CLASSROOM DISCOURSE *and* democracy

MAKING MEANINGS TOGETHER

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INTRODUCTION

Intellectual Authority for All

Upon what grounds might teachers in today's ever more diverse classrooms establish a pedagogical authority that reflects and represents democratic values? Shall a teacher's ability to improve students' standardized test scores be thought central or a teacher's mastery of disciplinary content and contemporary pedagogical theory? What about a teacher's ability to relate to students and to appreciate something of their often complex relationships with learning and school?

Today, educational administrators and teachers are under tremendous pressure within many school systems to raise students' test scores by specified margins within specified time frames. Some administrators therefore likely look to their teachers primarily to raise those scores. Educational theorists have proposed professional expertise in subject matter and pedagogical theory as the valid grounds of teacher authority. Others have suggested that teachers must also be able to relate to their students' lives.[1]

People defer to other people's *authority* when they are bound together by a social code that suggests, not only that such deference is appropriate, but also that it is morally right.[2] While each of the above capacities is likely to bolster a teacher's stature in the eyes of some, none clearly distinguishes a democratic pedagogical authority from other forms, as none of these capacities directly references the moral commitments to human equality and intellectual liberty that define democracy as a social and political form.

I propose characterizing democratic pedagogical authority in relation to yet another kind of capacity: the ability to orchestrate meaningful, powerful, and transparent 'knowledge construction processes' within one's classroom. Each of these adjectives—meaningful, powerful, and transparent—represents an organizing line of thought within the world of democratic learning theory. I specify *meaningful* because we now understand that ideas take root and grow only when they are linked to a student's concerns, understandings, and conceptual frames; *powerful* because all citizens

in a democracy need to master the languages, ideas, and practical tools required to become fully participating members of the broader society; and *transparent* because transparency is essential to the democratic construction of publicly held understandings.[3]

To be interested in 'knowledge construction processes' means to be interested in how knowledge is created and used by people to make sense of their worlds. The phrase suggests that one sees knowledge as located within people who are working to understand each other and the world around them in order to be able to behave in useful and satisfying ways. In this view, knowledge does not reside in books, although authors may successfully represent aspects of their knowledge within books, and knowledge is not seen as information that can be handed unchanged from one person to another, such as a phone number. Rather, knowledge is viewed as an ever-evolving matrix of cultured impressions and understandings that each of us continually constructs as we apprehend and interact with the beings, contexts, and objects in our lives. Knowledge, as employed here, determines the ways in which each of us views, and acts upon, the world.[4]

Meaningful, powerful, and transparent knowledge construction processes support the development of what I term 'intellectual authority' among all who participate in such processes. Intellectual authority has to do with what and how a person knows *and also with the ways in which a person attends to what others know*. To possess intellectual authority means to be able to represent one's own knowledge in personally and culturally meaningful terms and also to be willing and able to understand the divergent views of others.

Each of us holds intellectual authority to varying degrees, depending upon how much we know about a matter and the extent of our ability to consider alternative points of view on that topic. To hold intellectual authority in relation to a particular issue or area of concern, then, one needs to know something about how different people have thought about that issue. To establish intellectual authority within a professional or academic field, one must both become versed in the assumptions, methods, and shared understandings of that field *and* be able to weigh the relevant

strengths and weaknesses of competing lines of thought in a principled and fair-minded fashion.

These conjoined capacities—developing and articulating an informed perspective and appreciating the divergent perspectives of others—are best learned in tandem within a respectful and caring learning environment. In requiring students to maintain a discerning attention towards their own contributions and the contributions of others, teachers can help to foster a classroom community within which all feel free to speak their minds without fear of ridicule or neglect. This quality of learning environment allows each student to view his or her perspective as a valued asset in the work of the classroom, even when that perspective diverges from the perspective of the teacher or from those of other students. Such divergences come to be seen as opportunities for all to work toward greater transparency by clarifying the assumptions, experience, and reasoning that lie behind those different ideas and claims.

