

Laboratories of Democracy

Utilizing Problem-Posing Education in Our Classrooms

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Introduction

The very first time high school students walked past a giant sign hanging above the door that read “Laboratory of Democracy,” the first words they heard from me asked them to reflect, “What is the *greatest* problem facing students at our school?”

At first, I could not believe the responses. Their idea of problems ranged from limited lunchtime food options to gang violence, from the school dress code to systemic racism. Responses such as these highlighted the challenges my students faced while hinting at the knowledge and life experiences, both the mundane and the exceptional, they brought to class (Levinson, 2013). They also served as a starting place for both learning and civic engagement in the classroom.

Purpose of School

In my first years of teaching, I viewed the purpose of school to be what my childhood teachers and college instructors had instilled in me. School was simply a place for learning academic content and for developing skills needed later in life. Such delayed application is central to the thinking of Essentialist scholars like Eric Donald Hirsch Jr. (1987) and Perennialists like Robert Maynard Hutchins (1953). Although they come from different philosophies, both argue schools can reinforce democracy by producing culturally literate students who can solve problems later in life.

But as I struggled to connect what I

was teaching to the issues my students brought up, I realized that any conception of schooling that required them to wait—to put off addressing their problems until later in life—was ill suited, both to my purpose and to theirs. I needed another conceptualization of the purpose of school, one that pushed students and teachers to focus on solving problems, not later in life, but now.

Paulo Freire’s (1970) *problem-posing education*, which stands in opposition to the banking model of education I was struggling against, articulated to me an alternative purpose for school. Freire insisted that instead of starting from the arrogant assumption that “the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” (p. 73), and that the primary task of students is to record, memorize, and repeat whatever the teacher decides should be learned, education should instead start with the students.

In short, instead of telling students what to know, we should ask questions: What do you want to do? Where do you want to go? Who do you want to become? Then, let the answers to those questions guide what is taught.

Freire’s model of school engenders a new relationship between teachers, students, content, and the broader community as a whole. Problem-posing education follows three general phases: identification of the problem, analysis of the causes of the problem, and finding solutions to the problem (Freire, 1970, 1973; Solórzano, 1989).

In this scenario, school would function as a means for students to reflect and act upon their own problems. Freire (1970) wrote, “[Students] posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (p. 81). The result is a new, more authentic,

more democratic relationship forged by using school to focus on student-generated problems.

My Problem With Using Problem-Posing Education

As much as I aspired to follow Freire’s ideals, however, I found that enacting such a repurposing of school in my own teaching was daunting in both the ideological and logistical challenges it posed. I realized that to help my students, perhaps I should start with myself.

This, in essence, became the problem I posed: How should I implement a problem-posing education as a means of encouraging students to become more active democratic citizens, today?

Of course, this kind of question is not one I expect ever to answer fully, but I have found careful examination of Freire’s three phases and my planning and reflection process to be essential.

Phase I

How you implement the educational process is as important, if not more so, than the results. Democracy is steeped in *how* we accomplish our collective goals. Do we debate a piece of legislation and pass it through multiple versions of our collective will, or does one individual take swift and unvetted action? Both achieve the same goal, but the latter is at the cost of democratic ideals. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) reminded us that “it is fundamentally important that the process respect the varied voices and priorities” (p. 243) of stakeholders.

In this spirit, my students and I began Phase 1 of Freire’s approach by carefully and publicly documenting problems. Students brainstormed their beliefs about problems they faced at our school. They

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shared their ideas in partners, and together we generated a large list of problems on the board. At this point, I asked them to select two that piqued their interest and free-write about them.

Following the free-write, I opened the floor to the students and facilitated discussion. I asked, "Which problem are you most concerned about, and why?" We made explicit connections between what we were doing and the special relationship members of a democratic society possess. We discussed how each of our thoughts and actions concerning a problem can and do affect the lived realities of other members of our community. I pronounced, "What others think about an issue and how they vote is important to us all."

After much discussion, we prioritized. My students voted for issues they felt were important to the school community, and the field of options was whittled to two, then one. When we were a community of learners who had agreed to engage with one primary problem, Phase 1—identifying the problem—was complete.

Not all practitioners of problem-posing education follow this model for Phase 1. Examples where the teacher alone identifies the problem for students exist (Nixon, 1995). Schleppegrell and Bowman (1995) advocate a more teacher-centered approach, encouraging teachers to prefilter problems for students so the problems will "not be overwhelming or unsolvable" (p. 298). Fear that students will feel their work had little impact on a particular issue is common within such types of socially-responsive education (Banks, 1994).

Yet other examples highlight the more student-centered approach to identifying the problem I have chosen to take. In one example, the teacher begins by asking students to "map" their communities by writing about issues that "deeply angered or affected" them (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 257). These maps are used to collectively see themes and/or areas in common before voting on a particular area of interest the whole class would investigate.

