

## Original Paper

# Democracy in Higher Education Courses: Transformative Strategies

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### **Abstract**

*Teaching/Learning can be a mutual journey in higher education. It requires more than wanting to approach teaching and learning differently. Our schema about power and teaching must be addressed. It is not a simple thing to tease out what part of submission in learning is vital to gaining mastery and learning to think deeply and critically, and what part is inhumane. It also requires a complex skill set for ourselves and for students that must be experienced and embraced by us, then taught and practiced. It is a complex change full of excitement and cognitive as well as personal challenges. Can we allow teaching and learning to become inseparable parts of a greater whole? Constructive teaching in higher education is not just about our ability to transcend the moment but the mutual journey, all participants teaching and learning that is the miracle.*

### **Keywords**

*Constructivism, empowerment, facilitator, teaching/learning*

### **1. Introduction**

In my Master's program, I experienced my first educational taste of feeling that I mattered as a person. I always excelled in school, and was awarded honors and scholarships. I suppose I was even teacher's pet from time to time, but this was different. Now, instead of answering set questions, developing the viewpoint handed to me by a teacher, along with corroborating facts, what I thought and how I came to my conclusions mattered. I felt alive, empowered, energized!

I taught my first undergraduate courses the next semester and vowed to bring that feeling, that experience, energy, permission to think and to feel powerful in developing a personal viewpoint, to my students, for I realized that such education is compelling, and creates an epiphany of sorts.

Others share this extraordinary vision of teaching. I sense it in historical accounts of the teaching of Socrates, Christ, Buddha, Confucius. I identify it in Shon's (1987) reflective practitioner, Tharp and Gallimor's (1993) work on *Rousing Minds to Life*, Sizer's tale (1992) *Horace's school*. We celebrate that educational process in Anne Sullivan's teaching of Helen Keller, in movies like *Touch of Blue*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Stand and Deliver*.

Effective teaching literature (Cruickshank, 1985; Brophy, 1987; Walberg, 1990) validated quality instruction, student appropriate lessons, motivational pre-sets, time on task, clarity in organization of instruction, warmth and enthusiasm as best practice. However, including the factors or imitating the process is not sufficient. Seemingly intangible dynamics bring teaching/learning to life. That "peak" in teaching, transcending the moment, occurred sporadically, and in reflection, teacher and student united in those encounters, but what created unity; teacher and student soaring, making time disappear and the search for ideas consuming, essentially eluded me.

Energy expended on students and content fortified the learning atmosphere, but I keenly felt unresolved frustrations: attendance, lack of insightfulness, less than stellar work by some students, some students over-talking, others mute for the semester. Then, I stumbled across Reinsmith's (1992) work on teaching archetypes. His systemic view described teaching, student role and content as tied together, something I perceived from my own practices. Once I recognized that precept of expectations being a mutual responsibility, I saw many researchers who identified education as a process (Bruner, 1962, 1990; Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1969) and great teaching as teaching/learning. Identifying interconnectedness as systemic process helped me recognize I was changing myself without seeing the embedded and interwoven nature of relationship among teacher role, student role and content. This explained why even small changes were more difficult than I anticipated.

### *1.1 Small Change*

When I made a change, students could get upset over unforeseen details. Freedom to learn or personalize a course brought out trust issues and need for structure with almost every student. For example, I decided to make due dates **suggested** rather than mandatory. No matter when a project was due, someone had a mismatch, conflict or life stressor, so it seemed like a student focused solution. I announced that projects were now due when they were done, and quipped that turning in assignments sooner would be counterproductive. No one chuckled; instead, students seemed panicky: "Just how soon after the due date should I turn it in?" "What if I don't have it done until a week later?" "How many points will I lose if it's not in on the suggested due date?" I repeat, "It's due when it's done". Still, half way through the semester these questions are posed.

