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Lindsay Ellis
Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI

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Negotiating Perspectives: Writing as Democratic Citizens in the Classroom

Lindsay Ellis
Grand Valley State University
Allendale, MI

The International Criminal Court has been at the top of the news this spring. For the first time, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for a sitting head of state: Omar al-Bashir, the President of Sudan. To the charges that he has committed war crimes against the residents of Darfur, al-Bashir responded with outraged resistance, holding mass rallies in the streets of Khartoum and accusing the ICC and the United Nations of being neo-colonialist organizations. The ICC, argues al-Bashir, has no legitimate authority over Sudan because Sudan was not represented in its formation. In this historical sense, Mr. Bashir is right. While the International Criminal Court was formed in Rome a decade ago by a treaty between 120 states, Sudan was not a signatory. What, though, about the rights of the residents of Darfur? Who represents these individuals if their government in Khartoum does not? Basically this situation is a mess, and the tension between individual rights and the authority of governments that exists here is also present even in healthy democracies (Mouffe).

As a woman and a mother, I have read the accounts of murders and mass expulsions in the Darfur region of Sudan with great sadness, even horror, over the last five years. As a scholar of the origins of international mechanisms like the ICC, I read the events of the last few weeks with interest in the relationship between rights and representation. As a teacher of future teachers, I wonder how I can embed my growing understanding of the tensions at the heart of democratic practice into my pedagogy, helping my students to grasp the practice of educating future democratic citizens.

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Citizenship. It's a weighty word, one that speaks to serious responsibility. As a teacher of teachers, I feel a burden to prepare my students to participate in the democratic process—both national and international. The more I read the more complicated this simple commitment seems. In basic ways, teachers prepare students for citizenship every day, beginning with letter recognition in preschool and continuing through critical textual analysis in secondary school. Literacy enables citizens to investigate the promises of those who would represent their interests in government. Literacy enables citizens to learn from history in order to build the kind of future for which they hope. Literacy enables citizens to cast informed votes and speak with strong voices. Literacy, therefore, is political, as evidenced by historical efforts to keep these skills from certain populations (Freire; Gates).

I am not alone in thinking that basic reading and writing skills are not enough to secure the health of democracy, particularly as the United States becomes increasingly part of a global network of interdependent societies (Morrell 312-313). Critical literacy scholars argue that teachers need to help students reflect on the ways that language is used in groups small and large to persuade, to celebrate, to educate, to silence, and to create new ways of thinking. Additionally, students should be encouraged to think critically about their own literacy education (Boyd et al. 335). Patricia Roberts-Miller's work has persuaded me that literacy education is political in ways that go beyond striving to give all students access to the languages of power. She writes,

Argumentation textbooks typically say that skill at argument is important in a democracy, but they do not make it clear which model of democracy they

imagine; in fact, very little (if any) of the current discourse regarding the teaching of argument indicates awareness that there are different models. (4)

Roberts-Miller's book then looks closely at different methods of teaching argumentation and explains how each promotes a unique (and often competing) model of democracy. Her work is echoed by political scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe, who argue about how the tensions in democratic practice between liberalism's respect for law and ancient democracy's privileging of the power of the majority. All of this I consider when I sit down to construct my syllabus for English 310: Methods of Teaching Writing in Secondary Schools.

Democratic Theory Meets Syllabus Design

I teach future teachers at Grand Valley State University, and when my colleagues look at the syllabus for my "Methods of Teaching Writing" class, they see something unusual. There are no predetermined activities for the second half of the course. Following each date is the phrase: "To be determined by consensus." I teach the first half of the course in a fairly traditional way: I prescribe readings; I ask students to keep a detailed reading journal; I ask students to practice writing the assignments that our readings suggest as "best practices"; I teach students to confer about their writing; I teach them how to function as peer response groups; and I teach them to respond to writing as if they were the teacher. Finally, I ask them to reflect on these writing and conferring experiences in order to learn what actually helps them grow as writers and what just feels like "busy work."

When the midpoint of the course arrives, my students have encountered a variety of ideas and descriptions of ways to teach writing effectively. There are many practices that they have read about but never tried; there are several practices that they have tried once but not honed. This is when the democratic fun begins.

Classrooms as Microcosms of Democracy

Before I go any further writing about my specific course design, I want to suggest that what follows can be adapted to many different subjects and grade levels. My basic idea is that each classroom is a microcosm of the democratic public sphere (Dewey; Roberts-Miller). We serve our students well when we ask them to treat each other as citizens in a democratic community; we serve them well when we ask them to write, yes to write, as members of this society. By writing to each other in order to make decisions in democratic ways, we give students real reasons to write and real audiences to address—two qualities of excellent writing assignments.

Getting Started

Back to my classroom: at the midpoint of the course, I ask my students to stop and reflect on what they have learned and what they still want to learn. I give them a sheet that gives step-by-step directions for our upcoming negotiation, and it begins with this assignment (see Appendix):

- Please review your reading journal and notes from the first half of the semester. Please consider and summarize in your journal: What do you still wonder? What do you want to try?

