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Michael A. Peters

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Democratic Teacher Education Practices

Alan Ovens¹ and Shrehan Lynch²

(1)School of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

(2)Initial Teacher Education, University of East London, London, UK

Alan Ovens (Corresponding author)

Email: a.ovens@auckland.ac.nz

Shrehan Lynch

Email: slynch@uel.ac.uk

Without Abstract

A democratic pedagogy for teacher education refers to the dynamic and deliberate process of assembling a professional learning community committed to enacting democratic principles. The key principle among these is the presupposition of equality among all participants as a starting point rather than a goal to be achieved. The learning community is then enriched and shaped by the connections it makes both within the teacher education institution and beyond. The aim is to allow teacher candidates to engage with practicing teachers, school students, parents, elders of cultural groups, academics, policymakers, and other community members. In this way, a democratic pedagogy for teacher education utilizes a community's funds of knowledge, both local and distant, as an integral component of the teacher education curriculum that emerges through such interaction. It seeks to embrace diversity, participation, inquiry, connectivity, and voice as a means for teacher education.

Orienting education with democratic values is not a new idea. Stretching back more than a century, leading thinkers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey to A. S. Neill and Paulo Freire to more contemporary thinkers like bell hooks and Ira Shor have all articulated the need to create education environments where students are immersed in the values, practices, and beliefs of democratic societies and human rights. However, the rise of neoliberalism as the underlying rationale for modern educational governance and management, alongside the postmodern critique of liberal humanism as the basis for contemporary social justice, has meant traditional notions of democratic education need to be continually revised. The definition above addresses the realities of working in modern workplaces while still being coherent with the initial aspirations and ideals of earlier thinkers.

In the following discussion, we explore how democratic pedagogy has been traditionally conceived in teacher education before examining some of the contemporary issues and concerns that have made the concept more or less moribund. We then propose a set of principles that may guide a revised democratic pedagogy and conclude with some examples of how these could be enacted.

Democratic Pedagogy Traditionally Conceived in Teacher Education

“Democratic education” and “democratic pedagogy” became common terminology across educational institutions after the work of progressive educator John Dewey. For Dewey ([1944](#)), the most notable philosopher in democratic education of the nineteenth century, democracy was rooted in a humanistic notion of equity and inclusion. Within a democratic educational structure, Dewey suggested that students should experience “discipline” and “freedom.” Discipline was defined as personal and gradual exercises of power and having independent initiatives that become naturalized and practiced toward habits of thinking. Freedom was thinking in action toward lines of personal inquiry. Students would freely and intrinsically express intellectual thoughts that were spontaneous and impulsive. Therefore, meaningful growth occurred through ethical interrogation and deep levels of critical reflection. Discipline and freedom within educational structures meant that students were provided with opportunities that privileged continual communicative experiences that were individualized, student-centered, experimental/inquiry-based, socially orientated, and meaningful. The social medium was educative, and within that structure (or the unstructure of free inquiry), students would be able to question what came before and would become curious, thus intellectually free. In teacher education, democratic pedagogical approaches incorporated apprenticeship style experiences, mentor systems, research, and observations of role model educators.

Following Dewey, critical pedagogues Paulo Freire ([2000](#)) and hooks ([2014](#)) suggested more explicit democratic pedagogies to create social change for emancipation. They can be summarized into four main outcomes: (1) to be inclusive of all students despite background and provide equal opportunities, (2) to raise the critical consciousness of students toward social realities, (3) to provide relevant care to the community, and (4) for students to experience democracy in action. Democratic pedagogies included teacher educators creating environments where they were the facilitators of a problem-posing education. Through problem-posing, educators would reject knowledge transmission (the banking method) and share teaching spaces with students for knowledge-exchange, seeing students as pro-consumers of knowledge. Furthermore, teacher educators would provide transformative learning experiences for students to deconstruct knowledge through theoretical dialogue, which privileges meaningful conversation and personal growth.

Both Freire and hooks considered democratic pedagogy to have an explicit political focus that emphasized liberation. Moreover, when individuals had transformative learning experiences that raised their critical consciousness, they became enlightened and were called to a sense of agency to act upon inequitable social realities. hooks specifically rooted democratic pedagogy in feminist politics, stating that regular discourse and confrontation of student perspectives/assumptions are essential in teacher education and educators must be conscious that questioning students can be a painful and discomforting type of educational process. However, such discomfort must occur for consciousness raising. Thus, democratic pedagogy in teacher education was a place where classrooms became consciousness raising spaces, in which structures of institutions were questioned, critiqued, and rethought for traditional democratic ideals such as justice, equality, equity, and social good. Moreover, students took part in assignments that involved critical self-reflection such as creating a teaching philosophy or self-identity work, community change/policy advocacy plans, and self-selected inquiry projects typically attempting to overcome specific types of oppression.

