

**Teaching Democracy: Instructional Approaches Preparing Students for Active
Participation in Democratic Society**

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The supervisory committee met with the candidate for a final evaluation in which all aspects of the candidate's program were reviewed. The committee's assessment and recommendations are:

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction.....	6
Review of Personal Education History.....	6
Introduction of Pedagogical Theories.....	8
Description of Teaching Goals.....	10
Summary of Chapter 1.....	11
Chapter 2. Annotated Bibliography.....	12
Chapter 3. Methods.....	20
Participants and Setting.....	20
Data Collection and Analysis.....	22
Researcher Positionality.....	23
Chapter 4. Findings.....	25
Peer engagement develops empathy.....	25
Community is a prerequisite of learning.....	28
Expect the unexpected.....	32
Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion.....	36
Discussion.....	36
Limitations.....	38
Conclusion.....	39
References.....	41

Chapter 1. Introduction

Review of Personal Education History

My personal educational history was full of privilege but also by no means short of traumatic. I went to college at Princeton University, where I received my Bachelor of Arts in German and finished out my senior year online during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. One could think that I come from a well-to-do background because my alma mater is a place that is described by many people like F. Scott Fitzgerald in his 1920 novel, *This Side of Paradise*, as “the pleasantest country club in America,” but for me that assumption could not be further from the case: never judge a book by its cover.

My mother and father divorced before I have memories at around the age of two—I was born in 1998. Bob, my dad, was a great worker and caring father, but he became addicted to various drugs and left my mom alone to take care of my sister and me. Kim, my mom, went to Linn Benton Community College and became a medical transcriptionist, but less than a year later her position was replaced with computers. Due to her being a single mom struggling to make it while unemployed during the ‘08 recession, my mom was prescribed pain killers by her doctors as a way to make things better. Thus, my mom also fell into an addiction. After about twenty years, both of my parents are thankfully clean, sober, and involved in my life, but that was not the case during my K-12 years.

One memory that sticks with me is from my 7th grade year. On a normal day, I went to school and stored my backpack, jacket, and notebooks in my locker. Later, I heard a rumor from a friend that my locker was searched. Immediately, I began to panic. The smell of cigarette smoke was apparently emanating from my locker, and the principal and vice principal looked through my locker as they suspected I was harboring a pack of smokes. What struck me most

about the situation was the break in trust. I believed my teachers and authority figures at the school would know that I would always make the right decision. I was a good kid with a 4.0. Rury (2019) explains, though, that the foundation of the school is to instill in its students certain moral codes and laws: “The cultivation of skills and the transmission of culture were major concerns of English settlers, evident almost immediately upon arrival. This was especially true in New England, where early laws called for establishing schools and for educating young men—and eventually young women too” (Rury, J.L., 2019, p. 26). In other words, this statement means that GPAs and other measures of success are more ways of capturing conformity than of learning. Schools and their administrators and teachers reinforce desired behaviors in their students; moreover, they discourage negative behavior through discipline and punishment.

My experience was shocking because it was one of the first times I realized that the people I trusted would also have to follow through with their cultivation of wanted actions no matter the circumstances. It was different from the experiences of the young peoples in New England colonial schools because I was not forced to learn a new way of life; however, it was similar in that there was punishment for disagreeable behavior.

One other experience that sticks out to me is from 7th grade. I was struggling with my social studies geography class. I asked the teacher for further assistance on a map coloring assignment, and all he would say in response was, “Just do it right!” It was frustrating because I was sincerely trying to execute the task correctly. I felt like the teacher was not willing to listen or help me, perhaps because he thought I was either lying or incapable from the very start. Although I immensely enjoyed the subject, that specific class was horribly difficult and alienating. Middle school in general was more difficult for me than elementary school or high school. I suspect it was because those were the most turbulent years of my life, both in terms of

life at home and also my body. Not only was I moving between my mom and dad's places but also I was going through puberty. A lot about the world and my life did not make sense. Those were challenging times but I am nonetheless thankful for them as they shaped me into the person that I am today. It is the responsibility of the teacher to create a space in which all students can thrive and learn. I enjoyed ones like working in groups, meeting new people, and more. I valued new perspectives and looked for new experiences.

The focus of my research is how education does/can teach students to be active participants in democracy and democratic society. It encompasses language, empathy, and the development of democratic qualities. The purpose of this ARP is to explore pedagogical approaches that best prepare students for active participation in democracy.

Introduction of Pedagogical Theories

Democracy is a continuous and community-based social process, which is to say it is a political system that lacks the rigidity of many legal frameworks. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theory of cognitive development posits learning as a social process. Called the sociocultural theory of learning (sociocultural pedagogy), the theory proposes that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. Relationships between peoples influence their understanding of and toward the world; in a classroom setting, examples of it include turn-and-talks, think-pair-shares, working together on a project, and more. Learning is mediated by the interactions with adults and peers who provide guidance, modeling, and support. Thus, students internalize knowledge, skills, and values from the people around them. In the language of sociocultural theory of learning, the agent from whom the students internalize is called the 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO).

Vygotsky (1978) says learning happens in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the range or gap between what a student can do alone and what he or she can do with

the help. The ZPD is where cognitive growth happens. In order to learn new skills and expand the ZPD—which is to say in order to learn—the learner must be provided with temporary support and guidance from the MKO. Theorized as ‘scaffolding,’ an MKO makes available to the learners temporary support towards a task or skill that are in turn gradually removed as they gain independence towards their learning. Scaffolding refers to the MKO’s process of providing structure and support to help the learner become proficient in a task in their ZPD/expand their ZPD. Scaffolds are the specific, nonpermanent supports, models, and guidance provided by the MKO to help the learner in his or her mastery. For Vygotsky, language is vital to learning: students speak to others for social communication. As the learner advances, he or she will eventually speak internally to themselves, leading the thinking and problem solving. Thus, knowledge is constructed socially. Being an active participant in democracy means socializing with others, which is to say it entails knowing the language and skills to express unique ideas, to agree, and to disagree. Therefore, in a classroom, Vygotsky is relevant because students learn through social interaction.

