

I *An obvious goal of adult learners is to find their own voice, to be heard in rational discourse with their peers, and to gain control over the day-to-day decisions that affect their lives. This chapter asks how doctoral students can be partners with faculty in charting the direction of their academic pursuits.*

Democracy—Unleashing the Power of “We”

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A new field of study was identified as recently as the 1920s when Lindeman (1926) linked the building of democracy to the practice of adult education (Brookfield, 1984). In this endeavor, adults sought to understand their society and the world around them so that they could intelligently participate in shaping decisions that would affect their day-to-day lives and collectively improve conditions of their lifeworld. Such knowledge was distinguished from developing skills related to the workplace or to the acquisition of academic degrees. The pursuit of knowledge involved reflection on experience, our own and the experiences of others, in order to understand and better control the variables that limited our collective ability to act for the common good. The conditions for democracy rest squarely on our capacity to learn (Brookfield, 2005), and education is the fuel driving the machinery of responsible and informed action in a democratic society.

Since the naming of the field of adult education in the 1920s, adult educators have taken their practice in many divergent directions, a few of them having little to do with building democracy. While not alien to democracy, workplace training—the development of employable skills or literacy—more frequently ignores the values of collaborative and collective action, replacing them with learning for earning and individual advancement in the labor market. Increasingly, graduate study in colleges and universities has been directed to the development of a professional class and has fostered a burgeoning elite resistant to involving nonprofessionals in what are properly the professionals' decisions, or as Gouldner (1979) notes, “a class that is elitist and self-seeking and uses its special knowledge to advance its own interests and power” (p. 7). Professionalization results in the clientization of everyone who lacks professional training. The helping professionals maintain a comprehensive labeling power in democratic societies, determining who requires services and who does not—or in the case of professorial privilege, labeling what is knowledge

and what is not (Colin & Heaney, 2001). “Their badge bestows the caring authority to declare their fellow citizens ‘clients’—a class of deficient people in need” (McKnight, 1995, p. 16). This culture of deficiency is the product of what Illich (1978) called the “Disabling Professions” (p. 16).

A counter to this disempowerment can be found at the core of an adult education practice that is informed by the original ideal of enabling informed, collective, and democratic action (Horton, 1973). In such a practice, the expertise usually associated with the professions is not disparaged, but rather embraced as a resource available to all in the context of democratic interaction. The challenge is how to learn this ideal, not only in graduate programs focused on adult education, but also in graduate programs generally.

Learning Democracy

Democracy is a valued ideal in the Western world, understood in the abstract, but confused in the political practices of modern democracies. We witness the dysfunctions of the U.S. Congress and see not a strengthening of the ability to enact meaningful legislation, but a paralysis of inaction and blame. We are surrounded by conflicting ideologies and factions that fight for political space, not with an open mind in quest of understanding, but with misinformation and propaganda.

Our society offers few sites of democratic participation—few opportunities to collectively reflect, strategize, and take action. We stand inexorably in the face of power and live with the consequences of decisions others have made without consulting those of us affected by those decisions. Whether in our children’s schools, the workplace, or government agencies, our options are circumscribed. We are asked to accept the limits to our freedom as inevitable in a complex and divided world. In the absence of democratic models, we are unable to understand, much less create or participate in, collaborative decision making. The circle of control over our own lives is drawn ever more tightly around us, limited to a narrow range of personal and individual choices.

Universities are especially hierarchical and tradition-bound institutions (Baldridge, 1982). While a commitment to academic freedom and shared governance has empowered faculty in some institutions, students have generally not been similarly endowed with the right to participate in decisions that affect them in their graduate studies. Moreover, in doctoral education the personal relationships that develop between faculty advisers and individual students might belie a student’s powerlessness as a member of the student class. In some cases, as a mentor–mentee relationship morphs into a collegial one, the illusion of student-as-partner is maintained. Yet while a student might represent her individual interests to faculty, the students as peers find no opportunity to act on their interests collectively.

