

Chapter 10

Democratizing Classroom Discussion

Stephen Brookfield
University of St. Thomas, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the way Jurgen Habermas, the German critical theorist, connects the development of democracy to the educational use of discussion. It proposes an understanding of democracy that regards it as an ever widening, inclusive conversation, in which teachers (as well as students) exercise their power as educators. The authors explore three specific dialogic methods that can be used to democratize classrooms along the lines suggested by Habermas: the circle of voices, circular response, and chalk talk techniques. Each of these is designed to create an inclusive conversation where no one voice dominates, to hold back the reaching of a premature consensus, and to integrate the widest possible number of perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

One of the strongest claims people make for discussion is that, properly conducted, it is inherently democratic. Few writers have advanced this claim more determinedly than the German critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas. Over the past five decades Habermas has produced a constant stream of texts that, in their different ways, examine the connections between learning discussion behaviors and practicing democracy.

Habermas believes that post-industrial society has seen the decline of the public sphere (the civic space or ‘commons’ in which people come together to discuss and decide their response to shared issues and problems) and the weakening of

civil society. In this chapter I review his contention that the key to reversing these negative trends is understanding how people learn communicative action and how they apply that learning in democratic conversation. For me, Habermas is a theorist of democracy who believes that a society is more or less democratic according to the discussion processes its members use to come to decisions about matters that affect their lives. As societies democratize its citizens have fuller access to information and endure progressively fewer distortions to constrain discussion. Truly democratic discussion represents the freest, least restricted communication possible. In Habermas’ view the greater the freedom of discussion that people enjoy, the higher the chance that true critical reason – reason employed to create a just, humane democracy – will emerge.

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But what does a democratic classroom look like in very specific terms? Is it one where teachers simply do what the majority of students want? This notion of democracy as a majority vote is not educationally defensible. After all, students will rarely vote to explore ideas that threaten or challenge them, or opt to undertake work that is complex, dense and requires considerable effort. Yet doing both these things is often necessary if people are to move beyond their current levels of skills and understandings.

In this chapter I analyze the way Habermas connects the development of democracy and the educational use of discussion and I propose an understanding of democracy that regards it as an ever widening, inclusive conversation, in which teachers (as well as students) exercise their power as educators. Along the way I explore a number of specific dialogic methods that can be used to democratize classrooms along the lines suggested by Habermas.

BACKGROUND

Adult and higher education has firmly embraced the democratic ideal. To describe an act of practice as democratic is to confer on it the educational 'Good Housekeeping' seal of approval. Of all the ideas espoused as representing an authentic American educational tradition, the idea that its practitioners should work to make their practice, and the world, increasingly democratic is the most powerful. The words 'democracy' or 'democratic' are often used to justify and defend whatever practice adult educators subscribe to, serving as a kind of scriptural signaling. They are invoked to signify the progressive credentials of the speaker. This is what in philosophy is called a premature ultimate; a term that, once invoked, has the effect of stopping any further serious discussion of its exact meaning. Describe one's practice as democratic and there is a chorus of agreement, a massed nodding of heads. If we answer a ques-

tion about our practice by replying that we did something because it was democratic, then the conversation often comes to a full stop. The word is so uncritically revered in adult education that it has become almost immune to critical scrutiny.

Yet the idea of democracy is malleable and slippery, with as many particular definitions and interpretations as it has utterers. It can be invoked so frequently and ritualistically that it becomes evacuated of any significant meaning. Only by trying to live out the democratic process do the contradictions of this idea become manifest. As a way of beginning this chapter, then, I need to address what I mean by democracy.

For me, a democratic system exhibits three core elements. First, its members engage in a continuous, ever-widening conversation about how to organize social, economic and political affairs. To be democratic this conversation must be as inclusive and wide-ranging as possible involving widely different groups and perspectives. It must also be one in which people are able to make decisions based on full knowledge of the situations in which they find themselves, full awareness of the range of different possible courses of action open to them, and the best information about the potential consequences of their decisions. In Habermas's (1996) terms, democratic occurs in its most fully realized form in an ideal speech situation that allows all participants full access to all relevant knowledge pertaining to the issues discussed. Mezirow (1991) used this element of Habermas' work to develop his theory of transformative learning and it informs his conviction that adult educators need to ally themselves with social movements that seek to secure people's full access to the knowledge that affects how they might live.

Teaching democratically according to this notion focuses on creating conversational forms that are as inclusive as possible and fighting any vested interests concerned to block access to relevant information. When an organization or structure seeks to privatize knowledge and keep

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