

2020

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Recommended Citation

Shugurova, Olga. (2020). Co-constructing a learner-centered, democratic syllabus with teacher candidates: A poetic rendering of students' meaning making experiences.. *i.e.: inquiry in education: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 3.*

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol12/iss2/3>

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i.e.: inquiry in education is published by the Center for Inquiry in Education, National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.

Co-constructing a learner-centered, democratic syllabus with teacher candidates:

A poetic rendering of students' meaning making experiences

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Abstract

In this arts-based research study, the creative concept of a co-constructed, learner-centered, and democratic syllabus (Marino, 1997; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017; Ricci, 2012; Richmond, 2016; Shor, 1996) is creatively and critically examined through a poetic inquiry that focuses on its pedagogical significance in one of the Canadian teacher education programs. Specifically, the author aims to understand what this pedagogical significance means to her students-teacher candidates. The research question is: What does this syllabus-making experience mean to teacher candidates? The study reveals that the pedagogical significance of co-constructed syllabus is embodied in students' changing self-perceptions as the active and critical knowledge creators, rather than the passive and immutable consumers of the provincial curriculum. Specifically, co-construction embodies diverse learning experiences, as the students struggle to understand why they have to co-construct their syllabus and what this pedagogy actually means to them. The study demonstrates that co-construction actively, enthusiastically, passionately, and energetically generates students' engagement. Also, the co-constructed syllabus has an unstructured structure with multiple entry possibilities for learning.

Keywords: Democratic Teaching, Learner-Centered Syllabus, Co-Construction, Arts-Based Research

Introduction and Background

In this research study, I explore the concept of a co-constructed, learner-centered, and democratic syllabus in a teacher education foundations course with a focus on arts and social transformations. Currently, there is little research on how to co-construct a learner-centered syllabus in teacher education programs with a focus on preservice students' learning experience (Richmond, 2016; Shugurova, 2019).

Usually, I develop my courses with a sense of wonder and intrigue. For example, I once was inspired by Smith (2017) and decided to create a mysterious learning environment right from the

beginning of my course by placing a large sealed envelope on each desk with a message “Don’t Peek.” In this envelope, I hid the course syllabus, handouts, and some relevant university brochures (e.g., late assignment policy, sexual violence awareness, APA 6th edition guide, library information, and academic learning center handouts). When students walked into the class and saw this envelope, they raised their eyebrows and looked at me. I repeated the message, “Don’t peek!” They shared with me later that this envelope had an immediate sensational effect on them; it created a sense of suspense and curiosity. They began to wonder: What is inside? What does this course have to offer?

On this mysterious note, I introduce my courses with an inspirational epigraph by Holt (1967/2017) who says that “there is no difference between learning and living, that living is learning, that it is impossible, and misleading, and harmful to think of them as being separate” (p. 5). I then welcome all of my students and ask them to express their thoughts about this quote. Often, students seem to be silent and reserved at first; sometimes one or two individuals express their fascination with the idea of learning as living and say that they agree with it. Then, I explain what this quote means to me and my teaching philosophy and how this quote leads us into the course. Afterwards, we introduce ourselves in a way in which everyone can walk around the classroom with a name tag and engage all classmates in a lively and friendly dialogue about anything they want. At the end of this chat, each student should represent themselves and their newly acquainted friend. Then, I let them open the mysterious envelope which contains a hard copy of the course outline with a university-mandated course description, my specific learning objectives and outcomes along with a detailed description of learning activities and germane readings (e.g., Eisner, 2007; Freire, 1968/1970; Greene, 1997; hooks, 1994; Weston, 2004). In addition, my course syllabus has a caring language, so that my students perceive me as a “more motivated, warm, and approachable, as well as a less difficult teacher” (Richmond, 2016, p. 3). This perception is enhanced by my explicit commitment to dialogic questioning through open-ended, higher-order questions (Nystrand et al., 2003; Sherry, 2019).

Thus, we focus on the syllabus together, and I let my students know that I have created it for them; yet, they also have an opportunity to transform and recreate it to fit their needs, interests, curiosities, and passions. Hence, the syllabus is not predetermined in structure and meaning because it is co-constructed through a learner-centered and democratic educational process. The sense of collective wonder becomes more intense at this point because students seem to be intrigued and perplexed. I rush to explain myself with the help of the literature and my theoretical framework.

