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Power and Democracy through Self Governance: Negotiating Landscapes and Minefields in One Adult Education Doctoral Program

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Abstract: In this paper four graduates and a faculty member critically analyze efforts to develop and sustain democratic practice in the context of their doctoral program in higher education.

Rationale

Every human enterprise is governed, whether wisely or foolishly. To govern is to “conduct the policy, actions, and affairs” of that enterprise. But who is to govern, how will the apparatus of government be formed, and whose interests will that government serve? These questions are at the core of any aspiring democratic society.

There is a tradition of democracy in adult education with roots in the writings of Lindeman who saw adult education as essential to democracy. It is through education that people become informed and committed participants in decisions affecting their day-to-day lives. Democracy is self-government—government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” From its beginnings in 1996, the adult education doctoral program at National-Louis University has encouraged both faculty and students to ask: who will govern? And how will a government be formed?

But higher education is not adult education. However much faculty attempt to import the best practices and principles of adult education into the classroom, there are systemic barriers to democracy in the academy. In traditional institutions of higher education, the answer to the first question is clear—faculty govern the academic pursuits of the university. How the government is formed is less uniformly prescribed, but generally involves departments, committees, and academic officers in various combinations, but all dominated by faculty. While it is clear faculty are accountable for the integrity and academic quality of the university and, therefore, must have some responsibility for governing programs and actions promoting learning and research, it is by no means clear that faculty alone bear this responsibility.

The questions guiding this study were:

• In practicing democracy, how can we work more effectively with the tools provided in the adult education curriculum?
• How did our model of self governance hinder or foster a democratic process?
• What apparatus for decision-making could foster students and faculty sharing power in more meaningful and sustainable ways?
• How did race, class, gender, and other interlocking oppressions intersect with and impact the self governing body we created?

How is Democracy Defined in This Paper?

We believe in the principle that people have a right to express their interests in decisions that affect them, but this is not to affirm anyone’s right to prevail. We must ask of each decision, who is responsible (and thereby accountable) for the outcome? If special knowledge or expertise
is demanded, who has this knowledge or expertise and by what means is this determined? When a decision has both harmful and beneficial consequences, who will weigh these effects and keep them in balance? There are decisions in which none of these questions are relevant, but there are many—and these tend to be the more critical decisions—in which they are. Democracy is a complex system of decision-making that is too often uncritically embraced without acknowledging its complexity.

In other words, participation in decision-making, or democracy, is not inconsistent with authority—authority derived from responsibility, special knowledge or expertise, experience, or judicial wisdom. For example, academic decisions about the content of a field of study or the quality of academic performance, while open to the voice of learners, is ultimately the responsibility of faculty who are charged by the university and the professoriate to maintain high academic standards. At the same time, faculty has a responsibility to consider alternate views on curriculum, modes of discourse, and paradigms, whether these are presented by students or by peers.

The complexity of a democratic practice lies in the multiple roles we are called upon to play, depending on the nature of the decision to be made. At times we are advisory, at times we have direct jurisdiction, and at times we relinquish decisions to others. Monolithic views of democracy that insist on the equal participation of all are unworkable. The challenge is to sort through the array of agenda items on the planning table and to determine the appropriate response to each.

In attempting to build a democratic practice in the graduate classroom, we (students and faculty) often lost sight of this complexity. Our participation was impacted by expectations, prior knowledge, expertise, time, effort, and a willingness to engage the process. How could our decision-making be truly democratic when the loudest or most articulate voices often dominated? How could we hope to avoid the contaminants of dominant culture—competitiveness, self-interest, chauvinism—when these are deeply embedded in our lives?

**Description of Governance**

At the beginning of the doctoral program, governance was presented to students as a space where they would share power with faculty to push the envelope of democracy. Monthly, during the fall and spring semester and several times during the summer semester, all members of this doctoral cohort would meet without faculty to discuss matters that could possibly affect the direction/richness of the program: curriculum, guest speakers, selecting an advisor, support groups, teaching topics and formats. Each semester, three volunteer facilitators served as a governance team; this team was not considered authority figures (leaders). At the end of each ‘governance meeting’, faculty rejoined the group and one of the facilitators reported to the cohort and teaching team what was discussed and decided as a group. The faculty would usually approve, reject, or offer a compromise based on students’ requests.