Such steps toward building consensus in the classroom can help to increase intrinsic motivation and responsibility (Sartor & Brown, 2004). In other examples, small groups of students are charged with choosing a focus issue for themselves. Brown (2013) highlights how middle school social studies groups studying Africa self-selected topics such as drinking water, corruption, and health care. When the problem-identification phase draws directly from students' knowledge

and experience, teachers have begun the process of valuing students ownership of the experience while typically increasing motivation (Beane, 2005).

Phase 2

In Phase 2 of problem-posing education, we analyzed the causes of the problem. One semester, all three of my senior government classes decided student parking was the greatest problem facing students at the school. The high school was located in the center of an older sprawling suburban town designed well before people knew most juniors and seniors would want a parking space on campus.

As a result, students routinely parked on the neighboring narrow streets, raising tension between local homeowners, students, and the school. To make matters more urgent, neighborhood locals approached city council with a pilot parking permit program, which would have blocked students from parking on the city streets adjacent to the high school campus.

A significant challenge in implementing problem-posing education is becoming comfortable with not being able to anticipate all learning experiences. I was at a relative loss for how to present and then analyze the cause of the parking problem. Fortunately, the student-teacher and teacher-student relationship granted me permission not to be required to know everything. Instead, I worked collaboratively with my students to find out what we knew, what we did not know, and where we could find answers causing the problem.

My students gathered information from the town newspaper, spoke with longtime neighborhood residents, and discussed the problem with their parents and peers. They reached out to administration at the school site and at the district level and collaborated with a local newspaper reporter. The mayor himself was invited and accepted an invitation to come speak to us on the issue. Additionally, students conversed among themselves on the issue.

In taking these steps, my students increasingly tapped into their own stores of knowledge on the issue and began to recognize a culture of frustration, accumulated over the years, concerning this issue. In this way, I was about to "utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). My students became vocal in needing to understand what political power the school, school district, townspeople, and city council had over local issues. Furthermore, they needed knowledge of ways they

could actively engage in legislative discourse. I began to act as a bridge between what students already knew about the problem and what they needed to know.

Increasingly, we as a community of learners were forced to make our own mental maps of how local political structures worked. Students came to recognize the high school, the school district, neighborhood locals, high school students, and the city council as separate political entities, each with its own motives and goals. As our collective knowledge of the problem grew, so did students' comprehension about who was responsible for the problem.

One student told the school paper, "If students are a bit more respectful towards the neighbors and don't litter or vandalize, such problems would not be so overbearing," while another admitted, "Tracy Unified School District should have made enough parking spots for all of its students" (Rodrigues, 2014). Such comments highlighted my students' increasing awareness of the complexity of the problem.

Phase 2 of problem-posing education constitutes a more "messy" version of student-centered learning (Neumann, 2013). Finding appropriate texts and visuals to analyze the problem has been noted to be challenging (Schleppegrell & Bowman, 1995). However, embracing your students as sources of knowledge will always prove useful.

Nixon (1995) described how her adult female students used "spread sheets with schedules, open notebooks with lists, copies of government documents, and a diagram with measurements of a living space" (p. 2) as the texts to analyze their problem of child care. In this example, we see how self-generated texts can be used in conjunction with outside sources of knowledge.

Regardless of the text, successful versions of Phase 2 will find ways to help students grapple with the particulars of how factors, such as social, political, and economic forces, contribute to the problem (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Phase 3

Once the students possessed a collective knowledge of content, we were able to make decisions about the best way to engage with the problem of parking. Thus began Phase 3.

Phase 3 of problem-posing education manifested differently in each of my three government class sections. One class chose to meet with the principal, another asked the assistant superintendent to come share

the school district's plan on parking, while the last circulated a petition and elected representatives to carry their voice to city council.

At times, my classes felt more like a community organization than a high school government class, enacting a commonly felt sentiment (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). I was a facilitator, and my students were agents of change. In the end, my students did convince the city council to delay implementation of the pilot permit parking program, the assistant superintendent established a parking task force with representatives from each class as members, and the town mayor lauded the students' engagement and encouraged them to continue to participate in the future.

Examples from the field further suggest a wealth of diversity in what and how Phase 3 may manifest. Problem-posing students have held informational forums for peers and created and distributed informational pamphlets on how the SAT is based (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Other have written letters to the editor, constructed and administered surveys in their communities, created posters, and presented skits to share their knowledge (Schleppegrell & Bowman, 1995). In many instances, students have opted to work to solve the problem through raising awareness of the issue they have come to better understand.

Planning

Planning learning experiences in problem-posing education is challenging. Unlike other forms of unit planning, authentic problem-posing education necessitates significant input from students during *each* phase. Wallerstein (1987) noted that "the curriculum constantly evolves from students' issues, and teachers can't measure fulfillment of predetermined objectives or test outcomes" (p. 43).

Given these realities, models of unit planning, such as backward planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), have proved less useful. Beane (1993) acknowledges this challenge in shifting from "holder of knowledge" to "facilitator" (p. 88). One teacher noted, "The control lies with me, and I don't know that I'm ready to give this up to the students. But I know it is the right thing to do, but just because it is right does not make it easy" (Brown, 2013, p. 160).