According to Ricci (2012), learner-centered and democratic education is willed, which means that people of all ages become owners of their education and gain control of their learning processes. There are neither specifically designated teachers nor learners in this context because “every teacher is a learner and every learner is a teacher” (Ricci, 2012, p. 1). What’s more, willed learning is democratic insofar as it is self-directed by learners’ passions and interests, rather than by externally imposed and undemocratic structures of compulsory schooling or other sociopolitical institutions (Ricci as cited in Swift, 2011). Ricci and Pritscher (2015) state that “willed learning is based in fascination, trust, respect, and care. . . . Fascination and trust are what allow for an internal motivation to flourish” (p. 3). When teachers perceive their students as self-directed learners, they allow all of them to become willful in their education and life.

Freire (1968/1970) states, “Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis. In order to *be*, it must *become*. Its ‘duration’ (in the Bergsonian meaning of the word) is found in the interplay of the opposites *permanence* and *change* [emphasis in original]” (p. 72). The Bergsonian meaning revolves around the idea of consciousness or conscious existence that one becomes aware of through the act of intentional recognition of the self as the historical being. I quote Bergson to provoke my students to question the undemocratic concept of permanence in education and wonder if there is anything at all outside of ourselves to be discovered and learned:

What are we, in fact, what is our character, if not the condensation of the history that we have lived from our birth-nay, even before our birth, since we bring with us prenatal dispositions? Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will, and act. (Bergson, 1907/2012, p. 5)

Needless to say that this philosophical explanation of the syllabus puzzles, intrigues, and frustrates many students. Some of them exclaim that they did not sign up for a philosophy class. The idea of learning from ourselves creates an emotional entry point into the course that is accompanied by an explosive and, simultaneously, numbing reaction from the students. They sense that this course is different from their other courses and that “they do not know what to expect” (Survey).

Then, I invite them to become self-directed and to self-organize in small learning communities, in which they have to create their own syllabus, present this new syllabus to the whole class, and collectively develop a consensus about the new co-constructed syllabus (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017). Hence, students’ groupings are not prescribed by me, since all students have a possibility to become responsible and accountable for their own self-directed groupings and its organizational learning dynamic.

Also, I share with them that I have learned about the pedagogical significance of this syllabus process from my teachers and the literature (Freire, 1968/1970; Marino, 1997; Matusov, 2011; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Ricci, 2012; Ricci & Pritscher, 2015; Shor, 1996). Further, I encourage my students to become willful in their learning and to begin with themselves: their self-perceptions, interests, passions, thoughts, topics of interests, learning objectives/outcomes, success criteria, and, even, deadlines. Consequently, I define the idea of willful learning as the democratic praxis of change that recognizes individual differences and “the uniqueness of each learner’s perceptions” (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 92) and the freedom of individual meaning-making experiences (Holt, 1995).

According to Aristotle, praxis (i.e., acting) should be distinguished from poesis (i.e., making), whereby acting does not have any predetermined goals and outcomes to be achieved (Matusov, 2017). Furthermore, praxis embodies in itself the very meaning of democracy because everyone is perceived as equal and, therefore, can pursue their will, interests, and ideas (Aristotle, ca 350 B.C.E./2011). In this context, our syllabus becomes a democratic, co-constructed process that is imbued with energetic feelings of sheer excitement and enthusiastic debates about the very idea

of educational structure in *our* course. These debates and processes are educational in themselves (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017).

Theoretical Context

What Makes My Syllabus Learner-Centered and Democratic?

Theoretically, the concept of a learner-centered and democratic syllabus is shaped by a critical pedagogical paradigm that is simultaneously informed by its branches of unschooling and dialogic pedagogy (Bisley, 2016; Freire, 1968/1970; Holt, 1970; Matusov, 2009; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017; Ricci, 2012). This paradigm can be broadly defined as an epistemological, ontological, and axiological constellation of ideas that intentionally aims to empower *all* students to become creative, willful, and critical change-makers, including the change-makers of themselves and of their learning communities in a broader sociocultural context of free democracy (Denzin, 2009; Freire, 1968/1970; Greene, 1977; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017; Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Ricci, 2012). These change-making processes entail the individual agency to live freely without any constraints and, in doing so, to become a decision-maker and leader of one's life.

More specifically, this agency embodies a meaning-making experience that “forces us to focus on the individuality and the uniqueness of the meaning *maker* [emphasis in original]” (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 91). Ultimately, free democracy is the individual ability to openly and freely speak “without fear of repression and punishment” (Denzin, 2009, p. 379). Also, the democratic freedom of speech includes the freedom to speak against the idea of democracy itself (Postman & Weingartner, 1969). In this view, pedagogy is not a noun, it is a verb of action that embodies a process of democratization (West, 2004).

