging field of adult education in his seminal work, The Meaning of Adult Education (1989), first published in 1926. His visionary reflections on adult education were what many would identify as the self-conscious beginnings of adult education history in the United States. As Heaney (1996) noted:

Grounded in the progressive and pragmatic tradition and building on the work of his colleague and friend, John Dewey, Lindeman observed the interdependence of an informed public and democracy—a relationship at the core of Dewey’s philosophy of education—and expanded Dewey’s notions about school-based edu-

cation for democratic participation to adults who throughout their lives struggled to participate in social and economic decisions affecting them [pp. 4–5].

For Lindeman, what distinguished adult education from other forms of education was the fact that its purpose is social and that it is integral to the democratic struggle (Brookfield, 1984). Adult education is an essential component of a democratic society. Its absence leaves decisions in the hands of an educated elite, promotes a cult of experts, and erodes democratic social order. Such a view reflected the spirit of the times, the spirit of possibility and confidence that inspired both grassroots learning and action exemplified in labor colleges, town hall meetings, the Chautauqua, and the Highlander Folk School.

Through various publications, we have articulated as a primary goal of our doctoral program the emergence of our graduates as change agents, committed to facilitating a shift in power within the context of their respective practices—a shift that will reconfigure societal relationships and result in a significant enhancement of the quality of life for those whom they serve.

Through our research agendas and teachings, we encourage the identification of complex relationships between and among various interest groups and analysis of the sociocultural factors of race, gender, and class. We, along with our research scholars, dissect and critique how and in what ways these factors shape and influence our perceptual patterns and subsequently our practice. Indeed, these are the salient issues that frame the critical discourse within the context of our teaching-learning environment (Colin, 1994; Heaney, 1996; Heaney and Strohschen, 2000; Tisdell, 2000).

For us, our conceptualization of what constitutes democratic practice is truly reflective of what we perceive the mission of the field to be. It is the implementation of a practice that begins with a sociocultural critique of conceptual shifts that occur as a result of critical discourse. It is a liberatory and transformative process that effects changes not only within our research scholars but also within ourselves.

It is within this framework that the doctoral program in adult education at National-Louis University was designed. In this program, the aim of adult education is conceptualized not as the acquisition of knowledge alone but as the acquisition of knowledge that strengthens the knowledge's sense of responsibility and influence over decisions that affect day-to-day life. Whether in the workplace or the community, adult learners are diminished not only by ignorance but also by powerlessness. At the core of adult education practice thus conceived is the practice of democracy—shared decision making in the face of an inequitable distribution of power.

Limits to Academic Democracy

The issue of power is widely discussed among both students and faculty. The governance process that each cohort of students has devised increasingly challenges faculty to involve learners more fully in developing the
curriculum. As faculty, we try to respond positively, but inevitably we have found it difficult at times to let go of the prerogatives and privileges of our professorial position. At times, we have cloaked ourselves in a rationale of efficiency, arguing that logistics and timeliness are better served by a planning process that involves fewer people. We have argued from our lofty position of special knowledge that the “information” on which the curriculum is based is available to students only as the curriculum unfolds in course work. How do faculty and students share this information before the course begins—indeed, before the syllabus is prepared? And so many decisions are made without benefit of student consultation. Such preemptory decisions by faculty contradict the democratic principles of our classroom and can result in conflict.

In such moments of disagreement, we readily recognize the contextually complex environment that our graduate classroom presents for democracy. In fact, we have not one but several democracies working, sometimes in tandem but occasionally at cross-purposes. Ours is at minimum a tri-cameral structure in which each body has specific areas of responsibility.

The first democracy, the student governance group, struggles to build consensus among peers who frequently have divergent interests. The second democracy, the two or three members of the faculty team teaching in a term, struggles with collegiality in melding the content of several courses. And both groups—students and faculty—struggle to create democracy in their negotiations of day-to-day practice in the classroom. The third democratic structure, the doctoral steering committee, guides the whole enterprise, assessing the curriculum and applying policies set by the department and the university.