When students come to class the next day, I lead them in a brainstorming exercise. We fill the board with a list of possible activities for the rest of the semester: small writing groups, whole class writing workshops, individualized research, whole class mini-lessons, review of grammar and mechanics, reading the same books and discussing them, reading books individually and giving "book talks"...the possibilities are myriad. While students inevitably look to me to help them generate this list, the more they have reflected on their own learning and their own questions, the more representative their list becomes.

Reflection and representation are mutually dependent, and of equal importance here. I ask students to reflect on the schooling that they have received so far in my classroom—critical thinking about their own literacy instruction. The more thoroughly students reflect, the more able they are to represent their own interests and predict what types of activities will help them learn well in the future (Dewey 74-75).

With this list on the board and in students' notes for the day, I send them off to write their first short essay. Their classmates and I are the audience, and their purpose is to articulate what they want to do with our limited resources

of class time for the rest of the semester. This is a real dilemma, a real writing situation; there is more to learn than we have time to learn it. Additionally, these students know that soon, they will be standing in front of a group of middle or high school youth, in charge of the learning of others. Raising the stakes even higher, my students have other courses and other jobs competing for their time. Here is their charge:

- For homework, compose a two-page paper that outlines how you think our time should be used for the remainder of the semester, and give good reasons for your positions. Bring copies of your paper for me and for each classmate.
- In class we will read these papers aloud and discuss them.

I explicitly let my students know that they will be representing themselves by orally reading their papers to the class. Ours is not an off-the-cuff in-class discussion. While oral negotiations are useful, too, for learning to live well in a liberal democratic society, my purpose is to slow this process down by asking students to write reflectively. I want students to improve their writing skills by taking the time to consider audience, tone, style, content and organization.

Guiding Questions for Teachers

As I wrote earlier, the subject of these position papers can flexibly adapt to the grade level and content of most courses. What decisions affect the work of your class? Are you making decisions by yourself about which of two books to read next? Are you deciding whether to have one-on-one or small group peer conferences? Are you considering how long to give students to work on a paper, or whether to be graded on the completion of early drafts? There are hundreds of decisions made alone by teachers in the process of constructing lesson plans. I charge students with the heavy responsibility of considering and composing arguments that represent their individual and collective interests in these decisions. By reflecting on their schooling and learning experiences in the past and predicting what structures will aid them in the future, students can build their muscles for critical thinking as citizens as well as nurture their writing abilities.

Engaging Students in Democratic Interactions

The fun doesn't stop here in my class. I follow Sheridan Blau's advice to let my students read and respond to each other's writing in their own writing--creating a functioning community of intellectuals. Here is my third homework assignment:

- For homework, review these position papers and compose a second paper, again taking a position on what we should do and why. This time, though, take the interests of your classmates into consideration. Mediate existing conflicts. Consider what the relationship is between your interests and what you believe to be the common good. Practice responsible citation skills, quoting your peers and giving them credit for their ideas and words.
- Bring copies of your paper to class for me and for each classmate.
- In class we will read these papers aloud.

In these activities, I ask students to practice integrating other "sources" into their writing. This is not an empty exercise but a skill that will serve students exceedingly well in college. Students must compose as professional scholars compose—summarizing the ideas of their peers and responding carefully to them. Many students struggle to refer to "outside" sources in meaningful ways. By having students write to each other about each other, we can teach students how to integrate the voices of others into their own writing in ethical ways. In my experience, students will not take their peers' quotes out of context when they know that they will be reading aloud to those peers. This real intellectual work calls for real intellectual responsibility. As such, it can also make the practice of citing sources accurately (the mechanics of commas, quotation marks, and parenthetical notes) seem worth learning.

Once students have read their second essays aloud to each other, we are ready to begin our conversation. I have a made a choice prior to this moment. I can either have explicitly taught my class some basic negotiation skills, or I can let my students try their hands at negotiating on their own--relying on their prior knowledge of conflict resolution. My handout reads:

- Following these readings, we will orally

negotiate a draft of the syllabus for the remainder of the semester. You will be responsible for this process on your own. I will intervene only if my interests are not being adequately met.

It's true; I really try to speak as little as possible. My power as professor has already been represented by requiring the group to do this work of deciding how to spend our time the rest of the semester. I have laid out some parameters about number of pages of reading and the presence of lesson plans in their final portfolios (according to the requirements for teacher certification, according to NCATE), but the content of the readings, the process of composing, and the additional genres composed, are all up for discussion.

I consider it vital to allow the government of my students to be accomplished by my students insofar as I am institutionally able, but this ceding of control to the majority is also in tension with my role as protector of the rights of individual students with unique learning needs.

What happens is fascinating, and I invite others to try it with whatever issues matter to the authentic life of their classrooms. While this short article is not the place for a discourse analysis of my students' language, I will offer a few observations in summary. Students practice the skills of summary and analysis of what they have written. They discuss the very nature of democracy itself: how they should make decisions; what they should do with the student's ideas that are at odds with the majority of the others'; which student or students (though it's usually only one who takes the pen or the keyboard) should represent them in drafting a document of their consensus. There are so many rich social dynamics at play that I ask my students to stop and reflect. Students' reflections are authentic scholarship on the nature of democratic politics.

