



A Democratic Classroom Can Help Students Develop Agency for Their Learning

What is this Research About?

In a democratic classroom that follows a Students-as-Partners approach, students help make decisions about course assignments, content, and assessment. Instructors act as observers, guides, or co-deciders. This study describes a small undergraduate course that followed a democratic and Students-as-Partners model. The researchers examined students' writings and reflections from the course and found that the classroom model helped build a collaborative classroom where students took agency for their learning.

What did the Researchers Do?

The researchers studied students' experiences in a small (23-student) undergraduate course that used a democratic and Students-as-Partners pedagogical model. The course was lightly-structured, and students were responsible for choosing their groups, the topic of their final project, the manner of delivery, and the criteria for success. All course decisions were managed through class discussion and deliberation. Students completed 6 Learning Charters in which they wrote reflections about the content and the process of learning in the course. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of students' Learning Charters and their comments during class discussions. They also examined course evaluation data to understand student perceptions of the use of democratic and Students-as-Partners pedagogies.

What did the Researchers Find?

The researchers found that students provided positive feedback about their experiences in the course. Students rated the course environment as collaborative and supportive. They described feeling agency for their learning. They reported feeling less concerned about their final grade in the course than they were with the learning they had experienced. In their Learning Charters, they expressed that it was sometimes difficult or uncomfortable to work together to make decisions about course content and assessment criteria because they had little experience with this level of autonomy in a course.

SoTL

Snapshot

A synopsis of a scholarship of teaching and learning journal article

➔ How to Implement this Research in Your Classroom

Critical pedagogy challenges the notion of the instructor as the holder of knowledge and the student as the passive receiver. This study describes a democratic and Students-as-Partners classroom which students described as collaborative, supportive, and effective in helping them learn. Consider using democratic and/or Students-as-Partners pedagogies in your classroom to allow students to co-create their learning. Some methods to introduce student knowledge co-creation in the classroom include having students generate a list of topics or questions to explore in the classroom, and giving students choice in the course assessment format.

➔ Citation

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➔ Keywords

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