Student responses like these followed empowerment of any kind; length of paper, open topic essays, open ended journaling. I learned students resented not getting enough content, but most did not feel responsible for personally adding learning activities on their own, even in areas that seemed obvious. For example, I talked about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and mentioned that *The Broken Cord* (Note 2) was an excellent story. Next class, a student raised his hand and said, "I found that book you mentioned.

Do you think I should read it?"

I ultimately realized that students need support and practice in assuming responsibility. Lack of due dates did not inspire ownership, but rather anxiety. Making attendance a matter of honor sometimes resulted in fear of failure, and periodically, passive aggressive insults when I did not go back over things a student missed when not present. Students were either not used to the idea of an education being personal, or unprepared to proceed.

My initial response was to tell students to read the syllabus again. Then I tumbled onto the fact that the syllabus, while allegedly designed for students, was just like lesson plans and goals. We say they are for students, but a syllabus contains clear explications of teacher expectations, rules of conduct, and global issues. The syllabus tends to be a product rather than process document.

This marked the change in how I presented the syllabus. I tried sharing syllabus building, but reaped a lot of resistance. I tried providing objectives and having students develop personalized syllabi, but that opportunity for ownership netted resentment. Now, at the beginning of the course: 1) I provide a syllabus, including university approved components; 2) Students examine the document and write personal course expectations; 3) At the second class meeting, we share expectations and make alterations to the document, taking changes and perspectives into account; 4) We sign the amended syllabus to show agreement with changes.

This is also when I realized how few students were ready to share responsibility, so now I literally design and implement process devices to prepare students to understand and utilize opportunities to learn and explore ideas. A sample of a student oriented syllabus section follows:

### *1.2 Student Process Plan*

#### Week Two - Assessment: Legal and Historic Context

YES	NO	
_____		1. I was in attendance. On time?
_____		2. I reviewed the syllabus. Clarification:
_____		3. I wrote out my own expectations for the course.
_____		4. I reviewed the cooperative learning material.
_____		5. I played Intro Bingo.
_____		6. I took careful notes about the psychology of discipline and - - -
		a) Got it!
		b) I still don't understand _____

## **2. Structure**

These experiences underscored the importance of structure. I discovered that the more graphic the undergirding, the faster students made the transition from "taking" a course to fully engaging in the work. The more defined an assignment as to intent and connection to extending expertise, the more prepared students seemed to ask relevant questions, personalizing and valuing tasks. Another light went

on for me. By providing this type of structure I was intensifying student regard. Without realizing it, I was addressing Coopersmith's (1967) classic components of self esteem. Changing expectations from teacher to mutually shared goals supported students viewing themselves and others as competent, significant, empowered and virtuous or trusted. No wonder this was effective!

Making the distinction between deep and surface structure was also part of my discovery. **Deep structure** includes relevance of course materials; communicating expectations about depth and breadth of competence. It is personifying or moving into the student's realm to survey student ability to comprehend, analyze and utilize concepts and constructs creatively. It also defines relationship expectations among students and teacher, delineating the importance of respecting each other, expressing trust in students, their ideas and insights. It is manifestly infusing the importance of competence and mastery in a subject and in each other rather than accepting the more passive emphasis of passing a course to get a degree or certification.

Deep structure fits naturally into the syllabus, but it also needs verbal expression at appropriate junctures in the class. It's a *constructivist* concept. Students do not need to be *told* how something connects with the future and occupational goals or tasks, they need to *see*, for themselves, how it fits. For example, I always begin each course of study by sharing the philosophy and current research in the subject. My first assignment helps students apply foundation concepts to their own lives; who they are and what they believe, based on their own personal history. I provide grade bearing opportunities for students to identify norms and hypotheses they developed as part of living experiences. They examine how they come to those belief systems. This helps students live in the midst of and feel a personal stake in the concepts we are covering. It also supports understanding of personal schema.

**Surface structure** includes attention to detail and procedural guidelines—due dates, margins, number of pages or words in an assignment, attendance, tardiness, presentation style; these things are important, yes, but not the province of ego, a test of wills or inviolate. Instead, this is an ideal place to initiate recognition of student ability and value personal taste, an easy place to honor the “being” of the student. I am free to validate a student request to change the nature of an assignment or test, include a more rigorous form of learning, or a group presentation rather than a paper.