Dewey (1914) argues that education and democracy are intrinsically connected. According to him, education socializes members of society and prepares them for life: “Any education given by a group tends to socialize its members, but the quality and value of the socialization depends upon the habits and aims of the group” (Dewey, p. 87). In other words, both a society is only as good as its education and the education of a society is only as good as that society. Democracy represents the moral, social, and ethical goals of society, and in that sense democracy presents a way of living together that values participation, communication, and shared experiences (insofar as those are the habits and aims of the group). Therefore, a healthy, functioning democracy requires citizens in the society to think critically, work together, and

respect diverse viewpoints. To this end, education should cultivate these qualities in students. Thus, schooling prepares students to be active, informed participants in democratic society by developing their skills of inquiry, cooperation, communication, and empathy.

Description of Teaching Goals

My teaching goals are based on standards outlined by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2013). Those standards are:

Standard #1: Learner Development The teacher understands how learners grow and develop, recognizing that patterns of learning and development vary individually within and across the cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical areas, and designs and implements developmentally appropriate and challenging learning experiences (Council of, 2013, p. 16).

Standard #5: Application of Content The teacher understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving related to authentic local and global issues (Council of, 2013, p. 27).

Standard #8: Instructional Strategies The teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage learners to develop deep understanding of content areas and their connections, and to build skills to apply knowledge in meaningful ways (Council of, 2013, p. 39).

Standard #10: Leadership and Collaboration The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth, and to advance the profession (Council of, 2013, p. 45).

Summary of Chapter 1

Throughout the course of this chapter I have reviewed my personal education history, introduced two pedagogical theories that guide my study in chapters 2-5, and described my teaching goals. The purpose of this action research project is to explore pedagogical approaches that best prepare students for active participation in democratic society. The first pedagogical theory that guides my study is John Dewey's conception of democratic education. The second pedagogical theory that guides my study is Lev Vygotsky's social theory of learning. My teaching goals are to learn about my students, to implement a robust application of content, to utilize various instructional strategies, and to provide many opportunities for growth.

Chapter 2. Annotated Bibliography

The purpose of this action research project is to consider pedagogical approaches that best prepare students for active participation in democracy. Throughout this chapter, I will analyze and discuss the relevant literature surrounding democracy and education. This will be achieved through including a citation to the source, a summary of it, and then a reflection on how it applies to my research.

Alscher, P., Ludewig, U., & McElvany, N. (2022). Civic education, teaching quality and students' willingness to participate in political and civic life: political interest and knowledge as mediators. *Journal of Youth and Adolescents*, 51(10), 1886–1900.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-022-01639-9>

The purpose of this article was to consider not only the teaching qualities within civic education that contribute to students' willingness to participate in political and civic life but also how political knowledge and interest relate to this relationship. The method of research was a survey study of 250 students. The article looked at the findings through a theoretical lens that posits a culture of democracy as a prerequisite for functioning democracies and healthy democratic institutions. The authors concluded that cognitive activation and open classroom climate are positively associated with students' willingness to participate; however, discussions of current political events in the classroom are not. Additionally, political knowledge and interest fully mediate students' cognitive activation and willingness to participate.

This article is relevant to my research because it provides teaching strategies I can use to teach my students to be active participants in democracy. I will design lessons to engage students (cognitive activation) and create a classroom that is inclusive and conducive to student speech (open classrooms). As the data shows, it will not be as important to include in my lessons

moments for students to discuss contemporary politics; however, I will teach about politics and get students interested in civics so that they pay attention and are engaged during civics class.

Crawford, J. A., Filback, R. A., & Noguera, P. A. (2025). Voices in education: Bolstering social studies education and revitalizing democracy through action civics. *The Teacher Educator*, 60(1), 138–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2024.2421891>

The purpose of the article was to explain the rationale, design, and implementation of the University of Southern California's Democracy Project, which is a curriculum that responds to the inadequacies of traditional civics education and the failure to engage marginalized students in meaningful democratic participation. The authors used a mixed methods approach, which included pre-surveys, classroom feedback, and artifact (i.e. examples of student work) analysis. 23 diverse educators were included in the study. The article drew heavily on the theoretical workings of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Conclusions reached are that the Democracy Project increases student engagement and leadership, and 95% of educators in the study rated the curriculum as highly relevant. Furthermore, it was concluded that action civics bridges equity gaps by empowering underserved students to engage in democratic processes that directly affect their lives at home, like political campaigns and advocacy projects.