Lacking the ability to preplan all stages of the learning experience, I utilized other modes of conceptualizing a flow of learning events. Zervos and Latsko (1993)

have developed a series of question sets to establish the context and sequence of a problem-posing unit of study. The five question sets include describing the situation, identifying the issue, relating the situation to personal experience, analyzing the underlying issues, and doing something. Such models have proven useful in helping teachers grapple with the logistical challenges inherent in such a radically student-centered approach to teaching (Schleppegrell & Bowman, 1995).

Problem-posing education requires making strategic decisions about what standards are to be covered, how you will cover them, and why certain content and concepts are presented. In the preceding example, I covered the same History–Social Science Content Standards on the workings of government I had in previous semesters; I simply covered them earlier and more extensively in response to when my students needed to learn them.

Reality does not fit neatly within the strands of state content standards. As such, we focused on California Standard 12.2, which asks students to evaluate and take and defend positions as democratic citizens, while also addressing Standard 12.7, through which students will analyze and compare the powers and procedures of the national, state, tribal, and local governments.

Inquiry-based learning at times requires nonlinear approaches to addressing state standards, as other inquiry-based models, such as project-based learning, have highlighted (Boss, 2012). Yet, in the context of the Common Core State Standards, thematic and inquiry-based orientations toward teaching content are increasingly common, as exemplified by the National Council for the Social Studies C3 Framework (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010).

Reflection

Problem-posing education required me to reflect on my identity as a teacher in new and challenging ways. Not surprisingly, I discovered I did not know the answers to all the questions that arose during the course of the learning experience. I needed to relinquish my role of expert, end my pretense of knower of all things, and reject my position as sage on the stage and assume one of life learner. I needed to move beyond content knowledge and tap into knowledge about how education systems work, what resources I had at my disposal, and how I might use them to create authentic learn-

ing experiences for all my students. I find that maintaining a growth mind-set is a necessity (Dweck, 2007). As it turns out, I learned that not knowing did not diminish my authority or power as a teacher. As I shifted from teacher to facilitator, I found new deposits of knowledge and strength, in me *and* in my students.

The nature of democratic processes is slow, often chaotic, and at times disappointing. My senior government students spent what seemed to me an inordinate amount of time grappling with how to confront their problem, and I saw many possibilities they seemed unable to consider. I had to remind myself that how I proceeded as the facilitator was important. I realized that telling my students what to do would defeat the purpose and that creating time and space for them to come to a consensus would be much more meaningful.

As I reflected on the choices I had made, I came to realize the crucial difference lay not in the *what* we were doing but in the *how* and *why* (Beane, 2005). Lortie (1975) has argued that effective teachers find alignment in what, how, and why they teach. Careful and consistent consideration of these three questions was ever present in my reflective process.

After a time, each class of students developed a solid plan and engaged with their problem in a variety of ways. In the end, when their hard work did not stop the pilot permit parking program from going into effect in the long term, my students were stunned and disappointed. Similar to culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), social reconstructivism (Grant & Sleeter, 1993, 1997), and multicultural education as social action (Banks, 1994), problem-posing education can leave students feeling disheartened if they are unable to bring meaningful resolution to the problem at hand.

I too was disheartened but pleased with the even deeper lesson that my students had experienced. Debriefing and unpacking such moments of *apparent* failure is important in preparing students to become lifelong civic engagers. Even when outcomes are not what we want, process matters.

Conclusion

Freire's view of education is both relevant and needed. School communities are increasingly looking toward frameworks of learning that are student-centered and inquiry-focused. The rise in project-based learning and Makerspaces seems strong

evidence of this trend (Lou & Peek, 2016; Tintocalis, 2015). Yet, a key difference between such models and problem-posing education may lie in the sharing of power over what, how, and why learning experiences unfold (Beane, 2005). In this way, implementation of Freire's vision of learning provides the unique potential to transform relationships.

Problem-posing education provides a powerful frame for increasing active civic engagement by asking teachers and students to modify the traditional relationship between them as they reflect and act upon their lived realities. Recent scholarship has noted the positive impact schools can have on the political socialization of students (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Neundorf, Niemi, & Smets, 2016), while also highlighting racial disparities in access to high-quality civic education (Graham & Lindsay, 2009).

Such realities highlight the need for both teachers and students to demystify and, it is hoped, normalize participatory citizenship as part of our daily experience as citizens. When we do so, we invariably make our classrooms into laboratories of democracy.

Enacting problem-posing education in my classrooms was far from easy. In many ways, I found I was uncertain about my willingness to share power and authority with my students. At the same time, many of my students were hesitant to assert themselves in ways required by the framework.

Yet problem-posing education has forced me, and continues to force me, to rethink much about my practice of teaching and my relationship with my students. Now, I think of my students as artists, the course content as the medium, and the result of our efforts as performance art that, I hope, my students will continue long after they leave my class as they engage with real-world problems.

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