Contemporary Issues and Limitations

As different social commentators have observed, we are currently living in “new times” that challenge how democratic pedagogy is enacted. The implications flow in several ways. Firstly, notions of what equality means when living in advanced capitalist countries have been challenged. The orthodox view has drawn from liberal humanism. In this view, society is framed hierarchically with those in positions of power positioned above and controlling access to particular social resources and opportunities for those lower down. The key issue here is the deep assumption that equality is a matter of distribution. There are those who distribute equality and those who receive it. Distribution implies passivity on the part of those who receive the distribution and hence, these individuals do not have anything to do with equality other than to be the object of it. Liberalism places most people at the receiving end of the political operation, with attention focused on issues to do with the mechanisms of distribution. The key issue here for enacting a democratic pedagogy is shifting the notion of equality from being the possession of a political hierarchy to instead being the expression of political actors. In a post-liberal sense, equality must be conceived as the starting condition of those who teach and not an aspirational outcome to be achieved.

Secondly, as Zygmunt Bauman ([2007](#)) points out, the social forms central to contemporary life no longer have a sense of permanence and certainty but are characterized by what he calls a “liquid modernity” that is more fluid, uncertain, and complex. Substance and essence are substituted by process, emergence, and influence. Social forms emerge as key ideas, people, and resources become assembled by other forces and flows. As Bauman argues, society should be seen as a network rather than a structure, constituted through a diverse and multiple connections that allow for an infinite volume of possible permutations. A central focus in this view are the concepts of connectivity and relationality, particularly in respect to understanding how pedagogy is situated within networks of power relations that simultaneously constrain and enable how teaching becomes expressed as a set of practices, spaces, knowledges, and actions. The implication here is that, in enacting a democratic pedagogy, practitioners should be conscious and reflexive about how connections, both vertical and horizontal, enable particular ways of knowing, teaching, learning, and being. The question shifts to whose knowledge counts, what funds of knowledge can we access, and what are the issues relevant to the local community?

Thirdly, and emerging as a result of the previous two, is the ascendancy of a neoliberal ideology that normalizes the logics of “free” market competition and transforms the state from a provider of public welfare to a promoter of markets and competition. Within this ascendancy, universities have become inexorably reassembled within neoliberal rationalities that see niche markets, commodification, economic rationalization, and performance metrics substantially transforming academic scholarship and research. As Webb ([2017](#)) points out, neoliberalism reforms the notions of social justice and democracy as commodities to be produced, branded, and exchanged while interpolating people as human capital valued by their productivity and employment potential. Two key implications for democratic pedagogy follow on from this point. The first is that contemporary teacher education programs do not sit outside this ideology but are constructed and perform their work within this quasi-market environment. The second is that teacher educators, as institutionalized intellectuals, are beholden to market forces in an era of accountability and are rarely as autonomous as they would desire. Overall, there is a risk that teaching oriented toward equity, access, and social justice becomes refracted through neoliberal rationalities and erodes, rather than cultivates, democratic pluralism.

A Proposal for Rethinking the Democratic Project

Given the issues outlined above, the question becomes one of how to enact a democratic pedagogy in a post-liberal world that is highly fluid, networked, and increasingly governed by neoliberalism. Our proposal is to rethink the notion of democratic pedagogy around a series of principles. These principles are not meant to be exhaustive, but they point to the possibilities for enacting or participating in democratic pedagogy for teacher education.

The starting point is to acknowledge that a democratic pedagogy is a creation of those who participate by acting together out of the presupposition of equality. As such, it is made by the commitment and dispositions of the participants rather than granted by those positions of power. In this sense, a democratic pedagogy is immanent rather than transcendent. That is, it emerges from a collective agential ontology that affirms practical reasoning for exploring what teaching could be rather than applying generalized outcomes or standards about what it must be. Its participants are committed to constructing more productive alternatives to professional learning through unfolding, refolding, and transforming the existing practices to locate different ways that one could engage in the process of professional learning and becoming a teacher.

Secondly, in acting together, participants assemble a professional learning community that is enriched and shaped by the connections it makes. Two aspects are important to this principle. The first is that connectivity is a deliberate act that involves reflexivity toward who and how the network is connected. This includes connecting vertically to ensure advocacy and voice are present in the groups that make policy, governance, and management decisions. The second is expansive, in the sense that attention is given to ensuring the network of connections is broad and extends beyond the teacher education program boundaries. Together, these two aspects emphasize the link between network connectivity and the richness and flow of learning activity that emerges within the community of learners.

Thirdly, and extending on the second principle, a democratic pedagogy is sensitive to the relationship between place and pedagogy. Humans occupy many arenas, from being part of a family, to engaging in work, to participating in cultural and civic activities. Each of these arenas is the result of a particular assemblage of people, buildings, objects, beliefs, values, etc. that transforms a space into a meaningful place. Places then become primary experiential spaces where local heritage, cultures, customs, practices, identities, relationships, languages, issues, and problems emerge as the existential reality of participating in that setting. Connecting place to pedagogy then acknowledges the powerful pedagogical influence participating in places and the assemblages that give them meaning.

Fourthly, a democratic pedagogy enacts a politics of action that builds knowledge through community engagement. This involves allowing teacher candidates to engage with practicing teachers, students, parents, elders of cultural groups, academics, policymakers, and other community members (e.g., social workers, employers). Teacher educators must value community voices and must permit these voices to have a say in reshaping what it means to learn to teach. In this way, a democratic pedagogy utilizes the funds of knowledge available within and beyond the learning community as an integral component of the teacher education curriculum.