Foremost among the many functions of the university are the legitimization of knowledge production and the certification of knowledge acquisition. These two functions are strongly influenced by prevailing value assumptions

and belief systems of the given institution. Depending on predetermined values, agents of the university (faculty) are empowered by this legitimation and certification authority, and the university's pedagogy and structure reinforce this power. These functions are strongly influenced by experiences and issues of race, gender, and class. Given that a university exists within social structures, which are thusly influenced by the university as well, contradictions arise between the various stakeholders in this fractious environment.

Some, like Ira Shor (1996), have engaged in an unsettling exercise in democratic dreaming that brought him and his students “into power sharing, sometimes called negotiating the curriculum, shared authority, or co-governance” (p. ix). His experiment with working-class undergraduates was remarkable in the transformation of both teacher and students. But we may ask, is there room in doctoral education for learning and living by democratic ideals, and if so, how would it be accomplished? Much learning in higher education is learning by doing. For example, we read about methodologies of research, we listen to the pronouncements of faculty who reflect on their own experiences as researchers, but then, most importantly, we practice doing research—usually with small projects before tackling a dissertation or thesis. Similarly, we learn democracy by creating a venue in which we are full participants in decisions that affect us as faculty and students.

Without question there are decisions that are the responsibility of faculty. Decisions about curriculum appropriate to a particular discipline, standards of performance, or rubrics of engagement are frequently determined by institutions or accrediting bodies without consulting students. Faculties, with varying degrees of flexibility, have the responsibility to embed these standards in a syllabus. It would not compromise the ability of faculty to do so, however, if students were able collectively to recommend additions or changes to the syllabus and suggest alternative activities better suited to their needs—in a word, to negotiate the curriculum. It is recognized that “participation in decision-making, or democracy, is not inconsistent with authority—authority derived from responsibility, special knowledge or expertise, experience, or judicial wisdom” (Ramdeholl, Abdulla, Giordani, Heaney, & Yanow, 2008, p. 325).

Some individual students do approach faculty members with suggestions or recommendations for change. In doing so, the individual student does not speak for the group of students who might be affected should the change be made. If there were a forum within which the collective student voice could be heard and subsequently be negotiated with faculty, would this not strengthen the learning environment while maintaining the rigor of the doctoral classroom? Would it not also provide a tool for learning democracy, which for many would probably be the first such opportunity for shared decision making that they have encountered?

Example of One Doctoral Experiment in Experiential Learning.

An adult education doctoral program at National Louis University has made democratic governance a recurring component of the curriculum. It is a cohort-based program in which students begin their studies at a residential

summer institute at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. At this institute, in addition to course work, students come to know each other informally in walks through the wooded grounds and by the lake. They also meet collectively without the presence of faculty and begin the arduous task of creating a democratic forum for reflecting on their program and finding a common voice. They begin to assume responsibility for determining future directions for study and practice. At times, issues under discussion are within the purview of the students: forming support groups or selecting an adviser. Other times the students' interests would have to be negotiated with faculty: guest speakers, adjustments to curriculum, classroom activities or assignments. If the students reach agreement on a recommendation, they bring their decisions and recommendations to a debriefing session with faculty. If student consensus requires any modification or addition to the curriculum, these are then negotiated.

This practicum in democracy provides a space in which students are encouraged to engage in a collaborative process. They not only take ownership of their individual learning experience, but they benefit more broadly from the experiences of the entire cohort. Through governance students have both a forum for deep discussion of issues specific to the group, and also an opportunity to take part in collective decision making for social justice and positive change. In addition, this raises awareness of embedded contradictions between adult education and graduate education that can only be overcome when students take control of their own learning and assume ownership of the curriculum.

In practice, the deliberation by students meeting without faculty to discuss issues within their own education constitutes a student caucus, which is at times challenging and raucous. But it is in the subsequent meeting of students with faculty that the more challenging task of creating a democracy occurs. It is challenging because both students and faculty need to display a flexibility that remains, nonetheless, consistent with the standards of the academy. Positions taken need to be supported by a rationale and open to free and open debate. If positions are thought to be reasonable by students, and yet those decisions are rejected preemptively through the exercise of faculty power, then democratic action collapses and students will perceive their participation in governance to be a charade. If faculty members do not follow through on recommendations put forward by students, they need to close the circle. They must return to the students with a rationale.

