

# **Empowerment and Social Change: Promoting Transformative Practice Through Student-Centered Learning**

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## **Abstract**

*The responsibilities of today's educational institutions far exceed basic education. Aside from academics, schools are also responsible for developing citizens who can identify and rectify social injustices. Preparing students to engage in transformative practice requires student-centered classrooms wherein students first reflect on themselves and become aware of their belief systems, and then take ownership of their own learning by means of choice and decision making. The goal is for students to develop critical thinking skills that will carry over into their evaluations of the world as a whole and the choices that they make to initiate social change.*

Over the years, there has been a great deal of discussion and debate surrounding what constitutes a "good school." Some educators believe that good schools provide students with a meaningful education, while others stress the importance of developing respectful citizens. Regardless of personal opinion, most would agree that one of the most important factors of any good school is that it prepares students for purpose in life outside the classroom through developing a sense of social responsibility and critical perspectives. Schools that engage in humanizing pedagogy are not just good schools; they are great schools. These schools not only give students an appropriate education; they also set the stage for the type of thinking and learning necessary for transformative practice by empowering students to initiate social change. These schools empower students by cultivating student-centered learning; providing opportunities for self-reflection, choice, and student ownership; teaching according to a meaningful and relevant curriculum; and fostering the development of critical thought.

Today's students are living in a world saturated with hidden messages concerning expectations for their behaviour and beliefs as well as information about their level of influence over others and events in their environment. The majority of these messages are intended to perpetuate the beliefs and desires of those dominant groups in positions of power. According to Henry Giroux (2009), one of the most influential critical theorists of our time, without recognizing their culpability, schools are also responsible for perpetuating the messages of dominant groups through both content and organization. In order for students to make meaningful contributions to the world around them, schools must instead teach students to look at these messages from a critical perspective and identify injustices as they appear. In addition, students must also learn a sense of social responsibility to initiate change when necessary.

In order for students to be prepared to take on this role, they must first develop the sense of empowerment necessary to identify and challenge age-old beliefs. According to McLaren (2009), "Empowerment means not only helping students understand and engage the world around them, but also enabling them to exercise the kind of courage needed to change the social order where necessary" (p. 74). In order for this transformative practice to occur, students must be aware of their own opinions and beliefs, feel confident in their abilities and responsible for their futures, and believe that they have the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to initiate social change. The development of all of this awareness begins at the school level, with the hope that the resulting sense of empowerment carries over into the interactions that students have with the world around them.

## **Teacher-Centered Versus Student-Centered Education**

More traditional approaches to education, according to theorists such as Paulo Freire (2009), operate under the assumption that "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider

themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 52). Freire suggested that these teacher-directed banking models prevent students from engaging in meaningful thought about their surroundings, since "the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (p. 53). This teaching style suggests to students that they are inferior members of the learning environment, their job being to store the information passively without questioning its validity. As a result, students fail to develop the sense of responsibility necessary to engage in critical thought, developing their own perspectives, questioning their surroundings, and making meaningful and relevant connections. Traditional approaches often leave students feeling powerless, unaware of their strengths, and lacking in self-confidence. Without opportunities to engage in critical thought, combined with having their entire education dictated to them, students feel little responsibility for their future and are rendered incapable of transformative practice.

Schools that empower students typically take a student-centered and holistic approach in which "teachers and students both become actors in figuring out the world through a process of mutual communication" wherein "questions and not answers are the core of the curriculum; open-ended questions prod students to critically analyze their social situation and encourage them to ultimately work towards changing it" (Peterson, 2009, p. 306). Teachers model "social responsibility and critical engagement in community and global issues" (Peterson, 2009, p. 306), while demonstrating respect for the opinions of students and a willingness to consider their perspectives. The result is a classroom atmosphere "where students feel secure and confident enough to interrogate their own realities, see them in a different light, and act on their developing convictions to change their own social reality" (Peterson, 2009, p. 306). Students come away from this environment feeling satisfied and empowered, having been given the respect necessary to feel confident in themselves and to take responsibility to initiate change.

### **Self-Awareness and Opportunities for Reflection**

Empowerment through education begins by teaching students to reflect on their own opinions, identifying how they developed these beliefs and what they are based on. In order to look at the world from a critical perspective, students must first be aware of their own personal biases and consider how these beliefs may influence their opinions and actions. Student-centered classrooms provide ample opportunity for this type of reflection through open dialogue and experiential learning. As students engage in discussions and decide whether they agree or disagree with the opinions of others, they have the opportunity to learn a great deal about themselves and their own personal belief systems (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Once students are aware of their opinions, teachers must then "help them reflect upon why they think the way they do" (Peterson, 2009, p. 315), analyzing how these beliefs developed and who or what influenced them. From this point, students can then think critically about these influences and decide whether they are reliable sources of information, worthy of impacting their own personal views. By thinking about their own thinking, students are engaging in metacognitive practices that promote critical thought and empowerment. Understanding oneself is crucial in having the power to influence social change.

