

A REASON TO TEACH

*Creating Classrooms of
Dignity and Hope*

JAMES A. BEANE

the power of the democratic way

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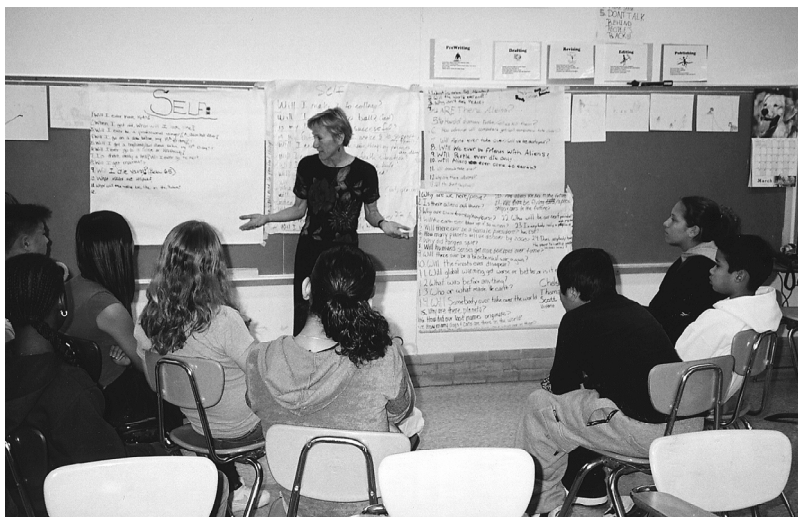
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more and more in question these days. To know all these wonderful young people is more luck than anyone deserves.

I don't know what to say about Barbara Brodhagen. When a person holds you together personally and professionally and gives you hope, there really are no words adequate to say what should be said. If there were, I would say them to Barbara first of all.



We teachers are constantly concerned about what might be called “technical matters”—the nitty-gritty of classroom organization, learning activities, lesson plans, and so on. And who can blame us? When the bell rings, the time for speculation is over. Something has to happen. And that something needs direction and organization. Certainly, spontaneous moments occur in classrooms, but only someone completely out of touch with classroom life could think that teachers do not have to plan ahead about a wide range of technical details. What are my students supposed to be learning about? What kinds of resources do I need? What activities could we use? How will particular students react to one or another activity?

Moreover, teachers have reasons for the choices they make. Maybe a certain book looks like it will be interesting. Maybe one activity seems like it will be more engaging than another. Perhaps one way of forming small groups would make them more heterogeneous than another way. Whether it is to make the classroom more exciting or more efficient or more equitable or something else, teachers have reasons for what they choose to do in their classrooms.

What happens if a teacher chooses to teach the democratic way? The philosophical commitment described in Chapter 1 is just the start. What happens when the bell rings? When a teacher wants to teach the democratic way, how does that teacher think about what to actually do in the classroom? These are extremely important questions, because while philosophical discussions may avoid them, once the classroom door closes, they demand full attention. And it is in this moment that the most noble intentions of a teacher may come to a screeching halt.

In this chapter, we will consider some of the possibilities for thinking about how to bring democracy to life in the classroom. The intention here is not to write a complete methods guide or recipe, but to imagine how we might think about what to do. After all, there is no one way to bring democracy to life in a classroom, and factors like local circumstances, teacher confidence and security, and the prior experiences of students have to be taken into account. But there are lots of ideas and examples we might draw on to see the connection between classroom details and the democratic way.

Deciding the Democratic Way

In a democracy, the principle of human dignity insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that their say counts for something. For this reason, probably no idea is more widely associated with democratic classrooms than the involvement of young people in making decisions about what and how things are done (Boomer et al. 1992).

The portrait of a democratic community is often that of a group of people in careful deliberation, making decisions together about which issues to take on and how to go about the work of the group. Inspiring as that image may be, it implies a kind of open-ended agenda that is not always available in classrooms. Perhaps the implication of that vision is why so many teachers say

The content needed to teach freedom must include understanding of such great principles of democracy as the worth and integrity of every human being and the right to share in policy making.
Gertrude Noar, 1963

they can't have a democratic classroom. They may feel that there are too many external mandates to allow an open agenda or that young people don't know enough about what is in a course or subject to make decisions about it. In some cases, teachers even begin to feel guilty because they believe that it is unlikely they can ever reach that idealized portrait.

The fact of the matter is that most teachers do not have the luxury of a completely open agenda. They are hired to teach a particular subject or course whose content and resources have often been decided on by some school or district curriculum committee that is in turn responding to pressure from state standards and assessments. And even where there is a good deal of flexibility, teachers often already have favorite themes or topics they like to bring to the classroom, sometimes having refined them over years of use. In either case, they cannot imagine how young people can be involved in planning.