This article is relevant to my research because it proposes a curriculum that develops marginalized students' civic education and meaningful democratic participation. Action civics, which is learning about civics by meaningfully engaging in one's local community, is a successful way not only to teach underprivileged students about democracy but also to close disparities between them and their more advantaged peers. I think the concept can apply to all students in a social studies class, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Garrett, H.J., Schmeichel, M., & Clark, C. (2025). "You don't have to tell them it's a lie":

teaching social studies within a backsliding democracy. *Democracy & Education*, 33(2), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.65214/2164-7992.1682>

The purpose of this article was to show how the reliance on evidence and argumentation as the primary mode of navigating contemporary political issues, which is the traditional framework for civil education that was conceptualized and implemented during a time of worldwide as well as nation-specific democratic progress, may not be able to accommodate the realities of current democratic backsliding and its related misinformation. Furthermore, it explored how teaching strategies designed to navigate a functioning democracy's partisanship are no longer able to address the challenges posed by democratic backsliding. The authors interviewed 17 teachers across middle and high school about their experiences teaching during democratic backsliding. The article was theoretically informed by Bermeo (2016)'s conception of democratic backsliding, which is the elimination of democracy-sustaining practices and institutions. It also was analytically framed so as to position the United States as a nation experiencing democratic backsliding. Conclusions of the article stated that a potential way forward for pedagogical strategies is to reframe pro- or anti-democratic stances and questions rather than more traditional liberal-versus-conservative framings.

This article is relevant to my research because it provides a lexicon for my lessons. Instead of framing discussions and stances as liberal or conservative, they should be oriented as either pro- or anti-democratic in light of the democratic backsliding that is occurring both worldwide and in the United States. I appreciate the perspectives offered by the article because the proposed change in language will make the points of my lessons clearer. Instead of students becoming confused by the political connotations of liberal and conservative, they will better understand what is at stake by considering the world through pro- or anti-democratic lenses.

Griffin, M. (2011). Developing deliberative minds- Piaget, Vygotsky and the deliberative democratic citizen. *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 7(1), Article 2.

<https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.113>

The purpose of the article was to propose, for the development of deliberative citizens, the pedagogy of Lev Vygotsky as a better alternative to that of Jean Piaget, which undergirds most of civics education today. The author used the theoretical lenses put forward by Vygotsky and Piaget, as well as deliberative democracy as an analytical one. The article was a conceptual discussion. Thus, a cross-comparison critical literature review of various educational theories and pedagogies took the place of a data-driven methods section. The author concluded that Vygotsky's ideas are better than Piaget's because they treat the development of deliberative citizens as a cultural, contextual, revolutionary, and mediatory process.

This article is perhaps most directly relevant to my research because it claims that Vygotsky's theory of social learning is best at creating deliberative citizens for a deliberative democracy, which is a form of democracy that considers deliberation as paramount in the decision making process. In my lessons, I will treat learning as a cultural, contextual, revolutionary, and mediatory process. One of the shortfalls of the article is that it is a conceptual paper and therefore lacks empirical research or evidence; however, the author does research the theories and pedagogies throughout the literature.

Mumma, K.M. (2025). *High School Effects on Civic Engagement* (EdWorkingPaper No.

25-1260). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/04mk-qe46>

The purpose of this article was to investigate to what extent and how public schools impact civic engagement. The author used nine cohorts of ninth-grade students in Indiana by connecting their education records, birth records, and national voting records. The author

deployed a formula developed by Riker & Ordeshook (1968) that calculates one's decision to vote as the theoretical lens for the paper. The paper concluded that schools have significant effects on voting: test scores and responsible behavior are positively related to adult voting.

The paper is relevant to my research because it explains classroom activities that do or do not lead to students being more likely to vote in their adult lives. Specifically, it considers which aspects of education make it so that students will vote after they graduate from high school. In my classroom, I will focus on cultivating behaviors like ownership, responsibility, and courage. Additionally, I will prioritize the development of students' skills and knowledge in all lessons. One of the paper's shortfalls is that it is a working paper, which means the author is still soliciting feedback and collecting data.

Reichert, F., and Print, M. (2018). Civic participation of high school students: the effect of civic learning in school. *Educational Review* 70(3), 318–41.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1316239>

The purpose of the article was to examine the meaning of formal civics education and the role of students' participation in a range of school and extracurricular activities. The article used a multilevel lateral analysis of two cohorts of Australian secondary students. The authors considered the results through the theoretical lens offered by John Dewey, who presents democracy as an educational conjoint communicative experience. The conclusions indicated the students' curricular and extracurricular activities play only a small role in students' willingness to participate in future civic and political action. Among the factors that did influence students, formal civics learning, participation in student governance activities, and engagement with the community are significant predictors of intended future participation.

This article is relevant to my research because it suggests that school and extracurricular activities have very little impact on a students' proclivities to participate in democracy later in life. Further, it finds that out of the activities that do have marginal impact, learning about civics and being engaged in the school and community are the most important. In my lessons, I will plan opportunities for students to engage in political structures and processes, prehaps by running a mock election. Unfortunately, there is no student government at my school. Outside of school, I could assign points to participating in events like campaigns, political volunteering opportunities, and the like.

Teegelbeckers, J. Y., Nieuwelink, H., & Oostdam, R. J. (2025). How to teach for democracy?

Identifying the classroom practices used by expert teachers of democracy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 157, Article 104942. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2025.104942>

The purpose of this article was to consider the classroom practices that are most effective in promoting democratic competencies. The authors interviewed 20 expert teachers of democracy in the Netherlands and established trends between what all said. Their findings were analyzed through the theoretical framework that democracy is contested and can be conceptualized in many ways. It was concluded that the classroom practices that are most effective in promoting students' active democratic participation are meaningful embedding, providing multiple perspectives, thinking about solutions from divergent perspectives, independent information collection and presentation, taking sociopolitical action, and critical reflection on subject matter. Furthermore, more successful instances showed various combinations between the classroom practices and teaching strategies.