As an ideal, this process is straightforward, but in practice it is messy and complicated with contradictions and conflict. There is a tendency to enter into discussion with a commitment to an intended outcome, rather than maintaining an open mind and a willingness to first learn the interests of others in the group. For example, a student might have an interest in maximizing downtime for planning a group project, whereas a faculty member might have an interest in including content that will fill all available class time. In any group, it can be anticipated there will be many interests at play—perceived benefits that accrue to each individual. Interests can be identified, but they should not be judged. In this, an interest differs from taking a position on how that interest

can best be served. If we enter discussion committed to a certain position—an alignment with a particular outcome—we are likely to create a situation in which there will be winners and losers. All the factors of group dynamics come into play; some dominate the conversation, while others sit back apathetically, not trusting the process or certain that others will not value their contribution. Some are unable to deal with conflict and prefer to avoid it by simply dropping out of the conversation. Others pursue their opinions aggressively, thoughtlessly offending others.

If any of these situations occurs, then democratic governance might seem to be a recipe for disaster! But this exercise is meant to be an invitation for learning. For learning to occur, there has to be time for reflection on the experience. Expectations must be examined and negotiated. Processes for decision making must be determined—consensus, majority rule, straw men, balloting, and so on. There are numerous guides that can inform reflections on best practices in collective governance. Interest-based strategies focus group members on reaching win-win decisions by focusing on interests not positions, in order to understand those interests, not judge them. Books like *Getting to Yes* (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991) and *Difficult Conversations* (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999) foster essential skills for democratic action, such as consensus building, thinking systemically, and sustaining a collaborative relationship and process.

Outcomes. The experiment with democratic governance in doctoral education has had mixed results. A few students have been frustrated and bewildered by the time required to reach consensus. A few others have been angered by their failure to prevail, which they frequently interpreted as not being heard. On the other hand, many have experienced for the first time the empowerment of collaborative decision making and found a forum for consensual action. They have bonded as a group and strengthened their resolve to persevere and achieve a deeper level of scholarship by taking ownership of the program.

Governance was conceived as a vehicle for learning democracy, and evidence of the experiment's success in this regard is found in the number of journal articles, books, book chapters, and conference papers that have been produced by graduates and faculty and reflect critically on the experience of governance and its results (Baptiste, 2001; Baptiste & Brookfield, 1997; Bront de Avila et al., 2001; Colin & Heaney, 2001; Ramdeholl et al., 2008; Ramdeholl, Giordani, Heaney, & Yanow, 2010; Shor, 1996). However, the argument that democracy, which is a relevant focus of study in a graduate adult education doctoral program (Brookfield, 2005), holds a similar relevance for doctoral programs generally has yet to be advanced.

Unleashing the Power of “We”

It has frequently been observed in many contexts that people without power have only the power of numbers, which is actualized when they coordinate their actions with others. Graduate faculty, despite their self-assurance of

expertise, can be intimidated by the power of numbers, fearing a diminution of their academic authority and a loss of control in the classroom. “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” (Colin & Heaney, 2001, p. 31). Underlying professorial fear is a profound lack of trust in students as research scholars whose primary interest is to maintain the value of the degree to which they aspire. In this there is also a failure to acknowledge that teachers, recognized experts in their fields, are themselves learners—learning not only from the research conferences they attend and the books and journals they read, but learning from their students as well. Many faculty members can recall anecdotes from the classroom when the intervention of a single student challenged or illuminated the topic of discussion, provided insight, an “aha” moment. At such times teachers learn. But some of these same teachers might perceive it to be a threat when students speak with a unified voice on pedagogical or academic issues directly related to their classroom. The response is similar to the reaction of management when workers seek a common voice through the unionization of the workplace. In such instances, both the role of educator and manager is mistakenly assumed to be grounded on authority or control.

But is it? Learners are most engaged in learning when they are intrinsically motivated to understand and to know, when they experience the freedom to shape their learning and set goals for achievement. Colin and Heaney (2001) conclude 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” (p. 35). Educators who encourage and support independent and collaborative scholarly activity create a learning community and a milieu in which scholarship can thrive. It is the goal of doctoral studies to produce a society of scholars who become the colleagues of their teachers, who both teach and learn from each other. This goal is not suddenly achieved at the time when the doctorate is awarded, but is achieved incrementally over the course of study.