Within my classroom, students engage in regular discussion on a variety of issues. On at least a weekly basis, I bring a current event or news topic to class for discussion. I am always surprised by the range of opinions and perspectives brought forward. These discussions give my students opportunities to become aware of their own opinions and to take into consideration those of their peers. In my experience, it is often difficult for students in junior high to adjust their opinions in light of new information, but because I make a point of creating space for everyone's thoughts, my students begin to realize that there often is no one right answer. With time, they are beginning to adjust their opinions when they encounter ideas they had not considered at first, but see some value in now. At other times, they are able to articulate exactly why they

disagree, this proving to me that they are not only able to consider many sides, but have enough self-awareness to explain why they believe so strongly in their own opinions. Through open discourse, my students are becoming more capable of critical analysis of a variety of opinions and so they are developing the first skills necessary for transformative practice.

I also make a point of discussing very controversial issues with my students, including topics such as euthanasia and the death penalty. Once students identify their opinions on these issues, I again have them attempt to identify where their opinions originated and decide whether the sources may be biased or unreliable. My hope is that my students will approach the development of their own points of view more critically, in order to ensure that they have reliable information before choosing a side or taking a stand. Surprisingly, students are very critical of the influences that they experience and can often easily identify potential sources of bias, both of which set the stage for their becoming capable of transformative practice.

### **Opportunities for Choice**

The next step in providing students with an empowering education is identifying their interests and tapping into their strengths in order to increase engagement. When students are interested in what they are learning and are given opportunities to showcase their talents, the resulting sense of success guarantees engagement. Since student growth is the primary focus in student-centered classrooms, lectures are replaced with opportunities for active learning through hands-on experiences and often include individual interest-based projects that allow students to pursue their passions and explore their world in a way that appeals to them (Nanney, 2004). Assignments that offer choice in content and/or presentation increase engagement and effort, as well as the likelihood that every student will experience success within the classroom. Experiencing success while exploring the world and developing opinions within the security of the classroom cultivates the sense of confidence that students need to carry these skills over into the world outside of school. By providing students with opportunities for choice, teachers increase feelings of self-confidence and foster the development of a sense of curiosity about the world necessary to encourage students to continue to think critically about their surroundings for years to come.

I consistently take advantage of opportunities to offer choices to my students whenever I can. This year in particular, I have an enormous range in both ability and interest, and so I have realized much more success in allowing students to make their own decisions with regards to both content and presentation. The results are remarkable for several reasons. Not only does overall performance improve because students are much more actively engaged, but overall confidence and feelings of self-worth are also on the rise. I attribute this boost in confidence to increased engagement and therefore increased success, and also to students' learning about themselves, identifying their own strengths, and the realizing that they are capable of making good decisions. According to Giroux (1985), the key to developing the "civic courage" necessary to stand up to social injustices is to stimulate "their [students'] passions, imaginations and intellects so that they will be moved to challenge the social, political and economic forces that weight so heavily upon their lives" (p. 165). Feeling more confident in themselves and in their opinions and choices places my students in positions to approach the outside world more confidently. This confidence makes it much more likely that students will make valuable contributions and this, combined with being aware of their strengths, results in the feelings of empowerment necessary for transformative practice.

### **Ownership and Responsibility**

As with confidence, student-centered classrooms also foster the development of a sense of responsibility. In traditional classroom settings, students rarely develop a sense of responsibility. Instead, they often develop a sense of irresponsibility as a result of being subjected to "teacher-

centered and textbook driven curriculum which serves to disempower children” (Peterson, 2009, p. 310). School experiences that prevent students from making decisions regarding their education result in their failing to develop “the responsibility and self-discipline necessary to be independent thinkers and actors in our society” (Peterson, 2009, p. 310). Student-centered approaches to education offer students multiple opportunities to take their education into their own hands by setting their own goals and monitoring their own progress (Lapan, Kardash, & Turner, 2002). Students within these classrooms feel as though their education is their responsibility, as they have a say in what they learn, how they learn it, and how they are assessed. Students are responsible for developing their own opinions and adjusting them in light of new information. As students begin to assume responsibility for their learning and success, they also become more independent learners. Once students have a desire to learn and are interested in their future, they will begin to take ownership in and responsibility for their own experiences, developing critical thinking and leadership skills necessary to “perceive the gaps in what exists and try to transform and repair” (Greene, 2009, p. 95). Learning that they have a responsibility for their future and that of others elicits empowerment, which inspires them to engage in the critical thought necessary to initiate social change.

In my classroom, students are highly involved in the assessment process. First, through self-reflection, the students have an opportunity to assess their abilities and performance. Surprisingly, they are generally very honest and accurate. This not only helps students to gauge their learning and identify areas that they need to focus on, but it also suggests that their opinions are important and will be taken into consideration. Second, students are major players in decisions concerning assessment. I often include students in the creation of rubrics not only so that they will be aware of how they will be assessed, but also because I want them to understand that I value their input. As a result, students tend to put forth a much stronger effort, as they feel a sense of ownership in their learning and are a part of the process every step of the way. They take their learning more seriously and in turn become more responsible classroom citizens. Taking pride in their careers as students sets the stage for taking responsibility for their futures outside the classroom, making mature decisions, and take the steps necessary to express their opinions and take action to change that with which they do not agree. Engaging in transformative practice so early in life provides students with the experiences that they need in order to continue these behaviours well into adulthood.