The practice of democracy is complicated by relationships among these three bodies, each with its own interests, requiring negotiation and compromise when in conflict. A limitation, but not a barrier, to the development of democratic decision making is the special responsibility of faculty for maintaining standards and policy in the context of an academic institution. The faculty are also accountable in some imprecise way to the field of study, causing them at times to assume the role of guardian of the boundaries of the field in resolving student-faculty differences—boundaries that maintain the hegemony of dominant (Euroamerican) norms. The university exerts its own demands on both faculty and students through a separate apparatus of faculty governance. All of this gets very messy. Working through issues requires patience, perseverance, and a willingness to question without pretending we can change everything.

A Tale of Two Countries

Nowhere does the tension between democracy and “standards” become clearer than in collaborative inquiry, and specifically in relation to the doctoral dissertation. In our program, this major research project is called a critical engagement project (CEP) in order to place emphasis on the ways in which the researcher will be engaged in not merely naming but transforming the world. No one should have greater commitment to or interest in the outcome of a CEP than the research scholar who undertakes the rigors of this task. We have found that most doctoral students hold themselves to the highest of standards, requiring little exercise of overt faculty power in order to ensure that the stringent requirements of academic research are met. Our research scholars are responsible for coordinating their own CEP teams, thus equivalently chairing their own dissertation committees. Critical Engagement Project: A Manual defines that core faculty will “determine when or whether a CEP is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation” (Heaney, 2000, p. 15). Nonetheless, the manual cautions students that “while the faculty can offer support and challenge at various points, you are the primary navigator of this adventure” (p. 4).

This process in which both the research scholar and faculty have voice is another instance of a persisting question: Is democracy consistent with the negotiation of matters in which one partner in the negotiation makes the ultimate decision? For example, after all the discussion and negotiation occur, it is faculty who decide whether a student's work is complete. Similarly, who makes the ultimate decision regarding a syllabus? Students have generally asked that faculty take responsibility for planning the first few days of each term and make proposals for subsequent blocks of time to which the students could respond and negotiate changes. The development of curriculum can involve both students and faculty in a democratic process. But at issue are institutional roles, expertise, and experience.

One of the students several years ago argued that the inequitable distribution of power in the higher education classroom led unavoidably to faculty domination. He projected the image of students as citizens of one democratic country and faculty as members of another. However, the Country of Faculty is the more powerful and assumes the role of protector over the Country of Student. The Country of Faculty is able to reject norms and standards developed by the citizens of Student, because Faculty did not have anything to do with their development. He asked, “What makes this different from colonialism?”

This challenging question goes beyond the issue of voice. The argument is not merely that students’ voices must be heard, but that their voice should effect that which they name. While faculty can certainly develop the means by which the students are consulted in the syllabus-building process, responsibility for the final decision regarding such matters in the university rests with the faculty.

Learning to Be Free Democratically

From the frustrations and accomplishments of the past four years, we have learned many lessons. We agree with Manning’s (1992) observation that “a political vision of emancipation is more than a set of ambitious goals, it's the
courage to state what's wrong with our society... The real problem isn't with the politicians; it's within ourselves" (p. 248). To assist those who would challenge the assumptions, ideas, and processes that perpetuate antidemocratic practices in our graduate programs, we offer the following suggestions:

- We must first practice what we teach. This means that we should have an articulated plan to transform ourselves through ongoing learning. This begins with the acknowledgment that what we may know about something is not all there is to be known. We must relentlessly search out other intellectual paradigms and make space for competing ideas, concepts, and philosophies.
- We must be willing to consider alternative models of graduate adult education. We would argue that only the cohort model allows for the consistency of time and space needed to create an environment conducive to democratic practice. The interrelationship of mutual trust, respect, and academic democratic practice is not one that can be developed within a single semester and maintained over the duration of a program.
- We must not be afraid to critique the assumptions that influence our social and political worldview. Clearly, these assumptions are not inalterable states of being. A heightened level of social consciousness will alter our view regarding the sociopolitical implications of our practice.

References


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SCIPIO A. J. COLIN III is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education, National-Louis University, Chicago.

THOMAS W. HEANEY is an associate professor and director of the adult education doctoral program, Department of Adult and Continuing Education, National-Louis University, Chicago.
Understanding and Negotiating the Political Landscape of Adult Education

Catherine A. Hansman
Cleveland State University

Peggy A. Sissel
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

EDITORS