Structural authority of faculty is a constant in doctoral education. Ultimate decision-making power about the quality of student achievement is vested in someone who holds the degree to which the student aspires. Nonetheless, students need to reflect on the relevance of curriculum—what is included and what is excluded. Students need to engage in the social construction of the effectiveness of pedagogical activities and their value in promoting growth in understanding, knowledge, and skill. This goes well beyond summative and formative evaluations submitted anonymously by individual students. Such evaluations do not represent a consensus of the students, but the perspectives of individuals usually uninformed by the perspectives of their peers. As a result, faculty members do not receive clear guidance as to what adjustments to make in their teaching or the curriculum in the face of competing interests.

The purpose of democratizing the doctoral classroom is not merely to learn democracy and acquire the skills needed to act democratically in a society often resistant to shared decision making. Rather it is to mobilize the full potential of immersion into rigorous doctoral study by engaging student voice in the task of building and assessing curriculum. Unleashing the power of “we” is relevant to doctoral education in social studies, history, philosophy, psychology, or any of myriad disciplines in the academy.

Building a Democratic Forum

In order to resolve competing interests, students will require space in which they can give voice to those interests and move toward consensus. Such space needs to be free of the influence of faculty whose authority could intimidate students and prevent open discussion. Faculty become involved only after students have given voice to their common concerns and to their proposals to resolve those concerns, at which time their recommendations are negotiated with faculty.

Finding common concerns is difficult and impossible in certain contexts. It requires trust, discipline, and confidence—these build over time. So time is a factor in creating the practice of democracy. When students are in a cohort, they have time to develop relationships over the course of their program. When students are in a more traditional program, changing peers with every class they take, it is difficult to develop trust and discipline when the participants in dialogue are constantly changing. Alternate strategies might be needed.

In the previous example of the experiment in the doctoral program at National Louis University, a significant amount of the students’ time at the beginning was spent designing protocols and procedures, developing the mechanisms for making decisions, and managing meetings. This time could be shortened if a smaller, representative group of students developed a blueprint for governance that would then be ratified by all the students. Students would then implement this shared plan each term in their respective classrooms.

In nurturing a democratic forum, we need multiple models, influenced by discipline, by institution, and certainly by the profiles of both students and faculty. It is the doctoral faculties who are charged with the formation of scholars. The exercise of this task requires constant vigilance and an examination of the adequacy of our doctoral programs—an examination “not from the perspectives of those who are already stewards of the discipline, but from the perspective of the programs’ major constituent: the everyman-everywoman doctoral student” (Taylor, 2006, p. 46). Doctoral students bring a special passion and insight to their growth as scholars driven by a commitment to become stewards of their field of knowledge, and when those students act in concert, the ethical, intellectual, creative, and social character of each student is elevated (Kunstler, 2004). We are engaged in a process of building an intellectual community. In this community, all are agents of change.

One of the special strengths that graduate students can bring to the process of change . . . is that they are not yet fully inside the system. Sometimes this sense of being outside may be a source of anxiety and frustration, but it is also a position of strength. Students bring fresh lenses, different perspectives and passions, and an ability to ask unexpected questions about what others may take for granted. (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008, p. 144)

The program at National Louis University provides a model of learning democracy for doctoral education in many disciplines. While accepting that relations in a democracy are always messy—frustrating and fulfilling, compromising and empowering—we nonetheless commit ourselves to an ideal of a shared freedom. By ongoing reflection on the process and perseverance, we learn to take control over our lives, not only in the classroom, but in the life-world. We learn to critique our own first impulses to action and balance our interests with the interests of others. These are important lessons in our fractious and torn nation.

Building a democratic forum for the creation of student voice is a component of the involvement of doctoral students in the construction of an intellectual community. It deepens the commitment of our research scholars to the rigors of their program of study, which they have come to own through their participation in its unfolding design. Their participation is real because it has consequences. It is, at the beginning, what Lave and Wenger (1991) would call “legitimate peripheral participation,” in which students are insiders, but at the periphery. As insiders their voices count. And faculty listen.

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