As a process, pedagogical democratization allows teachers and learners to perceive and transform the dominating neoliberal realities of undemocratic regimes, including the taken-for-granted regimes of self and syllabus. Specifically, this process has three main components: 1) democratic socialization or the transformation of a classroom into a public sphere where all learners can equally participate in a collective decision-making process; 2) learning activism or the freedom of all learners to critically examine themselves and their realities in order to make meaningful decisions about their education; and 3) authorial agency and leadership (i.e., ownership) of one's life (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017, p. 3).

In my courses, I let my students know that democratic socialization is an integral part of our learning, which means that everyone is considered a part of class democracy. For example, we transform the idea of the syllabus from the beginning and co-construct it together in the spirit of free democracy. In doing so, all students are encouraged to become active learners. According to Lima and von Duyke (2016), this process allows all learners to engage in an inquiry-based learning and the teacher becomes a guide on a side (p. 102). Also, learners can make mistakes without being punished for them.

Likewise, I encourage my students to perceive themselves as learners and to practice their authorial agency because “authorial agency treats practices as praxis—an activity in which its

goals, values, definitions, and quality emerges in the activity itself” (Matusov et al., 2016, p. 435). In this view, learners become conscious of themselves not only as the decision-makers, but also as the responsible leaders of their education. Hence, they begin to understand the democratic value of personal responsibility for their ideas, actions, and praxis (Matusov, 2017; Matusov et al., 2016).

Clearly, the pedagogical democratization is always a dialogical and transformative process that involves unlearning and unschooling students’ self-perceptions (Freire, 1968/1970). Unlearning embodies the transformative process, through which students begin to question and, consequently, reflect on their previously schooled knowledge about themselves as the passive consumers of externally imposed curriculum. These reflections help them define themselves not as the isolated individuals who exist apart of the world, but as the relational individuals in the interconnected world.

As Freire (1968/1970) writes, “Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man [*sic*] nor the world without men, but men in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it” (p. 69). Hence, unlearning is an act of consciousness and consciousness is an ontological process of being *with* the world (Freire, 1968/1970). What makes this process ontological is a dialogic reflection, through which students question what they do and why they do what they do (Matusov, 2009). Furthermore, what makes this ontological reflection a transformative and unschooling process is precisely their self-directed freedom to choose what they *want* to do and to *talk* about why they want do these activities (Holt, 1995; Matusov et al., 2013). Matusov et al. (2013) explain,

Students’ ontological engagement in their education (Matusov, 2009) means that when the students are asked why they do what they do in school, “Why are you doing that?”, the students find the source of the activity in themselves (e.g., “I like it,” “I want to find out...”, “I want to learn that...”, “it is useful for me because...”) or in the activity (e.g., “it’s fun”, “it is interesting”). When students are engaged in the learning activities ontologically, their whole personality exists in their learning while this ontological learning penetrates the whole existence of the students “here-and-now”. . . (p. 42)

Thus, ontological engagement allows students to become willful learners and to perceive their classroom as their democratic world. Furthermore, the learner-centered, democratic syllabus engages students ontologically in the collective process of co-construction of their education and leadership of their future.

What Makes the Syllabus Co-Constructed?

Co-construction embodies in itself an educational process, through which all students equally participate in a *shared context of meaning-making*. Specifically, these meanings are about our course with all its details, such as timetable, themes or topics of interest, readings, assignments, deadlines, and length requirement for written assignments. All learners in their self-organized learning communities can work together on these transformations, and then we collectively discuss their new ideas.

However, this process is always messy because students do not know where to start and what to do. Therefore, I inspire them to become creative in their co-constructions and provide all tools that to my mind are necessary, such as bristol boards, construction paper, markers, colorful pencils, acrylic, and scrap paper. Also, I invite them to envision our syllabus as a canvas by Francis Picabia's *Cacodylic Eye*, which gathers his friends' signatures on it. And our course becomes a metaphoric canvas that embodies all of our signatures on it. By signing and co-constructing the canvas, each individual learner becomes the owner of her or his learning and education in this course. Matusov et al. (2016) write,

By placing his/her signature, the person acknowledges that the action does not just happen to the person, it is not causal, it is not forced, it is not reactive, it is not a natural outburst one's body and psyche, it is not capricious, it is not arbitrary, it is not temporary, it is not provoked by others or by circumstances—but the person's own action. (p. 431).