Nurturing everyone's sense of emotional safety and personal worth is particularly important within the world of Pre-Kindergarten-12 (PK-12) education for obvious reasons. Children are impressionable and vulnerable; their relationships to learning and knowledge are shaped in lasting ways within the primary and secondary schools they attend. In order for our schools to inculcate valuable cultural resources and cultivate a commitment to democratic values and methods, educators need to create learning environments in which everyone appreciates and respects the significant challenges that can accompany any effort to build new understandings. It becomes as important for students to value their own and each other's thinking as it is for the teacher and students to understand and value each other.

Rather than speaking of 'teacher-centered' or 'student-centered' teaching styles, I will speak here of teacher-led, student-led, and co-led learning experiences, *all* of which can advance the intellectual authority of both teachers and students. When well constructed, each type of learning experience can therefore contribute to the creation of a richly realized democratic learning environment. As the philosopher John Dewey long ago argued, there can be no choosing between teacher understandings and student understandings within

democratic schools.[5] To the contrary, teachers and students must continually strive to engage with the content of their studies in ways that deepen understanding, extend cultural literacy, and increase intellectual clarity for all.

In providing children and adolescents with the resources to represent their own experience and understandings in literate and cogent terms, teachers prepare their students to assume their rights and responsibilities as active participants within their democratic society. In enabling their students to grapple with cultural understandings in a meaningful and rewarding manner, teachers nurture a sense of social integration within those students and a propensity toward lifelong growth and learning. In these ways, accomplished, democratically minded teachers establish principled grounds for the responsible exercise of their authority.

In contrast, a teacher's convincing mastery of prescribed content knowledge and current pedagogical theory means little if that teacher cannot inform the lives of the students who enter that teacher's classroom each day. And a teacher's ability to relate to students' beliefs and perspectives means little if that teacher cannot empower those students to make sense of their greater worlds in culturally fluent terms and to build constructive attitudes toward and relationships with those worlds. Finally, the currently widespread pursuit of high test scores will provide meager returns indeed if, in the end, students feel diffident towards the competencies they have mastered in order to earn those scores.

Should teachers prove able, however, to harness their content knowledge, pedagogical expertise, and interpersonal resources to orchestrate meaningful, powerful, and transparent knowledge construction processes, then each of these capacities could mean a great deal. And should high test scores be seen to represent an appropriately conceived (and so, modest) share of students' expanding sense of intellectual authority, then the capacity to generate those scores among one's students might also be made pedagogically valuable.

These claims are based upon a theory of democratic education that aims for every student's willing intellectual engagement within the classroom, leading to their eventual responsible and personally

satisfying participation within the broader society. Such willing, responsible, and personally satisfying participation is seen as essential to vibrant democratic life and is believed to rest upon both a sense of membership in one's surrounding communities and a sense of personal liberty to believe as one chooses in many areas and to shape one's experience according to those beliefs. These feelings of social membership and individual liberty are seen, in turn, to result reliably from particular forms of shared experiences and the consistent nurture of democratic commitments, sensibilities, and methods.

These ideas regarding the dispositions and capacities that democratic schools must foster are supported by a considerable amount of scholarship from a number of relevant fields. I have mentioned the philosopher John Dewey, who investigated the defining characteristics of democratic education throughout his long career. Although some have seen Dewey as a moral relativist, Dewey believed that democratic relations imply and entail a distinctive moral outlook, one that underlies the character of classroom discourse advanced here.[6]

Of the many philosophers who have engaged and advanced Dewey's insights regarding democratic school practice, this work references, in particular, the scholarship of Amy Gutmann, Nel Noddings, and Maxine Greene. As a political philosopher, Gutmann has focused on the essential role that principled deliberative processes play in all democratic relations, pointedly arguing that children therefore need to be apprenticed into such processes throughout their school years. Gutmann's development of the notions of liberty and justice in relation to democratic school practice also supports the emphasis readers will find here on providing opportunities for personal meaning-making throughout a child's primary and secondary school career.[7]

Noddings is well known for her thoughtful deliberations on the broader aims and interpersonal character of democratic classroom practice, again based upon organizing democratic commitments to human equality and intellectual liberty. For example, Noddings has investigated the roles that human care and happiness play in sustaining democratic relations and has situated these considerations