Instead of beginning with the idealized picture or the real and imagined reasons why young people cannot collaborate in making decisions, perhaps we could begin by thinking about areas in which virtually all teachers make classroom curriculum decisions: the selection of activities and resources, the identification of organizing centers for the curriculum, or the ways in which a group's experience might be evaluated. Within each one of these areas, many decisions have to be made. In a democratic classroom, one of the key questions is, Who will decide about such matters? Will the teacher decide? Will the students decide? Or will the teacher and students decide together?

Suppose it's time to start a yearly unit on cultures, in which students are to read books and poems by authors from diverse cultures as preselected by a curriculum committee. There is nothing here preventing the teacher from asking this year's students, "What questions do you have about cultures?" and then using those questions to guide their discussions about the readings or to expand the unit into new topics. Nor is there anything preventing a high school algebra teacher with a predetermined course, content, and textbook from inviting students to suggest how small groups might be used, how evaluation might be handled, or how homework might be scheduled. Certainly in the case of the high school algebra class, students would have had enough experience

in school to know about these things and to have some idea about how they might be arranged.

Many teachers use guided approaches like these, especially one known as K-W-L, originally suggested by Donna Ogle (1986). In this case, students are invited to think about a theme or topic by asking three questions: What do we *know* about this? What do we *want* to know? and, later, What did we *learn* and do we still need to learn? In addition to providing an opportunity for student voice and reflection, this and similar approaches help students understand what the theme or topic is about. Jeff Mass, a grade 2–3 teacher, offers an excellent example of how this might happen in Figure 2–1.

In some cases, teachers do have a large degree of discretion in determining the curriculum. For example, Lin Frederick (Nelson with Frederick 1994) and her first-grade students planned their curriculum together through three interrelated steps:

A democratic society requires citizens who are skilled in the decision-making process.
National Association for Core Curriculum, 1985

1. selecting the target theme (the focus for developing the curriculum);
2. establishing guiding questions to serve as the scope and sequence of the thematic unit; and
3. designing the classroom activities (p. 71).

In one case, they decided to do a unit on “Whales.” Next they identified guiding questions for the theme and categorized them according to the different subjects they usually had in school: language arts, music, art, mathematics, and so on. Finally, the group created activities to answer their guiding questions and again discussed how these connected to various subject areas. As well as being an excellent illustration of collaborative planning, this case also tells us that it is not just for older students. Little kids can have big ideas, too.

In another case where wide discretion was possible, this one in a middle school, Barbara Brodhagen describes how she and her teaching partner began the year from scratch with no definite plan for the curriculum. After a few weeks of community

Figure 2–1

The Planets Unit

Not only was this unit designed to meet particular standards within the elementary science curriculum, it also served as a vehicle to demonstrate a fundamental inquiry process, a process that is fundamental to the building of a classroom community. The process:

- Ask a question.
- Gather data.
- Tell others about your discoveries.

This simple inquiry process plays out in many complicated ways during the school year. It is applied in a variety of classroom situations, from individual reading projects to small-group art projects and all-class environmental science projects. The process is intended to tap children's natural curiosity about the world around them and to make their curiosity an important part of the methodology of the community. Making children's questions the legitimate business of learning is inherently democratic. It brings background knowledge, both cultural and intellectual, into the learning community. It creates an atmosphere of ownership and authenticity in the learning community.

The Unit: For this particular unit on the planets, I first asked the kids, "What sort of things do you know about the planets?" Each one generated a list privately of all the things they knew about Earth, the moon, the sun, and any other planets in our solar system. After generating their list, they were assigned to small groups to share their knowledge with their classmates, looking for commonalities within their knowledge as well as any facts that were unique and interesting. After the small-group work, information was shared with the entire class. Key facts were written on a large sheet of paper at the front of the room. When the planet information was shared, I modeled questions that could be generated from the information. ("Why do you think there are thirteen rings on this planet and none on this one?") The modeling

was designed to facilitate the generation of student questions and open up possible avenues of research.

After sharing knowledge, I asked, "What do you want to learn about the planets?" Once again, kids wrote privately, then shared their questions with the same small group of classmates, again looking for similarities and differences. Eventually, a group list of *questions* was composed:

What Do You Want to Know?

- What is the temperature on your planet?
- How many moons does your planet have?
- How long is the day (one rotation) on your planet?
- How long is one year (revolution) on your planet?
- What does your planet look like?
- How big is your planet compared to Earth?
- Does your planet have rings?
- Does your planet have storms?
- How far is your planet from the sun?