**Theoretical Framework**

One contradiction within efforts to self-govern was that the program was situated in a higher education institution which privileged competing interests which inevitably created conflict in the fledgling democratic process. This and other inherent dilemmas impacting power speak explicitly to critical theory, which highlight the multiple ways in which capitalism pushes people into dehumanizing ways of living that perpetuate legacies of economic/racial/gender oppressions (Brookfield, 2005). Critical Race Theory (CRT) developed in the 1980’s also
entered our cohort experience. Essentially, it centers race as the perspective from which to view the world. CRT themes include the notion that racism is an endemic part of our society, challenging the reality of ideas such as neutrality and colorblindness (Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J., 2001). CRT is important in this study because, while not always explicit, issues of race continually emerged in our cohort experiences. Additionally, this research is grounded in the paradigm of adult education for democratic social change. This lens offers critical perspectives to evaluate our cohort’s efforts toward self-governance and democratic practice (Freire, 1970; Lindeman, 1989).

**Tension Between a Culture of Possibility and the Governance Process**

Initially, promising seeds of possibility were collectively sown by the cohort striking chords of hope within many students. There was recognition this program represented an opportunity to become producers/subjects of their own knowledge, acknowledgement of being in a space containing significantly different visions from many of their prior educational experiences, and there was an enthusiasm to take advantage of that opportunity, to re-write their educational narratives. However, translating this desire to stand together in solidarity in sustainable, collective ways remained a challenge. Painful incidents rooted in race, privilege, and marginalization peppered the cohort’s journey leaving many students with the perception of the classroom being a hostile, uninviting space.

**Struggles and Inherent Contradictions in the Governance Process**

*The GoalMission/Objective of Governance*

What is clear is that, while students were told the goal of Governance was a forum/space to practice democracy, people were unclear of the mission and objective. Here was a place that people’s experiences in society and pre-existing knowledge could have and probably did play a role in the group’s actions. According to The Institute on Governance (n.d.), the general outcome of governance varies by the sector: In the public and non-profit sector, importance is placed on the process and outcome, which usually focuses on “issues of public concern to benefit citizens and society.” However, governance in the corporate sectors usually is primarily concerned with the ‘bottom line’ or issues of profit. (Our cohort consisted of members employed in both of these sectors).

*Avoidance of Leadership*

The organization of group decision-making requires leadership to facilitate free and open discussion of interests and to manage occasional attempts of a few to digress or to dominate. While the capacity for leadership was manifest in many students, leaders did not emerge and, in fact, were discouraged through a process of cycling a group of three facilitators each term. Even though facilitators were responsible for setting the agenda and maintaining order at meetings, they were seldom given the authority to do so. When conflicts emerged, the absence of rules of order and recognized leadership exacerbated the conflict and resulted in long-term dissention and tension. The emergence of leadership is not only consistent with equality, but is its prerequisite.

*Difficult Conversations*

When students were left to resolve difficult and sometimes divisive issues in the absence of faculty, differences surfaced unpredictably, occasionally in offensive and damaging ways. The absence of acknowledged legitimate leadership left a vacuum. Racialized and gendered discourse
became personalized and uncritical. This phenomenon—which some called the Lord of the Flies syndrome—disrupted governance and led some students to withdraw from their peers.

This analysis, however, places a disproportionate share of responsibility for the breakdown in student government on the students themselves. Difficult and divisive issues usually had their origins in the classroom when the faculty team was present. While faculty frequently discussed racism and white privilege, these discussions were largely theoretical. Real and perceived differences within the cohort itself, specifically those related to race and privilege, were largely held in check by a politically correct discipline unchallenged by faculty. Difficult conversations (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999) seldom occurred and certainly were not encouraged. Therefore, the only available venue for the resolution of tensions and perceived slights became the students-only meetings of governance and occasionally a student-only email distribution list.

Analysis

It seems though in considering the situation as a whole, much of the conflict and strife experienced in governance began with a profound and fundamental dysfunction resulting from a reaction to a feeling of powerlessness. At the same time, there existed no recognition of power, or the lack of power, as being at the root of the problem and the cause of the feeling. As unrecognized feelings of powerlessness grew, other negative behaviors began to emerge. At times, students voiced faculty concerns and opinions during our sessions: Some faculty approached the governance team (or other members of the cohort) and offered suggestions about directions of our ‘governance’ session; other times individuals sought advice from faculty about ‘governance’ issues and brought these faculty’s’ thoughts into the session, sometimes sharing with the cohort that these were opinions expressed by faculty and other times masking them as their own. Whenever this happened, misrepresentation/miscommunication almost always occurred.

Although power certainly played a significant role in our self-governance issues, these experiences must also be explored from a perspective of race. In a program that is heavily dependent upon learning from life experiences, how can we not respond to those particular experiences as racist when the impact reflects life experiences some of our cohort members may have had, many times before?