If an assignment is not done well or lacks substance, I can offer help in retooling or reframing it with the student or share additional insights, provide new sources for inspiration. When misspelling occurs I take the opportunity to suggest purchasing and carrying a spell checker. When a number of typos exist, I suggest asking a peer to review initial drafts. Surface structure helps balance the needs of the student with the demands of the discipline. It is also a way for students to see teachers as facilitators, encouraging and validating work efforts. I enter each of these opportunities expecting to find a way to say “YES!” as I co-author learning.

### 2.1 *Who's in the Driver's Seat?*

When teaching/learning roles seem confused, I think about driving a car. As long as I am in the driver's seat, I have the power. It also means that others in the car may not focus on where we go. In fact, I feel

uncomfortable if there are many signs that others are second guessing my driving (though I feel even worse if they seem to resent being in the car and keep others from enjoying the trip). If I turn the wheel over to others, I find myself hyper alert at first, and then I begin to relax. When I turn the car over to an inexperienced driver, I may constantly guide, suggest, flinch, even squeal disapproval. Soon, the person driving is so unnerved and unhappy, he or she will refuse to drive, get angry, or only drive when I am not in the car. When I “turn over education to students” I see parallels in my behavior. I need to help students feel ready and competent, and then I must relax and remember when I am driving and when I am a companion on the journey.

I find it critical to develop a definite deep structure and to communicate expectations, then guide and facilitate with consistency and kindness. It is also important to give students help in understanding why the structure is in place. Just like the car, they need to be ready to drive, understand the rudiments, even agree on the context (structure). We need consensus on destination (goals) and how much time we have, but I either stay the driver, so I can have the sense of being in control, or prepare students to drive with the honest expectation of turning the wheel over with guided practice and in short order, refrain from back seat driving.

### 2.2 Respect and Balance

I initially juggled back and forth between honoring individual need and group good, teacher need and the demands of content. I soon saw that student/teacher and teaching/learning were enmeshed and could work as a continuum rather than an *on* and *off* switch. Conceptualizing ideas as continuous as well as systemic naturally led to the idea of balance. This was another break-through in my quest for a more democratic educational setting. These are examples of concepts that blended for me:

independence ----- belonging	fragility ----- resilience
consensus ----- creativity	work ----- drudgery
task ----- trust	cooperative ----- competitive
power ----- control	creative ----- chaotic

Working for balance rather than thinking dichotomously helped me clarify the process of teaching/learning, and highlighted the necessity of infusing self understanding and second person perspective (Note 3) as a formalized part of instruction. It moves the concept of ownership to the next level; stewardship. We literally changed the way we spoke to each other, how we approached ideas and issues once we started thinking about the views of others. Conflicts were more easily resolved, once we thought in terms of sliding from one option to another until each person felt sufficient safety and comfort with the resolution. As students become more immersed in understanding multiple positions and the needs of fellow students, the idea of saying “YES” moves from a personal agenda to the operational vocabulary of the students. The need to get along, to attain a sense of unity, gives impetus to community building. [Note a shift here? This no longer “I” but “we”]

### 2.3 Process Skills

Once I realized how important and powerful process and relationship skills were in transforming

learning to a mutually shared endeavor, I hunted for ways to make them a part of the class, and still deliver all the content. I tried using the first week of class to teach community, but found little benefit from that. I later discovered that group cohesion is developmental (LaCoursiere, 1980; Luft, 1984), so time spent at the first of the class initiates a strong coalition, but does not facilitate later stages. To be effective, group work needs to be infused with course content and be ongoing. This led to development of the ABC's of group work. Each lesson has two pages; the first gives basics of instruction about a community building topic, while the second page supplies hands-on community building activities. With 36 topics, students can self select skills that fine tune and personalize group experiences, contributing to the individualization and democratization of process building. A sample lesson follows. Group work is monitored through individual or group logs, while occasional classes include time for group work to determine level of commitment, help with focus or facilitate resolution of interpersonal issues. This is especially critical during the developmental time of "storming" (Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T., 1994) when student participation is most likely to be conflicted. It is vital to value group work by giving it a place in the syllabus, providing continuity and time for it, giving some credit for time and energy expended. Many students will need help and focus, since this is likely to be a new or emerging skill and proper attention to structure and dynamics will facilitate progress.

