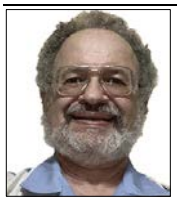
ISSN: 2325-3290 (online)
Dialogic Pedagogy
an International Online Journal

Teacher as a benevolent dictator: Promoting a culture of democratic dialogic education in a conventional university



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Abstract
This essay[1] provides a grounded critical discussion of why a professor might limit their undergraduate students' sovereignty of educational decision-making to promote an opportunity for a democratic dialogic culture in the class situated in a conventional university. On the one hand, both democracy and dialogue require voluntary participation by the students in their education and dialogue and their sovereignty over collective decision-making and educational reasoning. On the other hand, this participation is based on the students' socialization in a special culture which might often be at odds with their sovereignty. It is difficult for many students to freely choose democracy and dialogue in education when they are embedded in a conventional educational institution based on Kantian educational paternalism and foisted education. Also, the students are often culturally unfamiliar with such concepts as "democracy," "dialogue," and "self-education," let alone their practical implications. To address these contradictions, I introduce the notion of the "teacher as a benevolent dictator." I discuss, problematize, and analyze the forms of this benevolent dictatorship, its potential pitfalls, and promises.

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Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Ana Marjanovic-Shane, Kevin Curry-Knight, Peter Gray, Rebecca English, Bob Hampel, and an anonymous reviewer of the DPJ for discussions of, critical feedback on, and helpful suggestions for this essay. I am also thankful to Jim Rietmulder, who was the first person to call me "a benevolent dictator" while reflecting on my innovative democratic dialogic teaching practice.

Setting a problem

To introduce the problem of a teacher as a benevolent dictator in democratic dialogic education, let me start with the following event that occurred in the fall of 2018 semester in one of my undergraduate

[1] A shortened version of this paper was published in Matusov (2021c)

classes. I tried to run all my classes democratically by engaging my students in decision-making about their own education through dialogue as much as possible. One of these opportunities for decision-making was to let the class choose what to study: at the end of each session, the students decided what topic to study next from a list of curricular topics ("The Curricular Map") that we created together (similar to what was described by Duberman, 1969). A student would propose a topic from the Curricular Map and then try to convince their peers to choose it (among other topics proposed by other students). Then the students usually voted on all proposed topics to select the topic for the next class meeting.

A second opportunity for decision-making concerned the "pedagogical regime" (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017) the students would prefer for themselves. The students have a choice of four pedagogical regimes that I provide to them, and they change according to their wants and needs:

1) Open Syllabus for "self-responsible learners and lurkers," where students can make all decisions about their own education – what to study, how to study, with whom to study, when to study, – including their final grade.

2) Opening Syllabus for "other-responsible learners," where I made the initial decisions about the organization of the class and then gradually transferred responsibility to the students. The students participating in this pedagogical regime can choose "virtual attendance" instead of attending the class meetings, which, in fact, generate possibilities for a variety of versions of the Opening Syllabus pedagogical regimes for the students based on their own choices, creativity, interest in the subject, and life circumstances. That was the default pedagogical regime from which the students could switch.

3) Non-traditional Closed Syllabus for credential students who just want to be certified via passing exams, similar to receiving a driver's license.

4) Non-Syllabus for "prisoners of education," i.e., students who were forced to take this class by the university but felt that the class was unnecessary and painful. They were given any grade of their wish and said "goodbye" to avoid education being a "cruel and unusual punishment"[2] for them.

Third, I tried to turn any emerging problem or organizational question in the class into an opportunity for collective deliberation and democratic decision-making (e.g., should we have a break in our 3-hour class meetings?).

Finally, the fourth area of decision-making was how to make collective decisions – by majority vote, by consensus, by flipping a coin, by making individual decisions, by delegating decision-making to me, by splitting into groups having common curricular interests, by studying solo, and so on.

I used to believe that students' decisions about their education would promote their learning activism and ownership of their education (Matusov, 2015). I was not afraid of their "bad" decisions because I expected that they would experience the consequences of these "bad" decisions and would correct them through democratic decision-making. That was my philosophical belief in democracy in education (and elsewhere) (cf. Hayek, 1994). However, my views have gradually changed as my students, and I experienced the educational consequences of this approach.

[2] Cf. the wording of the United States Constitution.

Just before the 2018 fall semester started, I was asked to teach a course on cultural diversity for future teachers and students who needed to meet the "multicultural" university requirement. Because of this last-minute change, I could not choose a room for this class. Usually, I request a so-called "PBL room" (Problem-Based Learning) for my classes with flexible desks that allow for students' groupwork. The rectangular room assigned had a conventional set of moveable desk-chairs in several rows facing two long blackboards. Students were sitting at their individual desks with their laptops, which we used in class. I employed diverse learning activities of group study and discussions, individual studies involving some learning activities, whole-class video watching, and whole-class discussions. For the group studies, students moved their desk-chairs together to form small circles, but then they returned to the row formation. During whole-class discussions, a few students tried to attend to and engage in the discussion, some were consumed with whatever was on the screens of their laptops or smartphones, and some were in and out.