The signature represents students' agency and embodies their commitment to meaningful learning. Then, I pass my prepared canvas around the room and ask my students to sign it if they agree with this idea of educational ownership through co-construction. It is important to note that students can walk around the room and use water, brushes, acrylic paint, and other tools to sign the canvas. The photo of one of these canvases is presented below as an illustration. Usually, all students sign the canvas during their group discussions about the syllabus. Most of them find this signature-making process relaxing and entertaining because it gives them something to do with their hands while they struggle with the complex and abstract concept of co-construction.



Figure 1. Co-constructing the course through the visionary metaphor of ownership and Picabia's inspiration. A fragment.

Clearly, it is important to critically render the theoretical concept of co-construction and the context of shared meaning-making because it is not self-evident what exactly is shared and what the teacher's and students' responsibilities are in this process. Blinne (2013) states that syllabus co-construction is, in fact, a democratic negotiation of the course content and structure that helps

students reinvent themselves through community-building and a practice of freedom. For Hudd (2003), the goal of co-construction is for students to create their assignments, set a participatory tone, and enhance a sense of collective ownership (p. 195). In this context, Hudd presents her students with a course skeleton without any assignments, and students have to independently develop their assignments (i.e., type, content, and due dates) at home. Then, students are assigned into teacher-organized, gender-mixed groups where they have to build a consensus in 30 minutes (p. 198). Consequently, this co-construction is teacher-centered, rather than learner-centered because students' choices are limited in structure, content, and self-organization. Hudd's concept of hierarchical co-construction is superficial because it does not entail her reflexivity on the context of power in the classroom. In fact, teacher-led co-constructions mask the dominant power relations and sustain its circulations and uninterrogated assumptions (Shor, 1996).

Interestingly, Blinne (2013) claims that not all learners can co-construct because many "have been silenced and excluded from their educational process" (p. 42). Like Hudd (2003), Blinn presents a remedy to silenced students in her list of predetermined questions about the course goals, expectations, learning spaces, and multiple learning styles. These questions provide a guiding framework for the teacher in the co-construction process (Blinne, 2013). Clearly, these pre-set questions and activities contradict the concept of praxis (Matusov, 2017). Hence, the silenced students become even more silenced and may choose to hide behind more vocal students.

In this view, the hierarchical concept of co-construction does not reflect a practice of freedom because students do not have the power to share their own questions and to freely speak their minds. Consequently, the democratic negotiation is questionable by the teacher's imposed questions and guidelines as well as her imposed concept of silenced students. Perhaps, a teacher can mislabel students as silenced, while they are, in fact, resistant to her authority and "intellectually exiled" in their resistance (Shor, 1996, p. 12). Therefore, it is unclear how she determines what groups of students are silenced during the first class; and whether her questioning helps them overcome their silenced histories.

In addition, Blinne (2013) and Hudd (2003) write that teacher's and learners' responsibilities are negotiated throughout the course. For example, Blinne claims that "if something is not working, we know immediately and can create a new direction" (pp. 42–43). Yet, it is unclear who knows what/how, who gets to choose this direction, and who steers change in whose direction. In this view, democratic participation and responsibilities become elusive. Further, a collective sense of responsibility renders the very meaning of responsibility insignificant. In fact, there is no responsibility at all when it refers to a vague idea of collectivity (Matusov et al., 2016).

In contrast, Shor (1996) shares his experimental co-construction experience with his students by focusing on the contested context of shared power with them. Specifically, Shor does not begin his lesson with a pre-planned skeleton of handouts nor a gender-mixed group assignments; he does, however, decide to intuitively rely on the unplanned and the unknown. He acknowledges that students do not necessarily want to co-construct anything on their first day of class and are not interested in any negotiations.

Even though Shor introduces his political commitments at the beginning, his students do not always understand what these mean due to the complex academic discourse and jargon (p. 19). Despite the appearance of power negotiations, students follow their teacher. Shor (1996) writes, “Faced by this democratic vacuum in everyday life, I have no choice but to use my institutional authority to ease into a process of shared power. . . I invite students to invent with me a negotiated curriculum in a mutual process that repositions us” (p. 19). Likewise, one of my students expressed the similar feeling of vacuum during the co-construction due to the fact she is not used to this type of free democracy. Rather she is used to a popular cultural consumerist democracy. This means that students do want to have the power to own their education; however, they also know that this power of learning cannot necessarily be fully shared (e.g., the teacher education program has the required list of compulsory courses) and they cannot own their education the way they choose to (i.e., public schooling is also compulsory nationwide).

