Democracy and Education: Empowering Students to Make Sense of Their World

There is a simple yet vital link between democracy and education, Mr. Garrison argues. The best learning happens under a democratic system as students assume the freedom and responsibility to make choices and direct their learning experiences.

By William H. Garrison

EVER wonder why democratic societies are unrivaled in expanding knowledge and creativity? There is a simple yet vital link between democracy and education, and it is found in how we learn best. If you have studied educational psychology or learning theory, you probably have insight into the causes of this phenomenon. If your instructional practices include such things as self-directed learning, self-reflection, or action research, you are probably well aware of the practical mechanism underlying this productivity even if you don't know it by name.

It is a fundamental belief under our system of governance that education is necessary for democracy. Less recognized is the equally important principle that democracy is necessary for education. Looking closely at the relationship between democracy and education reveals a common foundation in a learning mechanism that is as important for classroom practice as it is for a democratic society.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey defines education as the "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."[1] Education, like democracy, is fundamentally empowerment. Both provide the participants with the means to shape and direct their experiences.

The educational process in a democratic society, even in the most autocratic of classrooms and institutions, is grounded in basic freedoms. These freedoms exist beyond the particular classroom and institution, if not within them. From a learning perspective, the most important of these freedoms is the freedom to choose, to act on that choice, and to experience the results of those actions. Instructional practices that include self-reflection and action research are based on the idea that we learn by following our thoughts and actions and examining their consequences. By choosing a course of action and experiencing the results, our beliefs and understandings about the world, how it works, and how we

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fit into it are reinforced or modified.

In describing "intelligence," Jean Piaget echoes this fundamental play between thinking, acting, and learning: "The essential functions of intelligence consist in understanding and in inventing, in other words in building up structures by structuring reality."[2] We learn by constructing meaning from our experiences. We reconstruct, reorganize, and direct our experiences as we attempt to make sense of our world. Our understanding of the world is constructed through what we make of our experiences, how we interpret them, and how these interpretations are integrated into our knowledge and beliefs. These learnings provide the mental structures and dispositions that influence and direct subsequent experience.

We continually make choices in all of our thoughts and actions. Ulric Neisser wrote about the "perceptual cycle" of learning: of all the possibilities presented in our environment, our thought processes or mental structures guide our perceptual awareness, which samples the available information. As we choose to focus our attention, what we experience serves to modify or reinforce these structures, which guide further perceptual exploration and experience.[3]

This fundamental learning mechanism underlies the rich and productive relationship between democracy and education. Learning is the process of constructing meaning or structuring reality. It is necessarily a self-directed process contingent on individual choice and action.

The critical connection between democracy and education is that democratic social institutions are produced and sustained by the same progressive mechanism: the freedom to learn from experience, to build on experience, and to use this knowledge to direct the course of subsequent experience. Learning, individually or as a democratic society, is fundamentally contingent on freedom and self-governance: the ability to make choices and to take action, to formulate understandings and to test those understandings in actual experience.[4]

Formal education, as a system by which society transfers its knowledge and customs from generation to generation, generally does a poor job of teaching students how to learn, specifically a poor job of helping students to develop as self-directed learners, which is so critical in a rapidly changing world. The motivation we provide in school for learning is mostly external and driven by the belief that today's curriculum is essentially preparation for what comes next in the curriculum. But the curriculum is actually the total learning environment that we as educators create. For the future of each student's education, this environment is responsible for what he or she learns about learning. Cultivating the desire to learn is the single most important objective for any instructional strategy.

An often-quoted analysis of a major international study of science and mathematics education criticized the United States for a curriculum that is "a mile wide and an inch deep."[5] Nowhere is this more apparent than in our secondary schools, in which college preparation, including grades and test scores, is too often the only rationale for what and how we teach. In a curriculum that is always focused on what's next, there is little time to connect the subject matter and concepts to student experience. But it is precisely these connections that motivate and engage students and promote the joy of learning that feeds the desire to learn more.

The interests that teachers inspire often arise from their efforts to make the subject matter relevant. Schooling should focus on the connectedness of the subject matter to the student's life and world. The curriculum, as Dewey and others have argued, needs to connect in a meaningful way to the world in which our students live rather than rationalize its pace and content as necessary for the course and sequence ahead.

The primary mission of schooling should not be to prepare for the next grade level but to help students understand, to make sense of, and to be successful in their world today and tomorrow. The skills our students need now and in the future are acquired only through learning. It is learning that needs to be cultivated.

It is really that simple: the best curriculum is structured around helping students make sense of their world. This is a natural drive, a survival instinct that we all share. This does not require a radical change in today's curriculum, just a different mindset.

And the best learning happens under a democratic system, as our ever-maturing students increasingly assume the freedom and responsibility to make choices and direct their learning experiences. As teachers in a democratic society, we should cultivate a learning curriculum by empowering students to make sense of their world.

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1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916; reprint, 1944), p. 76.

2. Jean Piaget, *Science and the Psychology of the Child* (New York: Orion Press, 1970), p. 27.

3. Ulric Neisser, *Cognition and Reality* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976).

4. William H. Garrison, "Democracy, Experience, and Education: Promoting a Continued Capacity for Growth," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2003, pp. 525-29.

5. A phrase employed by William Schmidt, director of the U.S. National Research Center for the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).