The class had multiple pedagogical regimes giving students opportunities to attend or not attend classes. I had a small core of students who came all the time or almost all the time. Another group of students was coming from time-to-time, about half of the time. The third group of students came rarely. Finally, the fourth group of students never came to the class after an initial couple of meetings.

At the end of each meeting, I asked the attending students to write "Exit Reflections" on their class experiences. They frequently said that the class was interesting but boring. The class was often interesting for the students because of the presented material, dialogic provocations, emergent controversies, and deep discussions. However, as some of them openly shared in the Exit Reflections and in class, boredom arose when very few students participated in the class discussions, and many partially or fully disengaged themselves from the class. In response, I told my students that it was very normal within any collective discussion for participants to have more interest at one time in the discussed topic and then less. I said it would be very difficult to come back for a more engaging part of the discussion if students disengaged themselves by doing something else on their laptops or smartphones when they felt bored. My students agreed as they all had an experience of this while watching interesting movies or TV shows, but this discussion of the problem did not help (Matusov, 2022, submitted).

At mid-semester, we had a town hall meeting to discuss how we felt about the class and how to improve it. A student suggested we change the desk-chair arrangement to make a circle. This student argued that the circle arrangement might boost students' engagement and attention during whole-class discussions. We discussed the PROs and CONs of this – it seemed that the idea got support from their peers. But at the next class meeting, this proposal was voted down by one vote. The students who opposed this proposal argued that they liked the privacy and anonymity of the desk row formation – the circle formation would provide too much visibility for them (perhaps a reference to teacher's surveillance through the Foucauldian panopticon?). The problem of disengagement continued along with the students' complaints in their Exit Reflections.

A few weeks after the mid-term town hall meeting, a student I will call Peter, who attended this class regularly, came to my office. Peter demanded that I impose the circle arrangement of the desks. He argued that my insistence on democratic decision-making about emerging problems in the class ironically created vicious cycles of student disengagement. Based on their prior experiences with conventional education, students decided to protect themselves from educational impositions. However, this protection created the very same disengagement and alienation the students complained about. With my philosophical beliefs in democracy, I asked Peter to bring this idea to the class meeting. But he demurred. Peter said that his peers would once again vote this idea down. He argued that many of his peers could not make an informed decision because they needed to test the ideas before deciding on them – to experience these two different sitting arrangements and their consequences to make a thoughtful decision. It made sense to

me. I agreed to follow his idea for me to impose the circular desk formation unilaterally, but I also decided to promote the class's reflection on that at the end of the class. Another innovation Peter suggested was for me to leave the class during small group discussions, so it would make more sense for the groups to report back to me (and each other) about their discussions when I come back. Before that, I had tried to move from group to group during the small group discussions. I agreed to impose that change as well.

So, I did. In the Exit Reflection on the class meeting with these changes and on the online discussion forum, all students commented on how engaging the class became. They mostly focused on their excitement with the discussed topic of the class, which was "Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the US" (Tobin, Davidson, & Wu, 1989). However, one student, Mike (a pseudonym), also reflected on my imposition of the new sitting arrangement and small group discussions in his Exit Reflection,

> Today, I was excited to learn about the different ways that different cultures teach students in the classroom environment because I actually want to teach in Japan one day, and learning about these cultures has really broadened my view of education in other cultures. I was also very surprised to learn how lenient Japan was in terms of its teaching and behavior management, and I was also surprised to learn how safe the country is in terms of crime and how smart people are in that country compared to America (Japan is better in both aspects).
>
> This was probably my favorite class overall. I really thought the desk arrangement this time around was really good, as it helped me connect more with my peers, and I really enjoyed the self-study session, where only us students talked amongst ourselves for twenty minutes about the topics from the video we watched, as that really made us feel really connected to one another through brainstorming (November 11, 2018).

At the end of the class meeting, the students were unanimous in continuing this circular sitting arrangement and their small group discussions without me. After this class meeting, I met with Peter, who made the original proposal for my imposition. He suggested that I should develop a list of necessary impositions to present to students at the start of each class at the beginning of the semester. Students should experience my impositions promoting their learning engagement first and then consider changing them later if they find some problems with them. Peter also volunteered to be an informal teaching assistant for the next class on cultural diversity that I would teach in another semester. Peter insisted that not all educational or organizational decisions must be made democratically for authentic democratic education to be promoted. At least, not immediately. Peter argued that students must experience and value authentic education, in which they can define and explore their interests, develop their authorial opinions, and critically examine them first. The students should have a taste of it to make informed democratic choices and decisions. The teacher must impose authentic education first on the students, who have been raised in and by authoritarianism, and only then engage them in democracy. This authoritarian role of a democratic teacher in building a democratic culture might be called a "benevolent dictator."