Clearly, a co-constructed syllabus is not an instrumental or hierarchal process that can simply be led by a teacher-guide, but an emotionally complex, nonlinear, and messy process of power negotiation and meaning-making. I tell my students that yes, co-construction is uncomfortable, unknown, and messy, but it does not mean that it should not be done or that we should simply go with the instrumental handouts and predetermined questions.

Shor (1996) explains that “in this situation, students and teachers can only learn how to negotiate by negotiating, on the job, in process. . . . We invent the process and, by doing so, reconstruct our social selves” (p. 20). Hence, co-construction is unfinished and flexible, which means that students should be able to choose their own assignments, due dates, modes of evaluation, and in-class activities throughout the whole course. Freire (1998) explains that “being unfinished, and therefore historical, conscious of our unfinishedness, we are necessarily ethical because we have to decide” (p. 100). By learning how to co-construct their assignments, students learn how to become ethical and how to democratize their learning. All in all, a co-constructed syllabus helps all students perceive their teacher as flexible, friendly, approachable, and caring (Hyland & Kranzow, 2012; Richmond, 2016; Saville et al., 2010).

Methodology

I have purposefully shaped my methodological framework with an intention to explore and answer the research question (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Leavy, 2015). My research question is: What does this syllabus-making experience mean to teacher candidates? The inquiry focus is on my students’ lived experiences. That is why I situate my method in a critical qualitative paradigm of arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Denzin, 2017), such as poetic inquiry (Blaikie, 2011; Glesne, 1997) because I am an artist and a teacher. My students’ experiences are intricately saturated and positioned with my teaching/learning/knowing experience. Hence, I cannot be an objective observer and detached researcher because their learning experience is influenced by my teaching and vice-versa. Denzin (2017) writes that “the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied” (p. 12). The situated processes are embodied by my poetic approach that gathers the participant-voiced poems (Blaikie, 2009, 2011; Glense, 1997).

Data

I have collected multiple data, such as the course syllabus, my teaching journal, and anonymous students' surveys of teaching opinions. The course syllabus serves as a reminder of what my students and I had done during the course and how we had co-constructed the syllabus together. My teaching journal is a sketchbook that consists of my chronological teaching log that is organized on a weekly basis with my learning goals and success criteria for the week, as well as my reflections on the learning process.

The anonymous students' surveys were conducted at the end of the course for the purpose of institutional quality assurance and the departmental evaluation of the course and my pedagogy. I received these surveys in the mail three months after the course completion. For this inquiry, I have chosen all qualitative data that are left out of the numerical survey. The numerical focus silences students' words by rendering them insignificant and absent from the survey at all. The official quality of my teaching is solely and exclusively formed on the basis of the numerical data that are statistically generated. In contrast, I purposefully chose the unofficial, informal data that are signified by the open-ended students' commentaries and reflections without any predetermined questions. These responses are not even meant to be read by the department leaders and are supposed to be there for my pedagogical renderings. On the surveys, there is a box entitled "other comments," where students can write freely without any presupposed ideas and templates. These outside of the box and open-ended data present a record of the students' self-generated significant and, thus, authorial ideas.

Blaikie (2011) explains that in arts-based research, *significant* ideas embody participants' "significant moments, feelings, phrases, and words" (p. 49). The significant ideas are not enforced by the departmental policing of students' opinions, rather they are self-authored, democratic, and more truthful.

According to Eisenhart and Jurow (2011), open-ended answers tend to lead to "new insights about what research participants care about" (p. 708). That is why my sampling is purposeful (Patton, 2002) because I chose to focus on my students' genuine and truthful ideas about their experiences that are *significant to them* and are not used to measure my teaching performance with the externally imposed regimes of numerical evidence without any context.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this context, I have purposefully gathered all relevant open-ended, anonymous commentaries (n = 60). Drawing on Blaikie (2009, 2011), I created my poems by letting the students' significant ideas come alive on paper. Blaikie (2009) writes that her poems emerged from her participants' "repeated words and themes and the most evocative imagery" (p. 4). I also highlighted the repeated words and rendered them into free poetic stanzas, while trying to visually reconstruct my students' expressions and lived experiences (Glesne, 1997). Specifically, I poetically rendered each individual survey by trying to capture the student's tone, emotion, and the significant idea of their commentary. Also, I created a memo for each stanza that included my poetic response to it and also my search for the emergent theme through focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Charmaz (2006) writes that focused coding helps

“explore topics that had been glossed over, or that may have been too implicit to discern initially or unstated” (p. 58). Through my focused coding, I assembled my poems together around two main generative themes: student engagement and emergent structure.

Findings and Discussion: What Does This Syllabus-Making Experience Mean to Students?