#### *2.4 Grading and Evaluation*

I changed my syllabus to mastery grading rather than a competitive model. Assignments are tied to accreditation or certification expectations. I write a rubric for each graded task and include it with the assignment. In order to pass the class, every assignment must be turned in and show adequacy of understanding or competency in using the material. In the syllabus I state that failure to hand in even one major assignment will result in class failure. I offer to negotiate any assignment and will help students find a more personally comfortable way to show mastery. Many assignments are guided practice and are combined with community building. Final exams are typically extensions of material into practical exercises. As an example, my final in classroom management consists of developing a personal discipline plan and participating in mock job interviews. At times I use multiple choice tests, and suggest students do them open book, utilize study groups or even bring up questions in class. The resulting score tells students and me how we are doing. If students want to challenge an answer, they can do so in writing or in class, and if they justify their choice, or even add an answer that they think is a better choice than those offered, they are likely to get double points for the question, one for proof of understanding and one for extending the thinking and synthesizing the course content.

#### *2.5 Relationship*

Structure, balance and respect are critical components in building the type of student/teacher relationship that facilitates a democratic learning environment. Moving a sense of ownership from teacher to community is essential and the evolution is based on relationships. Teacher moving from figurehead to "person with insight and expertise" is a vital piece of that. To accomplish this, I discovered I needed clarity about myself, ways to recognize when I was slipping into power plays and

enough time and energy to honestly and continuously assess self performance.

Boundary issues emerged as an early part of this process, including telling personalized stories to emphasize points, but not divulging “too much information;” being able to be wrong, to apologize, to give and thus receive rather than demand respect. In as many ways as possible, I affirm that I am trusting them. I often find myself saying, “I believe you, just put your initials in the grade book”. “Thanks for letting me know about your concerns. It matters a lot to me that you trust me with your insights”. “I feel that it is vital to trust you. You will be teaching the nation’s youth”.

Getting down off the pedestal is confusing on both sides. Current media issues allude to this. Is the president a man or a factotum? Is fallibility unacceptable? If a warm sense, a sense of trust and safety is built, students can forgive me my humanity. If I do not extend that safety net to them, I have left no room for error. If they believe I trust them, believe in them, accept and understand their errors and allow them room to err and grow, I have it for myself. If I am unbending, callous to their concerns and lack of perfection, I have no wiggle room. After all, how do we humans really learn... Ah yes, one mistake at a time.

Again it is balancing need for product and process, my needs and their needs. I explain my role as initial guardian of content and good conduct and invite all to participate in that position of trust. We are understanding yet self disciplined. My own experience teaches me that extending hospitality also helps build relationship. I frequently bring candy, snacks, or insert minor celebrations into our time together. It confirms their sense that my time with them is more than just a job, and models relationship as a critical piece of our time together.

This also asserts that attendance means “we miss you and we are cheated of your presence,” rather than the idea that coming to class is a solitary, uncomplicated individual choice. Of course, it also means that each class needs time for community building and sharing the richness of student input. This was problematic at first. One or two students wanted to dominate—assume the teaching role when given an opening, which can be deadly. It does not build democracy if teacher becoming guide creates opportunities for student tyranny. I address this through appealing to students to maintain balance, and then provide structures that enhance communications:

I give six minute interludes to groups of four:

- a) write a one minute answer
- b) go around the group and share each answer
- c) summarize salient points.