Another good example of a situation that requires the teacher's benevolent dictatorship in my classes was an issue of a class break. For many years, I intentionally did not schedule a class break in my almost 3-hour undergraduate and graduate classes. I expected that the issue of class break could become one of the first issues where the students sought our class's democratic decision-making. And often, I was right. However, if this issue emerged earlier in the semester when a classroom learning community was not yet formed, most students voted to shorten the class rather than have a refreshing break in the middle as they initially suggested. After the class had developed a taste for genuine education of critical exploration of inquiries of the student's interests, the class voted for having a break in the middle of the class and not to shorten it. Also, the time of shortening the class vs. having a break varied. When the class time was shortened, students shortened it to 20 to 30 minutes (out of 2 hours and 45 minutes). When the students

set a break in the middle of the class, it was between 5 and 10 minutes. When students experience genuine, authentic education, they often do not want to shorten the length of the class meeting because these students apparently feel that their in-class experience becomes important, constituting valuable events in their lives (Matusov, Baker, Fan, Choi, & Hampel, 2017). This is education for education's own sake – intrinsic education (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2019). My interpretation of this phenomenon is that when the students lack ownership of education in the class, they want to protect their time from the impositions of the class. However, when they started valuing and feeling ownership of the class, they did not want to shorten it. For example, one student from the described class wrote on their anonymous online evaluation of the class at the end of the semester on the prompt of how to improve the class, "Make the class meet more than just one night a week so we can cover more topics." The students seemed to become hungry for education and wanted more of it, not less. That is how I decided to include a mid-class break as a part of my teacher's benevolent dictatorship and not to offer it to my students for their initial democratic decision-making.

Finally, a student from one of my undergraduate 2018 fall courses, Leslie (a pseudonym), who later volunteered to be an unpaid Teaching Assistant to continue her experience with democratic education, criticized my multi-syllabus class with the four pedagogical regimes described above. Leslie appreciated the freedom of choice I was giving to the students, but she argued that I was giving it too soon on the first day of the class. Many students had not experienced democratic dialogic education in their life, knowing only oppressive alienated education. That was why some of them rushed out of my class by choosing the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime, stopped coming to class, stopped learning anything and got an unconditional A. For example, a fall 2018 student of mine wrote on the RateMyProfessors.com website about the class, giving a 4 out of 5 rating for the class:

> Take for a multicultural requirement or breadth! The 2nd class we went over the course and you have options as to your syllabus, CHOOSE AN OPEN SYLLABUS. I literally wrote a paragraph or two on what I planned on doing in this class and stuck to it for the semester and was able to grade myself with an A! No hw [homework], no exams, no attendance, still an A (from https://www.ratemyprofessors.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=586).[3]

I thought this type of student was Prisoners of Education masquerading as an autodidact. Leslie disagreed. Although she acknowledged that some of them might be true Prisoners of Education, the problem was that they were not informed enough and, thus, could not make an informed choice. Leslie suspected that some of them might like democratic dialogic education if they had a chance to taste it. Leslie insisted that I must impose the Opening Syllabus pedagogical regime on my future students to give them a flavor of democratic dialogic education. Rereading students' anonymous feedback at the end of the semester, I noticed that some of my past students discussed this issue. Some endorsed Leslie's argument, but others insisted on preserving students' choices from the beginning of the class. After agonizing, I decided to accept a role of a benevolent dictator and run a pedagogical experiment in the fall 2020 semester. At the beginning of the class, I gave my students a choice of only three pedagogical regimes; I withheld Open Syllabus. All of my students chose the Opening Syllabus during that semester. Just a week before the grace period at Week#6, I opened a possibility for Open Syllabus. About half of my students in the class decided to attend the class on a regular basis. Out of the students who chose Open Syllabus, only one-third seemed to be hidden Prisoners of Education as judged on the quality of their self-assessment and volunteer participation in the class forum.

[3] It is interesting that this student did not choose the Prisoner of Education pedagogical regime, available to them, even though they were obviously not interested in studying multicultural education but rather apparently prefer to "cheat" on the Open Syllabus.

Reflection

My original philosophical belief in democracy as a self-correcting political regime apparently required revisions. First of all, within a class community, this self-correction *requires time* to experience problems, become aware of them, develop alternatives, and test these alternatives to see if they address the problems satisfactorily or not. A 15-week university semester is too short for this pedagogical experimentation for many of my students. The students might get stuck with their bad decisions without having an opportunity to test them and propose and experience alternative solutions. Most students will never take another democratic class with me (or with anybody else at my university). We meet once a week for two hours and 45 minutes. However, democracy as a culture requires time to develop. For example, one teaching problem in my past classes was how I, as a discussion facilitator, should offer the public floor. Should it be only by students volunteering by raising their hands, or should I call on some students who do not volunteer, or should it be "the 5th Amendment" – I would have the right occasionally to call on non-volunteering students, while they would have the right to remain silent by saying, "pass," without any explanation (Shor, 1996). In the past, I discussed this issue with my students at the beginning of the semester, and the students predictably voted for the volunteering solution – I could only call on students who volunteered. And this solution predictably had a problem, about which I had informed my students in advance. Rather quickly in the semester, two groups emerged: a talkative minority and the silent majority. In some classes, the students corrected this during a mid-term town hall meeting by proposing and voting on the 5th Amendment rule. It often made a difference, but it was too late in the semester to experience deep, engaging, and inclusive discussions. Many of my past students recommended making the 5th Amendment rule built into the class's initial pedagogical regime and not letting the students vote on it at the beginning. As one student pointed out, the postponement of this rule robbed them of many learning opportunities because their discussions were truncated by the limited number of students who participated.