Children were then assigned a planet. Their charge was to *gather data* on their planet, the second phase of inquiry. Planet groups were constructed ahead of time and were designed to bring together a diverse mix of abilities, knowledge, and cultural backgrounds. For several weeks, kids read books from the library, explored reference books, and searched the Web for answers to the questions generated by the class. All information was kept in a planet folder.

Once all questions had answers, groups had to design a way to *tell others* about their planet, the third phase of the inquiry process. One group made a mobile of their planet. Three planet posters and three dioramas were created. One group wrote and illustrated a small book. Each group presented their planet to the class, answering all the original questions in their presentation.

Extensions: As with most units within our learning community, knowledge generated by the community is extended

Figure 2–1. *Continued*

into other aspects of learning. The inquiry process is a major component of our learning and is repeated in a myriad of forms, lending continuity to otherwise discontinuous events. The facts and information garnered from the planets unit extended into a project with our K–1 classroom buddies. My students were put in the role of teacher, having to design and implement two lessons about the solar system for a K–1 “student.” The planets unit also morphed into the children’s next creative writing assignment. Kids had to pretend that they were a space traveler visiting a planet of their choice. Information from the planets unit had to be integrated into the writing assignment.

Figure 2–1. *Continued*

building, they took their students through a process she describes this way:

We begin by asking the students to do some self-reflection: “We would like you to begin by thinking about yourself. Who are you? What are you like? What are your interests, aspirations? Please make a list of words or phrases you would use if asked to tell about yourself.”

Next we raise the first of the two major questions: “Still thinking about yourself and looking at the list you have made, now please list questions or concerns you have about yourself. What questions or concerns do you have about yourself?” After sufficient time for the students to list questions individually, we form small groups of five or six people and ask them to search for shared questions which are recorded on newsprint: “Are there questions or concerns that were expressed by several or all members of your group? If so, what are they? No one is required to show their personal list or to share anything from it unless they choose to do so.”

Once the group self questions and concerns are recorded, we turn to the second of the two major questions: “Now we would like you to look outside yourself at the world you live in, from the close parts (family, friends, school, cultures, our community, and so on) to the more distant parts (your state, your nation, the global world). We would like you to think about

that world—both near and far—and list questions or concerns you have about that world. What questions do you have about the world you live in?” Again, after sufficient time to record individual questions and concerns, the students are placed in their small groups and asked to find shared “world” questions and concerns (with the same right to remain silent).

At this point the classroom walls are covered by newsprint sheets filled with questions like these:

Self Questions

- | | |
|--|---|
| How long will I live? | Will my parents accept me as an adult? |
| What will I look like when I am older? | Where will I live when I am older? |
| Do other people think I am the way I think I am? | Will I get married and have children? |
| What job will I have? | Why do I act the way I do? |
| What would I do if I met an extraterrestrial? | Why do I have to go to school? |
| Will I ever go to outer space? | Will I have the same friends when I am older? |
| Why do I fight with my brother and sister? | Why do I look the way I do? |
| Should I get a tattoo? | Will I go to college? |
| Will I be poor and homeless? | Will I be like my parents? |
| Will my family still be there when I am older? | |

World Questions

- | | |
|--|---|
| Will we ever live in outer space? | Where does garbage go? |
| What will happen to the earth in the future? | Who will win the next election? |
| Why are there so many crimes? | Why are schools the way they are? |
| Why do people hate each other? | Will the rain forests be saved? |
| Why are there so many poor people? | Why is there so much prejudice? |
| Will racism ever end? | What is the purpose of time? |
| | How do you know when something is real? |

World Questions (*continued*)

Will there ever be a president who is not a white man?

Are there other planets than the ones we know about?

Who owns outer space?

Will the U.S. ever be out of debt?

Will cures be found for cancer and AIDS?

Will drug dealing stop?

What will people evolve to look like?

Will hoverboards replace skateboards?

Is time travel possible?

How many kinds of species are there?

Next we ask the small groups to look at their self and world questions to identify themes for the curriculum: “Are there any cases where there are connections between self and world questions (such as questions about conflict in school and conflict in the larger world)? If so, what are some words or phrases you might use to make connections (such as “conflict”)?” (In groups of 60 or less we have also done this by posting all questions from small groups in a central location and asking the large group to find themes.)



Teaching the democratic way means involving students in planning the curriculum.

Next, the lists of themes from the small groups are posted and the large group reaches consensus on a single list. A vote is then taken to select the first theme for the year (with the rest of the themes to be addressed later). Having selected an opening theme, the small groups are reconvened to identify questions and concerns from their lists that they would include within the first theme: "What are specific self and world questions and concerns we might want to answer within this theme? Be sure to indicate which questions are of interest to all or most of the group and which to one or two since there will be room for both large and small group activities." (For this task we have also used a steering committee with a representative from each small group.)