Student Engagement: Enthusiastic Excitement and Passion

Awesome, exciting, passionate . . .

We enter the room 304
Grouped tables in circles
Have paper, pencils, acrylic, pastels.
The teacher, dressed in bright purple,
Holds bristol boards; she walks back and forth.
“The smartboard is working well,”
She talks to herself.

She smiles and greets us with friendly gesture.
Unsure of what to say, think, to expect.
We sit back and wait for this unusual, artsy lecture.
The teacher searches for wires, outlets, cords to connect
Her laptop; she has technical issues with the projector.

Now she says that we should begin . . . with ourselves
Then we should co-create, co-construct our course.
This unexpected beginning feels strange, overwhelms.
What should we do? We are not being told, ain't being forced.

Wait, what? What does this all mean?
Encouraged to share stories, dreams, ideas, ideals,
We don't have to look at the front, at the board, smartscreen.
We face ourselves, being silly, thoughtful, serious, real.

What should we learn? How do we learn best?
Hands-on! Well... it depends...
By passion, talent, enthusiasm with the rest
Of the class, classmates- now friends,
Excited, awaken, perplexed, impressed,
And fully engaged.

All students think that co-constructing is highly engaging in itself because the process generates enthusiasm, excitement, and passion. Even those students who struggle to find any meaning in this process feel that this sense of engagement is at the heart of co-construction. In this perspective, the pedagogical meaning of student engagement is a philosophical praxis, “which entails the enactment of a curriculum of life” (MacMahon & Portelli, 2004, p. 61). However, the

term “student engagement has to be critically contested due to its inherent ambiguity (Bergmark & Westman, 2016). It encompasses a multitude of ideas and experiences, including student-led negotiations and self-management in the context of course organization (Brough, 2012). Generally, student engagement occurs when students’ motivations (i.e., intrinsic and extrinsic) are heightened because they can perceive the immediate relevance and valuable application of their learning experience in a classroom context (Beane, 1997; Brough, 2012; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Hence, students become engaged when they are involved in their learning praxis (Bahruth & Steiner, 2004; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012).

The critical pedagogical literature reveals three main praxis-based contexts of student engagement: 1) *transgression* of students’ objectification by allowing students’ agencies to be practiced in the classroom; 2) *humanization* of students’ subjectivities by recognizing the critical importance of their life experiences; and 3) commitment to *dialogic* teaching and learning (Freire, 1968/1970; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017; McInerney, 2009; Shor, 1996).

In my classroom, transgressions take place from the first moments when students encounter an energetic, circle-like environment, in which they learn that they will become course authors and agents. Also, transgressions happen when students perceive me as a part of their circle, not as an administrative leader above them. I de-center myself by walking through the class space. Interestingly, students always notice my dynamic and flexible presence that is not defined by a static, motionless statute-like figure at the front of the class. One student noticed that I am their creative conductor, and the co-construction is the orchestra.

As a teacher, I am always in motion, and this performative becoming contributes to and sustains the collective transgressions. What’s more, co-construction inspires students to perceive and perform their learning environments through motion and movement in the class. They can easily get up and walk to join their self-chosen and self-organized learning communities as well as to visit other learning communities. Thus, co-construction creates the ontological transgressions of students’ agencies, and our course becomes flexible. Students become excited and learning becomes fun.

Furthermore, the humanization is also implicated in the course because all students can and should reflect on their passions and life experiences. For example, all students have an opportunity to share and build on their previous learning experiences during the co-construction as well as to write about them through their chosen media.

This dialogic commitment intrigues and challenges students because they are not necessarily used to having any unstructured discussions in the class. They seem to think that I expect a particular answer that is grounded in the course texts and pre-planned learning outcomes. When I tell them that I do not expect any specific answer, they ask me why not and “what’s the point of asking.” The point is to create a collective dialogue where ideas can openly be shared, interrogated, debated, and contemplated. According to my students, class dialogues should be about *their* “passionate sharing of opinions and self-expressions” (Survey). This means that they can not only respond to my ongoing open-ended questions, but also pause the course discourse at any time and raise their own questions for the collective reflection.

Interestingly, Ricci and Pritscher (2015) write, “Teachers and professors don’t often enough notice that they are answering students’ questions before students have questions, and in doing so may interfere with students having questions” (p. 51). Hence, the concept of dialogic commitment is an enthusiastic provocation (Matusov et al., 2016) and not another compelled idea that a teacher may impose upon her will.

Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane (2017) write that dialogic provocations “throw and thrust them [i.e., students] into developing their own invested opinions about the issues at hand” (p. 15). However, my students do not always want to be thrown into compulsory dialogues; they want to create and engage each other in their own provocations through hands-on creative activities and self-emergent dialogues. Thus, dialogic encounters emerge through students’ intrinsic motivation to learn more about their own interests and to lead themselves in this pursuit of learning. This finding is congruent with research studies on dialogic learning and intrinsic motivation that reveal the importance of dialogic reciprocity, through which teachers and learners become collectively engaged in creative and personalized educational dialogues about their culturally embedded values, beliefs, truths, and practice (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2019; Phillipson & Wegerif, 2016; Tikkamäki & Syvänen, 2014; Wegerif, 2012). During these provocations, students can also freely challenge their teacher by questioning the very necessity of co-construction and by suggesting to make the co-construction of true learning throughout the course, not just on the first day of the course. Hence, dialogic student engagement is not concerned with a fixed and regulated consensus in the classroom, but rather with an ongoing reciprocity of learning.

Consequently, we co-construct the concept of co-construction as an unfinished, dynamic and enthusiastic process of passionate meaning-making and its collective negotiations at the beginning of each class. This process entails my openness to students’ input and feedback on a weekly basis.

That is why the first class of our co-constructed course is an inspirational beginning that sets the inclusive stage for student engagement and its future becomings. All in all, co-construction generates student engagement in the context of transgressions, humanization, and dialogic commitments. In order for students to find and create meanings in and through co-construction, all learners should feel excited, enthusiastic, and passionate about learning and teaching.

Emergent Structure: Choice and Freedom

Enjoyed the variety in choice
Yet, I found it difficult to know
What you want; what is meant by voice.
It’s just difficult to follow,
To know where we should go
At times; too many readings per class
What are the marks? Is it fail/pass?
What is empowerment, praxis?
Unclear on what is expected of us.

Material is not standardized

There is little to no structure in dialogic lectures.

Too many options: ambiguous, free, ruptured,

Unclear, unstructured, creative directions.

Too much choice, too much discussions.

I enjoyed learning though, loved this class.

It provoked critical thinking, opened my eyes

To new experiences, passions, ideas, ideals,

Such as being democratic, empowered, equals.

The structure of a co-constructed syllabus is democratic because it is multimodal, emergent, and generative. A student explains,

One of the most valuable things I will take away from this course is the structure that it took. I have never taken a class like this before, where each student was considered part of a democracy and we worked together to approve and make corrections to the syllabus and assignments. This was an incredibly interesting approach and I would love to implement elements of this into my future classroom.

Multimodal learning involves students' freedom to choose their favorite mode of learning and knowledge representation that matches their intelligences, such as auditory, performative, narrative, visual, and others (The New London Group, 2000). Thus, students can demonstrate these multiple modes as their assignments or as their in-class learning responses/activities. For example, at the beginning of the course, students suggested that we should critically discuss arts-integration and its practicality in public schools as a separate topic. Everyone agreed, and we determined a specific date for this topic to be taught and learned (i.e., in the middle of the course). However, on the specified date before the beginning of the lesson, many students seemed to be resistant to the very idea of arts integration. They did not want to discuss the topic of arts integration as a new norm; they wanted to actively challenge the norm. They thought that some ideas were "somewhat logically sound" and, yet, these ideas "left some students alienated" and "were not easy enough for the class to accept" (Survey). That is why we negotiated the structure of that lesson before its beginning, so that students did not have to accept any of the ideas without any informed and proper understanding of them.

Consequently, we had an enthusiastic discussion about ideas and how different ideas become normalized and institutionalized, for whom, and in what modalities or contexts. Based on the spirit of this discussion, we all realized that our learning modality for this lesson should be a passionate debate. Thus, students could also co-construct the structure of the debate itself, which they thought should be multimodal as well, including drawing on a poster (i.e., bristol board placed at the front of the class), mind-mapping on a blackboard with a chalk, as well as some role-playing, free dance, or oratory for the purposes of collective persuasion.

Likewise, Bergmark and Westman (2016) found that a co-constructed syllabus structure is multimodal. That is why the course structure is negotiated with all students at the beginning of each class. However, multimodality can also be perceived and experienced as confusing and

perplexing, chaotic and messy. For example, some students ($n = 4$) think that the whole idea of co-construction is problematic because the concept of multimodal structure signifies an emergent, unclear structure or a nonexistent structure (Survey).