Yet, at times, a late awareness of the problem of their own education can be an important benchmark for their growth and important learning. For example, one student in their anonymous online evaluation suggested the following class improvement: "Maybe have some requirements for coming to class; as much as I loved doing outside research with other members of the class, I think it didn't encourage my attendance and now that the semester is ending, I wish I had spent more time learning in class rather than outside of class." The student started appreciating the learning classroom community of their peers and the professor only at the end of the semester and wished to be forced[4] to attend the class by the teacher, a benevolent dictator, from the beginning of the semester. Elsewhere, I refer to this phenomenon of a student asking their teacher to force them to study what the student wants to study as *autopaternalism* (Matusov, 2022b). I argue that autopaternalism is another form of self-education.

However, it is highly possible that this student might not develop this value of their own intrinsic education and the classroom community if they were forced to come to the class through autopaternalism. In my view, it is important for students to experience certain problems in order to appreciate intrinsic, authentic education and a learning community, even at the expense of losing some important educational opportunities. I do not think that intrinsic education can be problem-free or waste-free. Elimination of problems and waste can kill the organic nature of intrinsic education. On the other hand, too many problems and too much waste can be toxic.

[4] In my interpretation of the student's wording "encourage my attendance," I think the student referred to the teacher's coercion. At the beginning of the class, I discussed with my students the PROs and the CONs of studying alone, outside, of the class but I think this discussion might feel too abstract for some students who had not experience freedom of self-studies outside of their classes with all their pluses and minuses.

The second way to understand the concept of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education is within the notion of the *culture of authentic (self-)education*. Most of the students have not experienced a democratic pedagogical regime and came from authoritarian, if not totalitarian, pedagogical regimes. As one of my students wrote on a class online forum,

> As a very anxious student, I very often find myself doing work just for the sake of seeing an "A" on my transcript, only to get it done and get the good grade. Very rarely do I find myself driven to learn solely for fun, however you [Eugene] bring up the point of students enjoying challenges. Personally, I love problem-solving and trying to discuss issues to find solutions. I took a [math education] course last year called problem-solving strategies and it was my favorite class ever. There was not much structure; we would come to class and solve whatever mathematical riddle we were thrown and that was that. I think with a progression towards removing grades, we must also reevaluate how we go about teaching courses. A lot of courses currently are organized in a way that logically progresses toward certain exams or projects, often failing to slow down and discuss the content. My problem-solving class and this class (EDUC258) are the two classes in college that have made me feel the most fulfilled. I feel like I really use my potential because I am not worried about retaining every minute detail in fear that it will come up on an exam. Instead, it is more about listening to others' views, reconstructing my own views, and gaining insight on issues that I never previously thought about. This class and that class both are teaching me applicable strategies that will come in handy, and I think if we are to remove a grading system all-together, we should attempt to shift towards more classes like this (Fall 2020).

Most of my students come from a defensive student culture[5] mainly concerned with protecting themselves from teachers' coercive engagement in alienated studies (assignments). When given opportunities to make decisions about their own education, their decisions are guided by their defensive student culture. The less engagement coupled with higher grades, the better. However, as a result, this defensive culture leads the students to even more disengagement and alienation, which, in its own turn, undermines their democratic decision-making. Students' true educational decision-making starts with caring about and valuing their education. The more they are alienated from their own education, the less they are interested in their decision-making about it (or their decisions are guided by their alienating defensive culture). This is the vicious cycle that Peter was talking about.

In contrast to the first issue discussed above, this problem cannot be solved by time – simply by the students experiencing and reflecting on the problem. Vicious cycles of defensive alienation are not self-correcting. Without having a taste for educational excitement in the classroom, it is difficult for the students to develop care for their own education that leads to their informed decision-making. Now, I think I was wrong to believe that democratic education starts with the students' decision-making about their own education. I think it starts with experiencing authentic (self-)education that creates excitement in the students. This experience of authentic education gives rise to the students' sense of nostalgia for it – e.g., see Mike's Exit Reflection above – (cf. my notion of "education for nostalgia," in Matusov, von Duyke, & Kayumova, 2016) which leads to a need for its protection, nurturing, and expansion through their collective and individual democratic decision-making[6].

This problem of transition from authoritarianism to sovereignty (e.g., democracy) is not new. In the Old Testament, Moses let the Israelites wander in a desert for 40 years before they could reach the

[5] This notion is somewhat similar to McLaren's notion of "defensive teaching," when some conventional teachers use their instruction that promote the institutionally expected order and student unconditional cooperation in the classroom (McLaren, 1993).

