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# Democracy Across the Disciplines: Design Your Course for Democracy

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*If a liberal arts education should prepare our students to participate in a meaningful way in democracy, what does that mean for how we design our courses across disciplines? In this paper, I first address the question: who should teach democratic skills? Using an upper-level course in Canadian politics, I then illustrate how to explicitly integrate democratic skills and attitudes into course design through learning objectives, classroom activities, assignments, and grading techniques. Finally, I argue that these practices can and should be adapted to other disciplines.*

## Democratic Skills: Who Should Teach Them?

Students often focus on their employment prospects upon graduation, but higher education also plays an important role in socializing students to democratic skills and values that allow them to participate fully as citizens upon graduation. Disciplinary structures obscure the crucial role we all play in educating our students for these larger goals. A disciplinary focus may lead faculty members to eschew the teaching of writing skills, assuming that it is someone else's job, perhaps an English professor. Not all students take English classes, not all English professors agree that teaching writing skills is their task, and not all students learn writing skills from one or two English courses. Professors demand writing proficiency in most

disciplines, and prospective employers require writing skills of graduates they hire.

Democratic skills, like writing skills, are general skills that students should master upon graduation. While high school offers some preparation, students continue learning these skills throughout the undergraduate years (Gutmann, 1999). Whether the discipline is dance or geography, undergraduates need to learn a range of democratic skills: how to interact with civility, how to stay informed about crucial issues that shape their discipline and world, how to deliberate with those who differ, and how to collaborate with others. They have to learn how to listen across cultures and to develop consensus on contentious issues. As the citizens and leaders

of tomorrow, who takes responsibility for meeting this challenge? Rather than leaving this task to some other class or discipline, all faculty members must take responsibility for fostering democratic skills. The discussion below illustrates how I designed an upper-level course in Canadian politics to help students master democratic learning objectives. Though this case example is a politics course, I will note how to adapt selected activities to other disciplines.

## Case Example: Overview of a Capstone Course in Canadian Democracy

I designed a fourth-year capstone course, *Canadian Democracy*, to integrate the learning of democratic skills.

I divide a class of 25 into small groups of four to six students. Initially, a representative from a non-profit non-governmental organization introduces their organization to the class. Each group drafts an advocacy proposal for an organization; each organization provides feedback on the draft. Over the course, groups develop research, policy analysis, and an advocacy strategy for their organization. Finally, groups present their projects to the representatives who evaluate its usefulness. Most group work is online or presented in class, making this assignment possible for classes of up to 50 students.

The organization (10%) and group members (10%) assess the advocacy project. Each group submits a policy analysis paper, and the group chooses either individual or group assessment (20%). The instructor evaluates a final portfolio (40%) and the democratic citizenship and professionalism grade (20%).

I developed learning objectives for the course using the Ontario Council of Vice-President's guidelines (OCAV, 2005). Below I discuss specific democratic learning objectives and illustrate how I have integrated each learning objective into course design,

teaching practices, assignments, and assessments.

Democratic citizenship skills are embedded in this group assignment. As students develop an advocacy strategy for their organization, they experience the challenges and possibilities of making democratic change in collaboration with others. Other disciplines could adopt this by selecting projects appropriate to their discipline.

### Autonomy and professional capacity:

#### Democratic citizenship and professionalism

Because our capstone courses are supposed to help students connect their undergraduate studies to career and citizenship, I jettison participation grades in favour of a democratic citizenship and professionalism grade.<sup>1</sup> During the first class, students discuss the citizenship and professional skills that they think they might need in the future, and how these are revealed in class behaviour, including: attendance, preparation, timeliness and organization, presentation of work, and class discussions. We confront unprofessionalism every day in our classes: lateness in attendance and assignments, failure to consult in a crisis, failure to consult course materials before asking questions, or failure to do required reading.

Democratic citizenship draws attention to a different set of classroom skills: respect for others, soliciting contending viewpoints, listening to others, or attending to views with which one may disagree. I ask the class to identify problematic situations and to propose appropriate remedies; I request examples of students disrespecting others or impeding others' learning. As we generate a list of negative behaviours, the class develops a shared commitment to reject such behaviour and act respectfully towards each other in tone, language, and demeanour, both online and in class. I use this method in a variety of contexts, and invariably, students generate the skills I want addressed. This list becomes the basis for developing a rubric for democratic citizenship.

Articulating professional and democratic skills is not enough. How can we teach students to use them regularly (Richhart, 2002)? To reinforce, I

<sup>1</sup> The author credits Elizabeth Wells (2007, June) for the idea of a professionalism grade.

require readings on democratic skills. I also call attention to appropriate behaviour in class discussions throughout the course: 'thank you, Susan, for connecting Ken's point to our prior discussion.' I keep detailed notes and distribute a one-page check sheet based on the rubrics so students can track their own performance. About one-third of the way through the course, I ask students to evaluate their own performance, based on the rubric. We meet to compare notes and discuss any glaring discrepancies or areas that need work. This formative evaluation is especially useful in providing feedback on group interactions I have observed in class. Similar reinforcement of democratic skills and self-evaluation is even possible in a large lecture.