Interestingly, Holt (1967/2017) found that all learning situations are structured, and that there is no such thing as unstructured learning or teaching (p. 28). Yet learner-centered, democratic structures are different; some structures constrain students, while others enhance and sustain diverse learning experiences. Co-construction creates multiple possibilities for all students to create and recreate their own structures of learning that are meaningful to them.

However, another student explained, “Too much freedom with the course left students unsure of what was expected” (Survey). What students understand as a structure is a predetermined set of activities, readings, and assignments that they can use to obtain a grade. If there is no external framework to follow, they do not necessarily know what my expectations are and what they are supposed to do (Survey). These students defined their frustrations as the shocking, confusing, and paralyzing freedom that they are not used to have in public education. A student wrote, “The freedom you give us was shocking at first but we slowly learned the value of freedom of expression” (Survey). The shocking aspect was precisely due to the fact that I told them that there is no specific answer or product that *I want* from them. A student reflected, “Need clearer expectations, pared down assignments, and more structure to inform students on what *you want*” (Survey). However, I informed students on the first day of co-construction that they should be willing to explore their interests, talents, ideas, intelligences and, in doing so, to create something that *they want, not what I want*. This finding confirms Shor and Freire (1987) that “students cannot understand their own rights because they are so ideologized into rejecting their own freedom, their own critical development, thanks to the traditional curriculum” (p. 107). Co-construction allows teachers and students to reclaim their rights and freedoms to meaningful educational experience through their self-authored, emergent structures of learning.

Yet, I have to admit that these first discussions about the co-construction and expectations seemed troublesome and chaotic to me. Specifically, I experienced a powerful sense of confusion and anxiety when some students struggled to brainstorm on the first day of the course. I felt that the course was not going well, even though the course had only started 40 minutes ago. Interestingly, Bergmark and Westman (2016) found that not only students, but also teachers often feel insecure in the context of co-construction. They explain that “the unpredictability was experienced as a feeling of chaos resulting in having second thoughts about the possibility of engaging students due to their resistance and the hierarchical, and sometimes restrictive, structures of the university” (p. 33). This sense of collective insecurity is uncomfortable at first, but it organically transforms into a sense of novelty, or productive perplexity, through time, ongoing reflections, and constructive feedback.

Conclusions: Reflections and Recommendations

This study invites the reader to contemplate the pedagogical significance of students’ meaning-making experience in a critical context of co-constructed, learner-centered, and democratic syllabus. The generative findings answer the research question by demonstrating students’ experiences, such as an emotionally charged engagement with the course and each other. Based

on these findings, teacher educators may implement their co-constructed syllabus and inspire their students to think independently about their education and without any predetermined templates. Also, teacher candidates may provoke their educators to implement multiple means of co-construction in their courses and, in doing so, to challenge the dominant status quo of undemocratic curricula. Last but not least, the public can demand for policy-makers to fund democratic, educational innovations in order to sustain free democracy in education and in society.

As suggested by one of my peer reviewers, this study implicitly suggests that a quantitative focus of teaching evaluations of educational quality is inadequate because numbers silence and marginalize students' voice and experience. Thus, my study suggests that students' surveys of educational quality should be assessed by deans through a holistic model that includes students' voices (i.e., open-ended remarks and thoughts), rather than a rigid numerical survey. Future research may utilize a mixed method study to determine risk-taking in democratic co-construction and its sociocultural impacts on teaching evaluations.

Furthermore, future research may address some of the limitations of the current study, such as a cultural and historical context of co-construction with a focus on students' inclusion and diversity. Generally, I observe that the concept of co-construction is in itself a cultural construct, which means that not all students interpret it as democratic. For example, one of my indigenous students shared with me that co-construction is intrinsic to her cultural heritage, and it should be practiced through a method of teaching circles. However, she urged me that co-construction has many different meanings in different indigenous communities worldwide that are not necessarily about the Eurocentric idea of democracy or inclusion.

Hence, a pre-planning, intercultural dialogue about the multiple meanings of co-construction should be implemented on the first day of class or through learning management systems. Future studies may analyze how these pre-planned dialogues shape culturally sensitive co-construction processes, enhance students' inclusion, and promote cultural diversity. In addition, a meta-analysis of pedagogical co-construction in global cultural communities and historical contexts may advance educational knowledge about diverse theoretical and practical contexts of learner-centered, inclusive, creative, and free democracy in a teacher education classroom.

On this note of wonder and curiosity, I conclude that a co-constructed syllabus will always be an unfinished praxis that invites us to creatively engage with the mystery of learning and to surprise ourselves with the new possibilities of passionate freedom, excitement, and enthusiastic being.

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