This article is relevant to my research because it provides a list of classroom practices that develop students' abilities to participate actively in democracy. In my lessons, I will embed

meaningful content, I will provide multiple perspectives in the form of diverse primary and secondary sources, I will require students to consider how other perspectives make sense of the world, I will assign research assignments, and I will have students self-assess and critically reflect. The Netherlands is an example of a successful democracy, with a global freedom score by Freedom House of 97/100 (compared to the USA's of 84/100). As such, the way they approach education and civics could be a model for the United States and its education system.

Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal Summer 41*(2), 237–269

The purpose of this article was to consider the politics of education or in other words the spectrum of what makes good citizens that are presented in democratic education programs. The method of research was a 2-year study of ten programs in the United States that aimed to teach about life in democratic society. Theoretical lenses included John Dewey's democratic education and Connolly (1983)'s argument that conceptions of democracy and citizenship are contested. Conclusions were twofold. One, that education for democracy programs defined the good citizen as either personally responsible, participatory, and justice oriented. Two, that the decisions educators make when designing and researching these programs often influence students' politics and participation in democracy later in life.

This article is relevant to my research because it makes me think about my biases and personal beliefs that might affect my teaching. It will help me consider which type of citizen I along with my curriculum and materials might be creating. It makes me wonder if there is a way to produce citizens that exhibit characters of all three, or if another pathway forward is possible. It will be useful by making me aware of any potential biases that could be present in my

instruction. Additionally, it clarifies that the theories outlined by Dewey will be useful for my research and pedagogical approaches.

Throughout this chapter, I have researched, read, and summarized the dominant literature surrounding pedagogical methods and democracy. The aforementioned authors discuss various teaching strategies that they have discovered to best prepare students for democratic life, which fits with this action research project's purpose of uncovering pedagogical approaches that prepare students for active participation in democracy. In the next chapter, I will outline and explain the various methods I used during the course of this action research project.

Chapter 3. Methods

The purpose of this action research project is to discover pedagogical approaches that best prepare students for active participation in democratic society. This chapter will describe the methods I employed in my classroom during the project. Action research is an evidence-based, self-reflective process whereby a teacher employs various pedagogical methods, strategies, and approaches to teaching with the aims of finding what works best for the students: “[...] action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions” (Sagor, 2000, p.3). Educators who utilize action research follow seven sequential steps, which are selecting a focus, clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results, and taking informed action. Action research is a proper method for my action research project because it offers a means of exploration into my own teaching. I will be able to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of my pedagogical approaches with it, which is to say it will help me adjust my teaching to effect more classroom success. A few research questions guide my action research project. What does it mean to be an active participant in democracy and democratic society? Which instructional approaches best prepare students to be active participants in democracy? What can the teacher do to prepare students for life in democratic society?

Participants and Setting

In order to situate and make sense of my action research project, it is important to know the contexts of my study. The school is situated at the center of Albany, a town with a population just above 57,000. The area was rural until the early 2010s, at which time the city focused on urban development; many apartments were built, needed infrastructure projects were completed,

and the area is now urban. Albany's demographics are homogenous. It consists mostly of White, working and middle-class peoples; however, there is a growing number of people of Color who live or work in Albany. Interestingly, the student population of the Greater Albany Public School District is shrinking despite the population of the town growing. This trend has forced major reductions in staffing, programs, services, and more.

I collected data from my sophomore Sociology class of ten students. Of them, eight identified as male and two as female. There were no non-binary students. There was also no LGBTQIA2+ representation. Three students are Hispanic and seven are White. All of the students speak English as their first language, which is to say there are no English language learners (ELLs). All of the students are children of non-immigrant parents. One of the students would be described as extremely economically privileged, two as economically privileged, and seven as economically disadvantaged. In terms of IEPs and 504s, one student has an IEP for ADHD and one student has a 504 for trauma from a concussion. Five students were Christian, three were Atheist, and two were unsure of their religion.

Students bring a wealth of academic and cultural funds of knowledge with them to the classroom. There is diversity and different voices present in the classroom. Students' families and home environments vary. For the most part, parents are extremely supportive and create positive home circumstances. Most of the student population faced challenges before enrolling at AOS, which is to say most of the parents are excited to see their child go to school in general, receive educational support, and be motivated to succeed. A number of the students also work outside of their time in school. Academically, students have access to a number of supports. AOS offers various programs like Choices I or Choices II. These programs offer options for students to attend school and earn credit. Other options include the GED, individualized tutoring, and

more. On the other hand, some cultural funds of knowledge are lacking in the class. For example, there is no bilingualism or LGBTQIA2+ representation.

I have worked with these students for over two years. My first year at AOS was in 2023/24, which is to say I have had many opportunities to understand these students, learn about my strengths with them, and reflect on my own areas of improvement. I grasped that the students are extremely resilient because of the particular obstacles and experiences they have overcome throughout their lives. About myself, I discovered that I am very empathetic. I see all people as infinitely valuable and I approach the world with an asset-based perspective. Consequently, students not only trust me but also register my classroom as a space where they can safely be themselves. In terms of improvement, I need to keep a serious face when students say or do things that are funny. I find it somewhat difficult not to laugh along at comical classroom moments.

Data Collection and Analysis

For an action research project, Sagor (2000) explains there are three methods of data collection that a researcher can use depending on the variable demands of the specific classroom. Data can be gathered through teacher records and observations, through the new instrumentation developed by a researcher in the process of data collection, and/or through the data collection plan. The data I used for this action research project included the unit plan, curricula, lesson plans, teaching reflection journals, exit tickets from class, assessments, informal observations of student engagement, and feedback from my mentor-teacher and field supervisor.