### Communication skills: Democratic listening skills

Democratic listening deserves to be singled out as a learning objective in its own right. Peter Elbow (1986) argues that students need to develop believing as well as critical skills if they wish to develop their creative capacity. While we often emphasize teaching critical skills, we seldom emphasize teaching believing skills. I would also argue that both believing and critical skills are crucial to a democratically functioning citizen. Critical skills allow us to attack another's argument, show where their evidence is weak, where they are inconsistent, etc. This is a zero sum game. Someone is right; someone is wrong. Believing skills allow us to hear and understand viewpoints different from our own, not so that we can critique them, but so that we can better understand how others see the world. Believing skills take us beyond mere 'tolerance' of difference and allow us to understand a perspective dissonant from our own. 'How can I see this the way you see it?' would be the lead question. Believing skills are the foundation of the respectful interaction so crucial to a democratic society, where people disagree on fundamental issues. To see something from another's perspective means that we learn that "truth is often complex and different people often catch alternate aspects of it; we grow closer to seeing correctly by entering into each others' conflicting perceptions and formulations" (Elbow, 1986, p. 289). Believing

skills are essential for a democracy that values cooperation and collaboration over conflict.

I embed democratic listening skills into the course in several places. In the first class, I pose problematic scenarios related to democratic listening: students who talk a lot but do not listen to other students; students who do not participate at all or very little; or students who speak only to criticize. Upon reflection, students can usually generate ideas about alternative democratic behaviour that focuses on paying attention to others' ideas, being able to summarize and expand on others' ideas, and listening to others' ideas to understand a viewpoint that is different from their own. I also ask them how important this skill is in a democracy.

This discussion shifts attention from how often they participate to the quality of their participation, including the quality of their listening. Subsequent class discussions explicitly highlight the practice of these democratic listening skills. In addition, I routinely use discussion techniques that support learning these democratic listening skills, including the leaderless discussion (Ritchhart, 2002), and the believing game (Elbow 1986), which could be used in any disciplinary context.

Students also practice in small reading and writing assignments, and submit their work online, in advance of class, and respond to the work of at least two other classmates. I give specific instructions for feedback, emphasizing believing skills and constructive critical feedback. For example, in the first assignment, students submit a political self-portrait that responds to questions such as: what has drawn you into political science? What political issues do you care about? Which courses did you learn the most from and why? Have significant life experiences influenced your approach to politics? Students respond to classmates' entries by identifying similarities in their experiences and reflecting on what they might have in common. They also comment on another student's work that differs significantly from their own. How has this changed the way they see the discipline? What have they learned from this fellow student? These exercises could readily be adapted to any discipline.

Another assignment asks students to compile a democratic profile of their current representatives,

federal, provincial, and municipal. They post a draft of a letter to one of their representatives on an issue that they care about to the course website, and solicit feedback from fellow students on the letter's effectiveness, noting ways to improve it. Both exercises require students to see issues from another's perspective. In other disciplines, an analogously authentic exercise would provide a similar opportunity for students to practice listening.

I evaluate these democratic listening skills in several places in the course. The democratic citizenship and professionalism rubric focuses on a specific range of behaviours: do you ignore others' ideas or pay attention and respond to them? Do you listen only long enough to tell someone why they are wrong or do you listen to others who disagree with you and try to understand how the issue makes sense from their perspective? Do you disrespect others in tone, language, or demeanour, or is your tone, language, and demeanour respectful? The final portfolio in the course asks students to compile evidence from course assignments to demonstrate that they have met each of the course's learning objectives, and to write a reflection piece that talks about democratic citizenship and professionalism skills they have learned in the course.

## Conclusion

Although my example is a political science course, these ideas could potentially be adapted for courses in many other disciplines. Class discussions in any discipline would benefit from having students interact with respect, listen to each other, and understand perspectives different from their own. We all share responsibility to prepare students for life after graduation as employees and citizens. It is too important for our democracy to leave this task to someone else.

## References

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## Biography

Janice Newton, Associate Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies at York University, was awarded a 3M National Teaching Fellowship in 2005, and has presented teaching workshops in Canada and the United States. Her publications include *Feminist Challenge to the Early Canadian Left* (McGill Queens 1995), *Voices from the Classroom: Reflections on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Garamond 2001), and articles on preventing plagiarism, classroom assessment, feminist pedagogy and women in the Canadian left. In addition to her research on democratic listening, Dr. Newton is also doing a history of representation in the Canadian Political Science Association.