Reconsiderations and Next Steps

In prior semesters, I have led this final reflection as an oral discussion, but I now believe that it is worth asking students to once again slow down to the pace of writing in order to prepare for discussion. Additionally, I have grown more thoughtful about the silencing of some students' voices in these negotiations, and I'm not entirely sure what to do about this. I consider it vital to allow the government of my students to be accomplished by my students insofar as I am institutionally able, but this ceding of control to the majority is also in tension with my role as protector of the rights of individual students with unique learning needs. These are the tensions in democratic practice that I alluded to at the beginning of this article. Because the stakes are relatively low in my classroom, I believe that helping students reflect on these paradoxes in their own experience of the syllabus design exercise enables them understand the nature of national and international democratic debates more fully. However, the next time I teach this process, I will take my verbal questions and write them down to prompt my students' writing. I will ask:

- For homework, reflect on this process and write a three-page paper on "what happened" to you individually and among your classmates. You might consider these questions:
    - How did you develop your initial convictions about best practices? How did your ideas change as you listened to the ideas of your peers?
    - How did you and your classmates define "the common good"?
    - What were the major issues that arose during the negotiation? How did the group move beyond moments of "getting stuck"? What terms or ideas did the group seem to unanimously support? Where did these unanimous ideas come from?
    - Did one or several people take the lead during the negotiation? What did they do to exercise leadership? Were there suggestions that did not end up in the final syllabus design? Why were these

ideas eliminated from the representative document?

- What role did you play during the negotiation?
- Does the final syllabus seem "just" to you? Why or why not?

In responding to students' reflections, I have the opportunity to integrate as much democratic theory into my response as I want. Some semesters, my students articulate pressing needs other than fostering citizenship among their future high school students, and I try to be sensitive to their requests for other information and move on. More often, my students see that what just happened among them was a microcosm of life in a constitutional democracy, and we then discuss it in depth. The opportunity is there for me to teach future teachers how to embed education for citizenship into the life of their classrooms, that is, how to draw students into a rich debate about the complexities of discursive life in a democracy.

Reflecting again on Patricia Roberts-Miller's call to self-awareness, what models of democratic practice do I value? I value the participation of citizens in deliberation about the issues that matter to their lives—deliberations that honor both reason and nuanced forms personal testimony. Supporting this conviction is my understanding that democracy requires participation, in fact, that participation is the basis of democracy. Citizens—and my students are citizens—should have a participatory role in the decisions that affect their lives.

In closing, let me re-emphasize a few of the ways that this type of classroom practice benefits students' writing skills. I have found that when students are writing to each other and to me in order to represent their personal interests, all of the skills of persuasive and argumentative writing that textbooks dryly explain come alive. Their writing work transforms their scholarly reading from a study of the past into schooling that matters to their present lives (Dewey 73). Additionally, students writing to one another learn that crass persuasion (persuasion that does not respect its audience) is not the most effective way to negotiate. Therefore, students learn, through writing as members of a community, the subtleties of short essay writing that is audience-responsive and even nuanced (carefully considering various viewpoints). A pragmatic aside, the grading scale for MEAP essays highly values these skills.

A final benefit to this practice is my students' enthusiasm for the activities that they themselves agree upon. As Roger Fisher and William Ury write in their introduction to the classic text of negotiation skills, Getting to Yes, "Everyone wants to participate in decisions that affect them; fewer and fewer people will accept decisions dictated by someone else" (xvii). My students are often used to being told what to do in the classroom, but when they are invited to participate in the decisions that affect them, they engage the material with new commitment. This is democracy at its core, honoring individuals' fervor for self-determination.

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Appendix

The Democracy Project:

Connecting theory to lesson planning that matters to you

What I believe:

- Writing done in school should serve authentic purposes in students' lives
- We are citizens in a democracy: Legitimacy of government is grounded in representation
- Provisional consensus is best reached through rational deliberation that incorporates personal testimony

What we will do:

- Please review your reading journal and notes from the first half of the semester. Consider: What do you still wonder? What do you want to try?
- In class we will brainstorm a host of possible activities for the rest of the semester: small writing groups, whole class writing workshops, individualized research, whole class mini-lessons, review of grammar and mechanics, reading the same books and discussing them, reading books individually and giving "book talks"...the possibilities are myriad.
- For homework, compose a 2-page paper that outlines how you think our course should be structured for the remainder of the semester, and give good reasons for your positions. Bring copies of your paper for me and for each classmate.
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- For homework, review these position papers and compose a second paper, again taking a position on what we should do and why. This time, though, take the interests of your classmates into consideration. Mediate existing conflicts. Consider what the relationship is between your interests and what you believe to be the common good. Practice responsible citation skills, quoting your peers and giving them credit for their ideas and words.
- Bring copies of your paper to class for me and for each classmate.
- In class we will read these papers aloud.
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About the Author

Lindsay Ellis (ellisl@gvsu.edu) is Assistant Professor of English at Grand Valley State University where she teaches courses in secondary English education. She also enjoys learning alongside teachers as Director of the Lake Michigan Writing Project.