Data analysis for this action research project followed traditional qualitative procedures by focusing on student work like journals, interview transcripts, and student portfolios. I used open coding analysis to make sense of the data by assigning a code to each particular occurrence,

which I then grouped and reviewed against each other to form broader categories. In doing so, these codes organized the data into the major patterns and themes that were identified by this action research project. Findings were triangulated to ensure the themes of my analysis are conceptually congruent, which is to say I used multiple independent sources of data to answer the research questions of this action research project. I sought feedback from two Western Oregon University professors, two peers from my MAT cohort, and my cooperating teacher.

Researcher Positionality

I am a twenty-eight year old White male from a low income family. I had challenges at both home and school growing up. I lived in a pretty rural part of Oregon and the schools did not have substantial support for my needs that resulted from my socioeconomic condition. I learned the power of the individuals within the system because many of my teachers showed compassion and understanding to me even though they did not have to do so. While working at Albany Options School, I find myself able to relate to the circumstances of many of its students there. The school serves a particular subset of the greater population, one which tends to be more socioeconomically disadvantaged than the students at the community's other two high schools. As such, I am deeply empathic to my students. Their struggles, experiences, and circumstances are ones to which I can mostly relate. I acknowledge that negative behaviors in the classroom, such as anger, frustration, resistance, or outrage, are ultimately just the manifestations of the student's unique challenges and obstacles. As such, they require a compassionate response by the teacher, just like the ones I received while in my primary schooling. I have also worked at Albany Options for over two years and consequently developed strong connections with students.

My layered identity as a White, US-born, English-speaking, heterosexual male makes it so that I may approach my data collection and analysis with particular biases. Another layer of my identity at Albany Options is as an established teacher with whom the students are comfortable. I will work to challenge the potential biases by critically reviewing data, using diverse lenses, and discussing with my advisors. Being a teacher at the school for a number of years, students might be more willing to engage and be themselves, which could also influence the type of data collected and analyzed.

Chapter 4. Findings

Three themes emerged from analyzing the data. Those themes are peer engagement develops empathy, community is a prerequisite of learning, and expect the unexpected. Each theme is discussed with supportive data.

Peer engagement develops empathy

Empathy is not a trait that individual students have, but rather a democratic disposition that is developed through structured engagement with peers. Pedagogical approaches that both demonstrate and promote empathy are important because democratic societies depend on understanding different perspectives, communication, dialogue, working with different people, and conscientious responsiveness to others.

I assigned students to work in pairs, with partners, or in groups. Most of the learning activities throughout the unit involved forms of communication with peers. For example, every class began with students answering a Do Now prompt that engaged their thoughts, beliefs, and ideas about a particular social topic. After writing their responses, students then presented and discussed it with elbow partners. If the students adequately expressed their responses to the prompts and communicated their ideas to their partners as well as thoroughly listened to and understood their partners' verbal responses, then the elbow partner provided a checkmark in the appropriate "checkpoint" box located on the lower right corner of the document. This communication expectation was constant throughout other classroom assignments like interviews, journals, the summative assessment, and more. Students were also expected to restate in their own words what their partners said, despite whether or not they agreed. In doing so, empathy developed through students' perspective-taking in interactions with their peers.

Students worked with each other by collaborating on various projects, assignments, and tests. For example, students worked in groups during part one of the summative assessment. They shared their opinions and beliefs that were personal, which opened up the possibilities for disagreement. Classroom expectations weaved in group work and participation. By creating a grading rubric that leveraged students' potentiality for peer connection, I created a classroom environment where students did not exist in learning silos. In other words, they could not learn all by themselves. Through peer engagement, students learned about the nuances and queues of social behavior. They perceived the effects of their own individuality on others. In the socratic seminar of the unit, students were required to listen, negotiate meaning, wait for the appropriate time to express a statement, solve problems as a group, and respect other people's needs. This cultivated a particular awareness of others as well as a personal responsibility in students for the wellbeing of their peers. Opposed to competitive learning environments, collaborative learning created the conditions for emotional understanding, which is to say peer engagement functioned as a vector for the development of empathy in students.

As the unit was first starting and students were just meeting each other, what stood out the most was the stark contrast between gender representation. Almost 75% of the classroom demographics are homogeneous in that only three of the students identify as girls. There are no non-binary or LGBTQIA2S+ students. There are also no emergent bilinguals, and only the English language is represented in the classroom. When the classroom started a unit about feminism and patriarchy, there was initially substantial hesitation from most of the boys to recognize that society is still unequal. Whereas they recognized that males were favored above other genders historically, six of the seven male-identified students believed gender inequality in today's society is a "hoax" (to use one of their terms from the first Do Now prompt.) On the

other hand, all of the female-identified students recognized what the boys both did and did not. Once the independent journaling portion of the Do Now was over, each of the three girls then shared their experiences about how they are treated differently in schools, jobs, and the community in a classroom discussion. I did not prompt them to do so with my typical use of equity sticks during this portion of the Do Now; rather, they were eager to answer by themselves, one by blurting and two by raising their hands. There was no disrespect or negative behavior from the classroom while these personal stories were shared. All students actively listened to their classmates. After the three girls shared their experiences and beliefs, a classroom discussion followed in which many of the male-identified students made verbal comments that deviated from the sentiments expressed in their journals from part one. In other words, many of the boys shifted their initial stances after hearing the unique perspectives from their peers.