Finally, we ask the students to identify possible activities the group might do and resources they might use to answer the questions for the theme. To do this we use one of several ways: small groups rotating through stations where one or two questions are posted, large group discussion, or dividing the group in half.

This process completed, the teachers proceed to organize and expand the activities, develop a calendar for activities and projects, and so on. The teachers and students also create a web for the unit as a visual organizer.

Among other things, these examples show that there is no one way to involve young people in making classroom curriculum decisions. The point is to continuously ask, How can students be involved? Sometimes the possibilities may be limited; other times they may be wide open. Teaching the democratic way means involving young people in decision making whenever possible and to whatever degree possible. Giving students a voice in this way, no matter how restricted the teacher may feel by various mandates, is a step in the democratic direction.

A word of caution is needed here, however. I have heard many teachers who have done a bit of collaborative planning with students excitedly say something like, "They decided to do just what I would have planned." This should come as no great surprise. Students are real people, too. They live in the world and they have been to school. If we ask them what questions they have about cultures or how to organize small groups or what questions they have about the world, they are very likely to come up with ideas that look like ours. But the word of caution is this: The purpose of involving students in planning is not to trick them into thinking

that our ideas are theirs or to subtly lead them to the plan we already had in mind. Tricking students or engineering their consent is not consistent with the democratic way. The purpose of involving students in planning is to help them learn the democratic way. Whether their ideas match ours is not the point.

For some teachers, the possibility of involving students in planning simply sounds like too much work. There is no denying that collaborative planning can be difficult and that it involves more complex skills than merely telling students what to do. On the other hand, too many teachers find themselves in a constant struggle with students because there is no mutual understanding of what is supposed to happen or the teacher has guessed wrong about the best way to do things. Worse yet, many teachers find themselves in long meetings trying to figure out with colleagues what might work with students. Why would teachers think that these struggles, meetings, and moments of bad guesswork are less work, let alone less frustrating, than planning up front with their students about how things might happen in their classrooms? More difficult? Perhaps. More complex? Yes. More work? Not in the long run. Collaborative communities are a lot less work than adversarial ones.

For other teachers, the very idea of planning with students seems almost impossible because it means letting go of their complete control of classroom life. Teachers are certainly entitled to such feelings, since most have probably had little preparation for planning with students, and moreover, they are responsible for what happens in their classroom. At the risk of seeming overly harsh, though, I want to ask the question, Whose education are we talking about here? In a democratic society, public participation in making decisions does not depend on whether elected officials feel comfortable with the idea. It is about the rights and responsibilities

Students who are able to participate in making decisions at school are more committed to decision making and democracy in other contexts.

Alfie Kohn, 1996

of citizens and the obligations of elected officials. Likewise in the classroom, the matter of collaborative planning is not really about the feelings of the teacher. True, the teacher must make many decisions alone regarding the safety and well-being of students. But there are still countless matters open to consideration in a classroom. In these matters, collab-

orative planning is about the right and responsibility of young people to learn the democratic way and the obligation of the teacher to help them do so.

So how can a teacher get started in planning with students? First, set aside any feelings of guilt over how little or much seems possible. Second, be honest with students. Tell them what you plan to do and why, and how you hope it will happen. Third, select a way that seems doable.

- Try asking students what questions they have about a theme you feel knowledgeable about.
- Ask them what kinds of activities they have had good experiences with in the past, and use the information to plan activities for an upcoming unit.
- Bring a unit plan you already have to your students. Ask them to look it over and give you suggestions.
- As part of getting to know your students, ask them what questions they have about themselves and the world. Collect these and think about how they might be incorporated into units you plan to do. Or study the questions to identify themes you might use during the year.

Obviously, there are lots of ways to involve students in planning. The way to get started is to pick one and try it out. If it doesn't work, try another. Remember, most young people have never been asked to be involved in classroom planning, so they may be as apprehensive as we are. The first request for their ideas may be met with silence or a remark like, "You're the teacher, you decide." But over time, we can help them find their way just as we will find ours. And that search, in and of itself, is an important part of the democratic way.

Notice, though, that in all of the examples of collaborative planning I cited, none involved simply asking students, "What do you want to do?" or "What are you interested in?" As we will see in the next section, teaching the democratic way is not a matter of whimsical ideas or of doing whatever we are interested in. Democratic communities take on particular kinds of issues and concerns. People may find them interesting and enjoy working on them. But even if they don't, the issues and concerns of democracy must still be addressed.



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