[6] There is somewhat similar reasoning and approach emerging in the environmental education. Some educationalists argue that environmental education should start not with focusing students on growing ecological humans-made catastrophes and problems, at it is often done in many schools, but with focusing on students' appreciation and enjoyment of the nature (Yang, 2015).

promised land to shake off their culture of slavery. Constitutional clauses of unpopular freedoms (e.g., the rights of the accused or criminals, the freedom of unpopular and disruptive speech), difficult to change, have been developed in some democracies to guard against populism guided by authoritarian cultures. Similarly, I wonder if, in the context of otherwise conventional/authoritarian institutional education, a limited authoritarian protectorate to nurture authentic democratic education is also needed and warranted. An authoritarian postponement of the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime or imposition of the 5th Amendment rule described above is a good example of such limited and, arguably, justified, benevolent authoritarianism.

Teacher as a benevolent dictator in democratic dialogic education

I conceptualize "teacher as a benevolent dictator in democratic dialogic education" in the following way. First, a benevolent dictator invites and then, if accepted by the students, throws the students into democratic dialogic education (cf. Heidegger's and Sartre's notion of "thrownness," Heidegger & Stambaugh, 1996). In my view (and in view of some of my students, see below), the nature of *invitation* allows some or all students to reject this invitation and remain firmly in the grip of conventional authoritarian education. This feature makes the invitation benevolent. Still, in my view, the invitation is always dictatorial because, in the context of the otherwise conventional authoritarian institution, the teacher has *the institutional power* to return to the authoritarian pedagogical regime at any time unilaterally. It is the teacher who grants students their educational freedoms, which the teacher can also revoke at will. This hovering power of granting and withdrawing the students' liberties constitutes the teacher's *domination* (cf. Pettit, 2014). Students intuitively know that, and it takes time for them to trust that the teacher won't do this[7]. For example, a student of mine, who had chosen Open Syllabus and designed her learning activities without summative assessment (she assigned an unconditional A for the class to get away from grading altogether), sent me her investigative essays (self-assignments) at the end of the semester. I asked her if she sent them to me for my feedback. She explained that she just wanted to show to me that she completed the promised work for the class to make sure that she "deserved" an A for the class. I replied that according to her own Open Syllabus design, it was she who made all the decisions about the class grade. She answered that she wanted to make sure that this was still the case. She wrote, "I don't want any surprises." Some students may not fully trust the democratic teacher until the semester is over and the students see that the teacher has stood by their words[8].

Second, a benevolent dictator is responsible for the emergence of a truly educational culture in the classroom to give students a taste of educational excitement. Here are some examples of students' articulation of their taste for genuine (self-)education in their anonymous online evaluation of the class at the end of the semester:

- "This class really encouraged students to enjoy and explore the material in their own interest. We acted as a community of learners using the class website and class discussions."
- "[The class] allowed the students to choose how they wanted to learn and what they wanted to learn in their own manner without the stress involved in their learning experience. It was a very stress-free yet content-filled class."

[7] I am thankful to Jim Rietmulder, a founder of a democratic school called "The Circle School," for pointing out this phenomenon to me.

[8] I suspect that the students who choose Open Syllabus pedagogical regime might have diverse motivation and it might change during the semester. Some of the Open Syllabus students might be autodidact, some are lurkers, some might want to guarantee an A grade, some might be "prisoners of education" who believe that a grade "must be earned" even when "the work" (i.e., study) is meaningless for them.

- "This course allowed me to go into an interview and project what I have been learning on my own and landed me the job!"

As I discussed above, if students do not have a taste of genuine (self-)education, they might not care about it, and, as a result, their democratic decision-making might be guided by a concern to protect themselves from teachers' educational impositions and colonization of their time, attention, ideas, and energy and from the teachers' and peers' potentially negative judgments and evaluations (Gates, 2020). As shown above, their defensive decision to preserve the privacy of their sitting arrangements, to cut class time, or to allow the teacher to call only on students who volunteer to talk and so on often creates vicious cycles of students' alienation from their own education. In turn, this alienation increases the students' defensive decision-making and helps to promote a defensive student culture that causes the alienation in the first place. Thus, I argue that a teacher, as a benevolent dictator in a democratic dialogic education classroom, has to unilaterally promote a student culture of authentic education, at least during the first part of the class term. After the participating students have enough chances to get a taste of democratic dialogic education to judge its value for themselves, the teacher's unilateral grip on the organization of the class and its design can be (gradually or abruptly) relaxed, and the responsibility for it can be shared with the students through increasing democratic decision making. Then, students' possible rejection of democratic dialogic education becomes their informed choice. The 5-week postponement of the Open Syllabus choice for my students described above is an example of this process.

Currently, my benevolent dictatorship at the beginning of my undergraduate and graduate classes is limited to the following unilateral arrangements:

1. An individual choice of four pedagogical regimes

    a. Open Syllabus for autodidacts – I postponed it for the first five weeks of the class, and I asked my students to submit their initial Open Syllabus design on a special online class forum for my feedback. This choice becomes available for my students only after the first five weeks of the semester;
    b. Opening Syllabus for other-responsible learners with initially non-negotiable learning activities, organization of the class, and choices backed up by grading;
    c. Non-Traditional Closed Syllabus for credential students – a set of graded exams and learning activities;
    d. Non-Syllabus for prisoners of education with an unconditional grade of the student's choice and saying goodbye to the student;
    e. A grace period of 6 weeks of the 15-week semester to decide about a student's pedagogical regime from the list above.