A similar learning trend occurred in all forms of student engagement throughout the unit. Whenever students talked with one another, their own thoughts were challenged by the different experiences, beliefs, and identities of their peers. In doing so, students are exposed to perspectives on society that would otherwise remain unavailable. These newly acquired lenses led students to see the world from the stances of their peers, which made them become more comfortable with each other as the unit progressed. Effectively, the classroom built their own community by speaking and listening to one another, either during times I formally built in the lessons or instances like the many informal student-led discussions that popped up sporadically. By the end of the unit, students were making eye contact with each other, asking questions, prompting their peers into further thought, and showing a general understanding of one's personhood. Ultimately, dialogue with peers and in classroom discussions encourage recognition

of shared humanity. Pedagogical approaches should support and create such opportunities in a classroom setting.

There were many occasions throughout the unit where students were challenged by their interactions with others. During lesson four's socratic seminar, a number of the students were initially shocked by their peers' stances on social issues. There was gasping. Some of the students were exasperated with the responses of their peers. One student would become physically frustrated. They were so passionate about many of the topics relating to patriarchy and feminism that they could not contain themselves. Students navigated through these interactions by using sentence stems that helped express either agreement or disagreement, focusing on the idea or argument instead of the person, practicing positivity, and more. Although there was conflict and disagreement, students ended up understanding each other better. The learning became more robust when there was a clash of opinions, perceptions, and beliefs. Rather than separating them apart from each other further, the divergences actually brought students closer together. So, empathy does not develop exclusively through harmonious interactions; rather, productive discomfort and conflict can also develop empathy.

Community is a prerequisite of learning

Community is a foundation of not only meaningful learning but also democratic participation. Pedagogical approaches that purposefully create classroom communities are best to prepare students for democracy because democracy itself is about responsibility, participation, and shared understanding.

The very first activity I assigned to the class was a 'Get to Know You' bingo card. In it, students were presented with a three-by-three grid that contained descriptors about identity, knowledge, characteristics, and more. Students then had to get up out of their seats, move around

the classroom, talk to their new classmates, and find someone who could sign for the particular language in a box. A signature was given only if a student related to the particular description. Students completed the assignment once they got a blackout on the card. Throughout the process and in the other activities like think-pair-shares and turn-and-talks that were centered on social interaction, students created meaning as a group. Moreover, there was increased participation over time as the students formed a community. Through structured student talk procedures like hand-raising, three-before-me, summarizing partner speak, and more, the learners build on one another's ideas, become more comfortable to ask questions, and are more willing to express confusion. Ultimately, learning does not happen in isolation but instead is socially constructed through relationships and participation in groups. Put another way, interactions with a learning community are a necessity for one's own learning.

Being an alternative school, the students usually come from former educational experiences and circumstances that have left them deeply traumatized. To create a sense of safety, the students established a conversation contract that spelt out the terms and boundaries of classroom discussion. Terms of the contract included respecting people's pronouns, using positive phrasing, avoiding an attack on the person, and more. As a result of the contract, students that were hesitant to speak at first quickly grew to find their voices. Some of the most notable moments from classroom discussion were when students encouraged or motivated their peers. Each person in the classroom registered themselves as an integral part of the whole because of the implemented pedagogical approaches that underscored collectivity over individuality. In other words, community creates a sense of psychological safety, which enables authentic engagement and intellectual curiosity. By feeling a sense of belonging, students can fully participate in learning.

The students established shared norms, either formally through assignments like the classroom conversation contract or informally through side-conversations, friend groups, and more. They held their peers accountable in most instances when these established boundaries were crossed. Many of those who broke the norms were realigned to the expectations as soon as their peers mentioned something about it. The identity assignment students worked on during the second lesson involved group problem solving and discussion, which were guided by these norms. Students were expected to explore their individual identities, brainstorm possible solutions to current social problems, and then navigate through the similarities and differences between them and their peers. In doing so, not only did students ascertain the importance of intersectionality but also they developed the skills to negotiate through differences and establish meaning. Overall, the classroom community teaches students the relational habits necessary for democracy. Participants in such a system must be able collaborate through their similarities and differences, obliging them to act with a sense of collective responsibility opposed to individual gains.

The bonds, relationships, and connections between students were so strong that they held each other to very high standards of learning. For example, during lesson five, one of the students put his head down and probably began to fall asleep. Rather than allow him the opportunity to nap, his elbow partner patted him on the shoulder and startled him awake. I did not ask him to do so, which shows the sense of responsibility each individual in the classroom registers for the collective. Throughout the course of the unit, students would ask questions to which they should have already, either because it was posted on the board, indicated on the written directions, or covered by me verbally during instruction. Almost always, one student

would answer their peer's question, usually opining where to find it or that it was already covered by myself earlier in the lesson.

Another moment that underscored the importance of community involved the tragic loss of a sophomore student. To summarize the event for context but not to go too much into detail about it, essentially what happened was one of the most connected and influential students in the building was struck and killed by a car while she was moving a toolchest. More tragically, the driver of the vehicle was her older sister, who was arguably the most well-known, significant, and authoritative senior at the school. Both girls were noticeable members of the school and the tragedy affected nearly everyone. It sent shockwaves through the school and town. After the event, the older sister was absent for days. She was unsure if she even wanted to finish her senior year, which had less than one month left, and earn her diploma. Classmates were shocked and traumatized. There was substantial grief, crying, and confusion. The school brought in three specialist therapists to provide support, in addition to the two social workers that are always there. It was difficult for all students in the aftermath to engage and learn. Likewise, the teachers were also substantially impacted by the loss. Conversations with my colleagues revealed that they found trouble teaching with the same effectiveness and intensiveness than beforehand. They were picking up on the same forces that were shaping the experiences and behaviors of the students. In the face of all this, the learning did not stop at Albany Options School. The day after the tragic loss, students, though sad, expressed a desire to get back into the status quo of things. All students and staff supported each other. They took proactive steps to take care of each other and ensure the education continued, which is to say that belonging to a community increases engagement and accountability in learning.