We must also engage critical analysis from a viewpoint of narratives and counter-narratives. Through this process, one can recognize that any story told comes from a socially-constructed point of view (Delgado, 2000). When white students suggest that the conflicts began as a reaction to our lack of power, isn’t this a conclusion which ultimately supports the dominant position of color-blindness and white privilege? The suggestion that race may not be the vortex of the problem, is a suggestion of privilege. All experiences must be considered from an historical as well as a socio-cultural context. As a nation, we accepted the notion that we were a color-blind society. That acceptance disempowered the historical experiences of people of color (Gotanda, N., 1995).

Additionally, in a capitalistic society, both the oppressed and oppressors’ humanity is destroyed. Boggs (1998) adds, as members of a transformed society, we need to leap to a new stage of being a more human human being. Recognizing the damage that a highly developed capitalist system has done to the humanity its members, victims and villains, there must be a responsibility to create strategies to transform ourselves into human beings….a struggle not only against the external enemy but also the enemy within (pg. 151-152).
In the end, it is a mistake to consider what happened from any single critical lens. The experience was simply too complex. Since no explicit parameters were provided, and a true democratic society doesn’t exist, all experiences with this endeavor were limited. Students struggled to discern where the locus of power existed, whether it ever left the faculty in significant or meaningful ways.

Findings

- There is an inherent and essential ambiguity in the roles of students and faculty in the higher education classroom which can limit democratic practice. The clarification of those roles could have been derived from a democratic process, but was not.
- Competing interests derived from racial membership are evident, but seldom discussed in a manner likely to reveal the underlying cause of tension; this broadly impedes the negotiation of interests.
- The absence of venues for the practice of democratic decision-making in our lifeworld makes it difficult for participants in the democratic classroom to understand or aspire to the ideal of democracy.

Recommendations

Students began with a blank slate; no constitution, no rules of conduct, no guidelines for forming a government were provided. We were expected to accomplish in several meetings what it took the authors of our country’s Constitution four months of intense and sometimes contentious debate to draft. The historical record of previous cohorts was relatively unknown. There were no precedents. There was not even a common understanding of what a democratic government in the context of higher education would look like. Without knowing the goal of governance, it was inevitable that its shape was beyond imagination. What was needed, and what we recommend for future cohorts, is a provisional structure and rules of discourse, which would allow us to hit the ground running. This provisional constitution would clarify the purpose of governance and provide a general outline of how it would be implemented. It would also provide a mechanism by which structures and rules could be revised or new structures and rules created. This provisional document could be based on the mistakes of the past and reflect the cumulative wisdom of previous cohorts. It would be a living document handed on to each succeeding group of doctoral students.

We recommend that this document clarify the roles of all stakeholders in decision-making. Anyone who can veto a decision needs to be represented at the table when plans and decisions are made. Just as students desire to be present at tables currently the domain of faculty, especially when those decisions affect them directly, so also the interests of faculty in decisions being made by students should be represented at the table when these decisions are made. A sequential process in which students decide without taking into account the interests or concerns of faculty who must subsequently approve their decisions inevitably risks frustration.

This does not eliminate the need of both faculty and students to caucus separately at times in order to arrive at an understanding of their interests, these interests being subsequently brought to the planning table with both groups present. In a shared governance model, which involves both faculty and students as participants, conflict could still occur, but in most instances could be resolved through informed deliberation before participants in the conflict have solidified their positions. Identifying those differences and conflicts early can save considerable time and energy. Governance provides an opportunity for free and open discussion among
stakeholders before decisions are made. Some decisions will remain the purview of faculty, but those decisions will be better made when the interests of students have been heard beforehand.

We recommend that the provisional structure for governance also provide a clearly defined role for leadership—a person or persons delegated by the group to maintain order and insure that each person has an opportunity to be heard. To be heard is not necessarily to prevail, so leaders must also have the authority to mediate, to forestall contentiousness and personal attacks. Support for such leadership requires trust on the part of all, and integrity and accountability on the part of leaders. Structures and rules can provide a basis for leadership, but ultimately relationships within the group determine whether leaders are able to function effectively.

Finally, we recommend that formal time be set aside regularly for an evaluation of governance—its accomplishments or failures. It is important to step back from our attempts at democratic decision-making in order to engage in critical reflection. The provisional structure and rules serve as a starting point, but need to be constantly reviewed in the light of our practice of governance. It is in this that the constitution becomes a living document.

To the extent that democracy is a core value of adult education practice and that adult educators are committed to learners becoming active agents of their own learning, then the professional development of adult educators should equip them to understand and to implement democratic practice in the classroom. While democracy is an ideal, it is not an abstraction. It emerges in practice and is learned by doing. This research reflects on that practice as well as the experiences of those who have struggled to live democratically.

References