2. Default classroom pedagogical regime of Opening Syllabus, which includes:

    a. Curriculum Map – a list of possible curricular topics to study that can be extended by the students;
    b. Democratic deliberative decision-making about what to study for the next class;
    c. A choice of who prepares and (co)teaches the class;
    d. Teaching plans, the structure of the lesson, and learning activities, when I teach the class;
    e. The 5th Amendment rule of whom the teacher can call on;
    f. Name tags for everyone;
    g. Music at the beginning of the class and during group/individual work;
    h. Sitting arrangements in the class;

i. No homework (except one online posting per week) or exams;
j. Self-studies during the class (often as a part of the flip instruction);
k. One minimum online posting without any limit (min or max) of wording on issues broadly related to the course between class meetings;
l. 10-minute break in the middle of class;
m. Exit Reflection at the end of the class;
n. Mid-term "Town Hall Meeting" culminating with proposals for improvements of the class and democratic decision-making;
o. Main Learning Project, graded by the author(s) of the Project and the class peers and/or the teacher – the student's choice. In a case of discrepancy, the author(s) chooses the final score for the Project on the graded continuum. Also, the first draft of the Project must be submitted to the class peers and/or the teacher for feedback;
p. Required attendance: either face-to-face or virtual (with several diverse options by its form – synchronous via Zoom or asynchronous – and it's content);
q. The final grade for the class is based on points for attendance, online participation, and Main Learning Projects (or on the exams for Credential Students).

Of course, some students might have had prior experience with authentic and democratic dialogic (self-)education, and thus, they might need less or none of this benevolent dictatorship. When I have classes with many former students, they can heighten a sense of trust in the other students, who still don't know me, or authentic democratic education. I expect the benevolent dictatorship to become unnecessary with some critical mass of seasoned and/or returning autodidact learners.

However, why would university students accept the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education? I think that there are four major sources of acceptance.

1. The first is unconditional authoritarian institutional power. Undergraduate and graduate students have been socialized for at least 12 years of their formative life in accepting authoritarian institutional power unconditionally. The students must unconditionally accept things just because the institution or its teacher said so through its rules, syllabi, and regulations.

2. The second is the students' conditional trust in the teacher's epistemological and pedagogical expertise (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2015). This trust is conditional: if the teacher proves to be relevant, helpful, and exciting for the students, the trust credit will grow. However, if students (some or all) find the teacher irrelevant, unhelpful, and boring, the trust credit will drop.

3. The third source of student acceptance of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship is the teacher explicating their dictatorship and providing reasons for their unilateral decision-making. The teacher's reasoning dialogizes the benevolent dictatorship by addressing the students, encouraging them to ask questions, encouraging their counter-reasoning, and proposing their own suggestions for class improvement, thus, creating conditions for a legitimate and public challenge of the teacher's dictatorship by the students.

4. Finally, the fourth source is the teacher's care of the students from day one of the class by asking for their feedback at the end of each class and addressing students' concerns and complaints. In my classes, in addition to Exit Reflections, I created an online forum for Anonymous Feedback on the advice of my past students. Also, students express their concerns about the class via an online class forum open to all students in the class or raise issues directly

in class and during the Mid-Term Town Hall Meeting. The students get the message that their teacher cares about their concerns, well-being, and education and is eager to improve the class.

In my view, moving the source of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship away from the unconditional authoritarian institutional authority toward the students' conditional trust, the teacher's reasoning, and the teacher's care is important. When the class is progressing well, there are signs of this move. For example, at times, students ask me to choose the next topic for the class. However, when I do this, they demand from me an explanation of why I chose this particular topic – why this topic will be good for them in general and for the next class topic specifically. Once I joked with them by replying that since they had asked me to choose the next topic, I had a right to select whatever topic I wanted without any explanation. The class erupted in protest. They said, "In our class, everyone must explain their decisions!" and threatened to withdraw their delegation for me to select the next topic. Participatory democracy requires dialogue, while dialogue requires voluntary participation and students' ownership of their education. In my judgment, this demand by the students reflects the weakening of institutional authoritarian power, at least in this class, the fading away of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship, and the arrival of democratic decision-making and government.

Pitfalls of teacher's benevolent dictatorship

Even if it can be necessary and justified, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship is pregnant with the potential for power abuse. Dictatorship, the teacher's unchecked unilateral power, creates plenty of conditions for abuse, while the teacher's belief in its benevolence encourages an ideological cover-up of this abuse. A benevolent dictatorship can promote the teacher's corruption, philosophical distortions, pedagogical failures, and even blunt abuse of power.