During classroom and group discussions, students would solicit their peers' responses by asking them what they believe about the topic at hand. Put differently, there were spontaneous conversations that occurred without my directing to do so. At other times, I would solicit student responses through use of equity sticks, which are the names of students written onto popsicle sticks and stored in a cup. The random order of name calling provided by this system means there is no potential bias in who the teacher calls. It is possible that the teacher may call on students to whom the teacher is similar. One particular demographic group could be privileged because of existing societal hierarchies. In my classroom throughout the research project, all students were comfortable to be themselves, regardless of their identities. This is to say the community affirmed students and gave them a sense of belonging. Succinctly, community supports equitable participation by disrupting traditional hierarchies, expectations, and norms.

Expect the unexpected

Participation in a classroom is similar to that in democracy because they both require abilities from all the participants to adapt, respond, be comfortable with uncertainty, and navigate unpredictability. Rather than extremely rigid or fully pre-determined instruction, pedagogical approaches should allow for spontaneity, agency, and flexibility.

The case for every of my lessons was that they deviated in some way from the way I had designed them in the lesson plan. The everyday demands of the classroom were unpredictable and inconsistent. In each lesson, almost each of the students' questions were unexpected by myself. Classroom discussions throughout lessons four and five were a sudden change from my plans in that students shared their personal connections to social labels like gay, lesbian, feminism, patriarchy, and more. Students expressed interest in related topics, such as the effects and uses of intersectionality on current geopolitical events like the Israel-Palestine conflict, that

were not key vocabulary terms explained in the lesson plans. In short, both teacher and student dialogue and collaboration were dynamic, which is to say that participation cannot ever be fully scripted.

During these moments that departed from the plan when student interactions as well as my own were unplanned, there was more intense engagement by the students with the unit's central focus, the lessons' learning targets, and the overall instruction. Students incorporated their own interests and knowledge into classroom discussion, on independent answers, with group work, and more, which elevated their education in that they made connections that I as the teacher had missed. This pedagogical openness to adjust the planned course of the day's lesson and to leave room for spontaneous discussion created a classroom environment in which students were eager to share beliefs. They wanted to know what their peers thought about their own answers. In consulting with the group, students were constructing meaning socially and negotiating the truth. They wanted to know what their peers thought about their own individual answers so as to make them more agreeable and accurate to reality. In other words, students used their agency to create an informal peer assessment without my prompting to do it. Overall, a flexible curriculum and pedagogy allowed for deeper engagement.

It was not the case during my instruction that simplicity, questions with direct answers, or agreement resulted in more student learning; rather, student learning was amplified in moments where students grappled with ambiguity, disagreement, or unresolved questions. During the socratic seminar in lesson four, students put forth their initial stances on a number of statements about social issues, such as feminism is just for women, the patriarchy no longer affects citizens of the United States of America, men and women are equal in society, transgender rights are human rights, and more. As the discussion progressed, students changed their perspectives on the

issues. There was agreement, disagreement, negotiating of meaning, thoughtful questions, and perspective-taking during the classroom conversation. Student confusion led to deeper inquiry as they asked each other what they met by a statement, what they think about something somebody said, what their particular stances are given their unique demographic identities, and more. At one moment, a boy student asked for the perspective of a girl peer because he was not sure if his own was limited. Rather than teaching that the world is an either or, this pedagogical approach showed how social issues can go many ways, how society oppresses or privileges particular groups, and the importance of considering multiple perspectives when determining the truth value of a social statement.

Another instance of where the unexpected brought about robust student learning was the exit ticket for each lesson. At the end of every class, I played the daily CNN10, which is a ten-minute news broadcast hosted by former NFL player Coy Wire and age-appropriate for high school viewership, on the board for students to watch. The exit ticket task each time was to make at least three connections between what is going on in the world with the lesson's particular learning target. Although the learning target was planned, what was unexpected was the daily content of the CNN10. Neither students nor I could predict what would happen in the world the day before, which is to say the connections between the learning target and what is going on in the world had to be drawn in real time. Rather than sticking to rehearsed learning strategies, the ambiguity of what could happen in the world as it is shown in the CNN10 taught students how to form an objective analysis and to evaluate information in order to form well-reasoned judgements or conclusions. In other words, moments that were uncertain or unexpected by students promoted critical thinking.

There were many times throughout the unit where I adjusted the lessons, either formally ahead of time in the plans or informally during my actual teaching of them during my instruction, in order to meet student interests and demands. Moreover, I encouraged students to give me comments and feedback on the effectiveness of my teaching, the relatability of the subject matter, the language of the learning targets, and all other classroom procedures. For example, students expressed interest in creating a project for their final summative assessment but there was disagreement on the form they wanted it to take, so I decided to synthesize the various wants into a differentiated Learning Menu that gave students multiple options to show what they have learned from the unit. Another example of students taking ownership over their learning is when they would make unanticipated connections to real-world issues, which happened not only every time they would watch the CNN10 but also at many times throughout classroom conversations, during socratic seminars, on worksheet answers, and more. There was student-led discussion as well as informal classroom norms that emerged from students' unstructured interactions with one another. The student-centered pedagogies I implemented in my classroom shifted the authority away from teacher-only control toward shared participation. By giving students more agency and voice, the learning became less predictable but more robust and democratic.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