Fifthly, and leading from principle four, if teacher education is to become more democratic, institutionalized intellectuals must confront their own subjectification within the neoliberal rationalities governing their workspaces. This involves overcoming their inclination to insist that their knowledge is the knowledge that matters most. It also involves interrupting the desire to commodify practices in order to increase their performativity against institutional metrics. Finally, it involves practicing a critical self-reflexivity to ensure core ideas and concepts central to democracy become enacted within, and lived through, the instructional practices and structures being employed.

Democratic Pedagogy as a Site for Transformative Teaching

Guided by these principles, democratic education can take a myriad of different forms, each shaped by the mix of participants in a community or educational setting. To help flesh out the above principles, we list the following four themes that help characterize a democratic pedagogy.

Redefining the Role of the Teacher Educator

Traditional pedagogical approaches would assume a teacher educator as an authoritarian figure, practicing direct methods of instruction. Redefining this role around democratic principles involves rethinking both the concept of authority and the forms of instruction used. In terms of the authority of the teacher educator, the issue is not one of somehow sharing or neutralizing the power of the teacher educator, since this is usually institutionally mandated, but *how* this authority is exercised at any moment in teacher education contexts. In other words, the focus becomes on how the teacher educator structures the teacher education context and uses their authority to enact democratic principles in doing so. The aim is to create a conceptual space for enacting a form of democracy where learners actively participate in a learning community that is richly connected and draws on the funds of knowledge and expertise in the broader community. In terms of the forms of instruction used, the teaching becomes less oriented toward transmitting knowledge and principles of “best practice.” Rather, the forms of instruction become more dialogical and reflective as teacher candidates engage with a diversity of different viewpoints, beliefs, activities, policies, and practices. Within this redefined role, teacher educators become facilitators of learning, provoking reflection on candidates’ prior beliefs through discussion, joint problem-solving, compromise, and consensus. Positive, collaborative, engaging relationships are crucial to nonhierarchical pedagogical approaches, where students see each other as co-collaborators in the field of education rather than competitors.

Rich Connections and Emergent Curriculum

As previously mentioned, knowledge construction is contested in a post-liberal world, and the knowledge required for teacher education has traditionally included subject-specific methods courses on content, lesson planning, unit plans, and assessments. Within a connected curriculum, there is fluidity of what is needed in the moment. The curriculum emerges in response to student’s needs, as it is negotiated with students. Negotiating a curriculum means that while key elements are planned in advance with students, there is flexibility for some elements to also be spontaneous based on students’ requests. Thus, student deliberation, responsibility and voice are encouraged. Within teacher education, operationally, this may mean that an organizational framework is necessary for class decisions – for example, student bodies/panels, course leaders, class elects, and class assessors, who may be elected through appropriate processes. Curriculum becomes a connected element of democratic practice because it is collaborative, flexible, fluid, inquiry-orientated, spontaneous, inclusive, needs-based and has the potential to recentralize those traditionally marginalized in education. Such an approach is truly educative because not only are students engaging in democratic

processes and taking increased responsibility for their own professional learning, but they can view the self as someone who continually needs to be worked upon within the structure of democracy as their position should constantly be in question by their class colleagues.

Personal Growth Assessment

Standardized assessments that produce measurable outputs reproduce the status quo and lack transformative potential. Assessment should be viewed as a continued conversation between the connected group of learners and the teacher educator. Thus, assessment practices such as self and peer assessment cannot be implemented from a top-down approach but must be collaboratively agreed upon and constructed as a way to promote reflection that can lead to meaningful growth; this will give assessment transformational purpose. Therefore, teacher education assessment practices should include students deciding what to develop through conversational experience-based reflections where students practice critical reflexivity. While approaches could include journaling or video narratives, ultimately, students should decide how to evidence a learning journey. In the neoliberal university where grading is often compulsory and seen as a form of academic capital, grades should be co-constructed with students based on negotiated grading policies set by the negotiated curriculum.

Community-Orientated Practicums

Alternate informal clinical experiences that are outside regular classroom spaces within the community provide spaces that allow students to understand how pedagogy is situated within networks of power relations. When future teachers learn about the sociopolitical reality of schools and communities, they can see how structures can constrain and enable teaching. Importantly, learning can occur anywhere for both students, and future teachers and democratic pedagogy should be social movement focused. Thus, future teachers can be immersed in community projects with students. Through engagement with stakeholders, teacher candidates have the opportunity to learn about community needs in order to reimagine the democratic project. Meaningful community-orientated practicums can be focused on the social, cultural, economic, and political concerns of communities. For example, reconnecting with practices that were once taken away by colonization and/or encouraging positive affiliations with personal neighborhoods. Community learning can become meaningful when future teachers begin to question power arrangements and participate in community decisions as a participatory justice-orientated citizen. Participation through networks of relations means that future teachers can be change agents. As a teacher educator, a community-orientated practicum requires organization, positive relationships with stakeholders, funding, knowledge of community needs/current projects (which can be investigated through a connected curriculum), and sustained engagement.

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