First, the teacher's corruption involves using the benevolent dictatorship *to justify the teacher's own benefits at the expense of the students*. For example, many conventional higher education institutions nowadays demand from the teacher a promotion of credentialism, meritocracy, summative assessment, and, recently, in the US, strict surveillance of student attendance in their classes (as a condition for getting federal educational grants or loans). Rejecting or compromising these demands by the teacher may undermine the teacher's institutional survival or promotion. The teacher might be tempted to include these authoritarian institutional demands as a part of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for promoting democratic education. In other words, the teacher's own institutional survival masquerades as a benefit of the students' authentic education. I am not suggesting that the teacher's survival in a conventional authoritarian institution has to be ignored or neglected – there can be diverse approaches and strategies to address it in diverse conditions (see for more discussion and examples of that in Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, & Gradovski, 2019). However, I argue that these approaches and strategies must be separated from the notion of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education to prevent the described corruption.

Second, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship is *prone to promoting philosophical distortions in the teacher*. Since the second aspect of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship aims to encourage students' engagement in authentic education, it can be easily transformed into Progressive Education social engineering. As I argued elsewhere (Matusov, 2015, 2021a; Matusov et al., 2019), progressive education believes that "...any subject could be taught to any child at any age in some form that was honest" (Bruner, 1986, p. 129). Thus, it is the teacher's unconditional responsibility to find a way to teach every student what the teacher and/or society think is important for the students to learn. The main pedagogical question of progressive education becomes how to develop this "honest teaching" and make the student want to study

what the teacher chooses for the student to study – or, as the Foucauldian scholar Fendler (1998) put it, to create "the educated subject." The holy grail of progressive education is the creation of an educational vortex (cf. the notion of "double psychologizing," Dewey, 1902) that will suck all students into the studied subject matter all the time (Matusov, 2021a; Matusov et al., 2019). By making the teacher responsible for the educational outcomes, progressive education undermines the core belief of democratic education that the students are the final and ultimate authority for their own education (Klag, 1994). In my view, progressive education promotes a wrong pedagogical desire and pedagogical goal in the teacher to make all students engage in genuine education rather than to offer the student a taste of it so that the student can start making informed decisions (Matusov, 2021a). Let me explain the difference between progressive education and democratic education in my understanding with the following analogy.

When I was a little boy, I disliked smoked fish because it looked and smelled repulsive to me. At the same time, I loved dark chocolate candies. Once, my parents suggested I take a few bites of smoked fish in exchange for chocolate candy. After some trepidation, I agreed. When I tasted smoked fish, I loved it. I did not need any bribe to eat it – smoked fish became one of my favorite dishes. My parents' bribe encouraged me to test whether I disliked smoked fish. Their goal was not to make me eat smoked fish but only to test my visual repulsion. Similarly, in my view, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education is aimed at engaging students in tasting genuine education. If they like it, they can start taking ownership of it. If not, they have a legitimate right to disengage. In contrast, progressive education uses its impositions to make all students like the unfolding education.

I use the Mid-term town hall meeting to engage my students in critical reflection and decision-making about what they like and dislike about how the class has been run so far and why. We also develop and discuss various solutions for perceived problems to shape the remaining class meetings accordingly. I believe that in democratic education, students are the final agents of what they like or dislike. As one student from the described class wrote in their anonymous online class evaluation at the end of the semester, "If you want to engage in this class, you can. If not, you do not have to. It is completely up to the student how much they want to get out of this class. This gives students the responsibility to want to learn." In democratic education, students' non-participation is legitimate and respected (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2019; Rietmulder, 2019).

Third, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship can *inhibit a self-correcting process* and thus makes the class arrangement insensitive to the students' individual or collective needs. It aims to suppress students' "wrong" desires – the desires coming from their authoritarian past, discussed above and the teacher might see as educationally wrong. But it might also suppress the students' "right" desires for educational self-determination and signs of emerging pedagogical problems. For example, once, I had a graduate seminar on the contexts for learning, where almost 20 doctoral students enrolled (Matusov, 2022a). At some point in the semester, I noticed dissatisfaction among a small group of students regarding the topics that their peers chose democratically by majority votes. It took me a while to realize that I had three more or less stable groups in the class. The scientific paradigms defined the groups (Kuhn, 1996) they espoused. The biggest group espoused the so-called "cognitive, information-processing" paradigm of comparing the human mind with a computer.

In contrast, another smaller group espoused the so-called "sociocultural" paradigm of insisting that the human mind is shaped by culture, society, institutions, and practices (Matusov, 2007). The third group was uncommitted and in-between. The accidental composition of the class gave a systematic prioritization to the cognitive paradigm over the sociocultural paradigm in selecting the class topics. My original unilateral pedagogical design of the class, based on a selection of one topic by a majority – i.e., my benevolent dictatorship – was insensitive to the educational needs and interests of the second, smaller student group

interested in the sociocultural paradigm and its particular curricular topics. When I realized that, I brought this problem up to the class, and we decided to have two topics for each class at the same time, forming two groups who studied two different topics embedded in two distinguishable paradigms. The in-between students had a choice of joining either of these two groups. It seemed to solve the problem. Later, this issue on an individual rather than on a group level forced us to develop the notion of "asynchronous virtual attendance," where students could stay at home to study a topic of their own interest different from the interest of the class. Also, a student could come to class to do that if he or she wished to do so.