Discussion

I prepared students to be active participants in democratic society through classroom activities and scaffoldings that focused on development of their empathy, community, and preparedness to negotiate meaning in uncertainty. My teaching approaches were similar to and different from the instructional approaches examined in previous scholarship and outlined in Chapter 2. For example, I created an inclusive classroom using various methods Alscher et al. (2022) outlined. Some of those strategies included equity sticks with students' preferred gender pronouns, sentence stems for student speech, and more. Students' contemporary political knowledge was also developed through classroom discussions and viewing of the CNN10. My curriculum differed from the one proposed by Crawford et al. (2025) in that I incorporated many other aspects and standards. Although I still incorporated many marginalized voices as they suggest, my deviation from their recommended script suggests that there are many pedagogical approaches to student civility and democratic disposition. Throughout the unit, students used language and the lexicon proposed by Garrett et al. (2025). Rather than a liberal versus conservative mindset, students developed the skills and abilities to assess the world around them through pro and anti-democratic lenses. One different teaching approach that I adopted was focusing only on pro-democratic stances. There was not enough time in the unit to look at examples of anti-democratic governments, practices, or beliefs; however, by learning about pro-democratic stances, students were able to develop an implicit understanding of what could constitute anti-democratic stances.

I found my teaching approaches were most similar to those presented by Griffin (2011). Throughout the unit, students engaged in many activities that I purposefully designed according

to social learning theory. There were classroom discussions, socratic seminars, turn-and-talks, think-write-pair-shares, and other opportunities for students to learn through the behaviors, attitudes, and reactions of their peers. Consequently, students developed more democratic dispositions and became more deliberative citizens in their democracy. The teaching approaches I used throughout the unit underscore the theory developed by Mumma (2025) that public high schools can have a large impact on students' civil engagement. Students not only developed responsible behavior in terms of their empathy skills and community engagement but also earned daily points mostly through peer-assessments. By more students indicating between the pre- and post-assessment that they are more likely to vote in an election, it appears teaching approaches that hold students accountable and encourage positive behavior increase students' likelihood for active participation in democratic society.

At Albany Options School, out-of-school activities for students are somewhat limited. There are next to no extracurricular opportunities because of the small size of the school. As Reichert and Print (2018) suggested, the absence of such opportunities did not contribute to a decrease in the likelihood of students' civic participation. In other words, my research throughout this project shows that the development of a student's civility and democratic disposition is not exclusively dependent on just one scholastic feature. It was the case that other classroom practices, such as perspective-taking, collective research for information, and negotiating of meaning, were more directly tied to the cultivation of active participation in democratic society. Teegelbeckers et al. (2025) confirm these findings, arguing for a set of particular pedagogical approaches that are most conducive to teaching for democracy. Lastly, throughout the unit, I was intentional to try to avoid any bias in my curriculum and instruction. As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe, education is a political endeavour in that it produces

citizens that think and act in particular and varied ways. In my classroom, I attempted to teach students how to think, how to back up their claims, and how to make sense of the world around them.

Limitations

The research undertaken throughout this project was careful, rigorous, and thorough. Some limitations still apply to it. To begin, there are theoretical limitations. I used all the tenets as outlined; however, I did not include as much of John Dewey's theories as I would have liked to. An implication for a future study is to purposefully plan and scaffold with his theories in mind. My findings also underscored the social theory of learning as proposed by Lev Vygotsky, but there were instances where independent work also contributed to students' development of democratic dispositions. An implication for a future study is that learning to be an active participant in democracy extends beyond engagement with peers. The findings align to the theories as well as expand upon them, suggesting that there are multiple pedagogical approaches that can prepare students for active participation in democratic society.

There were methodological limitations to my study as well. To begin, the duration of the project was just over two weeks. Ideally, teaching about active participation in democratic society is a multiple-unit endeavour. An implication for a future study is to plan adequately and to consider the time it takes to develop students' democratic dispositions. Another limitation is that students never left the classroom. An implication of this limitation would be that it is useful for students to go out into the field and observe various ways people are active participants in democratic society. I would have liked to schedule field trips to various forms of democratic participation such as canvassing operations, voting procedures, protests, city hall meetings, and more.

Other teachers should be able to replicate this research project by applying my described pedagogical approaches in their classrooms to achieve a similar level of success; however, a few practical limitations exist. First, the number of students in my classroom was much fewer than what would typically be expected in a public high school. Classroom sizes are capped at fifteen students at Albany Options, whereas at most schools classrooms consist usually of thirty students or more. An implication of this is that pedagogical approaches that prepare students for active participation in democratic society might work best in smaller settings. Second, the school in which the study took place is alternative, which means not only the demographics and needs of students are different than in most high schools but also that pedagogical approaches must vary from what would be encountered in traditional high schools. An implication for future studies is that the success of recreating the study might depend on the environment in which the pedagogical approaches are implemented.

Conclusion

Empathy develops through structured engagement with peers. Engagement is most effective when it is grounded in a strong classroom community defined by trust, belonging, and mutual responsibility. Once students are genuinely interacting within such a classroom, learning often becomes unpredictable in productive ways. Put another way, my research shows that students learn to understand others, relationships create the circumstances for learning, and authentic truth-seeking occurs through dynamic human interaction. Pedagogical approaches that best prepare students for active participation in democratic society are ones that develop student empathy through structured peer engagement, build community through collective group work, and meet the daily demands of the classroom. A few questions arise from the results of this study. Which pedagogical strategies best prepare students for democratic processes like voting,

civil disobedience, canvassing, and running for political office? To what extent should public high school classes elucidate contemporary sociopolitical issues? What are various strategies a teacher can employ during instruction to avoid implicit bias? Ultimately, democratic education and democracy both rely on relationships, participation, and emergence.

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