### **Relevant and Meaningful Curriculum**

Because student-centered classrooms focus on the experience and interest of the students, those classrooms can easily offer students a relevant and meaningful curriculum. Classrooms that bring in the outside world encourage students to reflect on their lives, making connections, developing or modifying opinions, and building upon their own realities (Peterson, 2009). National studies have stressed that “schools need to do a better job of offering all students a quality curriculum. One often cited feature of a quality curriculum is the connection, whenever possible, to real-world applications that help students integrate their learning with possible futures” (Lapan et al., 2002, p. 10). By offering students a meaningful education, educators are making it much more likely that they will remain engaged in their learning, building upon connections, and developing or modifying their opinions along the way. With more and more information, students are in a much better position to make judgments about the world in which they live and, in doing so, identify injustices and the flaws in their surroundings in need of their efforts toward transformation. Relevant educational experiences, made possible through student-centered learning, are yet another requirement for initiating social change.

Regardless of subject or topic, I make attempts to relate everything that we are studying back to real-life examples. If I can show students that what they are learning is both important and relevant, not only will they develop a deeper understanding of the material, but they will also build connections to previous knowledge, thus gaining a more thorough grasp of the workings of

the world in which they live. In my experience, the activation phase of lessons is often overlooked or omitted for the sake of time. I tend to take the opposite approach and spend just as much time activating previous knowledge as I do in acquiring new information. The resulting deeper level of understanding has proven to me the importance of creating an environment that nurtures the building of connections between old and new knowledge. Understanding their environment motivates students to develop their own opinions and to identify that with which they do not agree. From there, students can begin to decide whether transformation is necessary and, because they have such a meaningful and solid understanding of the event, topic, or issue, they can identify just how to go about initiating change.

### **Critical Thinking**

Student-centered classrooms also promote critical thinking skills, yet another requirement for transformative practice. Three types of classroom interactions promote the development of critical thinking skills: “the extent to which faculty members encouraged, praised or used student ideas; the amount and cognitive level of student participation in class; and the amount of interaction among the students” (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995, p. 25), all of which are major parts of a student-centered classroom. Within the walls of a student-centered classroom, students are free to express their ideas, pursue their interests, and engage in open dialogue with their peers. In doing so, students not only receive the support that they need to discover their own points of view, but also have the opportunity to critique dominant views within society and to suggest alternatives. As a result, students “learn to question and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominate culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving, the wider social order” (McLaren, 2009, p. 77). This type of critical thinking is what will eventually lead the student to a point where they naturally begin to question “the way things are and imagine alternatives, so that the word and the world may meet in history for a dream of social justice” (Shor, 2009, p. 301).

In my opinion, critical thinking is difficult to define but very easy to model, and therefore can be taught only through demonstration. During the first month of school, I spend a great deal of time, particularly in my social studies classes, not only reading about historical events, but critiquing them as well. Using a more teacher-directed approach, we look at an event critically, identifying the key players and what led up to the event. Next, we discuss how different decisions or choices may have led to different results, and then we decide how that different path would have changed the face of history and whether that would have been beneficial in the long run. As the year progresses, I gradually release responsibility for these assignments, allowing them to be more student-directed. Students decide which events to look at, journal their ideas, and then present their opinions to the class. This often leads to problem-posing debates wherein students critique each other’s opinions and suggest alternatives. These types of assignments create a safe and healthy environment for students to express their opinions and challenge those of others. Although this process consumes a great deal of class time, the resulting critical thinking skills are well worth the effort.

### **Conclusion**

Preparing students for life outside the classroom should be the focus of any school. Today’s world is imbued with hidden messages intended to control and persuade the population to certain opinions and actions. Aside from preparing students for what is to come, educators must also give them the skill sets and confidence to navigate through these messages, analyzing their worth as they go. When students find themselves facing situations they feel are in need of change, they must have the ability and sense of empowerment necessary to initiate the transformation needed to right the wrong. “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world” (Nelson Mandela, 2003, line 33), and so it is the responsibility of schools to

prepare students for this task. Student-centered classrooms provide teachers with both a method and forum for engaging students in the type of education necessary to achieve these skills. In these classrooms, teachers “strive against fitting students quietly into the status quo” (Shor, 2009, p. 301) and instead create individualized education programs that allow students to achieve their full potential while learning about their world and being given opportunities to look at it critically and engage in changes to that world. These classrooms offer opportunities for students to “learn to critically appropriate knowledge existing outside their immediate experience in order to broaden their understanding of themselves, the world, and the possibilities for transforming the taken-for granted assumptions about the way we live” (McLaren, 2009, p. 77). The key to promoting transformative practice is creating learning environments that inspire students to develop their strengths, self-confidence, sense of social responsibility, and critical thinking skills. Engaging in the type of humanizing pedagogy necessary to achieve these types of classrooms is one of the most important characteristics of a good school.

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## About the Author

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