I may pair students to discuss a question. “Turn to a neighbor and share one instance of”... If we have a whole group discussion, I may pass out two pennies to each participant. Each person gives two responses during the discussion and when someone’s “two cents worth” is gone, no more comments can be made by that individual until everyone has shared ideas. I identify a social leader from the general class to monitor the equitable sharing and I also only have two cents. If one person needs to comment after every response, I give them a pad of sticky notes and a time we can discuss their

opinions and perspectives, thus gently stilling persistent forays. I also have most of the readings on the internet, so students can work on-line part of the time if their social skills are still emerging, if they already understand the content and need more depth, or to catch up on the content missed when absent from class.

### *2.6 Gains and Loses*

This kind of teaching has definite pros and cons. It is costly in terms of energy, of course, is more time intensive and didn't come as second nature. Few teachers modeled these patterns and few of my colleagues wanted to share the journey or discuss the work. I even had one, very highly respected friend say, *"You are crazy to be doing this! No teacher should ever give up power, and the worst of it is that you are ruining things for the rest of us"*.

In the gains and losses column, I lost the sense of certainty that multiple choice tests provide. I no longer knew that all students scored at a certain level on my exams. It stopped upsetting me when I revisited my own school experiences, for in honesty, I seldom felt tests or grades reflected my knowledge or level of effort. I gained student testimonials that they never worked as hard in any class before. The pride of ownership moved them from "X" theory workers to "Y" theory workers (McGregor, 1976) as students worked for themselves, not just for grades, or GPA's. The peaks of unity and high energy attention or transcendence occurred more frequently now, and classes literally never had management problems.

I no longer try to control students or punish them. Sometimes students miss class. I can not force them to come beyond building a deeper relationship. I conducted a poll one semester and found that students having difficulty attending my class were often failing other classes. I was taking their life problems personally and doubting the value of my program based on limited information. I gained insight, and a new respect for how difficult student lives could be, and a renewed sense of delight at how resilient most students really were, what sacrifices most were making to gain knowledge and an education.

I lost control in some areas by empowering students. For instance, by sharing surface structure, I lost the ability to lower grades based on spelling errors, tardiness or missed due dates. I gained the opportunity to model. I also lost some of my anonymity. Sometimes students call me at home; in fact last week I got a call from a former student of four years ago. She wanted to let me know that the course ideas were crucial to her success. She shared concepts and processes with colleagues, and the school was working to adopt my/her discipline ideas. I received a request from a student who needs help with citizenship papers. I get guest speaking engagements in the districts where students now teach and get holiday letters from students and even from students' parents.

### **3. Summary**

The process isn't over, but rather on-going. In fact, after eleven years of working to implement these ideas, I am still tinkering with the syllabus, envisioning better ways to embed deep structure so students feel safer, sooner. I am still looking for the best way to explain the value of taking responsibility for



learning and shorten the time it takes for students to trust the process, gain the vision of life long learning, optimize excitement.

As a teacher educator, I feel an added weight of responsibility. My students cannot become great teachers without understanding the nuances of great teaching. I need to be clear about them myself, communicate them to students, then help them recognize and replicate those conditions in their own teaching, in part through personalizing content, in part by exemplifying best practice. I can only bring democratic teaching to future students by modeling it myself.

Sometimes I think about how simple and yet how complex and inscrutable the changes really are. It is a little like removing *Apartheid* from our hearts. Freire's (1988) observation about victims may provide critical insight. We, ourselves, were victimized in many ways by the education we received. It is not a simple thing to tease out what part of submission is vital to gaining mastery and learning to think deeply and critically, and what part is inhumane. Can we allow teaching and learning to become inseparable parts of a greater whole? I now realize that it is not my ability to transcend the moment that is the achievement, but the mutual journey, all of us moving together, that is the miracle.

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*social context*. New York: University of Cambridge.

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### **Notes**

Note 1. This is intentionally in first person, a personal narrative approach, inviting connection and personalization of ideas.

Note 2. Doris, M. J. The broken cord.

Note 3. This is a term from ego development research. It signifies having the ability to move outside of the self and recognize the perspectives and needs of others.