In my view, although the teacher's benevolent dictatorship might be necessary in some cases, it is always pregnant with pedagogical and educational insensitivities. For example, a student can always dynamically change their attitude toward their own role in the class, while my current design insists that the students make up their minds within the 6-week grace period. The worst-case scenario is when the teacher overcommits to the benevolent dictatorship at the expense of the students' personal or collective needs, interests, and freedoms and rationalizes their own pedagogical failures by blaming and shaming students and by making the students' resistance to the benevolent dictatorship illegitimate (see Matusov & Brobst, 2013, for our description and analysis of this case). When that happens, the dictatorship stops being benevolent and becomes outright malevolent.

Fourth, I am a benevolent dictator *granting my students freedom of self-education*. Genuine freedom cannot be granted but only affirmed. If I have the power to give freedom, I can withdraw it at my will, and many of my students feel that by constantly asking my permission for their decisions or confirmation of their freedoms. My democratic education is caged by the conventional institution based on Kantian educational paternalism believing that experts have the right to force students to study and decide what the students must study, how, with whom, where, and so forth (Kant, 1784; Matusov, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b). To be not caged, I should not have this power of student empowerment created by the institution of foisted education.

Finally, fifth, the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education *can lead to blunt abuse of teacher power*. For example, in the past, when running the class as an entirely Opening Syllabus pedagogical regime, I was grading and provided formative feedback on my students' Main Learning Projects according to my judgment of the quality of their work and their educational needs. When my authorial judgments went along with the students' educational desires and visions for their own work, this feedback and grading worked more or less well. However, my feedback, especially rubrics-based grading, became oppressive and abusive when we were in discord. Using the institutional authoritarian power of grading, I tacitly demanded my students unconditionally please me. Of course, they had a right to argue with me, but it was always up to me to accept or reject their arguments. Essentially, it was "my way or the highway" to lower their final grade for the class. This violation of trust in democratic dialogic education and in me as their democratic dialogic teacher at the end of the semester was heartbreaking, as some of my past students shared with me (Duberman, 1969; Eisenstein, 2006; Holt, 1982; Kohn, 2011). I agree with Duberman, who argued that "only when the necessity to please others is removed, can the main job of self-evaluation begin" (Duberman, 1969, p. 260). I had to rethink and redesign my feedback and grading to address this problem of in-built abuse of the teacher's power by making my feedback and grading a student's choice along with their own and peer feedback and grading.

As it is now, I think that the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education must be limited to organizational-relational issues and not go into ideas, values, or attitudes. Students should feel free to express any ideas, values, and attitudes for their critical examination and deconstruction as much as possible – only when these ideas, values, and attitudes lead to relational crises should the limitations on students' free speech and expression be considered (see my discussions of these issues here, Matusov,

2018; Matusov & Lemke, 2015). Teachers must not impose their cherished ideas on the students in the name of objective truth, social justice, or some other reason. I believe that students' free examination of ideas, values, attitudes, and desires in a critical dialogue should be promoted and prioritized.

In sum, although necessary under some conditions, I argue that the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education creates opportunities, conditions, rationalizations, and temptations for hijacking the democratic spirit of educational governance and for the establishment of new educational authoritarianism.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have argued that the main goal of the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic dialogic education situated in a conventional university is to give students a taste of genuine (self-)education as the precursor of students' ownership of their own education and democratic governance of it. When there is a critical mass of students in a class who have experienced genuine intrinsic education (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2019) – who are deeply interested in the subject matter, have enough time and energy resources free from other demands, and assume the role of autodidacts – the teacher's benevolent dictatorship for democratic education is probably unnecessary. For example, this is how one autodidact student articulated their gratitude for an opportunity to define their own learning in an anonymous online evaluation at the end of the semester, "The most exciting/unique feature of the class was the ability to create or modify your own learning journey. This helped me tailor my learning to relevant and helpful subjects, and I could not be more grateful for the opportunity." This student did not seem to need any benevolent dictatorship from the teacher. When present in class meetings, these autodidact students can guide each other and non-autodidact students, who might need extra help in organizing their own learning. Even more, the autodidacts can sometimes become benevolent dictators for other alienated students who need a taste of genuine education. In some cases, a benevolent dictatorship for democratic education can be shared between the teacher and those autodidact students. When there is no critical mass of these autodidact students, those few autodidact students can be excused from the teacher's benevolent dictatorship through multiple pedagogical regimes in the class I briefly described above (especially through the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime that autodidact students can choose). However, one big challenge that still remains unaddressed in my pedagogical practice so far is that individual students, alienated from and inexperienced with authentic intrinsic or autodidact education, may need different forms, intensity, and levels of benevolent dictatorship at different times and with different curricular topics to get a taste of genuine education.

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